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LAWRENCE OF ARABIA: THE CINEMATIC (RE) WRITING OF HISTORY

Author(s): Gary Crowdus

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# LAWRENCE OF ARABIA

by Gary Crowdus

## THE CINEMATIC (RE)WRITING OF HISTORY

When *Lawrence of Arabia* received its world premiere at a Royal Performance for Queen Elizabeth and other VIPs in London on December 9, 1962, the film's running time was 222 minutes. A little over a month later, twenty minutes were cut so that exhibitors could schedule an additional daily screening of the film. When *Lawrence* was rereleased theatrically in 1971, an additional fifteen minutes were lopped off. When that eviscerated version received its broadcast premiere in 1972, the film's wide-screen compositions were eliminated in a rephotographing process known as 'panning and scanning' in order to squeeze the images into the drastically reduced dimensions of the TV screen. In less than a decade, one of the most honored screen spectacles of all time had become The Incredible Shrinking Epic.

Winner of Seven Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Direction, Best Color Cinematography, Best Editing, Best Color Art Direction, Best Musi-

cal Score, and Best Sound, *Lawrence of Arabia* received widespread critical acclaim, not only for its extraordinary visual appeal, but also for its compelling historical drama, including an unusually literate script, intelligent dialog, and an outstanding performance by a relative newcomer in the title role. More than one critic referred to *Lawrence of Arabia* as "a thinking man's [sic] epic."

Now, for the first time in over twenty-five years, this film classic has been restored to its original splendor and returned to the big theatrical screen. In a two year effort which involved searching through over four tons of film and sound materials, restoration producer Robert Harris and coproducer Jim Painten located and restored long missing footage, in some cases redubbing scenes that lacked sound, so that director David Lean, at the age of 80, could at last do the fine cut on the film he had never had the time to complete in 1962. Considering the serious state of deterioration in

which they found the original camera negative and magnetic soundtracks (see interview with Robert Harris in this issue), Harris and Painten have succeeded in a historic rescue operation, preventing this magnificent film from being lost to us forever.

They've not only saved the film, however, they've also technically improved it, since the restored and rejuvenated negative has been printed on the finer grain Eastman Kodak stocks available today, and the original four-track soundtrack has been rerecorded and enhanced in a new Dolby six-track Spectral Recording version. As a result, *Lawrence of Arabia* actually looks and sounds better today than it did during its 1962 premiere screenings. (The sole disappointment is the new advertising campaign, which features an artist's rendering of Lawrence posed dramatically atop a windswept sand dune, left arm akimbo, his diaphanous white robes blowing in the breeze. It's a rather fey image which

seems more appropriate for a newspaper ad announcing "Arabian Days at Bloomingdale's.")

While the much-heralded theatrical release of this newly restored director's cut will enable filmgoers to discover or enjoy anew this great film, it also provides us with the opportunity for a closer historiographical examination of both the film and its titular hero. T.E. Lawrence was a most unlikely candidate for military heroism, a man of letters transmuted into a man of action, a poet and scholar who found himself leading Arab tribes in a guerrilla war against the Turks and Germans on the Eastern Front during WWI. Real life events and historical personages have rarely been so compellingly portrayed on the screen, but it is the film's high level of cinematic artistry that throws into greater relief the ways in which artistic selection and presentation have their own political import. The question posed by such a film is whether good cinema and accurate history or biography must remain mutually exclusive qualities.

#### The Director and His Associates

The strengths of *Lawrence* as a motion picture are those of its director, Sir David Lean, an unpretentious man who modestly describes himself as a "picture chap," just someone who tells stories in pictures. Lean made his mark as a film editor in the Thirties, and began his directorial career in the Forties with such British classics as *In Which We Serve* (1942), *Brief Encounter* (1945), the Dickens adaptations of *Great Expectations* (1946) and *Oliver Twist* (1948), followed by the international success of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). Throughout his career, Lean has displayed dramatically expressive editing skills, a striking sense of composition and forceful *mise-en-scène* (including a three-dimensional sense of depth to his images), and an attention to meaningful cinematic detail. His imaginative flair for visually portraying dramatic concept and character is on full and continual display in *Lawrence*, a film which shows Lean at the peak of his directorial powers. There are scenes in *Lawrence* where camera movement, composition, lighting, performance, and music combine to create moments of absolute movie magic.

As a former film editor, Lean also supervises the editing of his films. "I'm really still an editor at heart," he's commented. "I can't keep my

hands off the scissors." Even in its 1963 general release 202-minute version, *Lawrence of Arabia* is one of the most superbly edited films of all time. Not to take anything away from Anne Coates, who won the Academy Award for editing *Lawrence*, but most of the film's stunning cuts were not created on the editing table but had been conceived by Lean prior to shooting and were described in detail in the shooting script. The pacing, particularly for a film of this length, is remarkably brisk. Lean has a definite flair for creating a smooth flow of images, each shot linked—visually, aurally, or conceptually—to those preceding and following it.

*Lawrence* is particularly notable for some breathtaking jump cuts with sound overlap, in which a sound effect from the next sequence is heard before its image appears, the effect being that of hurtling us forward in the film's narrative, with the sudden jump in time and space smoothed over by tying the disparate images together with sound. Natural elements such as the sky or windblown sand are frequently used to effect seamless scene transitions, while at other times elements within the frame are used for more dramatic transitions, such as the mauve flag which 'wipes' across the screen to reveal Lawrence's enraged reaction to Turkish atrocities. This steady forward movement of the narrative fulfills Lean's aim for the presentation of the film. "Every motion picture has a point at which an audience feels it can relax and light a cigarette. I should like to present *Lawrence of Arabia* in such a way that no audience will ever be able to get a cigarette lit."

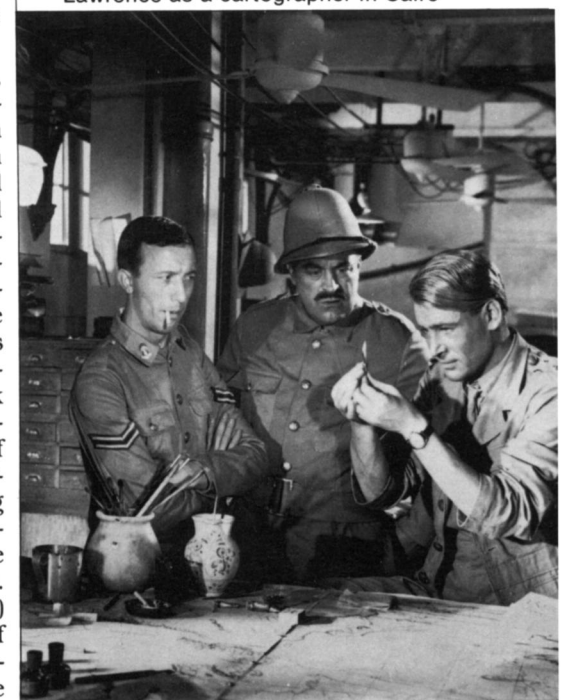
Without Freddie Young, of course, Lean wouldn't have had such ravishing images to edit. When this veteran cinematographer began his career in the film industry, hand-cranked cameras were still in use, and he had already photographed more than sixty feature films when he began working on *Lawrence*. Young's cinematography for the film features some of the most extraordinary images ever recorded, one of the most memorable being the mirage-like black speck on the horizon which gradually materializes through layers of shimmering heat waves in the person of Sherif Ali (Omar Sharif) riding his camel into the scene (Young photographed Sharif's long entrance with a specially built 450mm lens). Another spectacular (pre-Steadicam) camera flourish—a big close-up of O'Toole taken from a helicopter-mounted camera which then rose



Peter O'Toole and David Lean

"Every motion picture has a point at which an audience feels it can relax and light a cigarette. I should like to present *Lawrence of Arabia* in such a way that no audience will ever be able to get a cigarette lit."  
—David Lean

Lawrence as a cartographer in Cairo





Sherif Ali (Omar Sharif, right) pleads with Lawrence to avoid a massacre of Turkish troops

several thousand feet into the air to reveal a breathtaking aerial view of the vast desert expanse—unfortunately never made the final cut.

Fully utilizing the widescreen resources of the Super Panavision 70mm format, Young's cinematography captures not only the appearance of the desert—its unusual colors, the shifting patterns and textures of sand, the towering rock formations and cliffs, the awesome vistas—but also conveys a palpable impression of the place—heat waves shimmering off its surface, the relentless scorching rays of the sun, sudden sandstorms that sting eyes and exposed skin, the invisible danger of quicksand—better than any film before or since. Indeed, the desert becomes a protagonist in its own right.

#### The Man Becomes a Legend

**T**he real life hero at the center of the film's visual splendor was one of the most complex and fascinating personalities to emerge from WWI. As a boy, Thomas Edward Lawrence avidly read romantic tales of the Crusades and the medieval chivalry of the Knights of the Round Table. As a young man, his fascination with the Crusades led him on long walking and bicycle tours of France and the study of history and military theory at Oxford University. He later toured Syria on foot to complete the research for his thesis on Crusader castles and after graduation participated in archeo-

logical digs in Syria and Egypt. In early 1914, just prior to the outbreak of the war, Lawrence was involved in a survey of Sinai for the Palestine Exploration Fund, actually a map-making expedition for the British military for which Lawrence and his fellow academics were "obviously only meant as red herrings," he explained, "to give an archeological flavor to a political job."

Some months later, Lawrence was commissioned by the War Office as an Intelligence Officer and posted to Cairo where for the next two years he served principally as a cartographer. In October 1916, some months after the beginning of the Arab revolt, Lawrence visited the Hejaz province (the desert area east of the Red Sea) where he met Prince Feisal, one of four sons of the Grand Sherif Hussein of Mecca, descendant of the Prophet and protector of the faith, to whose rebellion against the Turkish Ottoman Empire the British had promised their support. By December, Lawrence had been posted to the Hejaz as Britain's military liaison with Prince Feisal's Northern Arab Army.

The film offers a highly condensed and simplified account of Lawrence's two years in the desert, focussing on such key events as the capture of the strategic Red Sea port of Akaba, Lawrence's hazardous crossing of Sinai in order to report the victory to the British High Command in Cairo, Lawrence's leadership of the Bedouin tribes' guerrilla war against the Turks, including the destruction of the Turkish railways, the torture of Lawrence by the Turks at Deraa, the Arab massacre of Turkish troops at Tafas, and the capture of Damascus.

Although Lawrence's instrumental role in the Arab revolt during the war won him promotions and numerous military decorations, he was known in Great Britain at the time only to a small number of people within military and government circles. He did not become the stuff of legend—Lawrence of Arabia, Prince of Mecca, Emir Dynamite, the Uncrowned King of Arabia—until after the war, in 1919, when American journalist Lowell Thomas ("Jackson Bentley" in the film) toured the U.S. and Great Britain with his illustrated lecture entitled "With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia." The presentation, which combined silent film footage and hand-colored slides photographed by Harry Chase with a melodramatic narration by Thomas, was an enormous success, playing for months in London alone. His romantic tales of military heroism in exotic locales were a welcome respite to a public grown weary from grim accounts of the carnage of trench warfare in Europe. Thomas's show succeeded, as Lawrence commented, in turning him into "a kind of matinee idol." A few years later, capitalizing on this popular interest, Thomas published *With Lawrence in Arabia*, an excessive, near-worshipful account of Lawrence's wartime adventures.

Although voicing discomfort with his newfound celebrity status, Lawrence was not an entirely unwitting subject. It is now known that he collaborated with Thomas and other early biographers, including Robert Graves and Liddell Hart, paying a great deal of attention to his public presentation. Lawrence admitted to

a "craving to be famous" coupled with "a horror of being known to like being known." He had a demonstrable talent for self-publicity, while at the same time seeming to decry the romantic image of himself he had helped to fashion.

Lawrence undertook his own creative presentation of self in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926), an autobiographical account of his role in the desert campaign. He labored on it over a seven year period, aspiring to create a "titanic book," an English epic that would rank with the likes of *Moby Dick*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. It was not generally published during his lifetime, appearing only in a limited subscribers' edition of about 200 copies, although a bowdlerized popular edition entitled *Revolt in the Desert* was published in 1927 and quickly became a best-seller.

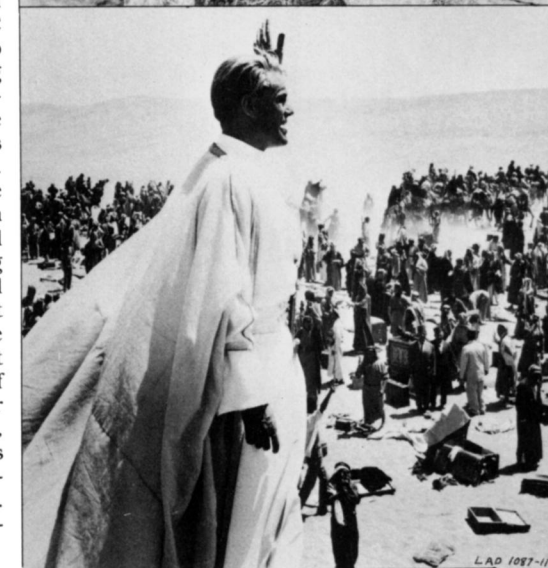
In a suppressed introductory chapter to *Seven Pillars*—eliminated at the urging of Lawrence's literary advisor, George Bernard Shaw—Lawrence belittled any claims for the book as a work of history and admitted that it unfairly emphasized, even exaggerated, the importance of his role in the events. "My proper share was a minor one," he explained, "but because of a fluent pen, a free speech, and a certain adroitness of brain, I took upon myself, as I describe it, a mock primacy."

In addition to thus artistically recasting his role in historical events, Lawrence later provided conflicting, ambiguous, or half-truthful accounts of the same incidents to biographers and friends, mystifications which only served to enlarge his legend. During Lawrence's lifetime, and for many years after his death, biographies and other published accounts of Lawrence's life adopted a favorable, largely uncritical view of his claimed achievements. Liddell Hart's biography, *Colonel Lawrence: The Man Behind the Myth* (1934), for example, fulsomely praised Lawrence for the originality of his conception of guerrilla warfare, comparing him to Napoleon as one of the "Great Captains" of military history. It wasn't until the publication in 1955 of Richard Aldington's *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry* that the authenticity of the Lawrence legend began to be challenged. Although Aldington's book had all the earmarks of a hatchet job, it served for the first time to put into critical perspective the largely self-advertised and media-elaborated dimensions of a near-mythical English hero whom Aldington summed up as "at least half a fraud."

### The Screenwriter as Historian

It was these inflated and conflicting claims that confronted Robert Bolt when he began work on the screenplay for *Lawrence of Arabia* in 1960. Bolt was then one of the most successful playwrights on the London stage, noted for his talent, as in his then-current *A Man for All Seasons*, at dramatizing philosophical and historical issues. Although Bolt began his research with a stack of books on Lawrence, they presented such a "tangle of contradictory facts," he explained, that he decided to discard them all and base his screenplay solely on *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Beyond his primary aim of presenting a dramatic story, Bolt explained his desire to "get at least within hailing distance of the factual truth," despite being convinced that the book contained considerable exaggeration and not a few outright lies. Bolt also hoped to "get within hailing distance of the truth about the man as well," although he acknowledged that this essentially boiled down to a matter of opinion. Bolt, Lean, and producer Sam Spiegel initially engaged in lengthy and argumentative script meetings, but Lean has explained that "the script is essentially Bolt's conception of Lawrence."<sup>\*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup>One thing unfortunately not restored to *Lawrence of Arabia* is the screenplay credit of Michael Wilson (1914-78), the Academy Award-winning screenwriter of such films as *A Place in the Sun*, *Friendly Persuasion*, *Salt of the Earth*, and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. When Wilson was hired by Sam Spiegel in 1959 to write the *Lawrence* screenplay, he was still blacklisted as a result of being an "unfriendly witness" during the HUAC hearings in 1951. Wilson completed two drafts of the screenplay before bowing out of the project because of disagreements with David Lean, by which time Robert Bolt was already at work on his own version of the *Lawrence* screenplay. When Bolt was subsequently given sole screenplay credit for the film, Wilson took the matter to a Screen Writers Guild arbitration. In late 1963, after examining all versions of the screenplay and related documents, the Guild determined that Wilson was entitled to equal credit for the screenplay. Since this writer has not been able to examine Wilson's version of the screenplay, stored among his other papers at the UCLA Theater Arts Library, it has not been possible at the time of this writing to determine the differences between Wilson's and Bolt's scripts. (Thanks to Larry Ceplair for UCLA research on this matter.)



Top, Lawrence (Peter O'Toole) with Col. Brighton (Anthony Quayle); Center, T.E. Lawrence (photo courtesy of Culver Pictures); Bottom, Lawrence salutes his troops



"We want two large glasses of lemonade." — Lawrence and Farraj visit the officers' bar in Cairo

Bolt had to do an enormous amount of condensation and simplification in order to reduce Lawrence's nearly 700-page tome to even a three and a half hour film. "You attack it with an axe," Bolt explained, "not a pair of scissors." Numerous British officers serving in the desert with Lawrence, including a few who also wore Arab dress, have been rolled into one — Anthony Quayle's "Colonel Brighton" — who serves as a strait-laced, do-it-by-the-book military foil for Lawrence's renegade adventurer. Several political and academic figures instrumental in effecting Lawrence's involvement in Mideast affairs have been combined in the fictitious character of "Dryden" (Claude Rains) of the Arab Bureau.

Events have also been greatly telescoped in time. The decision to assault Akaba actually followed Lawrence's first meeting with Prince Feisal by some seven months, but in the film it appears to be conceived and launched within a day or two. Many such incidents have also been dramatically simplified to comply with the genre requirements of big screen spectacle. Lawrence's account in *Seven Pillars* of the assault on Akaba, for example, includes the admission that during one preliminary skirmish, while charging at the Turks and firing wildly with his pistol, he inadvertently blew out the brains of his camel, was thrown from his mount, and actually missed out on the whole battle. He also explains that the Turkish troops at Akaba, realizing that they were badly outnumbered and lacked food and supplies for a long siege, simply sur-

rendered without a fight. In the film, a surprise Arab charge led by Lawrence quickly overruns the astonished Turkish garrison, and a long, majestic camera pan ending this sequence comes to rest on the massive cannons facing uselessly out to sea. Although it may not be a historically authentic recreation, it is a visually elegant and essentially accurate (albeit romanticized) representation of the ease with which Lawrence and the Arabs finally captured Akaba.

A more obvious example of the film's commercially-motivated departure from strict historical fidelity is the casting of Peter O'Toole, the handsome, six foot two inch tall star of Stratford-on-Avon's Shakespeare Memorial Theatre as the short (barely five feet six inches), rather plain T.E. Lawrence. Despite the increased glamor quotient and striking difference in height — which immediately eliminates a key motive for the overcompensatory physical efforts of a pocket Hercules like the real life Lawrence — O'Toole does have the same luminous blue eyes and long blond hair (O'Toole's brown hair, of course, having been dyed for the role) as Lawrence. O'Toole's bravura performance also conveys the remarkable charisma and force of character which by all accounts Lawrence possessed in great degree.

By taking his "axe" to *Seven Pillars*, however, Bolt has committed a more significant distortion than these predictable commercial concessions by severing some important aspects of Lawrence's personality. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is one of the most frank and self-revelatory works in English literature, mixing self-

aggrandizement with personal confession, and alternating purple prose accounts of remarkable military feats with long passages of tortured introspection and self-examination. Lawrence's critical, self-doubting tendencies, however, are seriously slighted in Bolt's script. Bolt's Lawrence is too much the romantic adventurer, almost a traitorous adherent to the Arab cause, rather than an Intelligence Officer for the British Army. Lawrence may have had an unusually deep streak of idealism, and been indulging his own grandiose notions of building a nation for the Arabs, but he was also capable of writing a lengthy set of guidelines for the British military on the art of "handling" Arabs. While he sincerely supported Arab aspirations for independence, he also had a strongly felt nationalistic stake in the Anglo-French rivalry in the region, and was enough of an Edwardian Englishman to express his ambition that "the Arabs should be our first brown dominion, and not our last brown colony."

Whereas the film has Lawrence cautioning Prince Feisal about allowing the Arab rising to become "one poor unit in the British Army," it was Lawrence who was instrumental in convincing Feisal to place his troops under British command. In the film, Lawrence appears completely ignorant of the Sykes-Picot Agreement (by which Britain and France in 1916 designated respective spheres of influence in a postwar Arabia), when, in fact, he was not only aware of it but also kept knowledge of the Agreement and its full political implications from Feisal for

as long as he could. Bolt's screenplay consistently tends to absolve Lawrence of any awareness of the political intrigues of the period, which also included the McMahon-Hussein correspondence assuring British support for Arab independence after the war, and the Balfour Declaration, whereby the British government declared its support for the postwar establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. By dramatically contrasting Lawrence to the scheming politicians and cynical military leaders around him, Bolt portrays Lawrence as merely a romantic adventurer and naive idealist when, in fact, he was a full-fledged member of the Arab Bureau, a political intelligence and propaganda division of the Foreign Office, and founding editor of the *Arab Bulletin*, a weekly secret newsletter for British political and military leaders.

Although Lawrence was certainly not directly responsible for the duplicitous promises or conflicting political agreements of his government, he suffered great emotional distress over his forced involvement in the "fraud."

*I could see that if we won the war the promises to the Arabs were dead paper. Had I been an honorable advisor I would have sent my men home, and not let them risk their lives for such stuff. Yet the Arab inspiration was our main tool in winning the Eastern war. So I assured them that England kept her word in letter and spirit. In this comfort they performed their fine things; but, of course, instead of being proud of what we did together, I was continually and bitterly ashamed.*

One of the scenes now restored to the film does touch on Lawrence's divided loyalties, and emphasizes Arab suspicions of his motives. Early in the film, as Lawrence and a raiding party secretly prepare to leave Feisal's camp for the assault on Akaba, he is surprised by Prince Feisal who asks Lawrence where he is going with fifty of his men. Upon learning that Sherif Ali has revealed their plan to Feisal, Lawrence observes, "Since you do know, we can claim to ride in the name of Feisal of Mecca." Feisal's reply echoes his earlier challenge to Lawrence's expression of loyalty to both England and Arabia. "Yes, Lieutenant Lawrence, you may claim it. But in whose name do you ride?"

That scene now parallels the later meeting with General Allenby (Jack Hawkins) in Cairo, after Lawrence and the Arab Army have captured Akaba, when Lawrence questions

his commanding officer about Britain's colonial aims in the region. "I want to know, sir, if I can tell them in your name, we have no ambitions in Arabia?" "Certainly," replies Allenby, only too willing to perform his duty in this mutual charade.

While Bolt's script at least broaches Lawrence's self-imposed role as a double agent, and his continual need to play one side off against the other ("I could not explain to Allenby the whole Arab situation," Lawrence wrote, "nor disclose the full British plan to Feisal"), this aspect is not sufficiently developed, nor do we get any sense of the mental anguish this caused Lawrence. "We are calling them to fight for us on a lie," he wrote in one wartime dispatch, "and I can't stand it."

### The Anti-War Lawrence

Ignoring this sustained theme in *Seven Pillars*, Bolt has instead chosen to focus on another controversial aspect of Lawrence's complex and many-sided personality—the sado-masochistic tendencies which Lawrence's wartime experiences revealed to him in all their shocking dimensions. In numerous passages throughout *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence's fascination with pain and violence, whether inflicting it upon others or experiencing it himself, is explicitly discussed. These tendencies were directly related to Lawrence's conflicted attitudes about sexuality, but Bolt's screenplay steers clear of this sensationalistic area. Lawrence's dramatic if somewhat oblique description in *Seven Pillars* of his torture and homosexual rape by the Turks at Deraa, and the masochistic sexual pleasure he experienced from the beating, is rather sanitized in the film.\*

\*Major revelations about the actual extent of Lawrence's masochism, including the postwar development of a flagellation disorder, were first revealed in Phillip Knightley and Colin Simpson's *The Secret Lives of Lawrence of Arabia* (1969), which also used newly declassified government documents and Lawrence's previously unavailable papers in the Bodleian Library to further document his political activities as British intelligence agent. Among the most significant and revealing of the dozens of biographies on Lawrence published since his death in 1935 are Suleiman Mousa's *T.E. Lawrence: An Arab View* (1966), John E. Mack's Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Prince of Our Disorder: The Life of T.E. Lawrence* (1976), which examines the psychiatric dimensions of Lawrence's personality, and Thomas J. O'Donnell's *The Confessions of T.E. Lawrence* (1979).



"By dramatically contrasting Lawrence to the scheming politicians and cynical military leaders around him, Bolt portrays Lawrence as merely a romantic adventurer and naive idealist when, in fact, he was a full-fledged member of the Arab Bureau, a political intelligence and propaganda division of the Foreign Office, and founding editor of the *Arab Bulletin*, a weekly secret newsletter for British political and military leaders."



Top, Lawrence (Peter O'Toole) must execute Farraj (Michel Ray) after he is seriously wounded; Bottom, Lawrence as sadist in the 'bloodbath at Tafas' sequence.

Avoiding these kinkier connotations of masochism, the film merely depicts Lawrence's stoic qualities and public displays of physical endurance (the show-off ability to extinguish a flaming match between his bare fingers is the film's neat visualization of this trait). Bolt does develop the theme of sadism, however, introducing it during Lawrence's first meeting with Allenby when, explaining how he had to execute a man with his pistol, Lawrence uneasily admits that he "enjoyed it." (That line as well as the rest of the dialog in this scene is entirely Bolt's conception, since Lawrence offered only the briefest description of the meeting in *Seven Pillars*.)

The dramatic payoff of this theme occurs in the film's recreation of the bloodbath at Tafas. As the Arab Army drives for Damascus, Lawrence and his men come upon an Arab village which has been pillaged by the Turks, and discover the mutilated corpses of women and children strewn about obscenely. Enraged, they attack the retreating Turkish column, surrounding and slaughtering hundreds of them in revenge. As Lawrence described the scene in *Seven Pillars*:

*By my order we took no prisoners for the only time in our war. . . In a madness born of the horror of Tafas we killed and killed, even blowing in the heads of the fallen and of the animals; as though their death and running blood could slake our agony. . . this was one of the nights in which mankind went crazy . . . and when others' lives became toys to break and throw away.*

In the film, Lawrence is shown struggling mightily with the dark forces inside him, but, unable to control his rising bloodlust, he both condones the massacre by his order of "No prisoners!" and participates himself in a fit of sadistic frenzy. The newly restored footage and some re-editing of this sequence underscores the brutality of the Turkish massacre of Arab women and children and the consequent revulsion which unleashes the Arab slaughter of Turkish troops. The wartime syndrome of butchery responding to butchery is now made clearer, but no less disturbing, including a grisly new shot in which a Turkish soldier enters the frame, his hands raised in surrender, only to be shot in the face by Lawrence at point blank range.

In heightening, even exaggerating, the strain of sadism in Lawrence's personality to the detriment of other equally important aspects,



Lawrence visits the Turkish military hospital

Bolt has produced a biased and one-sided portrait. While it is understandable that a screenwriter will emphasize certain characteristics of a historical figure for dramatic purposes, Bolt is only too aware of the dangers of such an approach, having stated that he doesn't believe "this artistic license extends to the point at which an author takes a historic figure . . . to illuminate a modern theme. . . . If you use figures who rightly were revered . . . for their courage and merit, you belittle and obscure them by borrowing their actual suffering, heroism and greatness for some idea of your own."

In developing his dramatic portrayal of Lawrence, Bolt has nevertheless taken considerable liberties by concentrating on how warfare licenses the unfettered expression of this dark and perverse side of Lawrence's personality. This selective emphasis on only one out of a complex mosaic of often contradictory motivations — taking at face value what many historians and biographers regard as just another example of Lawrence's tendency at self-dramatization—results in a seriously misleading character portrait and turns what might have been a richer, more complex historical drama into a simpler, more conventional, albeit well-intentioned, anti-war film.

Bolt is a WWII veteran of the R.A.F. and Army who later in life became a pacifist. He has been active in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, even briefly serving time in jail for his beliefs. Describing the theme of *Lawrence*, and thereby revealing his view of the serviceability of T.E. Lawrence as the vehicle for his anti-war message, Bolt has written: "When men go to war their own best qualities are turned against them. Their virtues are made to serve the ends of destruction and waste. In time of war we need not

look for a villain; the heroes are more than enough."

### The Arabs Get Sold Short

The film likewise does a disservice to the cause of Arab nationalism. It emphasizes and glamorizes, even more than his own admittedly exaggerated account in *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence's role in leading and directing the Arab revolt, with the principal Arab leaders—including Prince Feisal, Sherif Ali, and Auda abu Tayi—assuming clearly subservient roles. At the beginning of the film, the Arab revolt is shown in a decidedly sorry state of affairs, badly battered by Turkish artillery and aircraft, and lacking a sense of direction or purpose. The Arabs, Feisal admits, need "a miracle," and the film presents Lawrence as just the Englishman to provide it.

In this regard, the film also takes at face value Lawrence's claim that the plan to capture Akaba from the landward side was solely his inspiration, whereas most historical accounts acknowledge Auda's leading role in conceiving and organizing the assault. In the film, in fact, Lawrence is shown having to seduce Auda into joining the expedition with the promise of Turkish gold. The Howeitat sheikh was more than just the colorful desert warrior seen in Anthony Quinn's spirited performance. He was also an ardent Arab nationalist who, like many other Bedouin leaders, agreed to submerge longstanding tribal enmities during the war in order to ally his forces with others under Feisal's leadership.

Omar Sharif's Sherif Ali ibn el Kharish is very loosely modelled on Sherif Ali ibn el Hussein, a young Harith sheikh who played a prominent role in the revolt, but who in the film serves mainly as the Arab foil to Lawrence's English adventurer. Initially skeptical and mistrusting, Ali is soon won over by Lawrence and becomes his faithful comrade-in-arms and, whenever Lawrence's egomania or bloodlust get the better of him, his moral conscience, but who is always shown at a loss without Lawrence's inspired leadership.

If the film for the most part avoids traditional Arab stereotypes, even disparaging the racism of the British military toward the 'wogs' and 'gippos,' it may be because it has been holding in reserve a slew of Orientalist clichés for the concluding scenes. Having reached Damascus before Allenby and the British Army, Lawrence and the Arabs, acting in

the name of Prince Feisal, have established the Arab National Council. Lawrence makes a heroic, nearly singlehanded effort to mediate the petty disputes between the perpetually factious tribes, but the Arabs prove themselves unprepared to assume power. Lawrence tries to chair a mass assembly of the Council, but it quickly degenerates. Auda is shown walking atop the conference table in a heated argument with Ali; the city's electrical power and telephone service have ceased to function due to Arab inability to operate generators; and fires burn out of control due to lack of water pressure. As the Arabs squabble among themselves, the near-comic *mise-en-scène* reveals one sheikh blithely stuffing fistfuls of rice into his mouth, while, in the background, another rides his camel into the meeting hall. Soon afterwards, Bedouin troops are seen dispiritedly leaving the city to return to the desert. In a now virtually deserted meeting hall late at night, one sheikh snoring away in his chair, Lawrence continues to sign government decrees, the White Man's Burden clearly weighing heavily on his shoulders. (In actual historical fact, Feisal's Arab government ruled Damascus for nearly two years until the French forced him out militarily.)

It's almost as if Bolt had to fall back on such colonialist clichés in order to provide a neat dramatic conclusion to the film. He has provided little sense of the mental strain imposed on Lawrence by his duplicitous political role, and even less understanding of how the capture of Damascus signals—at least for the time being, until the Paris Peace Conference the following year—the end of the political game for Lawrence. The audience can thus only assume that it is a combination of battle fatigue and Lawrence's frustration at the Arabs' inability to capitalize on the victory he has handed them (a departing Ali comments to Lawrence, "You tried very hard to give us Damascus") that leads to the burnt-out shell of a man who stares numbly from behind the dusty windshield at the film's final fade-out.

In perpetuating Lawrence's inflated claims to leadership of the Arab revolt, the film caters to the same old self-flattering Western prejudices about Third World peoples, those benighted colonial subjects who are incapable of ruling themselves. Lawrence's value to the Arab revolt had less to do with his leadership skills or charismatic personality than with his role in supplying arms, equipment, and money.

The final drive on Damascus, for example, had less to do with Lawrence's inspirational rousing of the Bedouin tribes than with his means to deliver 2,000 camels at the right time.

Lean has explained that in *Lawrence of Arabia* "the political arena was not our main concern," and that is certainly true as regards the screenplay's limited characterization of Lawrence's political role and motives. In dramatically portraying such a historical personage and historical period, however, there's simply no way to avoid political issues. Lawrence was a man whose life was shaped by the intensely political circumstances of the historical era in which he lived, and whose actions during the desert campaign became the vehicle for conflicting national and personal aspirations and needs. T.E. Lawrence was a self-described "standing civil war" whose conflicted emotions grew out of his involvement in what he knew to be an imperialist enterprise. A fuller psychological portrait would have naturally involved a consideration of broader political issues, resulting in a perhaps less enigmatic but certainly a more dramatically compelling, because more understandable, protagonist.

Thanks to the talents of David Lean and his creative team—including not only the aforementioned Freddie Young and Anne Coates, but also John Box (Production Designer), John Stoll (Art Director), and Maurice Jarre (composer)—*Lawrence of Arabia* is unquestionably superb cinema. As good as Robert Bolt's screenplay is—and it is remarkable for its swiftly paced presentation of dramatic events, intense character interactions, and witty dialog (although many of the best lines derive from T.E. Lawrence's own writings)—its disproportionate focus on one of the most debatable traits of its main character to the virtual exclusion of his perhaps most obsessive characteristic, results in distorted biography and, therefore, questionable history. As screenwriter, Bolt has ultimately bungled the rare opportunity to illuminate broader social and political issues by fully dramatizing the psychological complexity of a significant historical character.

Several of the newly restored scenes do begin to flesh out some of these slighted complexities, hinting at just how close the film comes to achieving greatness on all levels. In so doing, they also suggest that there is no reason why compelling drama cannot grow out of a sense of historical fidelity. ■



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Photos, top to bottom: Lawrence mediates Arab disputes