

## SEVEN PILLARS OF SUCCESS? LAWRENCE OF ARABIA VERSUS LAWRENCE OF HOLLYWOOD

***Rufat SATTAROV***

*(Khazar University, Baku, Azerbaijan)*

Analyzing the history of a modern film, one cannot help notice the importance of David Lean's "Lawrence of Arabia" (1962) and its contribution to the history of cinematography. This epic film inspired many contradictory responses, and this itself suffices to explain the film's popularity. However, all these opinions had this in common: that the film was an extraordinary event, the importance of which went far beyond cinematographic circles.

Although this film was made by a British director and was from the very beginning generally praised by British reviewers, they generally complained of the film's length<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, this film received seven Academy Awards in 1962, including "Best Picture", "Best Director" and "Best Score" for composer Maurice Jarre's unforgettable music<sup>2</sup>. Later, this film was called "a remarkable production achievement and a thrilling event for audiences, an epic adventure with an intriguing plot and original characters"<sup>3</sup>. However, there were critics who called the film "a camel opera."<sup>4</sup> The makers of the film were taken to task for their extreme "Englishness" and in their nostalgia for "the good old days" when Britain was an Empire<sup>5</sup>. Those critics who praised the film to the heavens said that it was one of the things they would want should they be stranded on a desert island.<sup>6</sup> Those who criticized the film from every point declared that the film was full of historical inaccuracies and "grossly oversimplified the murky politics of the Middle East"<sup>7</sup>. So the following questions can be raised: what led critics to have so many contradictory opinions about this film? Can the answer to this question be found in studying the film's main hero, T. E. Lawrence? Or by researching the process of the film's production? In this article I shall try to answer these questions.

Because of the controversial nature of Lawrence's life and military career, it is remarkable that a commercial film of his exploits in Arabia was completed. Thomas Edward Lawrence (1888-1935) was born in Wales in 1888. He was an illegitimate son of Sir Thomas Chapman, an Anglo-Irish baronet, and Sarah Junner, governess to Thomas's four legitimate daughters. Though the boy was known as Ned to his family, his parents adopted to him later the name 'Lawrence'<sup>8</sup>. From his childhood T. E. Lawrence showed interest to the Middle East. In 1910, before gaining First Class Honors in his final examinations at City of Oxford High School for Boys, he wrote a thesis on crusader castles. While researching the subject, he visited Palestine and Syria.<sup>9</sup> Another interest of T. E. Lawrence's was archaeology. After graduating in 1910, he worked four years as an assistant at the British Museum's excavation of the Hittite city of Carchemish on the Euphrates River.<sup>10</sup> After World War I broke out, Lawrence was posted to the Military Intelligence Department in Cairo, where he became an expert on Arab nationalist movements in the Turkish provinces (currently, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and the Hijaz region of Saudi Arabia). In October 1916, he was sent to Hijaz, where Sherif Hussein of Mecca had rebelled against Turkish imperial rule. With one of four of Sherif Hussein's sons, Faisal, Lawrence helped to weld together disparate tribes of Arabs and led them successfully in "the Arab Revolt", a part of which was a guerilla war against the Turks who were then allied with the Germans. The remarkable achievements of Lawrence's military career were: his capturing of Aqaba in 1917 and his ride to Damascus in 1918.<sup>11</sup>

Since the mid-1920's, producers had considered the idea about making a film about T. E. Lawrence. But all attempts failed for either political or technical reasons. Not until 1962, more than 40 years after Lawrence rode to Damascus, was a commercial film about his Arabian exploits finally realized.<sup>12</sup> The story behind the making of *Lawrence of Arabia* began with American producer Sam Spiegel. Sam Spiegel gained common acknowledgement very quickly by winning an Oscar for *On the Waterfront*, and soon became identified with big-scale productions. With Lean, he produced *The Bridge over the River*

*Kwai* (1957), a story in many ways similar to that of *Lawrence of Arabia*. In 1959 Spiegel approached Lean with a project to make a film based on *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*,<sup>13</sup> – the book by T. E. Lawrence which he wrote between 1919-1920 while his memories about “the Arab Revolt” of 1916-1918 were still fresh.<sup>14</sup> At that time, Lean was more interested in filming the life of Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>15</sup> However, for Sam Spiegel Lawrence was a far richer film subject because he was “a man in conflict with his destiny”<sup>16</sup>. After getting further acquainted with T. E. Lawrence’s personality from written sources, Lean joined the project and his duet with Spiegel which had begun with *The Bridge over the River Kwai* continued.

From the outset, *Lawrence of Arabia* faced legal problems that threatened its success. One of them was indeed very serious, for it concerned obtaining rights for *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* from T.E. Lawrence’s younger brother and literary executor, A. W. Lawrence<sup>17</sup>. After huge efforts by Sam Spiegel, A. W. Lawrence sold the rights to the book to Spiegel. Before the agreement was signed, A. W. Lawrence read with great attention a synopsis of the Spiegel-Lean project based on a screenplay of American scriptwriter Michael Wilson<sup>18</sup>. Only later Lean’s criticisms of Wilson’s screenplay suggested a fundamental disagreement between the two men. Lean’s interest in Lawrence was more psychological than historical, while the latter generally predominated in Wilson’s screenplay. Wilson, for his part, wanted to situate Lawrence in the political context of the Anglo-Arab relations of the World War I period. In the end, on Lean’s request, producer Sam Spiegel signed another author, Robert Bolt, to replace Michael Wilson. Bolt’s play *A Man for All Seasons*, which ran at the Globe Theatre in London, strongly impressed Spiegel. Because time was short, the Lean and Bolt partnership resulted in a screenplay that was hastily written in seven weeks and which drew heavily on the way Michael Wilson had already structured the film. Later, Wilson demanded a screen credit for contribution to the film, but did not succeed and had to retire.<sup>19</sup>

While Wilson was working on his screen play, he advised Spiegel to sign the big-name American actor Marlon Brando for the

leading role, and even considered Anthony Perkins. However, in the end the young Shakespearean actor Peter O'Toole was given the role of T. E. Lawrence. This role was his screen debut after a relatively brief but intense English stage career that included three major Shakespearean roles at Stratford<sup>20</sup>. Lean was immediately impressed by the newcomer, but Peter O'Toole was in many ways physically unsuited for the role. He had to have plastic surgery on his nose and he also dyed his hair for the part (keeping it blond ever since).<sup>21</sup> Some critics criticized the choice of this actor for the role, saying that he was "nearly a foot taller than Lawrence"<sup>22</sup>. However, Peter O'Toole's talent allowed him to play Lawrence in such a way that this difference in the height was almost imperceptible. A strong background of theatre helped Peter O'Toole play T. E. Lawrence with his own understanding of this man's inner psychological world. This was amplified by an attractive voice, subtly incisive readings, and an interesting, expressive and somewhat feminine face. As S. Kauffmann pointed out: "There is never a moment's doubt with Peter O'Toole that Lawrence is the extraordinary man he is made out to be. Peter O'Toole made of Lawrence an idealist, whose ideas ultimately bring on his head the contempt of both friend and foe as well as sparking off his own moral degeneration."<sup>23</sup> Others recruited to play in film were Anthony Quinn, who had an extraordinary physical likeness to the desert bandit Auda Abu Tayi, and Arthur Kennedy, who would play Jackson Bentley. The young Egyptian star Omar Sharif, who was invited to play the role of bedouin Sherif 'Ali, was the only non-Anglo-American actor who played the principal role in the film<sup>24</sup>.

The cost of production was astounding. Filming in Jordan, Spain and Morocco took nearly two years and cost an estimated thirteen-plus million dollars. It was an exhausting endeavor. The crews went to places without names or markings on the maps. Conditions became so absurd that all participants in filming were refrigerating thermometers to keep them from bursting in the 51° C heat. One observer noted that only three things brought westerners to these desolate areas – oil, war and moviemaking<sup>25</sup>. According to the Columbia Pictures advertising brochure, water costs alone sometimes

reached \$80.000 a day to sustain 15.000 personnel, 5.000 camels, and 500 horses in remote filming locations. Nevertheless, all these efforts resulted in a great success beginning with the day of the film's premier in London on 10 December 1962.

*Lawrence of Arabia* is just one of many examples of Hollywood distortions of history and biography. The film proved to be as controversial as its subject. People, who had known T. E. Lawrence in life were deeply offended after watching the film. The "Lawrence Bureau," led by biographer Basil Henri Liddell Hart, bitterly complained that the portrayal of Lawrence as a sadomasochist with homosexual leanings was a grossly unfounded misrepresentation<sup>26</sup>. One can agree with this statement by remembering the famous episode of Lawrence's homosexual humiliation by the Turks in the film. This episode was treated very skimpily and was symbolized by a lustful pinch, a flogging, and Lawrence's being thrown out into the mud. The real Lawrence, by the way, wrote about the experience as follows: "That night the citadel of my integrity had been irrevocably lost"<sup>27</sup>. These words, however, did not necessary mean all that scriptwriter of the film Robert Bolt understood from them. Generally, Bolt's incorrect readings of various passages from Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* resulted in a number of serious inaccuracies in the film. Most disturbing to Lawrence's friends and family and contradicting historical facts was the film's manipulation of incidents during "the Arab Revolt," especially an attack on the Turkish Army at Tafas. The way this episode was presented, one could conclude that Lawrence was a sadist who had actually enjoyed killing. It was a falsification of history that resulted in distortions of truth. A reason for this was Robert Bolt's literal interpretation of certain passages from the Lawrence's book that were meant to be read quite differently. For instance, Bolt interpreted Lawrence's "we" in his account of the bloodbath at Tafas as not just an assumption of responsibility by a commander but as an admission by Lawrence that he had actively participated.<sup>28</sup> A. W. Lawrence's response, published on the front page of *The New York Times* shortly after the film premiered was prominent: "I did not recognize my brother in the film... The film tries

to tell an adventure story in terms of a psychological study which is pretentious and false. They [Lean and Bolt] have used a psychological recipe: take an ounce of narcissism, a pound of exhibitionism, a pint of sadism, a gallon of blood-lust and a sprinkle of other aberrations and stir well”<sup>29</sup>. The film, however, did more than misrepresented Lawrence and contradict historical reality. Gary Growdus, film critic and editor of *Cineaste*, a magazine devoted to the art and politics of cinema, noted that Spiegel-Lean epic also disparaged the Arabs, propagating the Old Western stereotype of the Arabs as subservient, savage, comic and incapable of ruling themselves, thus pandering to the preconceived notions of Western audiences<sup>30</sup>. The viewing public, however, was not interested in whether “Lawrence of Arabia” was a racist or an historically incorrect film. It won seven Academy Awards in a competitive field and became an historical event. It is worth noting, however, that the film did not receive awards either for best script or best actor. The best actor award in 1962 year went to Gregory Peck in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, a film that dealt with the subject of race with greater sensitivity.<sup>31</sup>

*Lawrence of Arabia* appeared as an extraordinary event twice: in 1962, when the film was first shown to a wide audience, and in 1989, when the edited version, 6.5 minutes longer, of this film was released.<sup>32</sup> And though the film itself consisted of various contradictions, it became one of those greatest films of Hollywood, during which “every spectator has a great feeling of being so thoroughly immersed in a film’s atmosphere, and having this immersion really compensates to a high degree for all its faults”<sup>33</sup>.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. J. C. Hodson, *Lawrence of Arabia and American Culture. The making of Transatlantic Legend* (London, 1995), p. 119. It is worth noting that the film is 217 minutes long.
2. J. Kagan, “Voyager in Depth”, an essay from *The Lawrence Home-Page*, 1995, p. 1, n. a.
3. *Ibid.*

4. L. Bohne, "Leaning Toward the Past: Pressures of Vision and Narrative in Lawrence of Arabia." *Film Criticism* 15/1 (Fall, 1990): p. 6.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
6. Kagan, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
7. Hodson, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
8. Wilson, J. "The Lawrence of Arabia Factfile", in <http://www.castle-hill-press.com/teweb>, January 2001.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Hodson, *op. cit.*, p. 108.
13. The title's idea was taken by Lawrence from a biblical text. See: Proverbs 9:1: "*Wisdom hath builded her house, She hath hewn out her seven pillars*".
14. T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*. (London: 1942), p. 11.
15. Bohne, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
16. Hodson, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
20. S. Kauffmann, *A World on Film: Criticism and Comment*. (New York, 1966), p. 26.
21. Hodson, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Kauffmann, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Kagan, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
26. Hodson, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
27. Kauffmann, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
28. Hodson, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
31. *Ibid.*
32. R. Frumkes, "The Restoration of "Lawrence of Arabia". *Films in Review* (4, 1989): p. 204, (5, 1989): p. 285.
33. Kauffmann, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

## X ü l a s ä

### MÜVÄFFƏQİYYÄTİN YEDDİ DİRÄYİ? ƏRƏBİSTANIN LORENSİ HOLLİVUDUN LORENSİNƏ QARAI

**Rüfət SÄTTAROV**

*(Xəzər Universitəsi, Azərbaycan)*

Yəqin ki, tarixi faktlar əsasında çəkilən və tarixi əxsiyyətlərin gerçək həyatını əks etdirən filmlərin çox azı “Ərəbistanın Lorens”i filmi qədər təzadlı əərhlərə səbəb ola bilər. Bəri baadan qeyd edək ki, bu film haqqındakı fikirlər təzadlı və ziddiyyətli olsa da, onların hamısı bir məsələdə ortaq məxrəcə gəlirdilər: bu film kinomatoqrafiyanın hüdudlarını aamıa, mühüm və fəvqəladə bir hadisə kimi ortaya çıxmıadı.

1962-ci ildə ingilis rejissoru Deyvid Linnin çəkdiyi “Ərəbistanın Lorensi” filmi ilk əvvəl Britaniyanın film əərhləri tərəfindən çox tərifiənsə də, məhz bu əərhlərin özləri filmi haddən artıq uzun olmasından və bəzi əxsiyyətlərin biografiyasının təhrif edilməsindən əikayətlənirdilər. Bütün bunlara rəomən, film 1962-ci ildə ən yaxşı film, ən yaxşı rejissor və ən yaxşı film musiqisi üzrə Oskar mükafatı aldı. Sonralar o, “orijinal obrazları və kəskin süjet xətti ilə tamaaəçiləri heyran edən mükəmməl bir triller filmi” kimi də əöhrət qazandı. Ancaq bəzi tənqidçilər bu filmi “dəvə operası” adlandırır, filmi çəkənləri isə “ifrat ingilislilik”də və Britaniyanın imperiya olduəu “yaxşı vaxtlar”ın nostalgiyasını qabarıq əəkildə hiss etdirməkdə günahlandırıldı. Bu tənqidçilər filmi tarixi təhriflərlə dolu olduəunu deyir və qaranlıq Orta Əərq siyasətinin filmdə kor-koranə bəsətləədirilməyə çalııldıəını qeyd edirdilər...