

## Colonial Romanticism and Postmodern Relativism in the Soundtrack of LAWRENCE OF ARABIA<sup>1</sup>

Alba Montoya Rubio (Barcelona) and Bernat Montoya Rubio (Alicante)

### *Lawrence of Arabia: the wanted myth*

Between 1916 and 1918 the British army soldier and spy T. E. Lawrence succeeded in coordinating an Arab rebellion against the Turk dominion over the Middle East, which finished with the conquest of Damascus in October 1918. This episode constitutes one of the most marginal scenarios of the First World War, and at the same time, one of the most famous. Why would the figure of Lawrence and the Arab rebellion become so famous?

The first public presentation of Thomas Edward Lawrence as a romantic hero dates from 1919. That year, the journalist Lowell Thomas presented a multimedia show entitled *With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia* in London and New York. Thomas combined a public lecture with the use of images and movie clips from his extensive shooting in the Middle East, where he had followed Allenby's campaign against the Turks, including captain Lawrence's irregular Arab forces. The show ran for six months, and the fascination of the public for the figure of the young and romantic British soldier T. E. Lawrence brought Thomas to eliminate Allenby's name from

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the conference *All Quiet? – Filmmusik und Erster Weltkrieg* (Humboldt University, Berlin, 25-27 July 2014), with the title *Colonialism, Nationalism and War in LAWRENCE OF ARABIA Soundtrack*. We have changed the first part of the title to better express the aspects of the soundtrack studied here.

the title of the performance, which became: *Lawrence in Arabia*. During the years that followed the First World War there appeared a number of biographies of Lawrence, which had a wide reception among the British public, including the one written by Thomas (*Lawrence in Arabia*, 1920), Robert Graves's best seller *Lawrence and the Arabs* (1927), and the several versions written by Lawrence himself of his participation in the Arab rebellion: *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1922–26) and *Rebellion in the Desert* (1927).<sup>2</sup> Apart from these, Lawrence's story attracted the attention of other biographers, political analysts, journalists, photographers and college lecturers, among others (Hodson 1995, 107).

The creation of a new myth was on, and it had begun only a few months after the end of the First World War. This fact shows us two relevant factors of the story of Lawrence: its success with the public and its propagandistic power. After four demoralising years of privations, hunger and loss of relatives among the civilian population, and a worse situation among the frontline soldiers (in the worst war experience ever seen or imagined), the British population was eager to find a myth, an illusion which could help them restore their hope for the future. From the government's point of view, it was even more urgent to find this myth. Such a myth could help to recover British confidence of living in a great nation, before hopes for a better future were invested in, for example, communism (since a communist revolution had just started in Russia). At the same time, the myth was also useful in the United States, where the privations and the communist temptation were much less relevant, but the intervention of the army in foreign wars was

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<sup>2</sup> Dissemination of *The Seven Pillars* during the twenties was quite limited. On the contrary, the shorter version of it created by Lawrence himself (*Rebellion in the Desert*) was an editorial success; Lowell Thomas and Robert Graves also had a significant publishing success.

much more contested (especially the wars which took place outside of the American continent).

Lawrence's success in making Arab tribes rise against the Turkish dominion provided the perfect plot: it was far from the highly lethal and demoralising trenches of the Western front, it could be presented as a series of rapid and decisive victories, and it had been developed into a romantic and exotic scenario (beloved by the colonialist mentality of the epoch). In addition, the instigator of the Arab revolt had been an educated and attractive young British soldier, a low-ranking officer who had ascended to a higher rank because of his bravery (a kind of story loved by the working class) and a mysterious man (a fact that increased his appeal).

All these aspects become clearly apparent in Lowell Thomas's book *Lawrence in Arabia* (1920), where Lawrence is described as a modern knight and the most romantic figure Thomas had ever met. The following fragment clearly illustrates the kind of myth desired by the Anglo-American public:

The spectacular achievements of Thomas Edward Lawrence, the young Oxford graduate, were unknown to the public at the end of the World War. Yet, quietly (...) he brought the disunited nomadic tribes of Holy and Forbidden Arabia into a unified campaign against their Turkish oppressors, a difficult and splendid stroke on policy, which caliphs, statesmen, and sultans had been unable to accomplish in centuries of effort! (...) He united the wandering tribes of the desert, restored the sacred places of Islam to the descendants of the Prophet, and drove the Turks from Arabia forever. Allenby liberated Palestine, the Holy Land of the Jews and Christians. Lawrence freed Arabia, the Holy Land of millions of Mohammedans. (1920, 18)

This description clearly shows the propagandistic and discursive intentions of Thomas. To begin with, he reminds us that Lawrence is a »young graduate« from Oxford. Throughout the text, he emphasises several times Lawrence's interest in archaeology. In that way, he starts breaking the typical image of the soldier as a bureaucrat without personality and presents us a young scholar who never loses his interest in research. Then Thomas starts to fix our attention onto a singular figure that accomplishes the impossible (a »splendid stroke on policy, which caliphs, statesmen, and sultans had been unable to accomplish in centuries of effort!«). Thomas's objective of creating a myth is obvious here, and also in his frequent references to the sacred: »He (...) restored the sacred places of Islam to the descendants of the Prophet«, »Palestine, the Holy Land«, »Arabia, the Holy Land of millions of Mohammedans«. These expressions clearly demonstrate, on the one hand, the social and political interest to create a myth around Lawrence's epopee, and on the other hand, the central role of Lowell Thomas in the origins of that myth, as has been noted by scholars (Hodson 1995, Jackson 2007). David Lean's film would transmit Thomas's vision of Lawrence as someone special, enigmatic and capable of incredible actions in a context of sacred spaces and sacred history. So, if Thomas was chiefly responsible for the emergence of Lawrence myth, Lean played an important role in the perpetuation of this myth for new generations who were born in a very different historical context.

### *Trying to film the Lawrence story*

The idea of filming Lawrence's epopee in Arabia begun at the end of the 1920s, but the project clashed repeatedly with the particular vision of T. E. Lawrence himself. He only accepted a film based on his own biography (*Seven Pillars of Wisdom*), which was a problematic demand. Lawrence's autobiography showcases a tormented and narcissistic personality with clear homosexual references, and he presents himself as a traitor to the Arabic desire of creating their own state. All this did not fit the kind of story desired by the public and searched for by the American and British governments: the story of a spotless, brave and romantic (and of course heterosexual) hero who had fought for a just cause. In short, the kind of story presented by Lowell Thomas, where Lawrence is introduced as the liberator of the Arabs from Turkish oppression, not as a sneaky spy who used their aspirations of freedom for the British interest. From this point of view, it is easy to understand why the British producer Herbert Wilcox refused Lawrence's offer to make a film about his *Seven Pillars* in 1926. As he would explain afterwards:

The author gave me an outline of this book which I found extremely interesting but not good cinema and in spots rather sordid (...)

I ventured the opinion that I could not see cinema audiences being attracted to such a subject. (Wilcox quoted in Jackson 2007, 30)

After this episode, Lawrence received several offers to buy the rights to his story, but he rejected them all. The person who was coming closer to actually making a film was Alexander Korda, who was even accepted by Lawrence just before his death in May 1935. Korda pursued the project, but it failed because it was feared that it might affect British geostrategic relationships, especially with the Turks, in the difficult decade of the 1930s.

After the Second World War, attempts of filming Lawrence's epopee returned, but now in a very different context. The colonial vision behind the previous versions of Lawrence's story started to be strongly contested. During the war, Syria and Lebanon (1943) obtained their independence, and afterwards, the increasing power of the USSR and the victory of the Communists in China (1949), resulted in a great deal of support for the anti-imperialist movement. Most Arab countries obtained their independence during the decade that followed the end of the Second World War (Jordan, 1946; Pakistan, 1947; Libya, 1951), including the difficult Algerian War (1954–62) and the Suez Crisis (1956). The latter caused the failure of another attempt of filming Lawrence's story (this time by the British producer J. Arthur Rank), due to the involvement of the British army in the military operations in the area. This context clearly shows us that the Middle East was a »hot area« (as it still is) and that made it highly difficult to proceed with filming Lawrence story despite its commercial potential.

### *David Lean's* LAWRENCE OF ARABIA

After this series of failed attempts, producer Sam Spiegel and director David Lean finally made a film about Lawrence. They had worked together before

on *THE BRIDGE ON THE RIVER KWAI* (1957), which was very well-received among critics and audiences alike and won seven Oscars. This success gave Spiegel more funds and the confidence of Columbia to trust him with a new film. In 1959 he approached Lean with the idea of making a film based on Lawrence's experience. Initially, Lean was more interested in making a film about Mahatma Gandhi, but Spiegel succeeded to convince him, pointing out the more contradictory aspects of Lawrence's personality. Contrary to previous cultural productions about Lawrence, Spiegel and Lean were interested in the contradictions of Lawrence's personality from the beginning (Hodson 1995, 109–110). This change was not just a matter of their personal take on the story, but also reflected changes in society and world politics. The independence of most Arabic countries and the advance of communism started to make it difficult for countries such as Britain and France to continue to show pride in their imperial history. In this context, to show Lawrence's fight for Arab freedom was not only possible but also desirable. At the same time, by the end of the fifties it had become feasible to make references to some previously problematic aspects of Lawrence's personal life, such as his homosexuality.

Spiegel purchased the film rights for seven different biographies of Lawrence. He also managed to convince Lawrence's brother to sell him the rights for *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* under the condition that he would be allowed to give his final approval of the screenplay. For this screenplay they hired Michael Wilson, a blacklisted American writer who also had worked on *THE BRIDGE ON THE RIVER KWAI*. Wilson used Lowell Thomas's book as his primary source. This fact is clearly visible in the first half of the film, which shows the romantic and idealistic vision of Lawrence and the Arab Revolt created by the American journalist in 1919/1920. This part of the film also shows the typical features of the stories from the age of

colonialism: the exotic beauty of the Eastern landscapes, the bravery of a western adventurer and the savage customs of the natives.

However, Wilson's script was also rich in the political conflicts between Turks, Arabs and the British depicted by Lawrence's memories, focusing on Lawrence's political dilemma of serving two incompatible masters: British colonialism and Arab nationalism. The script did not completely convince Lean, who preferred to concentrate more on the Lawrence's psychology and to attach less relevance to political aspects. These disagreements, and Wilson's weak position (because he had been on the blacklist) contributed to the cancellation of his contract in February 1961, when half of the film had been already filmed in Jordan. Lean and Spiegel asked Robert Bolt (a theatre playwright) to do it, and in his final draft he wrote a script more centred on the psychology of Lawrence, which was Lean's main aim. Therefore, the film can be divided into two parts: one that shows a glorious and romantic vision of Lawrence and his adventures in the desert (with strong colonial resonances) and a second one, more centred on the contradictions and worries of the ›real Lawrence‹. This second part has a stronger anti-colonialist message because we discover the British betrayal of the Arab aspirations to establish their own state. Nevertheless, the film is also skeptical of the Arabs' capability of governing themselves, as we can see after the conquest of Damascus. In summary, what the film shows in its two parts is, firstly a story of Lawrence's hopes and the rise of his project, and secondly the story of his decline and disappointment (with the British government, the Arabs, and especially with himself).

To complete this complex vision of the character, Lean's film warns us from the beginning that there is not a single ›canonical‹ vision of who Lawrence really was. The different testimonies spoken to the camera after Lawrence's



funeral clearly express this fact. Moreover, the film script creates the character of Lowell Thomas, who makes several comments about the convenience or not of communicating certain aspects of Lawrence's actions and declarations. In this way, the film warns the spectator that the Lawrence story will always remain a (re-)construction and we can never be sure how much truth there is to the facts. This meta-narrative consideration is an original aspect of the film, a postmodern reflection, but it was probably a product of the previous controversies between the different versions of Lawrence's story.

### *Analysis of the soundtrack*

Although today Maurice Jarre's soundtrack seems like the perfect match for Lawrence and his story, he had not been the original choice. Spiegel had the idea to have three different composers to do each style of music, with an »Eastern« set of themes to be provided by the Soviet composer Aram Khachaturian and the British themes by Benjamin Britten. He also sent for Maurice Jarre to do the dramatic music, because his work for *LES DIMANCHES DE VILLE D'AVRAY [SUNDAYS AND CYBELE]* (F/A 1962, Serge Bourguignon) had impressed him very much. Unfortunately, Khachaturian could not obtain permission to leave the USSR, while Britten said that he needed more time to write the score. So Spiegel decided to turn to a well-known composer of a very different kind: Richard Rodgers, of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Nevertheless, after hearing the themes composed by Rodgers and contrasting them with Jarre's music, Lean chose Jarre to do everything. Jarre was allowed just six weeks to have his

complete score ready for recording – though the task was lightened a little by Lean's wish to include an existing military march, *The Voice of the Guns*, composed by Kenneth Alford.

Taking into account that the soundtrack was composed in only two months, it is comprehensible that, in spite of its length, it has very few developed themes. In fact, there is only one leitmotiv that actually evolves through the movie, and that is Lawrence's theme. In spite of that, as Maurice Jarre explains, this was a very conscious decision:

I tried to find a beautiful idealistic theme for this film. I think it is very important to have a main theme and to manage to make as many variations as possible instead of disturbing the audience with too many different themes which then become lost. (Russell/Young 2000, 47)

The motive is composed in order to have certain »Arabic flavour«, although that perception is only valid for occidental spectators. As Maurice Jarre points out: »LAWRENCE was seen from an Englishman's point of view. So the film's score was mostly Western, with some Arab feeling to it.«<sup>3</sup>

The use of chromaticism and trills (known to Western listeners from Spanish music) gives to the score an exotic colour, at least for American and European audiences. Nevertheless, if we note the instrumentation of this piece (an occidental orchestra), it has a clear European origin.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview given to Daniel Schweiger and published in *Film Score Monthly* 59/60, July/August 1995, 16.

Lawrence's theme is first introduced during the operatic overture of the film, which lasts almost four minutes without a single image or title related to the film. It is most unusual to find this kind of introduction in a Hollywood film, with music playing to nothing but a black screen. After that, the theme is not used again for Lawrence's first on-screen appearance, but for his first encounter with the desert (0:17:20).<sup>4</sup> This decision points out one of the main aspects of this theme: the relationship between Lawrence and the desert.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, in *LAWRENCE*, the desert is not simply a backdrop, a stage on which the story or action takes place. Integral to the movie is a continuing interaction between the desert and Lawrence, resulting in the profound change that takes place in Lawrence's relationship with himself and his relationship with the desert. It is a change from love to fear. Lawrence embraces the desert and through the intensity of his experiences is transformed, a transformation that results in a destruction of a part of himself. (Kennedy 1994, 162)

These changes are also reflected in the music. Soon after the first appearance of Lawrence's leitmotiv, the desert and its inhabitants disappoint him: when Sherif Ali kills Tafas, Lawrence's guide, for drinking at a Harif well (LAW1, 0:25:44). Not only the music disappears, also the desert itself loses its beauty.

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<sup>4</sup> The time code refers to the DVD edition by Columbia Tristar Entertainment (2001). From here on, time codes are used together with short titles for the first and second half of the movie respectively (LAW1 and LAW2).

<sup>5</sup> The evolution of Lawrence's theme can be seen in the video created as an addition to this article; see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYwEnubbkAI&index=1&list=PLMYn4jMxbVLF-0uxyg\\_k8D\\_S\\_AyWHIMm3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYwEnubbkAI&index=1&list=PLMYn4jMxbVLF-0uxyg_k8D_S_AyWHIMm3).

This is also the first point in the movie where the desert fails to be gloriously rich in colour with interesting forms of dunes and cliffs or rock formations. (...) There are no strains of background music during this sequence; the only sound is the wind in the guide's clothes, the clapping of the camel's feet, and Lawrence's footsteps as he trips. We sense that Lawrence can overcome this first assailment, but a mood is set by Lean's image-event and we suspect that it will return. (Kennedy 1994,168)

Therefore, not only the presence of Lawrence's theme plays an important role, but also its absence. This is particularly remarkable during the war scenes, where there is no music at all. Used in this way, the music states an important question about this film, and does not take sides. Most films show war scenes as something heroic or, by contrast, as something barbaric, and music plays a decisive role in giving those impressions. Nevertheless, in this movie there is no good or evil, there is just war, and by staying neutral the music leaves the final judgement about it to the spectator.

Another important turning point is the sequence in which Lawrence realizes how to take Akaba. Here, his theme is replaced by music with no melody and, in some passages, with no tonal centre (LAW1, 0:50:30).

Lawrence's mission of »appraising the situation« for the British turns into a personal quest to »save« the Arabs and help them gain their own objectives: independence from the British. (...) Throughout the night, in the blue-white dunes accompanied by sounds of skittering sand, Lawrence seeks a way to take the strategic port of Akaba from the Turks. Finally, at midday, it occurs to him that Akaba should be attacked from the impossible landward side. The seed for the miracle is planted. (Kennedy 1994, 169)

After that, Lawrence's leitmotiv is presented to show his heroic side while he triumphs in a suicidal mission: crossing the desert to take Akaba. From this moment on, his theme is also mixed with Arabic musics. We use the plural because there is no clear motif to describe the Arabs, taking into account that there are also many Arab tribes, which are so heterogeneous that their true union (as Lawrence wants it) is impossible. This music appears when all clans are together (LAW1, 1:29:29) and before the invasions of Akaba (LAW1, 1:35:29) and Damascus (LAW2, 0:50:26). There is also a predominance of military instruments, such as drums. Moreover, a sequence with diegetic music is added before the invasion of Akaba, when women ululate for the men that go to war while the men sing, accompanied by distant drums (LAW1, 1:37:33). This is one of the moments where the exotic and mysterious aspect of Arab culture – from a Western perspective – is more tangible.

The British also have their own music, but in contrast to the Arabs, they have one unique, pre-existing piece that is always used as diegetic music, for the whole movie: *The Voice of the Guns* (1917) by Kenneth Alford. It is not by chance that this military march was composed during World War I, as a tribute to British artillerymen serving in the war. Maurice Jarre's score uses an arrangement for piccolos, and he also rearranged the piece for a military band, which segues in and out of fragmentary motifs. This theme appears for the first time after Akaba's conquest, in a moment that should be triumphant for Lawrence (LAW1, 2:06:43). However, Lawrence does not share the mood of the music because of Daud's death. Also, Lawrence's motif is never mixed with the British theme, so the distance between them is made clear. Moreover, this estrangement among Lawrence's feelings and

British culture grows over the film, so the music becomes anempathetic<sup>6</sup> to the character's mood.

(...) most of Lawrence's interaction with the British culture is institutionalized, taking place within the confines of headquarters in either Cairo or Jerusalem. There are limited, controlled environments in which Lawrence is portrayed as being uncomfortable and where he exists in relative social isolation. (Kennedy 1994, 167)

But major changes to Lawrence's theme occur in the second part of the movie, when his downfall begins. This first becomes obvious when he is introduced to the American reporter, Thomas Lowell, who wants to take a picture of him. He does not resist the request and displays how the Arabs admire him. Lawrence climbs onto the derailed train and walks around like a hero (LAW2, 0:15:55). At that moment we hear a new variation of his leitmotiv, but changed remarkably, with dissonances. This is the beginning of the end, and from that moment on everything gets worse. Lawrence begins to lose adept, which leads him to go alone to Deera, where he is tortured and raped. After that, his theme makes its weakest, almost inaudible appearance (LAW2, 0:38:32). The theme is absent during the rest of the film, and it is only heard one last time in the very end, when Lawrence has already lost his idealism and himself and returns to England, completely defeated (LAW2, 1:21:31).

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<sup>6</sup> An empathetic sound – usually diegetic music – seems to exhibit conspicuous indifference to what is going on in the film's plot, creating a strong sense of the tragic (see Chion 1993, 8–9).

## *Conclusions*

T. E. Lawrence's story has had a problematic and contradictory nature from the start. On one hand, it offered the kind of story needed by the British government and desired by its population after the long and destructive world war and the beginnings of the economic crisis of the 1920s and 1930s. Lawrence's epopee on the desert offered a clear victory in a far and exotic context, and its protagonist was a romantic figure who could be admired. On the other hand, there were difficulties presented by the real protagonists of this story. Firstly, the Arabs, who had fought for their independence, had also been betrayed by the British government, which extended its rule to these territories; and secondly, Lawrence himself, who was tormented by the bloody memories of the war (which had been much less romantic than depicted by its propagandists), by his own sexuality and by the British betrayal of the Arabic desire for freedom.

This duality of the Arab revolt and Lawrence's personality are clearly represented in David Lean's film. The film communicates to us at the same time, the heroic and romantic aspects of Lawrence's epopee and the darker and difficult sides of his personality and life. Interestingly, Lean's film explains from the beginning that there is not a single vision of Lawrence's figure, and that his story was transformed into a legend for political reasons. Unlike the first accounts of the Lawrence story made in the 1920s and 1930s, David Lean was able to show this kind of complexity in a big-budget film production. At the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties, colonialism was highly contested around the world, and most Arabic countries had obtained their independence. In this context, showing Lawrence's desire for helping the Arabs in their aspirations (in opposition to

his government's pragmatic intentions) was not only possible, but had become desirable. At the same time, this period of time made it also possible to show some of the more controversial aspects of Lawrence's personality, such as his homosexuality. Nevertheless, Spiegel and Lean had to deal with significant resistance, which explains some of the ambiguity of the film with regard to the morality of the conflict and with regard to Lawrence's homosexuality.

The film soundtrack reflects these contradictions in several ways. As we have noted, there is one central theme in the soundtrack, which describes Lawrence's relationship with the desert. The music evolves with him, but its absence also points out important elements of the character. There is a great contrast between the first half of the movie and the second one, as the music is scarce or even absent in the last hour of the film. The decision of not scoring war scenes is also a clear declaration of intent by the film's creators. From the beginning they make clear that the final judgment lies with the spectator: if there are good or bad sides to Lawrence's actions, and if war is the solution for the Arabs. Music also points out the differences between British and Arab culture. Although initially Lawrence feels more comfortable with the Arabs (expressed by mixing Arabic music with Lawrence's theme), while he feels estranged from British culture (whose music is completely alien to his mood), in the end we see that he belongs to neither of them. His isolation and his confusion about himself and the world around him is clearly shown in the transformation of a great, strong and epic theme into a weak and reluctant motif.



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## **Filmography**

LAWRENCE OF ARABIA (USA 1962, David Lean)

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### **Empfohlene Zitierweise**

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