Lawrence of Arabia (1962): A Tragic Hero in an Ever-Lasting Quest

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“I loved you, so I drew these tides of man into my hands
and wrote my will across the sky in stars
to earn you Freedom, the seven pillared worthy house (...).”
(T.E. Lawrence, dedication to S. A. in Seven Pillars of Wisdom)

The film Lawrence of Arabia, directed by David Lean and released in 1962, is based on the figure of T. E. Lawrence, the legendary English officer who led Arabs in their struggle against the Turks during World War I.

Having attended Oxford from 1906 to 1909, where he studied archaeology, he first travelled to the Middle East on scholarships to study the influence of the Crusaders on modern architecture. There he stayed for months, making Arab friends and learning their language. Later on, at the outbreak of the war of 1914, when England allied with France against Germany and Turkey, he was dispatched to Cairo, in Egypt, to work for the Bureau of Arab Affairs, and became involved in the Revolt of the Arabs against the Turks in 1916.

Meanwhile, he was assigned a position as liaison officer to Prince Feisal, and took part in military operations, blowing up Turkish trains and taking the city of Aqaba. In 1918, under orders from General Edward Allenby, he led an army of Arab tribes to coordinate with the British forces in their attack and capture of Damascus. After his return to England, he enlisted in the Royal Air Force under a false name and in 1935 he died in a motorcycle accident, which some thought a suicide. Winston Churchill, one of the prominent figures who attended his funeral, considered him: “one of the greatest beings of our time” (Santas 29), and he was praised both as a man of action and as a classical scholar who, among other things,
translated the *Odyssey* of Homer. His autobiography, entitled *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, published in 1926 with his own account of the two-year Arab campaign, did prove him a literary master and historian, while contributing to his status of a mythical hero of the desert and a liberator of an oppressed people.

Owing to this reputation of a hero of modern times, several attempts were made to film his story during the 1950s, namely by Alexander Korda, but they were thwarted by Lawrence’s living brother, Professor Arnold W. Lawrence, who was his brother’s literary executor and who refused to sell the rights of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* to cinema producers.

Nevertheless Sam Spiegel, the producer of Lean’s epic *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), was eventually able to buy the rights from Professor Lawrence. Born in Poland, Sam Spiegel was one of the independent producers who, with the gradual collapse of the studio system in the 1950s, began to come to the fore in Hollywood, being involved in a limited number of projects and usually releasing them through a major studio like Columbia. Aiming at producing films for the world market, they engaged top directors and well-known stars.

In 1959 Sam Spiegel contacted Michael Wilson, who had collaborated on the script of Lean’s previous film, assigning him to write a script for his new epic. Apparently owing to the excess of action sequences, his version was, however, disliked by Lean, who decided to invite Robert Bolt, the author of the famous play *A Man for All Seasons*, to take over the project and rewrite the screenplay.

Although using *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* as his basic source, Bolt deliberately chose to alter history for dramatic purposes, with the agreement of the director who, while not disregarding historical accuracy, did not think that an epic film had to be a historical document.

The question of accuracy and loyalty to the original source is thus unavoidable, and one on which historians, critics, and filmmakers do not always agree. To falsify history is regarded by some as unacceptable and even Steven Spielberg, an avowed admirer of Lean and of *Lawrence of Arabia*, admits that the inaccurate account of the Arab Revolt is nowadays more liable to hard criticism than at the time the film was released (Santas xxix). But his overall opinion is still extremely laudatory, as we may conclude from the following statement: “I don’t know any director who doesn’t go
down on one knee whenever *The Bridge on the River Kwai* or *Lawrence of Arabia* is discussed. I feel a great deal of reverence for David Lean". (Organ 60)

The main departures from the source are obviously related to the necessity to compress the whole story within a film whose length is, nevertheless, much above the average (222 minutes in the original version).1 Thus, for instance, Lawrence’s expedition against Aqaba is shown as the first major event, which omits an entire sequence described in *Seven Pillars*. On the other hand, Robert Bolt chose to make Lawrence ignorant of the so-called Picot-Sykes agreement — an agreement between France and Britain — until a crucial scene in the later stages of the film, while the historical Lawrence was aware, almost from the beginning, of the secret Western projects, which caused him a heavy feeling of guilt. In his introduction to the book, T. E. Lawrence had indeed confessed:

> It was evident from the beginning that if we won the war these promises would be dead paper, and had I been an honest adviser of the Arabs I would have advised them to go home and not risk their lives fighting for such stuff (...). I risked the fraud, on my conviction that Arab help was necessary to our cheap and speedy victory in the East, and that better we win and break our word than lose. (Lawrence 8)

Another departure from the book is the importance given to the episode at Deraa, after Lawrence is lashed and possibly raped by the Turks. Although this event is recorded in *Seven Pillars*, it is not described as a turning point

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1 “At the time of the premiere in December 1962, the picture ran 222 minutes. When the film was about to go into general release in February 1963 (...) Spiegel hoped that strategic cuts would increase the tempo of certain scenes that seemed to develop too slowly (...). Lean aimed to shave away twenty minutes so carefully that the audience would never notice. He and Coates thus brought the running time to 202 minutes. (...) A quarter of a century after Lawrence’s initial release, the film archivist Robert Harris got permission from Columbia to restore the film to its original length. Lean was euphoric. (...) When Lean took a look at the restored print of the film, he decided to snip out a few frames here and there that he thought slowed down the pace; by doing so he brought the running time to 217 minutes, slightly under the original 222 minutes. (Phillips 315-317)
in the attitude of the author, who goes on with his drive to Damascus with no signs of change of personality.

These and other inaccuracies of the film, mainly related to historical figures and events, lead critics like Constantine Santas to consider the film as follows:

Not so much a chronicle of the Arab campaign — as *Seven Pillars* does — but a story of personal relations, the rise and fall of a hero, who is (...) a ‘flawed’ character — a word used many times by Lean himself to describe the heroes he prefers. (Santas 32)

On more than one occasion, Lean has actually made the following confession: “Lawrence is an enigma and I’ve always been fond of enigmas. I liked the ‘flawed heroes’. Perfection is dull”. (Phillips 257)

As we shall see, Lean’s avowed predilections for tragic themes and flawed characters may be seen as responsible for the profile of a protagonist who happens to be similar to the tragic heroes of Ancient Greek tragedies, while the plot also incorporates elements traditionally pertaining to that genre. But we should not forget that T. E. Lawrence himself put emphasis on his own centrality in the story he had told, namely by writing: “In these pages the history is not of the Arab movement, but of me in it”. (Lawrence 6). As for the accuracy of the narrative, he insisted on warning the reader that it should not be seen as an impartial document. In his own words: “It does not pretend to be impartial. I was fighting for my hand, upon my own midden. Please take it as a personal narrative pieced out of memory”. (Lawrence 3)

To this recognition of the subjectivity of Lawrence’s narrative we must add the subjectivity of a screenwriter more interested in character development than in historical action. The result is a film based on history, but concentrating mainly on two topics: the Arabian desert (which many have considered to be the real hero of the film) and Lawrence himself, in the superb performance of British actor Peter O’Toole.

As for the desert and the numerous long shots depicting its immensity, the intended impression is a sort of religious feeling, as reported by Lean: “When you are in the desert, you look into infinity. It’s no wonder that nearly all the great founders of religion came out of the desert” (Santas 42). Lean seems here to be echoing Lawrence himself, when he wrote about the
Bedouin of the desert: “There unconsciously he came near God” (Santas 42). And in the film, when an American journalist asks Lawrence: “Just what is it, Major Lawrence, that attracts you to the desert?” he gives an enigmatic answer: “It’s clean”.

Thus, more than being only an appropriate scenery for the action, the desert gains a symbolic dimension in the performance of a hero who will be eventually confronted with the presence of external forces which are stronger than human willpower — the notion so persistently cultivated in the West. Fate, or Necessity, a concept inherent both to the ancient tragic vision and to the Arab culture, may provide an explanation for some of the unexpected and undesired reversals, both personal and collective, which threaten the success of Lawrence’s quest. It is this same vision that is implicit in the sentence pronounced by Auda, one of the Arabs, when he observes: “It was written then”.

In the classic sense, as described by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, the tragic hero may suffer the interference of external forces, but the reversal of his fortune (*peripeteia*) is above all the consequence of a fatal flaw (*hamartia*) which he will sooner or later acknowledge, in a moment of the action which Aristotle called *anagnorisis*, and which precedes the catastrophe. Being of great stature, as shown in the course of his brave deeds, the hero also has a vulnerable side, either related to aspects of his personality, or as the result of his human ignorance, which makes him unknowingly commit grave errors.

In *Lawrence of Arabia* the traces of character quite evident from the start in the protagonist are his megalomania and vanity, or, using the words of the Arab Ali in the film, the “blasphemous conceit” of a Westerner convinced of his capacity to unite the Arab tribes and to reach victory over the Turks. *Hybris* is the Greek term used by Aristotle that may well be applied to an attitude that challenges the boundaries of human action, as indeed the historical Lawrence has admitted:

> The dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for that they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible. This I did. I meant to make a new nation, to restore a lost influence, to give twenty millions of Semites the foundation on which to build an inspired dream-palace of their national thoughts. (Lawrence 7)
In Part One of the film, after Lawrence’s death and funeral, a long flashback shows him as the real driving force in the course of events, in spite of his being initially regarded as “half-mad” and as an eccentric by his superiors. General Murray, for example, tells him: “I can’t make out whether you’re a bloody madman or just half-witted”, receiving for an answer the following unexpected remark: “I have the same problem, Sir”.

The climax of his actions is seen at the end of Part One, with Lawrence at the peak of his glory and being admired both by the Arabs and by his fellow officers. This climax also coincides with the entrance of an American journalist, Jackson Bentley (played by Arthur Kennedy) who is seeking a heroic figure in order to raise America’s interest in the European war. Acting as both a biographer and commentator within the film, he will say about Lawrence: “Yes, it was my privilege to know him and to make him known to the world. He was a poet, a scholar and a mighty warrior. He was also the most shameless exhibitionist since Barnum and Bailey”. Lawrence’s habit of dressing in Arab robes does undoubtedly enhance the exotic and romantic aura around him and, accordingly, Lean has put deliberate emphasis on the tone of excitement and adventure in this first half of the film, as becomes evident in his notes about the Aqaba sequence:

The mood is of pure success, the visual impression that of irresistible momentum … In other words let the suffering and squalor (sic) of war be evaded at all intent and the glamour of it deliberately exaggerated, so that the audience is left stirred, excited, breathless with no time to reflect, only to enjoy, after the long slog across the desert and with Sinai to come. (Chapman 102)

But from this point onwards, Lawrence becomes the involuntary puppet of external forces which he cannot control, being now aware of the existence of an agreement between Britain and France to have Arabia carved between them after the war. In spite of this revelation, and although feeling betrayed, Lawrence still goes on, in hopes that he could eventually unite and liberate the Arabs.

The turning point in the action takes place when Lawrence is captured at Deraa, being tortured and perhaps raped by the Turks — an episode which, in the film, seems to be responsible for his change of attitude and for his desire to get out of his military assignments. His inner conflict
between two selves — the European and the Arabian sides — seems definitely to have no resolution. Moreover, having been an instrument of warfare, he is now advised by his superiors to let them be the workers of peace — something which is somehow explained in the words of Prince Feisal, when he observes: “Young men make wars and the virtues of war are the virtues of young men: courage and hope for the future. Then old men make the peace, and the vices of peace are the vices of old men: mistrust and caution”.

Part Two of the film is altogether darker than Part One, both thematically and visually, with more scenes shot in darkness and in medium or close shots. And in the final scene Lawrence is seen returning to England with the broken posture of someone being exiled to his own country. On his way to the ship that will take him back to England, he passes a group of Arabs on camels, a sort of reminder of his recent past, and he also passes a motorcyclist — which evokes the initial scene of the film in which, riding a motorcycle, he finds a tragic death.

As James Chapman and Nicholas Cull have noticed: “Lawrence is unusual for a mainstream film, certainly for a Hollywood movie, in its suggestion of the futility of individual agency. (...) Lawrence ends in failure: its protagonist is powerless to deliver on his promises to the Arabs”. (Chapman 103)

The final sequences of the film give emphasis to the theme of colonialism, and especially to the British Empire’s manipulation of international conflicts. The liberation of Arabia from the Turks was, in fact, a means of advancing the interests of France and Britain in that region, and the film denounces it even more clearly than T. E. Lawrence had done in his book.

The historian Jeremy Wilson relates this fact to Bolt’s left-wing tendencies and to his being known as strongly anti-war and a prominent figure in the British anti-nuclear movement. He even quotes a letter written by Bolt, in which he has stated: “In the film, in dramatic — and therefore crude — terms I have tried to show how War and nothing else was the villain of the piece.”

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This historian therefore concludes that Bolt saw *Lawrence of Arabia* as an appropriate vehicle for his political message. But, on the other hand, we should also notice that anti-imperialism is a feature common to four of the five epics directed by Lean, in particular concerning the British Empire and the excesses and blindness of imperial powers in several parts of the world. Besides *Lawrence of Arabia*, this is the case in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *Ryan’s Daughter* (1970) and *A Passage to India* (1984).

Representing the apotheosis of the cinema of Empire, *Lawrence of Arabia* may actually be seen as a watershed, since after its release there was a pronounced shift towards a more critical representation of the imperial project—a shift which is somehow iconically represented in the division of this film into two parts, as James Chapman and Nicholas Cull have observed:

> The film is in two parts: a heroic and triumphalist first half, seen through the eyes of Lawrence himself; and an anti-heroic second half, a study of imperial hubris, told from the perspective of the American journalist Jackson Bentley. (Chapman 88)

As these authors stress in the work entitled *Projecting Empire*, *Lawrence of Arabia* stands now as one of the great masterpieces of world cinema, one of the greatest of all epics, and also: “a bitter and disillusioned study of the legacy of imperialism” (Chapman 107). In 1963 the film won 7 Oscars (including Best Picture and Best Director) and Peter O’Toole was nominated for an Oscar as Best Actor in a leading role, having won a BAFTA Film Award as Best British Actor. It is also worth while noticing that in 2003 the American Film Institute named T. E. Lawrence of *Lawrence of Arabia* one of the top ten film heroes of all time (Phillips xvii).

Moreover, the film may nowadays be seen as a statement about the remote reasons for today’s troubles in the Middle East, which go back to

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3 “The critique of imperialism suggested by *Lawrence of Arabia* indicated an ideological shift in the cinema of Empire. This was evident in films produced in the wake of *Lawrence*, particularly *Zulu* (1964) and *Khartoum* (1966). Both films dramatize successful challenges to British imperialism by emergent nationalist forces who are presented as worthy opponents”. (Chapman 106)
Word War I and its aftermath. The great powers and interests of that day are shown to be responsible for the lack of national unity among the Arabs, with the subsequent divisions of Arabia into different nations.

The dream of a united Arab nation, a dream shared by Lawrence and the Arabs, has thus collapsed and, in the twenty-first century, almost a hundred years after the incidents recorded in this film, peace in the Middle East seems more and more to be an ever-lasting quest. Or, as Kevin Jackson has suggested: “As long as the conflicts in the Middle East persist, Lawrence’s ghost will continue to return”. (Jackson 112)

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Abstract

Being based on a real-life historical hero — T. E. Lawrence, who fought side by side with the Arabs in the First World War — the cinematographic adaptation of his work *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* directed in 1962 by David Lean and with a screenplay by Robert Bolt gives us the portrait of an eminently tragic hero. Admitting that his heroic status in the film is by no means clear-cut, this paper aims at demonstrating that he nevertheless displays the main features of the typical tragic hero, as presented in the ancient Greek tragedies. The quest he is pursuing relates, on the other hand, to the history of a region that, until nowadays, has been continually torn by conflicts rooted in the First World War and its aftermath.

Keywords
Adaptation; tragic hero; quest; First World War

Resumo

Baseada num verdadeiro herói histórico — T. E. Lawrence, que lutou ao lado dos Árabes na 1ª Guerra Mundial — a adaptação cinematográfica da sua obra *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, realizada em 1962 por David Lean e com argumento de Robert Bolt, dá-nos o retrato de um herói eminentemente trágico. Admitindo que o seu estatuto de herói não tem contornos inequívocos no filme, pretendemos mostrar que, apesar disso, ele apresenta as principais características do típico herói trágico, tal como surge nas antigas tragédias gregas. Por outro lado, a sua demanda relaciona-se com a história de uma região que, até aos dias de hoje, tem sido dilacerada por conflitos enraizados na 1ª Guerra Mundial e suas conseqüências.

Palavras Chave
Adaptação; herói trágico; demanda; 1ª Guerra Mundial