

"A Sideshow of a Sideshow": Postcolonial Personae of War in *Lawrence of Arabia* and *In the Year of the Pig*

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Abstract: This article seeks to explore the ways in which David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig* (1968) use characterization inspired by the experiences and deeds of significant historical figures as a cinematic technique to illustrate their critiques of imperialism and colonial wars. Respectively, the individuals in question were T.E. Lawrence and Ho Chi Minh. Despite the films' great differences, they similarly use these memorable figures for the purposes of exploring the power of individuals in wider conflicts, as well as for providing filmgoers with the cultural shorthand of a protagonistic character.

One method used for the analysis of both colonialism and filmmaking is explicating a broad view of a topic by analyzing a case study on a small scale. When filmmakers focus on one aspect of a larger event, audiences might identify with the story at hand while connecting to broader contexts. This scaled-down approach can be seen in two war films from the 1960s: David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), an epic concerning the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire and the ensuing British takeover, and Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig* (1968), a black-and-white modernist documentary of Imperial France's departure from Vietnam and America's involvement in the Vietnam War. These films not only feature seemingly adjunct conflicts—the Arab Revolt being but one theatre of the First World War, and the Vietnam War being an important struggle within America's war on communism—they each focus on a specific individ-

ual: T.E. Lawrence and Ho Chi Minh, respectively. *Lawrence of Arabia* and *In the Year of the Pig* use characterization inspired by the experiences and deeds of significant historical figures as a cinematic technique to illustrate their critiques of imperialism and colonial wars. While all filmic characters are fictionalized to some degree, Lawrence and Ho are characterized very differently by Lean and de Antonio in their respective films. Lawrence serves as a sympathetic proxy for a Western audience, but he is also used for satirical commentary on heroic tropes and imperial justification. Meanwhile, de Antonio almost idolizes Ho Chi Minh, who uses American hero-rhetoric and religious arguments to justify Ho's defensive position in the Vietnam War.

Postcolonial cinema is necessarily influenced by the history and lasting effects of colonialism. Both *Lawrence of Arabia* and *In the Year of the Pig* openly engage with Western empires' complicity in imperialism. *Lawrence of Arabia* takes place during the First World War, focusing on the conflict between the Ottoman and British Empires as well as the fallout of their conflict on the native population of Arabia. Ultimately, the film's protagonist is the only Western character in this film to show any degree of sympathy to those affected—a questionable conflict depicted in less-than-simple terms. *In the Year of the Pig*, meanwhile, uses the then-ongoing Vietnam War as its point of contention. The film portrays Ho's Vietnam sympathetically in the wake of interference by both French and American empires. Based on their explicitly imperial contexts, each film lends itself to analysis by a postcolonial lens, examining the impacts of historical events on film by expressing how the colonial past influences the present.

T.E. Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, had uniquely synthesized physical and personal traits, not to mention the mythologies created by the media of his time; these phenomena include an inflated self-image and love of public notoriety, as well as a sympathetic streak and distaste for authority. Lean unites many of these contradictory traits in the character portrayed on-screen, particularly in one antithesis: Lawrence the romantic hero versus Law-

rence the exo-British outcast. This conflict allows the cinematic Lawrence (portrayed by Peter O'Toole) to function as a symbol of both imperial power and sympathetic anti-imperialism. On one hand, Lawrence's paradoxical nature benefitted the empire by attracting the English-speaking public to the war effort in Arabia. Lowell Thomas, an American journalist (renamed Jackson Bentley in the film), garnered great success by reporting on Lawrence's heroics; in these media, Lawrence became a man of incredible skill, endurance, and cross-cultural charisma (Barber 29–30). Within the film, Lawrence provides the reporter with fittingly audacious deeds: for instance, parading atop a captured train while posing for a photograph (*Lawrence* 02:29:50–2:30:46). Though his real-life intentions in such cases may have been vain, rather than imperialistic, Lawrence's narcissism allowed the media to use his success to forward a colonial agenda. Comparatively, through his independent streak, Lawrence acted against his native empire by refusing to defer to its systemic authorities. He was reported to have often disregarded military authority, and he advocated strongly for Westerners to avoid holding narrow-minded views of the Arabic world (Porter 125). Lawrence's film persona acts similarly: his rebelliousness only manifests in mischief at the start of the film (00:11:45–00:12:27), but he acts more boldly later on, such as when he aggressively defends the dehydrated Arabic boy Farraj from British officers while in their mess hall (02:04:10–02:07:56). Here, Lawrence's fellow officers see him in Arabic dress for the first time, and O'Toole's body language displays that he has no desire to go back to wearing a standard uniform. Lawrence was intentionally aligning himself with ethnic outsiders, seeing that the British treatment of Arabs was unjust. Although both visions of Lawrence's character—the hero and the rebel—were driven by his independent nature, the former was ultimately more popular and was exploited by British powers for colonial ends.

Lawrence of Arabia emphasises Lawrence more than *In the Year of the Pig* does Ho; however, this by no means deflates the latter's role in the conflict depicted,

and Ho's portrayal is remarkably positive considering the Vietnam War's contemporaneity with the film. Ho connects the two major threads of *In the Year of the Pig*: the end of French power and the ongoing struggle against the United States. The film's collection of statements about Ho (*In the Year* 00:06:24–00:14:37) "situates Ho at the center of [Vietnam's] historical narrative, at once verifying his place as virtuosic revolutionary leader... while also installing [the film's] own historical argument" (Stork 11). De Antonio's documentary ennobles Ho as a key figure not only in the Vietnam War, but in his nation's greater history, and thus, he acts as a symbol of global anti-imperialism. The film also manages to use recognizable language that ends up depicting Ho in a sympathetic light. This approach is most apparent in the interview of Republican Senator Thruston B. Morton, who describes Ho as "the George Washington of his country" in the eyes of Vietnamese citizens (*In the Year* 00:10:12–00:11:22). Morton's statement serves as "a boon to the film's use of dissent from conservative voices" which "defines [Ho] within an American frame that relativizes Vietnam [. . .] in service of an American-friendly metaphor" (Blaylock 33). More than most nations, the United States has a history of celebrating individual merit and revolutionary leaders; *In the Year of the Pig* recognizes such patriotism and channels it toward a decolonial objective in the form of praising Ho. By utilizing nationalist American speech in the service of a competing nation, *In the Year of the Pig* both challenges the validity of such rhetoric and calls attention to the irony of how the film makes use of it. Considering that the outcome of the Vietnam War was yet to be determined when this film was released, de Antonio's portrayal of Ho impressively balances an endeavour to mark him as a patriotic hero, regardless of Vietnam's success, with the ultimate goal of advocating for radical anticolonialism.

While key criticism of *Lawrence of Arabia* leans into the trope of the white saviour, the film does complicate this stereotype. A white saviour may be defined as "a white person who helps non-white [. . .] people, [especially] for reasons viewed as ultimately self-serving, such as seeking

recognition or assuaging guilt" (OED). To some degree, this trope is certainly applicable to Lawrence—a white man assigned as an advisor, by the British Empire, to the colonized Arabic peoples, eventually serving as a key figure in their independence movement. However, more often than not, *Lawrence of Arabia* attempts to reverse these "white saviour" tropes. Whereas *In the Year of the Pig* emphasizes Ho's similarities to American heroic ideals, Lean uses Lawrence as a satirical take on English heroism. The first reversal is of the idea that Lawrence, as an individual, is at all a fit candidate for the archetype of a rational, hyper-masculine conquering hero. These traits are somewhat countered by the common belief that Lawrence was both a sado-masochist and a gay man—attributes scrutinized in works as early as Lawrence's own autobiography (Paris 18), though their depictions are toned down in the film. In this way, Macfie states, the film is "far from identifying Lawrence as the typical [. . .] masculine hero, and the Arab as the necessarily effeminate other, as the orientalist paradigm requires" (85). Again, the film uses Lawrence's real-life personal characteristics to stand against the expectations audiences would have for this sort of narrative; though there are undeniable issues with presenting these attributes as deviances, the film does manage to keep its protagonist sympathetic, and to some degree that sympathy is due to his lack of traditionally heterosexual traits. Second, Lawrence fails his role as a typical "white saviour" because the end result of his narrative is the furthering of British imperialism and a failure to resolve his own character. Not until fairly late in the narrative is Lawrence made aware of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Britain and France's plan to divide Arabia between themselves (*Lawrence* 02:59:46–03:01:53). This not only reveals the futility of his own actions, but also takes away all sense of moral superiority from Western powers' aims. The film's ending does not give Lawrence a happy homecoming either; his homeland "is depicted as a dead end, a tomb almost, as the motorbike [03:37:37–03:38:36] echoes Lawrence's tragic accident in the opening [00:06:11–00:07:45]" (Fontanaud 127). *Lawrence of Arabia* thus concludes with a full

reversal of the typical white saviour's "riding-off-into-the-sunset" ending: Lawrence's lush homeland is the inevitable site of his death, not a new beginning or even a fitting conclusion to the arc depicted in the film. The story of *Lawrence of Arabia*, with its tight focus on Lawrence's character, manages to use reversals of conventional heroic tropes to subtly criticize twentieth-century English notions of heroism.

Similarly, *In the Year of the Pig* not only praises Ho Chi Minh as a great individual, but also as a symbol of an alternate narrative to America's warmongering. First, the film clarifies that his philosophical background has more to do with peace than war. In an interview shown in the film, Yale professor Paul Mus recounts his knowledge of Ho, who he had met in person on at least one occasion in 1945 (*In the Year* 00:12:17–00:12:25). Mus recalls that Ho engaged in both national and international affairs from a Confucian perspective (00:06:46–00:08:10; 00:12:25–00:13:35), and that—from his point of view—it was Western powers who had started fighting in Vietnam, and thus the conflict was their responsibility: "He said, 'I have no army... I have no finance. I have no diplomacy. I have no public instruction. I have just hatred, and I will not disarm it until you give me confidence in you'" (00:13:57–00:14:37). Ho did, of course, manage to establish an army, but the film makes clear here that he did so defensively. The film's footage of American spirituality, on the other hand, is geared toward warfare. *In the Year of the Pig* begins with a montage of stills, concluding with an image of an American war monument, which transitions into footage of Vice President Hubert Humphrey stating "Scripture tells us that blessed are the peacemakers. I want to underscore the work 'makers'"—he is then temporarily cut off by the sound of helicopters and a scene of a man gesturing around a globe, before continuing—"and it takes a lot of doing to make peace" (00:03:21–00:03:44). This unsubtle transition suggests that making peace, in the American conscience, involves battling against foreign powers. Similarly, later footage shows Colonel George S. Patton III recounting his troops' connection between Christianity and violence: "I was at a... memorial service for four men....

The place was just packed. We sang three hymns and had a nice prayer.... [the attending soldiers] looked determined and reverent at the same time. But still, they're a bloody good bunch of killers" (01:14:03–01:14:55). Though de Antonio did not particularly dislike Patton as an individual, he used this comment because it "dramatized 'how totally irrelevant we are to a decent world'" (Lewis 100–101). By religionizing war, the American perspective from both politicians and soldiers stands in violent contrast to Ho's call for the West to own up to its history. Furthermore, by emphasizing the pacifistic ideals of Ho's philosophy, the film negates the United States' primary justification for the Vietnam War: that a lack of intervention will result in a domino effect of collapsing democracies. America posits that its actions are a response to violence, but if films like *In the Year of the Pig* display that Ho's intentions are peaceful, then American leaders have no way to legitimize their imperialism.

This analysis of *Lawrence of Arabia* and *In the Year of the Pig*, as with all good film commentary, is still worthy of being critiqued; an argument can be made that the thesis of individuals' importance could be falsified. Besides placing a valid emphasis on the white saviour trope in the former film, such an argument would most likely expand on the idea that *Lawrence of Arabia* and *In the Year of the Pig* give more credit to T. E. Lawrence and Ho Chi Minh than their respective historical figures had earned. Evidence for such a claim may be found in both of these films; for instance, by ending his film with Lawrence's ultimate failure, Lean may have undercut the idea that Lawrence was at all important to the wider history of the First World War. Another angle might have proposed that Emile de Antonio was more lucky than skilled to have chosen to venerate Ho on film, since the latter man was still alive—and the Vietnam War still ongoing—when *In the Year of the Pig* was released. In other words, de Antonio's cinematic thesis of anti-imperialism could have been discredited if Ho had acted differently in his final years. However, despite *Lawrence of Arabia*'s heroic nature and *In the Year of the Pig*'s modernist take, each film

commits the same concept to postcolonial film: that individual perspectives serve to make the reality of larger conflicts more relatable to audiences. Both Lawrence and Ho were real people with real perspectives and influences, and the details of their lives were adapted to a common goal of criticizing the wider impact of imperialism. Just as Lean's and de Antonio's films used important figures to comment on their respective anticolonial conflicts at large, while keeping the sense of humanity that comes with the speech and perspectives displayed on an individual level, an analysis of these works is heightened by acknowledging that the effects of concepts like colonialism are more easily understood through the eyes of proxies—characters with human perspectives, who act and react as members of the audience realistically could. Ultimately, films do have their limits, but both Lean and de Antonio took full advantage of these respective characters' depictions to contribute to the canon of postcolonial film.

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