



Representations of Lawrence of Arabia: From Said's *Orientalism* (1978) to David Lean's Film *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)

by Alexander Lyon Macfie

Orienting Paradise: Western Projections of the East

Lawrence of Arabia (1962)

Director:
David Lean

Runtime:
227min

Country:
United Kingdom

Language:
English, Arabic, Turkish

AWARDS

BEST PICTURE
BEST DIRECTOR & 5 more
Academy Awards 1963

BEST BRITISH FILM
BEST BRITISH ACTOR
(Peter O' Toole)
BEST BRITISH SCREENPLAY
BAFTA Awards 1963

BEST MOTION PICTURE -
DRAMA & 5 more
Golden Globes 1963

Lowell Thomas and the invention of the "Lawrence of Arabia" myth

Surprisingly, in *Orientalism* Said pays little or no attention to Lowell Thomas, the American journalist who, in the period immediately following the end of the First World War, not only turned Lawrence into a world figure but also, incidentally, in the process created one of the most powerful orientalist images ever invented. Unofficially sponsored by the American government, which wanted to increase popular support for American participation in the war, Thomas, after a series of failed attempts to discover a story with the right kind of popular appeal in Europe, visited General Allenby in Jerusalem in January 1918, where he met Lawrence and had his photographer, Harry Chase, take several photographs of him in Arab dress. Then, in March 1918 he visited Lawrence again in Akaba, where he stayed for some 14 days and acquired several more photographs. Thus equipped with his photographs of Lawrence, a rudimentary knowledge of the desert campaign, and a brilliant imagination, Thomas gave a series of lectures in March 1919, at the Century Theatre off Central Park West in New York, entitled "*With Allenby in Palestine and the Conquest of Holy Arabia*". After an uncertain start, so successful were these lectures, the title of which was quickly changed to "*With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence of Arabia*", that in the following years Thomas was invited to give his lecture, or travelogue as he sometimes called it, variously at the Madison Square Garden, New York, the Royal Opera House, London—where it was illustrated with other photographs of Lawrence in Arab dress, taken this time in London, more than 240 lantern slides, some 30 film segments, Levantine music and even an oriental dance routine—the Albert Hall and the Queen's Hall. Indeed, according to Joel C. Hodson in *Lawrence of Arabia and American Culture* (1995), in the four years from March 1919, a period during which Thomas travelled not only to Europe but also to Australia and New Zealand, Thomas may have given his lecture as many as 4000 times, speaking to more than four million people. As a result, by the time that Lawrence published the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935), he had already become very well known as "Lawrence of Arabia", the "Prince of Mecca", and the "Uncrowned King of Arabia"—images further augmented by Thomas's publication in 1924 of his *With Lawrence in Arabia*.



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Sam Spiegel and David Lean's film, *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)

Hodson is in almost no doubt that the Lawrence myth as cultivated by Thomas in his lectures and books, and of course by Lawrence himself in the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, contributed greatly to the rise of what he refers to as the Hollywood "sun and sand" film, a genre that almost always promoted the orientalization of the Arab "other" as sensual, cruel and exotic. In the 1920s such films included *The Sheik* (1921) (with Rudolph Valentino), *The Sheik of Araby* (1922), *The Arab* (1924), and *The Sun of a Sheik* (1926) (again with Rudolph Valentino); and in the 1930s *Morocco* (1940), *The Lost Patrol* (1934), and *Beau Geste* (1939). But surprisingly, it was not until 1962 when Sam Spiegel and David Lean, using a screenplay written by Robert Bolt and Michael Wilson, made *Lawrence of Arabia*, that the Lawrence of Arabia myth was at long last translated directly into film; though failed attempts had already been made by Alexander Korda, the Hungarian-born British film producer, in 1934; by J. Arthur Rank in the late 1950s; and by Herbert Wilcox, the British film producer, who appears to have flirted with the idea of making a film about Lawrence on several occasions. Not that all such attempts to dramatize the Lawrence of Arabia myth in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s were unsuccessful. In the late 1950s, Terence Rattigan wrote *Ross: A Dramatic Portrait*, a play based on Lawrence's experiences in Arabia and the Royal Armed Forces, performed with Alex Guinness as Lawrence in 1960 at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket. Surprisingly, Rattigan originally intended the work as a screenplay for David Lean, but the project came to nothing as Lean, for reasons which remain obscure, withdrew.

The orientalism contained in the Sam Spiegel and David Lean version of the *Lawrence of Arabia* myth appears at first sight evident enough. In *Lawrence of Arabia*, Lawrence is represented as the archetypal "White Man" busy managing—and even producing—the Orient (Arabia) on behalf of a Western colonial/imperial power. In the process, according to Ella Shohat in "*Gender and Culture of Empire*" (1991), Lawrence unveils the mysteries of an unknown space, accomplishing thereby a sort of rite de passage that allegorizes the Western achievement of virile heroic stature, or as General Murray puts it in the film, makes a "man" of him. The Oriental (the Arab), by contrast, as Said remarks in *Orientalism*, cannot represent himself but must be represented, in this case by Lawrence. It is Lawrence who, in the film, as in the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, carries the storyline, Lawrence who gives shape to the Arab Revolt, and Lawrence who directs its strategy. And when a second opinion is called for, it is to Lowell Thomas (played by Jackson Bentley) that the film turns and not one of the Arabs; though Emir Feisal and Sharif Ali do have one or two pointed

things to say from time to time. Nor is it lost on the Arabs in the film that Lawrence describes them as a little people, a silly people, “greedy, barbarous and cruel”. As for the Turks, they are represented as being cruel and beastly, murderers and rapists, much in need, no doubt, of European tutelage.

Such a characterization of *Lawrence of Arabia*—as an archetypal orientalist work—is, however, somewhat misleading for, as several students of the subject have pointed out, David Lean’s treatment of the Lawrence of Arabia myth in his film is deeply ambiguous. Steven C. Caton, in *Lawrence of Arabia: A Film’s Anthropology* (1999), for example, points out that *Lawrence of Arabia*, far from being an archetypal orientalist work, the product of an imperialist and colonialist consciousness, is actually strongly anti-imperialist and anticolonialist, concerned more with issues of gender and sexuality than with those of colonialism and imperialism. Michael A. Anderegg, in *Lawrence of Arabia: The Man, the Myth, the Movie* (1982), discovers in the film three “particularly absorbing” contradictions: that between weakness and strength; that between the good and bad imperialist; and that between self-promotion and self-abnegation. It is on these paradoxes, in Anderegg’s opinion, much more than on any specific account of Lawrence’s life, that David Lean and Robert Bolt constructed their version of the Lawrence myth. And Alain Silver and James Ursini, in *David Lean and his Films* (1974) find in *Lawrence of Arabia* not an historical account of Lawrence’s adventures in Arabia, or even an orientalist epic, but the story of a man’s discovery of his individual destiny and “its consequential almost megalomaniac alienation” (163–81).

In his interesting and perceptive analysis of *Lawrence of Arabia*, particularly of the scenes concerning Lawrence’s meetings with Feisal and Allenby, Caton shows that David Lean in his film, employing a method which Caton refers to as “dialectical criticism”, actually creates an alternative narrative to that provided by the standard orientalist paradigm. This narrative identifies Lawrence not as the symbolic embodiment of the European “self”, busily engaged in the political management and manipulation of an oriental “other”, but as a psychologically empty vessel, a “desert”, subject to the unscrupulous management and manipulation not only of Allenby, the archetypal British imperialist, duplicitous, deceitful and dishonourable, but also of Feisal, the subtle and slightly less duplicitous instrument of Hashemite imperialism; the film makes clear that Feisal’s ambitions are not so much national as imperial. In this world it is the Arab (Feisal, Ali ibn el Kharish, even Auda abu Tayi in his own peculiar way) who is made to appear sober, rational and judicious, and Lawrence, portrayed as a sado-masochist, who appears increasingly irrational, hysterical and

even psychopathic. In *Lawrence of Arabia*, in other words, the traditional representation of the European “self” as rational, humane and superior, and the oriental “other” as irrational, aberrant and inferior, is reversed. Nor is Caton in any doubt that that is what Lean and Bolt (and probably also Wilson) intended for, as he points out, in their early days both Lean and Bolt had been communists, and they remained strong supporters of nuclear disarmament; Bolt spent a period in prison for civil disobedience in 1961. As Bolt remarked in an article published in the *New York Times* in 1962, “I was brought up to disapprove of figures like T.E. Lawrence as being the colourful ornaments and stalking horses of imperialism.”

Anderegg shows in *Lawrence of Arabia: The Man, the Myth, the Movie* that Lean and Bolt constructed their film on the basis of three paradoxes which they identified in Lawrence’s life: the paradox of Lawrence, the Oxford graduate, aesthete, connoisseur of fine printed books, collector of brass rubbings, possibly homosexual, versus the dashing, magnetic Oriental, Prince of Mecca and uncrowned King of Arabia; the paradox of Lawrence, the lover of the East and liberator of the Arabs, versus Lawrence, the agent of British imperialism and betrayer of his Arab friends; and the paradox of Lawrence, the flamboyant exhibitionist who dresses up in Arab clothes, versus Lawrence, the recluse, who hides out in London, the RAF and the Tank Corps, and refuses to have his biography written. In this way, as Anderegg sees it, in *Lawrence of Arabia*, Lean and Bolt succeed in writing an essay on the paradox of heroism, the conflict between history and myth, and the difference between self and self-image. In particular, Anderegg concludes, Lean and Bolt, far from identifying Lawrence as the typical, Western, masculine hero, and the Arab as the necessarily effeminate other, as the orientalist paradigm requires, actually represent him as a sexual deviant (possibly a homosexual), a sadist and a masochist, albeit one who succeeds at the cost of his mental stability in transforming himself into a successful man of action. What Lawrence’s (played by Peter O’Toole) body language portrays in the film, in other words, is not masculinity but a stereotypical “gayness”, one that contrasts sharply with the evident masculinity of General Murray (Donald Wolfitt), General Allenby (Jack Hawkins), Ali Ibn el Kharish (Omar Sharif) and Auda Abu Tayi (Anthony Quinn).

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*This version has been edited for length.