The Boers and the Breaker: Bruce Beresford's Breaker Morant *Re-Viewed*

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Abstract
This essay is a re-viewing of *Breaker Morant* in the contexts of New Australian Cinema, the Boer War, Australian Federation, the genre of the military courtroom drama, and the directing career of Bruce Beresford. The author argues that the film is no simple platitudinous melodrama about military injustice—as it is still widely regarded by many—but instead a sterling dramatization of one of the most controversial episodes in Australian colonial history. The author argues, further, that *Breaker Morant* is also a sterling instance of "telescoping," in which the film's action, set in the past, is intended as a comment upon the world of the present—the present in this case being that of a twentieth-century guerrilla war known as the Vietnam "conflict."

Keywords: *Breaker Morant*; Bruce Beresford; New Australian Cinema; Boer War; Australian Federation; military courtroom drama.

Resumen
Este ensayo es una revisión del film *Consejo de guerra* (*Breaker Morant*, 1980) desde perspectivas como la del Nuevo Cine Australiano, la guerra de los *boers*, la Federación Australiana, el género del drama en una corte marcial y la trayectoria del realizador Bruce Beresford. El autor argumenta que la película no es un simple melodrama sobre la injusticia militar, como todavía es ampliamente considerado por muchos, sino una dramatización excelente de uno de los episodios más controvertidos en la historia colonial australiana. El director afirma, además, que *Breaker Morant* es también una excelente instancia de "telescopio", en el que la acción de la película, ambientada en el pasado, pretende ser una referencia al mundo del presente, en este caso es el de una guerra de guerrillas del siglo XX conocida como el "conflicto" de Vietnam.

Palabras clave: *Breaker Morant*, Bruce Beresford, Nuevo Cine australiano, Guerra de los *boers*, Federación australiana, drama justicia militar.

New Australian Cinema

Prior to the late 1970s, Australia was something of a cinematic backwater. Occasionally, Hollywood and British production companies would turn up to use the

country as a backdrop for films that ranged from the classic (*On the Beach* [1959]) to the egregious (*Ned Kelly* [1970], starring Mick Jagger). But the local movie scene, for the most part, was sleepy and unimaginative and very few Australian films traveled abroad. Then, without warning, Australia suddenly experienced an efflorescence of imaginative filmmaking, as movies such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *The Getting of Wisdom* (1977), *My Brilliant Career* (1979), and *Breaker Morant* (1980) began to be shown all over the world. Hitherto unknown talents from behind the camera (including Peter Weir and Bruce Beresford) and before it (most notably Mel Gibson and Judy Davis) became overnight sensations and were snatched up by Hollywood.

The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (1978) was the first Australian film to be featured in official competition at the Cannes Festival, in addition to being the first Australian feature to treat the "problem" of the aborigine as something more than exotic cultural baggage. *Jimmie Blacksmith* opened in the United States to critical acclaim in the fall of 1980, after which Fred Schepisi, its director, was invited to Cannes in a continuation of that Festival's love affair with New Australian Cinema—an affair that had been initiated by Ken Hannam's archetypal *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975). Hannam's picture was selected for screening at the Directors' Fortnight in 1975, as was Schepisi's *The Devil's Playground* in 1976. By 1978 there were twenty Australian films at Cannes, including *Jimmie Blacksmith*. Following this accomplishment, several new Australian films were significant hits at the Cannes Festival, and later in the U.S., in the next two years, including Gillian Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career* in 1979 and Beresford's *Breaker Morant* in 1980.

Breaking Bad

My subject here is *Breaker Morant*. Toward the end of this picture, a young Australian soldier, George Witton, is being led, handcuffed and sobbing, from his temporary military prison in Pietersburg, Transvaal, South Africa, to serve a life sentence of penal servitude in England. Momentarily, he breaks free of his captors and runs back toward his older fellow prisoners, Harry Morant (Edward Woodward) and Peter Handcock, who are in their cells awaiting execution that morning by firing squad. "Why are they doing this to us, Harry?" Witton screams, to which Morant shouts back, "We're scapegoats, George . . . scapegoats for the bloody Empire!" Thus does *Breaker Morant* proclaim, for the final and decisive time, that it is no simple platitudinous melodrama about military injustice, but instead a sterling dramatization of one of the most controversial episodes in Australian colonial history.

The year is 1901; the place Pietersburg, Northern Transvaal, a region infested with Boer (Dutch-descended) commandos; the conflict the Boer War (1899-1902), in which imperial Great Britain defeated two Boer nations in South Africa: the Republic of Transvaal in the north, where diamonds and gold had been discovered; and the Orange Free State in the southern portion of the country. (All of South Africa was united in 1910 and remained a dominion of the British Empire governed under a form of constitutional monarchy until 1961, when the country left the Commonwealth and became a republic.) In 1901, the British forces—composed of English, Irish, and Australian troops, to name only those participants mentioned in the movie—find themselves engaged in a form of guerrilla warfare that they are ill-prepared to fight and that they can win only at great cost. In order to prevent Germany from entering the conflict and thus prolonging it, the British have decided to sacrifice three Australians,

accused of executing a German missionary as well as a number of Boer prisoners, as the price for ending this costly venture as soon as possible.

The film is a dramatization of the January 1902 court martial of the Australian soldiers for the murders of the Boers and the Reverend H. V. C. Hess. The three are members of a specially created counter-guerrilla force known as the Bushveldt Carbineers (to which unit as many colonials were assigned as possible, and which was disbanded less than a year after it came into existence), who are fighting on the British side. (Australian Federation occurs in 1900, before the action of the film begins, although Australia remained a member of the British Commonwealth.) The guerrillas' leader is Lieutenant Harry "Breaker" Morant (his nickname comes from his skill at breaking horses), an English-born poet, adventurer, and soldier, who signed up with the Carbineers, as he wryly observes, "on April Fools' Day." He is a kind of Renaissance man, a representative of culture, whom we even see singing at a piano at one point. Morant's fellow accused are Lieutenant Peter Handcock, a pragmatist (and womanizer) who has joined the army to provide for his wife and son and escape economic hardship in Australia, and Lieutenant George Witton, an idealist (and naïf) who signed up because he has inherited his genteel family's belief in the values of the British Empire.

The prosecutor, Major Charles Bolton, is urged to secure a speedy conviction, which will avert the danger of a German intervention in the conflict on the side of the Boers. However, during the three-week trial the only recently appointed defense counsel, Major J. F. Thomas (Jack Thompson), mounts an unexpectedly powerful argument on behalf of his fellow Australians, establishing their bravery and effectiveness in dealing with Boer insurgents and ultimately disclosing that they were acting on unwritten orders to take no prisoners—orders that had been issued by Lord Horatio Kitchener himself, head of the British forces. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that, to facilitate a peace treaty with the Boers that will also satisfy the British and Australian governments, the three men will have to be sacrificed on the altar of political expediency. On the casting vote of the president of the court, Lieutenant Colonel H. C. Denny, the men are therefore found innocent of the murder of the German missionary but guilty of all other charges. (News of the verdicts was suppressed for three weeks, and the trial itself was conducted in secret to avoid unfavorable press attention.)

Apart from the careful delineation of distinctions among the three Australians, three sets of tensions work to make *Breaker Morant* a compelling drama. The first is the clash between the admirably courageous but arrogantly defiant Morant and the worthy and humane, but initially disinterested and seemingly inexperienced defense counsel, Major Thomas. Our interest in the unraveling of the film's plot is no greater than our interest in the developing relationship between Thomas and the men he has been ordered to defend, especially Morant. The second set of tensions revolves around the clash between justice and expedience. Were Morant and his Australian compatriots victims of British injustice? Were they themselves colonial martyrs to the interests of British imperialism during the Boer War? Or was Morant in particular a liar, thief, drunk, murderer, and all-around scoundrel—as some of his accusers attested—who deserved his fate? The third set of tensions is connected with the issue of war crimes. To wit: Must a soldier in modern warfare obey orders blindly, or does he have a higher duty to refuse to carry out an unlawful order? There is no question that Morant, Handcock, and Witton are guilty of killing Boers, but is it right, as Major Thomas puts it in his summation, to judge soldiers by standards of civilian morality in a war where, tragically, "horrors are committed by normal men in abnormal situations"? Can we hope to pass judgment on these men, he asks, until we ourselves have been subjected to the same pressures and provocations as they have?

Flashback Structure

Beresford avoids the pitfalls of overtly verbal, visually static courtroom dramas not only through incisive editing, which gives the exchanges between the men genuine edge and momentum, but also—and above all—by structuring the script of *Breaker Morant* around a series of flashbacks. (The picture opens at the very end of the court martial, with Morant making a final statement, so that, in a sense, all of *Breaker Morant*, even the trial itself, is a flashback, which makes this movie even more fatalistic than the usual flashback film.) The flashbacks come at instances in the film where they counterpoise or complement something that has been said in the court or the accused officers' living quarters. They also, of course, allow a break-out or opening up from the confines of the courtroom and let in the sky and space of the *veldt*, a release that the audience needs at certain points, not only so that it may relax its emotions, but also so that it may place the drama in its proper geographic—or geopolitical—context.

The film's flashbacks are roughly grouped into three blocks, each of which corresponds to one of the three charges against the Australians, namely, the execution of the captured Boer prisoner Visser, the execution of six surrendered Boer prisoners, and the murder of Reverend Hess. The first group of flashbacks (introduced through the testimony of Captain Robertson, Sergeant Major Drummond, and Trooper Botha) establishes the character of Morant by showing his emotional reaction to the mutilation of his friend Captain Simon Hunt: he orders the immediate execution of the Boer captured wearing Hunt's khaki jacket. The second flashback segment, the shortest one, dramatizes George Witton's vehement objections to Morant's order to execute the surrendered Boers and then Witton's own killing, in self-defense, of one of the prisoners who attacks him by surprise. The third block of flashbacks is probably the most intricate in its structure. Related through the viewpoints of Corporal Sharp, Morant, and Handcock, and alternating with scenes set in the Australian prisoners' quarters, this section concentrates on the third charge, the killing of Hess, and is presented in terms of Peter Handcock's actions on the day of the shooting.

The third group of flashbacks confirms that, with Morant's approval, Handcock did go out and shoot the German missionary, just after he has told us in the courtroom that he did not shoot Reverend Hess because he was courting two (married) Boer women at the time. (He was, indeed, doing so, *after* he shot Hess.) Certainly the murder of Hess is the crime with the most overt political significance within the context of the Boer War. While the shooting of Visser might be excused as Morant's overheated response to the mutilation of Captain Hunt (who, still alive after being shot, had his neck broken, his face stamped on with boots, and his genitals slashed), and the execution of the surrendered Boer prisoners as justifiable adherence to orders (even if they were only verbally transmitted), the shooting of Hess is a calculated action designed to prevent him from passing information on to the enemy. It is thus the only crime committed with "malice aforethought" and without official sanction, the only crime committed against a subject of a country not officially involved in the war, and the only crime that Handcock and Morant conceal with a direct lie, since they never admit to anyone except Witton their role in the death of Hess. Hence we are dealing here not with sentimentally conceived victims of judicial bias but, at least in the cases of Morant and Handcock, tarnished heroes with blood on their hands. In fact, we are shown the murder of Hess as a cold-blooded act of long-range assassination. Ironically, this is the one charge on which the Australians are acquitted.

Each block of flashbacks, then, focuses on one of the accused, so that, in the third case, we observe Handcock's indulgence of his carnal appetite, for killing as well

as sex; in the second case, we see the real-life challenge presented to Witton's idealism; and, in the first instance, we get visual evidence of Morant's passionate and impulsive nature. At the same time, all except one of these flashback sequences are introduced by a particular witness testifying on the stand. In this way the conventions of the courtroom drama are brought into play, as we quickly realize that every witness has a reason for giving hostile or unreliable testimony against the defendants. The convention exploited in each of these instances is, of course, basic to the courtroom genre: that of the suspect witness.

Capraesque Righteousness

There is an additional Capraesque dimension to the trial, as Major Thomas is presented as the courageous underdog fighting not only a tenacious prosecutor but also a president of court who is making clear his preference for conviction. The use of close-ups in this situation is particularly telling, never more so than on the occasion when Lord Kitchener's aide, Colonel Ian Hamilton, takes the stand to deny any knowledge of Kitchener's unwritten orders. The close-up of him as he takes the oath is so extreme as to verge on distortion—appropriate enough for a man who has just sworn to tell the truth while inwardly knowing he has come to court to do the exact opposite. As with the best screen courtroom dramas, the audience here becomes an additional jury, assessing the characters, witnesses, and issues before it.

The success of *Breaker Morant*, finally, as political protest derives from its effectiveness in arousing the audience's indignation and outrage, emotions that, operating on a simplistic level, do not invite a dispassionate analysis of underlying complexities and consequently admit little qualification. (After all, even the murder of the non-combatant but nonetheless spying Hess can be justified from a ground soldier's point of view.) In *Breaker Morant*, the protagonists are portrayed as victims who struggle heroically yet hopelessly against overwhelming odds. Lieutenants Morant, Handcock, and Witton are persecuted by their British military superiors and the power structure the latter represent. Their immediate antagonists, the members of the court, themselves perpetuate the power of the British army and, more broadly, the imperialistic interests of the British colonial empire. However, the very success of the

film in using melodramatic conventions results in a distortion of a number of truths central to the historical reality of the Boer War. Indeed, by centering the "problematic" of the flashback sequences on the three protagonists and the witnesses before the court, *Breaker Morant* makes the role of the Boers seem comparatively unproblematic.

The Boer War

Let me elaborate by considering the roles of both the Australians and the Boers in the Boer War. This was, first and foremost, a war of imperialism fought between the British and the Boers. Within this framework, as enlisted men fighting on the British side, the Australians' role in the conflict was a fundamentally ambiguous and even complicit one. While not denying the status of the Australians as British colonial subjects, we must also admit that, as members of the British army, they were active enforcers of England's expansionist policies. There are thus at least two simultaneous *loci* of conflict implicit in this situation: the antagonism between the Australian officers (in the cases of Morant, Handcock, and Witton) and their British superiors, and the conflict between the Boers and the British forces. Within this scheme, the Boers form the group consistently opposed to colonial power (though not to Boer power over, or disenfranchisement of, black South Africans), while the British assume a similarly monolithic role as colonial adventurists. The Australians, however, occupy dual roles as both victims of colonial exploitation and collaborators in an imperialistic cause. While the Australians can be viewed as victims *and* perpetrators, then, the demands of melodrama make it imperative to suppress the second of these two roles.

Although the Boers themselves were, historically speaking, one of the two central groups of antagonists in the Boer War, their presence in *Breaker Morant* is so drastically displaced as to render them almost irrelevant to the main plot and to discredit the validity of their cause. Indeed, their existence is simultaneously acknowledged and dismissed in the film's opening title: "The issues were complex, but basically the Boers wished to retain their independence from England." In the film itself, the execution of Boer prisoners is simply the pretext used by the British to put the Australians on trial. Otherwise, the Boer presence is drastically circumscribed by the dramatic dictates of Beresford's film.

First, the Boers are rarely presented in combat situations in *Breaker Morant*, although this was obviously their primary role in the actual conflict. The film contains eight major scenes in which Boers figure, but only two of these eight instances depict the Bushveldt Carbineers and the Boers in combat with each other, for this would reveal a dimension of significance that Beresford wishes to suppress. Second, in the two scenes that do involve the Boers and the Australians in combat—the failed Boer ambush out on the *veldt* (together with the Australian reprisal for that ambush) and the Boer surprise dawn attack on the British garrison—the first instance presents the Boers only as murky, anonymous antagonists and, in both instances, the Boers are portrayed as cunning, if not downright deceptive, in taking the offensive against the British forces. Third, of the eight major scenes in which the Boers appear, five occur in flashback, the three exceptions being the British officers' dinner, the discovery of the body of the collaborationist Boer named Trooper Botha, and the dawn attack on the British camp.

This dependence on flashback is significant in two ways. First, the flashbacks focus, not on the legitimacy of the Boer struggle, but instead on determining the legitimacy of the charges against Morant, Handcock, and Witton. Second, the literal segregation of the Boers from the primary, present-tense narrative frame effectively

diminishes their importance as *dramatis personae*. Moreover, Boers who have defined dramatic functions are all Boers who have chosen to collaborate with their enemy: Trooper Botha, the scout/interpreter for the Bushveldt Carbineers; the Boer ladies who accompany the British officers at their dinner; the Boer who comes to sing for the guests at this dinner; and Handcock's two Boer lady-friends.

Through all of this, *Breaker Morant* manages to avoid showing the Boers and the British forces engaged in face-to-face fighting on equal footing, a situation that, unlike the guerrilla fighting that *is* shown, would be most truly representative of the central conflict in the Boer War. Since the justice of the Boer struggle is never considered and the Boer is never shown meeting his opponents on equal ground in combat, the most basic facts about the war are omitted or neglected along with the possibility of portraying the Boer as fighting a war of resistance against an army constituted of both British and colonial forces. In defense of Beresford's suppression of the Boer point of view, one could argue that the film could not possibly encompass every viewpoint (including that of black South Africans, who are represented here, somewhat ironically, only by the court reporter); and that, in this respect, *Breaker Morant* only mirrored contemporaneous Hollywood movies about the Vietnam War such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which lamented the loss of American innocence during that conflict but gave little screen time to the Vietnamese perspective on events. Fair enough, but the American forces in Vietnam did not include colonials; the British forces in South Africa did, and Beresford missed the opportunity, through fuller depiction of the Boer struggle, to equate British oppression of the Boers with British exploitation of the Australians.

The director does tease us, however, with one visual equation of the Boers and the Australians. During the flashback showing Morant in evening clothes singing to a gathering of dinner guests that includes his one-time fiancée, the sister of Captain Hunt, the camera moves in for a close-up of the Breaker, followed by a close-up of the rapt face of Hunt's sister (whose eyes eventually turn downward). Watching this scene, we remember that we saw its counterpart earlier. At the British officers' dinner, the camera also moves in for a medium close-up of the Boer who is singing, and the scene ends with a telling shot of the Boer woman seated in front of him (a woman whose eyes also eventually turn downward). In this brief instance, the film seems to consider the relationship between the political stances of the Australians and the Boers, since each is, after all, the counterpart of the other in regard to the British. The moment passes, but the question remains: What if *Breaker Morant* had chosen to explore this implicit parallel between colonials, and what difference in perspective would such a line of inquiry have yielded for the total meaning of the picture?

Breaker and Bruce

Breaker Morant was nonetheless a success overall—unsurprisingly, especially in Australia, where it won ten prizes (including best film and best director) at the 1980 Australian Film Institute Awards for its sharply etched celebration of Australian masculinity, comradeship in adversity, and defiant anti-imperialism. This success came at a critical time in Bruce Beresford's career. Following a spell in the 1960s as chairman of the British Film Institute Production Board, during which time he made numerous shorts, he returned to his native Australia in 1972 to make features (while also working in television). His *Barry McKenzie* comedies (1972, 1974) were popular with the public but reviled by critics. Beresford's reputation rose later in the seventies with his

adaptation of David Williamson's 1971 theatrical satire *Don's Party* (1976), and with his sensitive version of Henry Handel Richardson's 1910 novel *The Getting of Wisdom*, a coming-of-age story set in a girls' boarding school.

It was only with *Breaker Morant*, however, that Beresford's talents—including a strong narrative sense as well as visual one and a gift for getting the best out of actors—came to full maturity. (The film was criticized by some, though, for its marginalization of its female characters—despite the fact that Beresford's career as a whole reveals a strong feminist leaning—a criticism that is unclear, since, as far as I know, women did not take part in the Boer War and therefore could only have been "marginal" to its fighting: as they are in *Breaker Morant*.) After its showing in 1980 at the Cannes Festival (where Jack Thompson won the award for best supporting actor), Beresford was invited to Hollywood, where he directed two Oscar-winning films in the next decade, *Tender Mercies* (1983) and *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989).

Script Adaptation

Although loosely based on a 1978 play by Kenneth G. Ross and a script by Jonathan Hardy and David Stevens for an unrealized television movie, *Breaker Morant* was very much Beresford's own project. Ross himself was not concerned with trying to tell the entire story of Morant or with exploring his central character, so much as with *displaying* that character in action. The action of the drama is therefore composed of a series of unusually short scenes (from which the Boers themselves are virtually excluded), chronologically arranged—without flashbacks—but shifting from setting to setting: courtroom to cell to bivouac to Lord Kitchener's headquarters and back to the courtroom. That chronology includes only the trial and last days of Morant, based on what is known of the historical circumstances as drawn from George Witton's *Scapegoats of the Empire: The Story of the Bushveldt Carbineers* (1907).

The final credits also acknowledge Kit Denton's 1973 novel *The Breaker* as a background source, but Denton's work is essentially a fictionalized biography of Morant, and the court martial occupies only its last sixty pages. This is because Denton does not make Morant's case a symbolic focal point around which large issues of twentieth-century warfare revolve. Even in the parts of the book's court-martial section that he adapts, Beresford makes significant changes, distributing some of the dialogue to different characters and particularly emphasizing wry humor and irony. An important difference occurs, for example, when one of the accused is asked what rules they were operating under as soldiers of the Bushveldt Carbineers. In Denton's novel, it is Handcock who answers, in a jocular fashion, that "we got 'em and we shot 'em, under Rule 303," referring to the caliber of the Lee-Enfield rifle used by Morant's mounted infantry regiment. In the film, Beresford gives this line to Morant, and it is delivered not jokingly but angrily, even menacingly, with Morant drawing a stark contrast between the cozy moral certainties of the courtroom and the harsh justice meted out by soldiers brutalized by war. This argument will be at the heart of Major Thomas's summation on behalf of the defendants (in a speech that's not in the novel or Ross's play but is entirely Beresford's own work), when he insists that the actions of such men cannot be judged by conventional standards of civilized behavior.

Beresford conducted extensive research at the National Army Museum in London and in Australian libraries. One discovery was the manuscript by Witton, who, after his life sentence had been commuted in 1904, wrote the aforementioned account of the whole affair titled *Scapegoats of the Empire*, which was quickly suppressed after its

publication in 1907. (Its eventual re-publication in 1982 came about undoubtedly as a result of the success of the film.) An equally remarkable discovery was a letter home from a member of the firing squad, giving a firsthand account of the execution of Morant and Handcock and prompting one of the film's most affecting moments, when Morant takes Handcock's hand as they walk toward their appointed place of death. This is the kind of pricelessly authentic detail that would ordinarily not have occurred to a screenwriter-director dramatizing the story of guerrilla warriors on the *veldt*.

Irony, Ambiguity, and Cinematography

In his opening up of the material, moreover, Beresford takes full advantage of Donald McAlpine's imposing cinematography (also on view in other Beresford pictures such as *Don's Party* and *The Getting of Wisdom*) in scenes of action that bring to life the courtroom testimony and, at the same time, nearly make a character of the harsh South African landscape. Cleverly, the director uses this opening up for purposes of irony as well as illustration. He contrasts the primitive conditions of the prison compound, for instance, with the luxuriant accoutrements of Lord Kitchener's dwelling—a contrast that underlines an important theme, the distance between the decision-makers in war and those whom the decisions affect. He also exploits discrepancies between what we hear during the trial and what we see on the screen. For example, the Boer scout's self-serving version, before the court, of his attitude toward the shooting of prisoners is contradicted by what we see him doing on the *veldt*.

Similarly, although Morant's thirst for revenge against the Boers is fueled by the belief that they mutilated the body of Captain Hunt while he was still alive, we see that Hunt, after being wounded, played dead subsequent to his men's retreat and then rose up to shoot one of the Boer leaders emerging from his hiding place. The Boers' subsequent killing of Hunt, then, is not an act of mindless barbarity but retribution for the sneaky killing of one of their own. Their motivation, in fact, is not very different from Morant's own. Like John Wayne's revenge hero in a film Beresford much admires, John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), Morant may have more in common with his "savage" adversaries than he cares to expressly acknowledge. Indeed, as he suggests at one point, the Australians (sometimes actually addressed by the British as "you colonials") may even be fighting on the wrong side. This may help to explain a kind of death wish on the part of Morant, for, just prior his execution, he refuses the offer of an escape-horse from a sympathetic fellow soldier.

The quality of Beresford's direction reaches new heights in the film's final few minutes, which are a masterly synthesis of its humor, heroism, and irony. A fateful overhead shot (similar to the one that concludes the court martial) frames Morant and Handcock in the prison courtyard on one side of the screen, while on the other side workmen outside the prison walls are busy constructing their coffins. "They could have had the decency to measure us first," grumbles Handcock, to which Morant replies serenely, "I don't suppose they've had many complaints." Morant and Major Thomas share a dignified farewell, and Morant courteously refuses the accompanying padre's offer of a final blessing, asking instead for the following epitaph for his headstone, from the book of Matthew: "And a man's foes shall be they of his own household" (10:36). Under a beautiful dawn sky, the condemned men walk hand in hand to two chairs in the distance and seat themselves before the firing squad, refusing blindfolds. "Shoot straight, you bastards! Don't make a mess of it!" shouts Morant, to the end combining a dark sense of humor with a strong sense of military pride. The wonderfully incongruous

final images show soldiers loading the bodies into the coffins and having difficulty making Handcock's legs fit—a misfit even in death, it seems. Over the ending credits, Morant's voice is heard singing "Soldiers of the Queen" (1898, by Leslie Stuart), a song in praise of the very forces by which he has just been executed. (Martial music of this kind is used in this way—ironically—throughout *Breaker Morant*.)

Breaker Morant and the Military Courtroom Drama

Breaker Morant's stature has deservedly grown over the years. In a varied and distinguished career, Beresford has done nothing finer, with the possible exception of *Tender Mercies*. *Breaker Morant* belongs with Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957) and Joseph Losey's *King and Country* (1964) among the cinema's most scathing indictments of military (in)justice; and, from the perspective of the twenty-first century, its interrogation of atrocities committed under the heading of "standard operating procedure" looks more relevant and prescient than ever. One certainly need not look very far in the United States for parallels, including, when such guerrilla procedures are deemed politically unacceptable, the speed with which scapegoats are found and soldiers on the ground become victims of the hypocrisies of government and high command.

At the time *Breaker Morant* was released, as a matter of fact, many, including this writer, saw Beresford's film as a telescopic comment on, or metaphor for, similar retaliatory incidents against the enemy that had occurred during the fighting in the Vietnam War, including the My Lai Massacre of March 1968. Like the Americans in Vietnam six decades after the Boer War, the British often could not tell the difference between non-combatant and combatant, for the latter frequently wore no uniform and fought only on a part-time basis. The British also attempted to separate civilians from fighters by herding civilians (mostly women and children) into concentration camps, again like the Americans in Vietnam—according to whose Strategic Hamlet Program chosen villages were surrounded with barbed wire or bamboo fence to keep away the Vietcong. Lord Kitchener even enacted a scorched-earth policy intended to destroy Boer homes and farms in South Africa, just as President Lyndon Johnson authorized the use

of napalm and Agent Orange to defoliate areas of the Vietnamese countryside friendly to the Vietcong.

The American connection aside, what was the British reaction to *Breaker Morant*? The film received no nominations from BAFTA, the British Academy of Film and Television Arts; was ignored by the British Film Institute's main publication, *Sight and Sound*; and was patronizingly likened to the morally bombastic films of Stanley Kramer (most significantly, in the present context, *Judgment at Nuremberg* [1961]) by the BFI's sister publication, *Monthly Film Bulletin*. Perhaps its message struck too close to home. *Breaker Morant*'s most eloquent British champion was the revered critic Dilys Powell, who admired its emotional power and moral complexity, and who put her finger on a key element that Beresford had highlighted: that the Boer War was a different kind of guerrilla warfare, being fought by civilians as well as soldiers, which brought with it antiheroic values, ruthless means of combat, and new forms of military apprehension that continue to this day (295). Amen.

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Filmography I: Key Works of the New Australian Cinema

Walkabout (1971), directed by Nicolas Roeg
The Adventures of Barry McKenzie (1972), directed by Bruce Beresford
The Cars That Ate Paris (1974), directed by Peter Weir
Petersen (1974), directed by Tim Burstall
Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975), directed by Peter Weir
Sunday Too Far Away (1975), directed by Ken Hannam
The Devil's Playground (1976), directed by Fred Schepisi
Don's Party (1976), directed by Bruce Beresford
The Last Wave (1977), directed by Peter Weir
Backroads (1977), directed by Phillip Noyce
Summerfield (1977), directed by Ken Hannam
The Getting of Wisdom (1977), directed by Bruce Beresford
The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (1978), directed by Fred Schepisi
Newsfront (1978), directed by Phillip Noyce
Mad Max (1979), directed by George Miller
My Brilliant Career (1979), directed by Gillian Armstrong
The Odd Angry Shot (1979), directed by Tom Jeffrey
The Plumber (1979), directed by Peter Weir
Breaker Morant (1980), directed by Bruce Beresford
Caddie (1980), directed by Donald Crombie
Manganinnie (1980), directed by John Honey
Gallipoli (1981), directed by Peter Weir
Puberty Blues (1981), directed by Bruce Beresford
Heatwave (1982), directed by Phillip Noyce
The Man from Snowy River (1982), directed by George T. Miller
Monkey Grip (1982), directed by Ken Cameron
We of the Never Never (1982), directed by Igor Auzins
Lonely Hearts (1982), directed by Paul Cox
The Year of Living Dangerously (1982), directed by Peter Weir
Careful, He Might Hear You (1983), directed by Carl Schultz
My First Wife (1984), directed by Paul Cox
Burke & Wills (1985), directed by Graeme Clifford
The Fringe Dwellers (1986), directed by Bruce Beresford
The Year My Voice Broke (1987), directed by John Duigan
The Lighthorsemen (1987), directed by Simon Wincer
A Cry in the Dark (1988), directed by Fred Schepisi
Emerald City (1988), directed by Michael Jenkins

Filmography II: Key Films about the Boer War

The Boer War (1914), directed by George Melford
Rhodes of Africa (1936), directed by Berthold Viertel & Geoffrey Barkas
For Valor (1937), directed by Tom Walls
Ohm Krüger (1941), directed by Hans Steinhoff
The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp (1943), directed by M. Powell & E. Pressburger
Fortune in Diamonds (1951), directed by David MacDonald

Majuba: Heuwel van Duiwe (1968), directed by David Millin
Strangers at Sunrise (1969), directed by Percival Rubens
Young Winston (1972), directed by Richard Attenborough
Breaker Morant (1980), directed by Bruce Beresford
Torn Allegiance (1988), directed by Alan Nathanson
Verraaiers (2013), directed by Paul Eilers

The author of many essays and articles over the years, R. J. CARDULLO has had his work appear in such journals as the *Yale Review*, *Film Quarterly*, *Modern Drama*, and *Cinema Journal*. For twenty years, from 1987 to 2007, he was the regular film critic for the *Hudson Review* in New York. Cardullo is the author or editor of a number of books, including *Theater of the Avant-Garde, 1890-1950*, *Playing to the Camera: Film Actors Discuss Their Craft*, *Soundings on Cinema: Speaking to Film and Film Artists*, and *In Search of Cinema: Writings on International Film Art*. He is also the chief American translator of the film criticism of the Frenchman André Bazin, with several volumes to his credit, among them *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the '40s and '50s* and *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism.*

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