A HUNGER FOR DESOLATE PLACES: LAWRENCE OF ARABIA, ORIENTALISM, AND ANTI-IMPERIALISM

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T.E. Lawrence, an eccentric and polarizing British Army officer also known as “Lawrence of Arabia,” arose to great fame after his involvement in conflicts in the Arabian Peninsula. Lawrence’s involvement in the Middle East during WWI was of immeasurable significance and led directly to the partitioning of Ottoman territories. Additionally, his impact on British culture was of paramount importance. David Lean’s 1962 film Lawrence of Arabia delineates both Lawrence’s military advances and his personal grapplings with the peoples and cultures of Arabia.¹ Portraying expansive scenes of the Arabian desert and depicting Lawrence’s personal involvement in the war as a leader, the masterpiece of film was met with great critical acclaim. It was nominated for ten Academy Awards and won seven, including Best Director and Best Picture. Having said, the film’s grandeur and success often overshadow the underlying motives of Lean in his depiction of the charismatic Lawrence. Lean illustrates Lawrence’s interests and passion regarding Arabia and, further, British interests in general, through an orientalist lens. The film dialectically opposes its own orientalist perspective, however, with abounding anti-colonial sentiment. Lean used a calculated precision in illustrating Lawrence as his hero, ultimately resulting in an endlessly complex and relevant film that made a significant impact on British culture of the time.

Lawrence of Arabia, although a film that is, according to Dennis Bingham in his book Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre, inherently “difficult to analyze”² must be examined in two aspects: its orientalist perspective and its anti-colonial premise. Orientalism, according to Edward Said in his book of the same name, justified imperial and colonial advances for the Europeans who devised it.³ Said undoubtedly believes Lawrence of

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2. Canton, Steven C. Lawrence of Arabia: A Film's Anthropology (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 77.
*Arabia* to perpetuate this imperialist mindset, mentioning Lawrence several times in his book.

Firstly, the orientalist elements of the film manifest themselves through both imagery and dialogue. At the moment of the viewer’s very first glimpse of the spectacular desert, the film’s widely recognizable, sensuous score begins to play, giving the Arabian landscape a distinctly exotic aura.⁴ Without a single word being spoken, this immediately presents the world of Arabia as mysterious and unknown land. The film, in many facets, is a tale of discovery—into the mind of its antiheroic protagonist and into the land of his conquests. The latter, deeply entrenched in what Said called, “a frank acknowledgement that it was a world elsewhere, apart from the ordinary attachments, sentiments, and values of our world in the West”⁵ uses orientalism not only to sustain Lawrence’s fascination with Arabia, but also to captivate the film's viewers. In a scene where Lawrence delineates his plan to cross the Nefud desert and take the crucial port city of Aqaba, obscenely clichéd images in the Arab Prince Faisal’s rickety, candle-lit tent of Arabs lying on carpets and animal hides while reciting the Qur’an further exoticize the Arab world.⁶ The film portrays the Nefud as an unparalleled wasteland referred to by Sherif Ali in the film as “the sun’s anvil.”⁷ After leaving Aqaba, Lawrence’s servant Daud dies in a cartoonish spot of quicksand.⁸ Almost unconsciously, these images instill a sense of awe in an audience far removed from the barren desert landscape of the Middle East. These settings contribute to an overarching image of Arabia as a vastly different and separate realm from that of its Western viewers.

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⁴ Lean, *Lawrence of Arabia.*  
⁵ Said, *Orientalism,* 190.  
⁶ Lean, *Lawrence of Arabia.*  
⁷ Ibid.  
⁸ Ibid.
The scope of the film’s orientalist perspective is even more apparent in its characters and dialogue. *Lawrence of Arabia* frequently posits its Arab characters as naïve, ignorant, and in dire need of British assistance. This “distillation of essential ideas about the Orient—its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality… its backwardness” places Lawrence in a Messianic role. A military mastermind, Lawrence arrives in the desert to evaluate the Arabs who, according to the British Colonel Brighton, “simply [do] not understand what modern weapons do.” Faisal almost idiotically commands his men, only armed with swords, to “stand and fight” during an airstrike where they are slaughtered. With his brilliant plan to and take Aqaba, Lawrence saves Faisal and his men at their lowliest of states following a tragic attack. On a larger scale, the film deems the Arabs as completely incapable of autonomous rule. After the seizure of Damascus and the establishment of the Arab Council, only havoc ensues. A riotous scene in the town hall, the makeshift meeting-place of the Council, depicts uncontrollable Arabs arguing over the power outage and the necessity of working telephones. This is promptly juxtaposed with a morbid scene of a hospital in Damascus overflowing with wounded men. A stark dichotomy then appears between the chaos of the Council and the calm, orderly, strategic meeting of Lawrence with General Allenby, Dryden, and Faisal regarding the need for British intervention. Without the British, one would assume the Arab-ruled Damascus to crumble. This degradation of the Arabs to such an unenlightened people in this light epitomizes the archetypal orientalist image that Said’s theory criticizes.

11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
While Said's definition of orientalism denotes an inherent justification for imperialism, Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* strongly advocates anti-imperialism. Lawrence himself, as he is portrayed in the film, wished to remove himself from the colonial mindset of his British command. In his conversation alone with Prince Faisal after discussing plans for Aqaba, Lawrence expresses a desire for not only Arab independence, but Arab cultural greatness. Faisal recounts the splendor of the Andalusian city Cordova, where there were, “two miles of public lighting in the streets when London was a village.” In response to this nostalgic declaration, Lawrence remarks, “[t]ime to be great again, my Lord.” Faisal also expresses his fear that "the English have a great hunger for desolate places," connoting a corrupt and villainous greed on behalf of the English with regards to their colonial advances. While this "hunger" is perceivably the same motivator in Lawrence's fascination with Arabia, Lawrence antithetically opposes the colonialist mindset that Said would argue it intrinsically bears. This is due in large part to what Dennis Bingham outlines as Lawrence's ambivalence. Lawrence, torn between his idealistic desires for both Arabia and his desire for solitude and anonymity, looks upon the manipulative and corrupted rule of his superiors with scorn, all the while they advance their own plan for rule. The film details his possible delusions of grandeur as Lawrence revels in the spectacle of his own image, referring to himself as an “extraordinary” individual. At times, he was described as “the most shameless exhibitionist

14. Ibid.  
15. Ibid.  
16. Ibid.  
17. Ibid.  
18. Ibid.  
since Barnum and Bailey.” At other times, Lawrence pleads for seclusion, asking Allenby to “leave [him] alone” when allured with the task of leading the Arabs to Damascus. This ambivalence, in addition to larger contradictory viewpoints in the film as a whole, enables seemingly incompatible attitudes to coexist.

The historical context in which the film was released gives great insight into the director’s motive’s in making the film. Lean would have been keenly aware of two important factors with regards to British overseas involvement at the time of Lawrence of Arabia's release: the diminishing scope of colonial territories and the Suez Canal crisis of 1956. By 1962, the British Empire had shrunk immensely from that of the empire depicted in the film, yet still controlled countless colonial territories around the globe in Central America, South America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and even the Arabian peninsula. Colonialism was at the forefront of many British minds at the time, and the Suez Canal crisis, specifically representing what Steven C. Canton in his book Lawrence of Arabia: A Film's Anthropology, calls "the government's defense of its imperial assets in the Middle East, in spite of the fact that they had dwindled to no more than a ludicrous symbol of British power,” divided public opinion greatly. Lean advances his anti-colonial viewpoint with regards to these issues by portraying Lawrence's superiors as conniving and scheming, rendering this image by the contrast of two lines from the British Army officials. First, Brighton insists to Prince Faisal during a conversation in Faisal’s tent that "British and Arab interests are one and the same.” Later, Allenby claims to Lawrence that "Britain has no interest in

22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Canton, Lawrence of Arabia: A Film's Anthropology, 177.
25. Lean, Lawrence of Arabia.
Arabia," only to seize rule of Damascus from the ill-suited Arabs near the end of the film. This portrayal demonizes the colonial mindset of the British while, in contrast, the adventurous and pro-Arab Lawrence "had appeal... across the range of British culture" and opposed the nefarious British militants behind the deceit. His enigmatic personality and valiant victories make him a compelling character, therein expanding the impact of his own anti-imperialist perspective. Even a certain tragedy is felt at the end of the film where a dejected Lawrence is driven away from Damascus, his best efforts having failed to bring true Arab independence. Bingham describes this downfall as “the geopolitical tragedy of a man who feels he has led his followers not to freedom but into subjugation.” This brings the film to a culmination sharply critiquing the colonial attitude of the time.

While Said might argue the film to be a purely orientalist film, it’s anti-imperial theme is impossible to ignore. These seemingly antithetical ideas combine in the film to form a conflicting and important whole. Its orientalist viewpoint, permeating the imagery and dialogue of the film, objectifies the Arab people and exoticizes the Orient. Yet, released against the backdrop of fading British colonialism, its discourse critiqued imperialism in a divided culture. Lawrence of Arabia, at once both delving into the mind of one of WWI’s most mysterious figures and making a much larger commentary on British colonialism of the time, calls into question the very nature of the British Empire as a whole—ultimately becoming one of the most influential films of the century.

26. Ibid.
27. Bingham, Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre, 75.
28. Ibid, 81.
Bibliography


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