RELUCTANT IMPERIALISM: 
DEPICTING EMPIRE IN 1960S ANGLO-AMERICAN FILM

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the myriad ways films can contribute to our understanding of historical events and cultural phenomenon. More specifically, it examines how the global political climate of the 1960s is reflected in filmic depictions of historical events in the Middle East. I argue that it is not coincidental that the three films that I chose for this project—Lawrence of Arabia, Khartoum and Exodus—all depict a certain reluctance toward imperialism. Rather than romanticize British control over this region, the films clearly portray the British imperial machine negatively, with the protagonists as the central characters who continually subvert this colonial authority. I argue that this phenomenon of "reluctant imperialism" is a clear reflection of the changing political climate of the 1960s, when the direct colonialism of the British Empire was being replaced by the softer indirect imperialism of the United States. That these popular films all play to this sentiment indicates that the Western viewing public approved this change. On a more fundamental level, this thesis also explores the usage of film as an interlocutor of historical debate and analysis. I contend that films are not only useful tools for the modern historian, but they are salient reflections of how societies view their world.
In Memory of Professor Ian Dyck,

Who relished his student's ideas and cherished words and language.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval .......................................................................................................................... ii
Abstract ......................................................................................................................... iii
Dedication ....................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................... v
Table of Contents .......................................................................................................... vi

INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER ONE: THE STRUGGLE FOR CONTROL IN DAVID LEAN'S 
*LAWRENCE OF ARABIA* ......................................................................................... 11
  Introduction ................................................................................................................. 11
  “I know I’m not ordinary” ......................................................................................... 12
  “We can’t all be lion-tamers” ................................................................................... 23
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 27

CHAPTER TWO: REBELLION AND RETICENCE IN BASIL DEARDEN'S 
*KHARTOUM* ............................................................................................................. 29
  Introduction ................................................................................................................. 29
  *Auteur and Metteur-en-Scène* .............................................................................. 32
  “I respect you, Gordon pasha, I make no war on you” ........................................ 35
  East vs. West ............................................................................................................. 42
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 48

CHAPTER THREE: AMERICA'S NEW ROLE IN OTTO PREMINGER'S 
*EXODUS* .................................................................................................................... 50
  Introduction ................................................................................................................. 50
  “When the showdown comes, we always stand alone” ........................................ 52
  “We British have shown throughout our history an extraordinary talent for 
    troublesome commitments” .............................................................................. 55
  “Kitty, you’re getting to be quite the Zionist” ....................................................... 57
  “We shall work together in the free state of Israel” ............................................. 58
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 68

CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................. 70

Bibliography ................................................................................................................ 76

Filmography ............................................................................................................... 80
INTRODUCTION

Since the origins of feature film with D. W. Griffith’s intensely racist epic, Birth of a Nation (1915), filmmakers have used historical events and people as the springboards for their narratives. Yet, it is only in the last two decades that scholars have seriously begun to investigate the impact of feature film on the public’s understanding of the past. While many critics have discussed the inappropriateness of film as a medium though which to convey historical events accurately, many scholars have come to its defence. These historians, like Robert Brent Toplin and Peter C. Rollins, argue that, while it is important to address the shortcomings of films as interlocutors of historical knowledge, there is much to be gained through analysis of what films can provide. They assert that scholarly analysis of films can improve our understanding not only of historical events and of people, but also of the process of constructing history and the cultures that create these films. This thesis explores these notions in its discussion of three Anglo-American films—David Lean’s Lawrence of Arabia (1962), Basil Dearden’s Khartoum (1966), and Otto Preminger’s Exodus (1960)—and investigates the ways in which these films reflect the changing political climate of the 1960s.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Hayden White challenged the historical profession with his analyses of academic history versus historical novels. White’s assertion that historical writings are “…verbal fictions, the contents of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences,”1 created much

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heated debate within academia, over the relative importance of empirical versus interpretive analysis. White continued to argue for the reconfiguration of the discipline of history in several publications, most notably *Metahistory*, which prompted professionals within the historical field to question the importance of empiricism in the face of this “narrative turn.”

One historian has commented that this publication has become the “book around which all reflective historians must reorganize their thoughts on history.” White’s influence has been far-reaching, with his assertions undermining the “scientific” basis of historical writing and providing a foundation for much discussion on the philosophy of history and the different ways in which historians undertake their craft. An important consequence of White’s assertions has been the deconstruction of what he calls the “empiricist episteme” that had characterized historical writing and the recognition that creativity and interpretation, as well as analysis and data, are important aspects of the discipline of history.

It is not surprising, then, that historians who have in the last two decades argued for the acceptance of historical films as subjects for historiographical analysis have based their assertions on the “narrative turn,” as historical films are audiovisual narratives, and, like novels, tend to appeal to wide audiences. Robert A. Rosenstone was one of the first professionals in the field to address the question of whether or not films could write history. He notes that even thirty years ago, this notion would have been unthinkable, yet he notes

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that more recently the field has expanded to include major journals like *Film and History*, panels at conferences, and indeed entire conferences devoted to the investigation of visual histories and their relevance to the practice of the professional historian. Yet, as he and fellow film historian Robert Brent Toplin, have noted, there exists no set methodology for critiquing films in this manner, with Toplin asserting that the field still relies on “emotional reactions” in assessing merits in the historical film.

Historian Natalie Zemon Davis introduces her analysis of films by drawing parallels between the dichotomy of poetry and history in the work of Herodotus and Thucydides and that of modern fiction films and current historical practices. In *Slaves on Film: Film and Historical Vision,* she echoes White’s notion of the “blurred distinction” between the work of poets (narrative stories) and the work of historians. She questions the notion that the work of the modern historian is somehow reflective of the Aristotelian proposition that historical investigation is flawless and without invention, arguing that this “ancient contrast between poetry and history, and the crossover between them, anticipate the contrast and crossover between historical film and historical prose.”

While these historians have paved the way for other scholars to re-evaluate the historical writing process and to incorporate films into historical discourse, their discussions have primarily focused on American films made about the American past. My thesis analyzes three Western produced films representing Middle Eastern history during an age of evolving Western imperialism. In doing so, I attempt to discuss further the possibility of viewing films as history when the films in question are representing international histories. In this way, my

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10 Zemon Davis, 4.
work will contribute a new perspective to the ongoing discussion, questioning whether the arguments of these advocates of historical films are as viable outside of the American experience.

Because the question of representation is key to understanding visual histories, I will address the depictions of “the other” as they exist in these three films. Edward Said’s seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), and the school of thought that it has generated over the decades since its publication, will be of some importance here. Though it will not be the purpose of this work to point out the many ill-founded representations of Middle Eastern peoples—this has been handled quite prolifically elsewhere—these aspects of the film will be incorporated when it is of use to this discussion vis-à-vis colonialism specifically.11

As my work deals with the importance of feature film as a conveyor of historical ideas and images to the public—based on film’s popularity and accessibility—the films that I discuss are restricted to dramatic feature films with historical subjects, eras, and people, rather than documentary films. The central focus in this discussion of film and history concerns narrative structures and issues surrounding dramatization therefore, other forms of historical film are not relevant to this venture. Documentary films, for example, as they generally do not play to as large an audience as the epic film, do not pose the same problems for the historian that the historical feature film, or the “dramadoc,” does.12 Historical dramatic films tend to elicit responses from the public which can counteract the work of historians and their ability to publish meaningful histories.

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I have chosen the term “Anglo-American film,” rather than “Western film,” or “Hollywood film,” for two reasons. First, these films were jointly made by British and American nationals, and so the term “Western” is far too large in its scope to be useful. *Lawrence of Arabia* was directed by David Lean, a British national, and was produced by Sam Spiegel, an American. Similarly, *Khartoum* was directed by Basil Dearden, a Briton, and ultra-American Charleton Heston portrayed the lead character, General Gordon. *Exodus* features the “all-American” male, Paul Newman, and Ralph Richardson and Peter Lawford, both Britons, portray the primary British characters. Thus, while these films are indeed made by “Westerners,” the creative input that produced these films were largely by British and American nationals, rather than by Canadians, Australians, Germans, or the like.

Secondly, for the most part, the main subjects of these films are British. Less obviously in *Exodus* than in the other three, the British play key roles in all of these films and are key to my interpretation that these films reflect the political climate of the decade in which they were created. These films all convey a particular brand of colonialism and promote a “softer” version of the imperialism of old. This is directly related to the “passing of the guard” that occurred between Britain and the United States after the Suez Crisis in 1956. This historical hallmark demonstrated that the British role in the Middle East (largely characterized by direct colonialism) was being replaced by a more “hands off” approach that American foreign policy makers advocated for much of the twentieth century. After the humiliation suffered by the British in pulling out of Suez, at the insistence of the Americans, it became clear that the hard hand of British colonialism was being put at bay.

In order to evaluate these films in this context, I looked to three types of resources. First, I investigated academic publications of the events on which the films were based in order to provide a historiographical analysis which included evaluating them according to the
sources that were available at the time, and asking the following questions: how closely does
the film reflect the contemporary scholarship of the time, how did the filmmakers ascertain
their information on the film, what resources did they use, and do the film’s larger themes
resonate with the larger themes of the historiography. Next, I looked at the literature
pertaining to the film. This included both academic commentary in journals, contemporary
reviews of the films in press packets, leading daily newspapers, and trade journals. Third, I
utilized existing literature and interviews that the filmmakers (generally the directors) gave in
order to establish their motivations and intentions in making the film. In doing so, I have
sought to provide a holistic evaluation of these films, one that reaches beyond literary
interpretation, yet includes it, one that moves beyond criticism of the film, yet includes it,
and one that also appreciates the poetic elements of filmmaking and the contribution that
these devices make in storytelling and our understanding of these historical events.13 In
essence, I have attempted to achieve a more balanced look at history through these films,
through situating them within the politico-cultural context in which they were made.

In the introduction to her important work, Epic Encounters: Culture, Media & U.S.
Interests in the Middle East since 1945, Melani McAlister outlines some of the important aspects
of using films to further our understanding of the cultures that produce them. She notes the
common mistake of assuming that films connote a “direct one-to-one correlation,” rather
than using motion pictures as a partial reflection of a given society.14 This is why, in this
discussion, I use a variety of sources to explain the significance of the film, what it says
about the society in which it was produced, rather than solely relying on a strict
interpretation of the works. When possible, I also include direct commentary on the part of

Press, 2000).
14 Melani McAlister, Epic Encounters: Culture, Media & U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945 (Berkeley:
the filmmaker, particularly in the cases where the filmmaker worked independently from the studio system and functioned with more autonomy in creating their vision.

McAlister’s work has been integral to this discussion in that her study focuses on the cultural importance of the films, rather than on how the characters and events in the works have been represented. While acknowledging the salience of cultural representation in films made about the Middle East and giving due credit to the work of Edward Said, McAlister focuses more on what these representations mean for the producers of these audiovisuals, rather than remaining stuck in an Orientalist quagmire continually berating false stereotypes. She states, “By focusing on the intertextuality, the ecumenicalism, and the common logic of diverse representation [one can see how] the production of a discourse about the Middle East comes to be understood as authoritative, as ‘common sense.’”

It is through this lens that this study will also attain its focus—addressing misrepresentation of Middle Eastern cultures without focusing on this important issue.

I chose 1960s films, and these three films in particular, because each of them in their unique way depicts a reluctance on the part of the British to undertake their imperial endeavours in three different eras and places in the Middle East over the past century. In Lawrence of Arabia, this reluctance is demonstrated by what Steve Caton has referred to as “dialectical criticism,” referring to Lawrence’s struggle to be the servant of two masters—the British Empire and the “Arabs.” The reticence to be involved in colonial affairs is depicted in Khartoum by both the lead character, based on General Charles Gordon, and in the many scenes involving Prime Minister Gladstone’s character, who clearly relents the “necessity” of sending aid to the Sudan in the face of aggression by the Mahdi’s forces. Exodus characterizes this reluctance largely through one character, General Sutherland, and his

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13 McAlister, 8.
continual moral questioning of keeping the refugees on Cyprus and not permitting them to gain entry to Palestine.

This “reluctant imperialism” is reflective of the changing political hegemony in the 1960s Cold War era vis-a-vis Middle Eastern nations. The United States first exerted its political might in the region with the overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadegh in Iran, and then solidified its role as the superpower in the region with the Suez Crisis in 1956.16

The British government did not remove itself entirely from the Middle East however, it still kept a strong military presence there, particularly in the Arabian Peninsula. The Conservative government of the early 1960s felt that “Britain’s continued role as a great power depended on the British position in the Middle East.”17 According to historian Tore Petersen, in his discussion of the “special relationship” between the U.S. and Britain during the 1960s, the United States, continually concerned with what they perceived as Soviet encroachment in the region,18 maintained an “at arms length” approach to the Middle East and the rise of Arab nationalism under Nasser, yet continued to support the British military presence in the region.19

Therefore, in the escalating Cold War context of that decade, it became clear to American policy makers that a new form of colonialism was required if they were to stave off the perceived threat of Soviet expansion. This is what McAlister has referred to as

18 U.S. involvement in the Middle East as a Cold War policy has been widely documented, yet for a more concise analysis of this policy, see Magnus Persson, Great Britain, the United States and the Security of the Middle East: The Formation of the Baghdad Pact (Lund: Lund University Press, 1998.
19 Petersen, 8.
“benevolent supremacy”—the notion that the United States would be offering up assistance to the Middle East in a seemingly more detached and kind way than what was previously offered by the European powers.20 As she notes, these policymakers were very aware of “the fact that the Middle East was a primary site of the former colonial empires of Britain and France: as the United States began to compete for dominance in the postwar era, it would do so as a counter to European, as well as Soviet, influence.”21 This passing of the torch has perhaps best been characterized by Edward Ingram, scholar of imperial history, as a comparison to “an alliance of restraint in which the weaker partner commits suicide by inviting its stronger partner to strangle it. In Britain’s case, the United States was all too willing to oblige.”22 For these reasons, I see it as no coincidence that these films tend to champion the characters who rebel against this idea of a direct European hegemony, and who embrace the notion of a softer imperialism as characterized by these American foreign policymakers.

Yet, other historians, such as Bernard Porter, have referred to this “exchange of power” in more blithe terms, insisting that America—while speaking of “not doing Empire”—was, and is, just as imperialistic as Britain had ever been, and that the difference is perhaps a facade. Yet, he too refers to the relationship between Britain and America in the post World War II period as “imperial Anglo-Americanism,” also noting that, after the Suez Crisis, this relationship began “to crumble,” allowing America, from that point on, to “call the shots on her own.”23

20 McAlister, 31
21 McAlister, 32.
What Porter and other observers of British and American foreign activities agree upon is that there is a clear difference in approaches between the way that Britain proceeded in the Middle East throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and how the U.S. dealt with these challenging foreign policy issues in the post-Suez era. When the United States was ushered in as a true superpower in this region, there remained a legacy of "non-involvement" in Middle Eastern affairs and their actions were characterized by a *de facto* policy, at the very least, of "isolationism." The three films that comprise this discussion are reflective of this change, and, in this way, are useful for understanding how the public viewed this changing political climate.
CHAPTER ONE:  
THE STRUGGLE FOR CONTROL  
IN DAVID LEAN'S LAWRENCE OF ARABIA  

Introduction  

David Lean’s epic film, Lawrence of Arabia (1962), is an incredible feat by any standard of filmmaking. Regardless of how stylistic approaches have evolved in recent decades, Lean’s work has not ceased to inspire a variety of filmmakers for its ingenuity, craftsmanship and daring. Many well-known filmmakers, like Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese, have referred to Lean’s work in Lawrence of Arabia, Dr. Zhivago, and Bridge over the River Kwai as inspirations for their own creations.¹ Lean’s romantic ideas of the desert—the catalyst in his considering this subject matter for a film—inspired some of the most famous sequences in film history, such as the famous edit between Peter O’Toole blowing out a match and the fiery red landscape of the Arabian Desert. The impact of this film on the public consciousness regarding the history of the Arab Revolt, and their appreciation for its aesthetic aspects, has been unparalleled. It is for this reason in particular that I will be focusing on David Lean’s work as a contribution to historiography, a highly audiovisual and stylized one to be sure, but a piece of historical construction nonetheless.  

Although I acknowledge that the film is rife with problematic assumptions about this region and its peoples, it is also remarkably multifaceted in comparison to the one-dimensional representation that peoples of the Middle East have endured in Western  

¹“A Conversation with Steven Spielberg”, Special Features-Disc 2, Lawrence of Arabia, Columbia Tri-Star Home Video.
features since film’s inception. The Prince Faisal and Sherif Ali characters, prominent as they are in the film, are indicative of the central role that Lean chose to give these historical figures, rather than relegating them to the margins of a purely “Lawrence” narrative. As a result, this discussion will not focus solely on issues regarding representation, nor will it engage in film theory, but it will seek to provide a framework for discussing “film as history,” by asking historically interpretive, rather than filmic, questions.

“I know I’m not ordinary”

It is not surprising that the major theme of Lawrence of Arabia is that of questioning the nature of T. E. Lawrence’s persona. Lawrence himself was a master at producing the mystique surrounding his public image, and even his mostly loyal supporters have acknowledged the misalignment of his various stories. There exists a significant crop of scholarly and public literature about Lawrence, some of it heralding Lawrence as the hero and catalyst of the Arab Revolt, while others question whether or not his actions are worthy of such acclaim. For this reason, many, most prominently Richard Aldington, have viewed Lawrence as a person with inflated accolades, and have made it their personal mission to dismiss his accomplishments in the desert as simply overstated. The defenders of Lawrence, the writers of his hagiographies, like Basil Henry (B.H.) Liddell Hart and Robert Graves, who had access to Lawrence while he was alive, have focused their attention on preserving

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2 John C. Eisele has provided an interesting set of categories, into which most films depicting Middle Easterners easily fit, including his “Sheik” subtype, which is characterized by a European or American character donning Arab clothes, such as in Lawrence of Arabia. See “The Wild East: Deconstructing the Language of Genre in the Hollywood Eastern,” Cinema Journal 41.4(2002):68-94.
3 Robert Brent Toplin has aptly noted the irony that exists between the popularity of film and the inaccessibility of the language used in film theory. See Reel History, pp 3-4.
4 Sam Spiegel, producer. Lawrence of Arabia. 70 mm, 228 min, Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1962, motion picture.
his hero-status. Jeremy Wilson, perhaps the most prolific of all Lawrence's biographers, and one of the few to have the stamp of approval of Lawrence's brother, A. W. Lawrence, provides the most comprehensive biography of Lawrence to date, boasting nearly 1200 pages, complete with appendices of Lawrence's own writings and correspondence. Wilson's work, the most current and the most sober and reliable, describes the historiography of Lawrence up until the 1960s in the following fashion:

In 1919, Lowell Thomas gave Britain a romantic military hero unsullied by the horrors of the Western Front. Afterwards when Lawrence wrote *Seven Pillars*, he was thought to exemplify the 'intellectual man of action'. During the Second World War, his reputation as a leader again came to the fore, and *Seven Pillars* was included in the standard library issued to British fighting units. By the 1950s, the intense patriotism of the war period was fading, and attacks on conventional values became commonplace. Predictably, the accumulated Lawrence legend came under attack. Then, in the early 1960s, Lawrence became fair game for amateur psychologists, and when 'permissive society' focused public attention on private lives there was a glut of salacious allegations.

Yet, the filmmakers of *Lawrence of Arabia* did not have the benefit of Wilson's exemplary research, nor the benefit of further hindsight. At the time, the material that wasavailable had director David Lean and writer Robert Bolt choosing between the veteran biographers in the "Lawrence Bureau," and the naysayer camp headed by Aldington. Perhaps it is the complexity of the material available for Lawrence investigators that allows this dichotomy to exist, or, as Wilson has argued, it may be fuelled by larger politico-cultural forces.

Regardless of the reasons for such polemics in the historiography of Lawrence, the filmmakers in the early 1960s were forced to muddle through conflicting material, searching

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8 Wilson, 4.
through scores of primary and secondary sources. In the Columbia Pictures Souvenir
Program, screenwriter Robert Bolt voiced his frustration with the complexity of the written
accounts of Lawrence's life and the contradictions therein. He asserted that "a factual
account of Lawrence that does not in some way contradict another factual account is not
really possible...the best one can do is point to those junctures where fact, fiction, and myth
hopelessly intertwine." Lean, however, seemed to embrace the ambiguity of Lawrence and
stated in his personal notes that "an audience should never feel certain about him." The
film, as a result, seems to be part of both of these contrary camps at once. While it certainly
does highlight Lawrence's status as a mythical hero, it also strips Lawrence of his status and
humanizes him, all the while self-reflexively asking "Who was Lawrence?"

Lawrence's fame is often attributed to the work of Lowell Thomas, an American
reporter-cum-documentary filmmaker, who first met Lawrence in Jerusalem in 1917. At
that time, the Governor of Jerusalem, General Storrs, introduced Lawrence to Thomas as
the "uncrowned King of Arabia," Some observers, however, have more accurately pinned
the rise of Lawrence's fame to Thomas's film and lecture series entitled With Allenby in
Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia (1921). It was this immensely popular series that, according
to one scholar, "once and for all transformed a fairly obscure young Englishman into a full-
fledged romantic hero." Michael Wilson, the initial screenwriter for the film, described the
myth-making of Lawrence in more specific terms:

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9 Robert Bolt as quoted in L. Robert Morris and Lawrence Raskin, Lawrence of Arabia: The 30th Anniversary
10 David Lean's Personal Pre-Production Research Notes, Special Collection on David Lean, British Film
Institute, London.
11 Morris and Raskin, 5.
13 Kevin Brownlow, "Lowell Thomas and Lawrence of Arabia" in Kevin MacDonald and Mark Cousins, eds.,
In the general disillusionment and cynicism following World War I, the Western world needed an authentic hero to shore up the ideals for which the war had allegedly been fought. A shining symbol was needed. The Lawrence legend was created to fill that need. One can even say that if Lawrence had never existed, it would have been necessary to invent him.  

Steve Caton, an anthropologist with a Middle Eastern specialty, has noted in his book, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Film’s Anthropology*, that the political aspects surrounding the myth-building of Lawrence are critical to our understanding of the film’s premise and the critiques that Lean and the screenwriters are making regarding this myth. As Caton has noted, the second half of the film, which “reminds us that the Lawrence legend was created by a newspaper man hired by the United States government to portray World War I in its more “romantic” aspects,” is a direct critique on behalf of the filmmakers of the myth-building process of Lawrence in general.

Indeed, the film’s successful task of critiquing and “enrich[ing]…the texture of the Lawrence myth” is evident in the opening sequences of the film. The scene at the commemoration ceremony for Lawrence sets the stage for the film’s general thesis. While standing in front of a bust of Lawrence at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, the character, Col. Brighton, utters the first words of the film—exclaiming that Lawrence was “the most extraordinary man I ever met,” to which his companion, a priest, responds, “…but did he really deserve a place in here?” This dialogue makes the film’s purpose clear, from the outset—that it aims not to debunk the Lawrence myth nor expound his mythical status, but to question whether Lawrence, although admittedly an “extraordinary” man, deserved to be

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15 Steve Caton, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Film’s Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 112.
16 Caton, 118.
17 Anderegg, 108.
remembered in a place of high honor and piety. This is the central thrust of the polemic surrounding Lawrence’s legacy and the biggest challenge set before the filmmakers.  

This question first came to light in Richard Aldington’s book *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry* (1955). The central aim of this book appears to have been to denigrate Lawrence’s mythical status, to problematize his image as a hero, to describe the “true” nature of his achievements with Faisal’s army, and to make claims regarding Lawrence’s sexuality. In an introductory letter, Aldington makes his general feelings toward the existing work on Lawrence clear: “*Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is rather a work of quasi-fiction than of history…” and asserts that Lawrence was “at least half a fraud.”19 Throughout the text, Aldington makes several assertions regarding Lawrence’s apparent megalomania, and then blames Lawrence himself for the faulty biographies emanating from the Lawrence Bureau, calling the attention he would receive after the war “a Frankenstein monster he himself had been the chief agent in creating.”20 He also attempts to explain the contradiction of Lawrence’s apparent desire for, and repulsion by, his fame by referring to it as a “God-man complex,” citing Lawrence’s collaboration with Lowell Thomas and Robert Graves in their work, only to insist fervently before these books went to print that he did not assist them in any way as evidence.21 On the DVD Special Edition of the film, in a documentary on the making of the film, David Lean states that Lawrence was known as the kind of man who “walked backward into the limelight,” noting the contradiction between his extreme desire for privacy as well as his desire for fame.

18 Although Michael Wilson was the first person to write the screenplay for the film, he was not given credit for his work initially. Lean did not approve of Wilson’s draft (which had been sanctioned by Lawrence’s brother A. W. Lawrence) and brought in Robert Bolt to re-work the script, earning the latter full credit as the screenwriter. After a court case in the United States, however, Wilson won official co-writing status, although he is not often acknowledged by commentators on the film. See Joel Hudson, “Who Wrote Lawrence of Arabia?” *Cineaste* Vol. 20, Issue 4 (October 1994): 18-49.


20 Aldington, 110.

21 Aldington, 111.
Many of these themes put forth by Aldington are captured early on in Lean's depiction. For example, in the first scenes in the film, when Lawrence is summoned to speak to General Murray, the feminization of his soft-spoken voice and the lackadaisical manner of his insubordination to his superior are immediately evident, prompting Murray to comment that perhaps sending Lawrence out to the desert "will make a man out of him." In addition, Murray remarks strongly to Mr. Dryden, the fictional character who is head of the British Arab Bureau, that the Arab Revolt is a "storm in a teacup," that the entire "theatre of operations is a sideshow; the real war is being fought against the Germans, not the Turks." This scene, then, calls into question the importance of the Arab Revolt as a whole, and as a corollary, the salience of Lawrence's role in this event by inferring that the Ottoman theatre of war paled in comparison to the "real war" being fought in Europe. In addition, the scene after the presumed rape at Deraa\textsuperscript{22} has Lawrence "skip[ping] with arms slightly akimbo toward some fellow British officers...in a movement that suggests gayness," as Caton has argued.\textsuperscript{23} It could be suggested, then, that some of the assertions put forth by Aldington are evident in Murray's comments. It is apparent in this opening scene that Murray has no respect for Lawrence, believes him to be effeminate and presumes that the Bedouin uprising in the desert against the Ottoman army was not of any great consequence to the winning of the war. It is evident here that the filmmakers wanted to elucidate these aspects of the Lawrence legend by questioning the contemporary historiography, and to contribute to the enigma of Lawrence, not to provide a definitive representation.

\textsuperscript{22}While some writers on Lawrence describe the rape scene with vagueness and uncertainty, most biographers of Lawrence writing on the events at Deraa (using \textit{Seven Pillars of Wisdom} as their primary source material) write with confidence that Lawrence was flogged and repeatedly raped. See Michael Asher, \textit{Lawrence: The Uncrowned King of Arabia} (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1998) 282-295; and Jeremy Wilson, \textit{Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T. E. Lawrence} (London: Heineman, 1989). Also noteworthy are other writers, while not biographers of Lawrence, write on the subject as if there is no question of rape, see Emmett Early \textit{The War Veteran in Film} (London: McFarland & Co., Ltd., 2003), 113.

\textsuperscript{23}Caton, 82.
Demonstrated in these scenes, then, is Lean's ability to truncate and assimilate information from a variety of sources, so that the important general themes of Lawrence's persona and legacy are encapsulated. That this meeting between Murray and Dryden never took place and is rife with fiction, such as Dryden's character, is irrelevant. This is emblematic of the difference in approaches between the professional historian and the filmmaker using historical events as the basis for their stories. As the filmmaker is restricted by time constraints, it is difficult, and perhaps unnecessary, for him or her to beleaguer the finer details of historical events. It is his or her mission to create a narrative that has some semblance of historical veritas in very broad strokes. Because of this, the filmmaker must “downsize for drama” and abbreviate volumes of information into a single sequence or scene. It is for this reason, as Toplin argues, not adequate to assess a film's merit based on academic criteria alone.

The controversy surrounding Aldington's book was so extreme that Fred Crawford was compelled to write a book solely on the subject of Aldington, his work, and the subsequent backlash it received by supporters of Lawrence. According to Crawford, the intensity of the polemic that Aldington caused was so intense that it created a schism between the author's supporters and those of the “Lawrence Bureau”, including A. W. Lawrence, T. E. Lawrence's brother and protector of the rights to Seven Pillars of Wisdom and Lawrence's overall estate. Members of the “Lawrence Bureau,” most notably B.H. Liddell Hart, one of Lawrence's earliest biographers and supporters, campaigned actively to halt the publication of the book, for fear of it tarnishing Lawrence's reputation.24

According to Crawford, Liddell Hart's main motivation for the suppression of Aldington's book may have been a fear that his own military stratagem (which directly mirrored Lawrence's) would be subverted in the work.\textsuperscript{25} Apparently, during the Second World War, when Liddell Hart suggested to Winston Churchill that British troops were not needed to assist France in defending the Maginot Line, Churchill responded that Liddell Hart seemed to be "more a candidate for a mental home than for serious action."\textsuperscript{26} Liddell Hart was still recovering from this blow when Aldington's work was in the pre-publishing stages and he became privy to its contents.\textsuperscript{27} Aldington's work "challenged [Lawrence]'s application of the 'indirect approach' by treating the Arab Revolt as an un-heroic series of meaningless hit-and-run skirmishes that provided loot and distraction for the Arabs without contributing to the Palestine campaign or to the 'real war' in the trenches."\textsuperscript{28} Lawrence's "military strategy—attacking material\textsuperscript{29} instead of personnel, weakening the enemy with few casualties to his own side" rather than a war of attrition—is also featured in the film, with Lawrence's character consistently chiding his Arab comrades for a supposed lack of respect for life and demonstrating his strategy of destroying railway lines rather than attacking the Ottomans directly.\textsuperscript{29} His journey back through the Nefud desert to rescue Gasim, the Bedouin who had turned back in fear of the intense heat, is one such scene in which Lawrence is portrayed as having an exaggerated value for humanity. That this respect for life is thrown aside in the third act of the film—in the scenes following the torture, and perhaps rape, at Derra—is, once again, a way in which Lean and Bolt demonstrate the paradoxical nature of the Lawrence myth.

\textsuperscript{25} Liddell Hart's own biography of Lawrence, which was first written in 1934, has been reprinted and revised 17 times since the original publication. This speaks not only to the popularity of Lawrence, but also to the "re-visioning" of the Lawrence myth and to the difficulty in ascertaining the "truth" about Lawrence.
\textsuperscript{26} Crawford, 72.
\textsuperscript{27} Crawford, 73.
\textsuperscript{28} Crawford, 72.
\textsuperscript{29} Crawford, 72.
A. W. Lawrence's opposition to Aldington's work, which one academic has referred to as a "hatchet job," was echoed in his denunciation of Lean's film.\footnote{Anderegg, 106.} In a piece for the Observer entitled "The Fiction and the Fact," he wrote that "I need only say that I should not have recognized my brother" and complained in a New York Times article shortly after the film was released that Lawrence of Arabia "completely misrepresents [him]."\footnote{Crawford, 155.} When Bolt wrote an article for the New York Times, entitled "Clues to the Legend of Lawrence," Liddell Hart and A. W. Lawrence began a letter writing exchange with Bolt, in which they steadfastly refuted the contents of his article. In particular, A. W. took offence to Bolt's discussion of Lawrence's sexuality. In response to the barrage of questions that Bolt received regarding whether or not Lawrence was a homosexual, he stated, "Whether he was homosexually active, I have no idea. That he was more or less homosexual by nature, I think almost certain."\footnote{Robert Bolt, "Clues to the Legend of Lawrence" New York Times 25 February 1962, 16.} When A. W. wrote to Bolt to refute these claims, Bolt responded, "Before I say anything else, I do hope that you don’t place me in the Aldington category?"\footnote{Crawford, 154.} This importantly indicates two things: (1) that Bolt and Lean were, in fact, aware of the Aldington controversy and, more than likely, made the film with this in mind, and (2) that they did not view Lawrence in the same way as did Aldington.

In fact, most viewers of Lawrence of Arabia would have a difficult time finding cause to put these filmmakers in a category with Aldington, as usurpers of the Lawrence myth. The film is an obvious homage to Lawrence in many ways. The display of his showmanship vis-à-vis his superiors marks him as the "likeable rebel," and he is clearly the protagonist of the story, with the audience's sympathy geared toward his character. Ella Shohat has remarked that Lawrence of Arabia is a prominent example of the "exploratory adventure" colonial film
that has the protagonist/hero’s “dynamic movement across a passive, static space, gradually stripping the land of its “enigma,” as the spectator wins visual access to oriental treasures.”

Producer Sam Spiegel remarked, in an interview in the pre-production stage, that the desert and the “revolt...[are] so magnificent as to give us opportunity for an extraordinary spectacle against which we will play this human drama.” In elucidating the enigma of Lawrence, the film strips the Orient of its mystery, making it more accessible and providing a clear backdrop to the central aspect of the story—Lawrence’s character. In addition, Shohat notes that the film is exemplary of the proto-typical Western representation in that it depicts Lawrence as “the individual Romantic “genius” [who] leads the Arab national revolt, presumed to be a passive entity awaiting T. E. Lawrence’s inspiration.” Indeed, the film does put Lawrence in a leadership role, based as it is on predominantly British sources, and excluding Arab ones. Additionally, Abdullah Habib AlMaaini has pointed out how Lean’s lens has countered Laura Mulvey’s celebrated assertion of the “male gaze,” and has argued effectively that the men in the film are the ones that “are represented as “to-be-looked-at,”” underscoring the obvious point that the hero of a film is often the protagonist, or the one that is the focal point of the narrative.

32 Columbia News Service, 16 October 1961, Special Collection on David Lean, British Film Institute, London.
33 Shohat, 27.
34 One of Aldington’s major criticisms of the previous work on Lawrence was the British-based sources used regarding Lawrence’s role in the Arab Revolt. His research includes the works of George Antonius, which include interviews with Amir Faisal, and the memoirs of King Abdullah of Transjordan. It is from these sources that he concludes that Lawrence’s role in the revolt was that of an aid to Faisal, rather than as a leader. See Aldington, 13. In addition, the lack of an Arab viewpoint in the historiography of Lawrence prompted Suleiman Mousa to write a history of T. E. Lawrence, T. E. Lawrence: An Arab View, transl. Albert Burros (London: Oxford, 1966). In the prologue Mousa explains his motivation as unfair treatment of Arabs in the British historiography and the penchant for those historians to view Lawrence as the leader of the revolt, which, as he states, was viewed by the Arabs with “a mixture of amazement and disbelief...because they understood the revolt to be a purely Arab endeavor,”(viii).
35 Abdullah Habib AlMaaini, “You Are an Interesting Man: Gender, Empire and Desire in David Lean’s Lawrence of Arabia”, in Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett, eds. Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999), 82.
Alain Silver and James Ursini have argued that Lean has not only embraced the hero legend of Lawrence, but has gone one step further in elevating him to a status beyond the mythical. Their most striking example is the scene that has Feisal looking around in the midst of the Turkish air raid early on in the film. In this scene, Feisal surveys the situation, seemingly desperate for a way to counter the hammering taken by the Arabs, when a point-of-view shot “reveals Lawrence behind the black smoke, suddenly before [Faisal] in medium close shot, as if risen from the earth in answer to his prayers.” According to his pre-production notes on the film, Lean did appear to have a mythical notion of Lawrence, or at least viewed Lawrence as a man with a deluded sense of grandeur. He states, “Surely this is the stuff of all prophets? My thoughts are crude and uncollected, but...I feel that Lawrence found himself in a situation, which combined with his extraordinary gifts of personality gave him a mirage-like image that he proceeded to follow.”

Yet, the assertion that the film is an homage to Lawrence’s efforts in the desert, does not mean that it is without criticism of Lawrence. Caton has effectively argued that a level of what he calls “dialectical criticism” is evident in the film, in that, while it depicts Lawrence as the de facto leader of the revolt, he is also represented as a “fascist.” Lean’s approach to this paradox is explained, as well, in his production notes. As an addendum to his comments noted above, Lean’s remarks indicate that he sees Lawrence as someone who viewed himself as mythical, yet also as a fallen hero. He states, “The test, the crucifixion, the third temptation, was probably the beat-up at Deraa. As he later confessed...he failed the test. This must have been a shattering spiritual experience—not because of the physical

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40 David Lean, Pre-Production Notes, Special Collection on David Lean, British Film Institute, London, England
41 Caton, 177.
experience, nor because of his failure to withstand the torture—but because it proved that his mirage of greatness was indeed a mirage, and that he had dared think it a reality.”

“We can’t all be lion-tamers”

The film is, at times, critical of the imperialist project, while still remaining a product of that enterprise. Adopting the open character of Caton’s dialectical criticism allows for a larger scope in analysing the film, rather than through the dichotomy of Said’s “orientalist episteme,” which, as Caton has pointed out, “overlooks, or at the very least, downplay[s]...the practices of self-criticism that practitioners of a disciplinary knowledge like anthropology may possess or deploy.” In his production notes, Lean makes remarks that seem to give credence to Caton’s assertions. In his discussion of those involved in the imperialist project in Britain, he asserts that they were not all soldiers of empire, but there were many who were self-critical, or at the very least, censorious of their government’s ambitions:

If we don’t show this facet of [Lawrence’s] feelings toward the Arab Revolt in particular, and colonialism in general, we will not be giving a true picture of Lawrence. His feelings were many years before his time and he came to grief accordingly...We had people at home who were pushing as hard as they were, and but for them we would still be in India. Lawrence was one of the spearheads of this modern way of thinking which is now generally accepted—at least in public utterances.

The paradox of the legend of “Lawrence of Arabia” that followed T. E. Lawrence throughout his lifetime, and continued long after his death in 1935, has appeared to some as inescapable. Michael A. Anderegg has put it thus: “the myth of TEL was founded on a

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42 David Lean, Pre-Production Notes, Special Collection on David Lean, British Film Institute, London, England.
43 Sam Spiegel, producer. Lawrence of Arabia. 70 mm, 228 min, Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1962, motion picture.
44 Caton, 173.
45 Special Collection of David Lean, British Film Institute, Notes on the Film.
paradox. Virtually from the moment he became a public figure, Lawrence inspired contradictory responses from those who came under his spell. David Lean commented that "there is enough action, enough psychological and thematic material in Seven Pillars for a dozen films with a dozen points of view." In his book, David Lean (1984), Anderegg discusses a trio of paradoxes that the figure of Lawrence has embodied and demonstrates how Lean, Bolt and Wilson effectively put these contradictions to the screen in their attempt to illuminate the mystery of this figure. For the purposes of this discussion, the two most striking and relevant paradoxes will be explored.

The first paradox that Anderegg mentions is the one in which Lawrence has been discussed as both a weak and a strong figure: The weak, "slight, short, pale, ascetic T. E. Lawrence... with a schoolgirl giggle... possibly homosexual, almost certainly masochistic..." versus the "courageous, dashing, magnetic Oriental Lawrence... uncrowned King of Arabia..." Indeed, these elements and descriptions of Lawrence are evident in the film. As discussed above, the "effeminate" nature of Lawrence is demonstrated in his soft-spoken manner in the earlier scenes of the film, and the way in which Murray deals with him, telling the audience that he is seen as less than masculine, or at the very least, that his colleagues see him that way. The strong Lawrence is also evident in the film, mostly in the second half, and perhaps most definitively in the scene before the taking of Aqaba, when Lawrence is depicted as having the final word in solving a tribal skirmish.

The second paradox Anderegg discusses is the question of whether or not Lawrence was a "good" or a "bad" imperialist. One of the central aspects of the debate over Lawrence has been the extent of his loyalty to the Arab nationalist cause. He is described as being one

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46 Anderegg, 160.
48 Anderegg, 106.
who has been the servant of two masters, and he himself commented on the extent to which this struggle was a burden on him during the campaign:

So, the Arabs, having tested my friendliness and sincerity under fire, asked me, as a free agent, to endorse the promises of the British government (the Husayn-McMahon correspondence). I had no previous or inner knowledge of the Sykes-Picot treaty, which were both framed by war-time branches of the Foreign Office. But, not being a perfect fool, I could see that if we won the war the promises to the Arabs were dead paper. Had I been an honourable adviser I would have sent my men home, and not let them risk their lives for such stuff...So I assured them that England kept her word in letter and spirit. In this comfort they performed their fine things; but, of course, instead of being proud of what we did together, I was continually and bitterly ashamed.  

In the film, the question of Lawrence’s loyalty is a running theme. It begins, however, with the depiction of Lawrence stealing away in the early morning to “work his miracle” for Prince Feisal, the attack at ‘Aqaba. When Feisal is made aware of this through Sherif Ali, he questions Lawrence on his motives and loyalty. Although Lawrence understands that Sherif Ali needed to make Prince Feisal aware of the adventure, Lawrence did not feel that he needed to tell his fellow officer, Brighton, about the escapade. Lawrence is, at this point, seen to be his own master, which is yet another recurring theme. As he jumps astride his camel, he asks permission to ride in Feisal’s name. Faisal answers, “yes, but in whose name do you ride?” The question is not answered and the film advances to the next scene, leaving the issue open-ended and up to the audience to decide. Not only does this sequence serve to illustrate the struggles of identity politics that challenged Lawrence, it also again brings the viewer back to the main question of Lawrence’s identity.

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49 T. E. Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph (NY: Doubleday & Co., 1935), 243. Although there exists much debate over the exact promises made to Prince Feisal’s father, Sharif Husayn of Mecca in the Husayn-McMahon Correspondence, it is clear that some level of sovereignty was to come to the Arabs in exchange for Feisal organizing the revolt against the Ottoman forces.
This central theme is again highlighted in the scene in which Sherif Ali presents Lawrence with a garland as a “tribute for the Prince, flowers for the man.” Lawrence replies that he “is none of those things…,” which prompts the question again, this time by Ali and the viewer, “what then?” Lawrence then replies that he “does not know.” This scene not only demonstrates that the Lawrence character is confused about who he is, but his masculinity is also called into question, not by Ali, but by Lawrence himself.

The paradox of the good/bad imperialist is perhaps most evident in the scenes in which Lawrence is dealing with General Allenby following the attack on ‘Aqaba. Here, Lawrence is attempting to secure artillery and gold in order to pay the Arabs for their contribution to the British war effort. At the end of this discussion, in which apparently Lawrence will get all that he asks for, he casually inquires about Britain’s plans in Arabia, almost as if it were an afterthought. The way that the filmmakers create the scene fits ideologically with the manner in which Lawrence wrote the paragraph above. It is as though the character has a nagging sense of British imperial interests; yet, he mysteriously takes at face value Allenby’s (who reminds the audience that as a military officer, he has no input into political ventures) suggestion that Lawrence can tell the Arabs that Britain has no imperial designs on Arabia. Lawrence explains to the officers and Dryden that Arab freedom “is the reason that they ride.”

Many scenes later, after the events at Deraa, Lawrence again confronts Allenby, this time asking for a transfer out of Arabia. Allenby, assuming that Lawrence is doing this because of knowledge of the Sykes-Picot agreement, is astounded to learn that Lawrence is unaware of this agreement to partition the Ottoman Empire into protectorates under shared British and French control. Lawrence, before being made aware of Dryden’s explanation of the agreement, had stated that he “could guess” what it was that they were going to tell him,
highlighting the particular portion of Lawrence's passage that he was not a "fool" and was suspicious of British designs on the area.

Conclusion

*Lawrence of Arabia,* then, is a historiographical survey of the debates surrounding Lawrence's character, yet is also a commentary on this polemic. The film is critical of Lawrence and the myth-making process that many in the "Lawrence Bureau," including B.H. Liddell-Hart and Lowell Thomas, have constructed. The film is, in this way, involved in the debate, as is shown by A.W. Lawrence's admonition of Lean's work and the way in which Lawrence is paradoxically featured in the film. Lawrence is seen at once in the film as a hero and a failure, and thus the film encapsulates the dichotomy and contradictions that are outlined in both the "pro" and "anti" Lawrence camps. He is depicted as a hero and a champion of Arab freedom, even at personal cost, but is featured as a failure after Deraa, when he betrays his military philosophy of material damage, rather than human damage, and orders the army to "take no prisoners." As one reviewer of the film has noted, the film is successful in its depiction of Lawrence because "rather than being simplified or generalized, incidents from Lawrence's story are used symbolically to illuminate the man and his work."30

If a part of the function of historiographical material is to promote discussion and debate, then this film certainly qualifies as historical commentary. Many historians have discussed the film and have used it as a pedagogical tool in the classroom. Not only does it provide a semiotic synopsis of the legend of Lawrence (although notably excluding Arab perspectives), it also provides strong critiques of imperialism, myth-making constructions, and Lawrence himself. As such, it not only successfully truncates much of the Western

historical debates surrounding Lawrence and his role in the Arab revolt, but it also has the ability to serve as a "visual springboard" for discussion of these variant themes.
CHAPTER TWO: REBELLION AND RETICENCE IN BASIL DEARDEN’S *KHARTOUM*

Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, the relationship between film and history began at the dawn of feature-length film, with David Wark (D.W.) Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Perhaps, not surprisingly, the negative depictions of Arabs and Muslim peoples also began with the very earliest films, and grew in tandem with the evolution of modern cinema, very rarely offering even-handed, or even semi-accurate, depictions of Middle Eastern peoples. In fact, the problems associated with these representations are evident in one of the very first films ever made, Georges Melies’ *The Terrible Turkish Executioner* (1905), which predates the feature-length film itself. As John E. Eisle has argued, the negative narrative tropes used to depict Muslims, as evidenced in this early short film, such as violent images of a Turkish executioner chopping off the heads of his prisoners, have continued until the present with films such as James Cameron’s *True Lies* (1994) and Stuart Baird’s *Executive Decision* (1996).¹

Labelling these films “easterns,” he notes that the usage of the devices of “imprisonment or slavery, mutilation or the threat of amputation with scimitars, and rescue” can be found in most films made about the East by the “Western” world.² Drawing on “earlier traditions of popular and literary Orientalism found in plays, novels, operas, songs, and the like…,” the “eastern,” he asserts, is simply centuries’ old Orientalism, on a grander

² Eisle, 68.
scale and with a larger audience. 3 And while Basil Dearden's *Khartoum* (1966) is not the most vilifying of the more than nine hundred depictions of Arabs and/or Muslims in Western films, there are certainly Orientalist images that need to be addressed in assessing the film's merit in historical representation, and to demonstrate the shift from direct to "soft" imperialism. 4 Yet it is important to note that Jack G. Shaheen, in his ambitious *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001), places *Khartoum* on his "recommended" list as an example of a film that is not wholly hyperbolic or stereotypical in its representation of Arab peoples. 5

Dearden's epic retells the story of the standoff between British General Charles Gordon and Mohammed Ahmed, the Mahdi of the Sudan, during a time of political and economic upheaval in that area. Although the film's reception was modest compared to *Lawrence of Arabia*, it did play to a wide audience upon release, and the critical response was such that it was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. 6 Thus, the film, although not deemed a "classic," like much of Lean's work, is important to the study of film and history, as it has enjoyed a relatively large audience and has helped to shape Western images of the history and peoples of that region in popular culture.

*Khartoum* opens with a long monologue, introducing the viewer to the "great" Nile, a river that is, according to the narrator, so old and grand that it is hard for most to comprehend. The voice-over narration continues, informing the viewer that the Nile is something of an anomaly, imbued with timeless traditions and mysticism that have

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3 Eisle, 68.
4 Jack G. Shaheen's work *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001), 3. This impressive work entails a catalogue of over 900 films in which Shaheen makes commentary not only on the plot of the film, but details the depictions of Arab and/or Muslim peoples for each entry.
5 Shaheen, 550.
characterized it since time immemorial, like “God” and “mystery,” which serves to underscore the pre-existing, Orientalist notion of the “ever unchanging” Middle East. This monologue also suggests to the viewer that what they are about to see is not only inexplicable, but also dangerous, due to its incomprehensibility. The narrator then introduces us to the first scene, which depicts British General Hicks' famous defeat by the Mahdi’s forces, followed by the Mahdi himself, portrayed by Sir Laurence Olivier. He proclaims to his followers that he is, indeed, the “chosen one,” and punctuates his remarks rhetorically, stating that Mohammed and God are on their side, as evidenced by the recent victory in the clash against the Turco-Egyptian forces. In doing so, Dearden “sets the scene;” this film is going to take you on a mysterious journey to inexplicable lands—the “vast, hot, African nowhere”—with dangerous and enigmatic people. This setting includes the necessary British hero, Charles (Chinese) Gordon, who is willing to take on the enemy almost single-handedly, despite the odds stacked against him. In this way, the film lionizes General Gordon, due largely to its Orientalist intensity in setting up the dangerous situation in which he soon finds himself.

The rest of the film contends with British backdoor politics, Gordon’s trip to Khartoum, two courageous visits to the Mahdi’s camp (which never occurred in actuality), and several battles between Gordon’s people, i.e. the Sudanese who reject the Mahdi’s claim, and those of the Mahdi’s following, ending with the eventual martyrdom of Gordon at the city of Khartoum. Although the film changes setting quite often, due to the filmmaker’s apparent desire to present a narrative of behind-the-scenes British politics vis-à-vis Gordon’s struggles in the Sudan, evident throughout is the attempt by the filmmakers to make a martyr out of Gordon, and to demonstrate a reluctance to practice imperialism on the part of Gordon and Prime Minister Gladstone.
**Auteur and Metteur-en-Scène**

It is important to note a distinction in film theory regarding directorial styles. David Lean and Basil Dearden are widely different in their approaches to their work, and in order to assess the historicity of these films, it is necessary to consider the filmmaker’s methodology. Lean, although not the writer of the screenplays for most of his films, can be referred to as an *auteur*, meaning that his works, particularly the more recent examples when he was awarded more autonomy, are marked by his own personal style. His artistic stamp of individuality is on all aspects of his work; the projects (although always a collaborative effort), and all the parts therein, have all had Lean’s approval, including lighting, composition, acting styles, sets, and equipment used, thereby marking him as the ‘author’ of his films. Andrew Sarris, one of the most prolific American writer on *auteur* theory, has defined it as follows, “... *auteur* theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value. Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature.”

Yet *auteur* theory, like any other, is contentious and subject to discussion and debate. Much of this discussion has focused on the dichotomy between the *auteur* and the *metteur-en-scène*—a style that is more reflective of a director who clearly answers to the studio. In recent scholarship, the discussion has moved in alternate directions, with some theorists convincingly arguing for the legitimacy of referring to some actors as *auteurs*. This, of course, problematizes the notion that the director is always the chief artistic contributor to the film, and allows for an opening in viewing other contributors to film projects as more influential.

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than previously thought. Such discussions clearly illustrate that while the notions of the 
auteur and metteur-en-scène are not absolute, there is a common understanding among scholars as to their fundamental meanings and importance.9

Dearden was clearly a pragmatic filmmaker, noted more for his efficiency and punctuality than for his artistic vision. According to the writers of the introduction of Liberal Directions: Basil Dearden and Postwar British Film Culture, Dearden’s work has been side-stepped and overshadowed by British film giants like David Lean and Richard Attenborough, due to his more plodding approach to filmmaking. They note film scholar David Thomson’s biting indictment of Dearden’s style as thus:

Dearden’s coming in on time is replete with the obedient, leaden dullness of British studios. His films are decent, empty, and plodding...[they] stand for the underlining of obvious meanings, for the showy resort to ‘realism’, for the middlebrow ticking off of ‘serious’ subjects, for the lack of cinematic sensibility...for the complacent description of problems and the resolute refusal to adopt critical intelligence to deal with them.10

Criticisms of Dearden clearly mark him as a “studio director,” or, as a metteur-en-scène, which in a post-war political climate that valued artistic direction over pragmatism in filmmaking, has led to a paucity of information on the director. As noted by the compilers of this work on Dearden, Thomson, like many others in his field, do not value Dearden’s pedantic style that allowed for making a film that “was completed at 5:30 on the proper day with the due number of tea breaks.”11 The press packet for the film also suggests that Dearden was a bit more conservative than his contemporary counterparts, stating, “Basil Dearden is the antithesis of the flamboyant motion picture director. His usual costume, in the studio or on

11 Alan Burton, Sullivan, and Wells, 5.
location, is a business suit, shirt and tie, a far cry from the bohemian attire of most of his colleagues.”

In his memoirs, lead actor Charlton Heston expressed several times his hesitation in working with Dearden, particularly after he had seen his work. He states he, “...ran Basil Dearden’s Sapphire. It’s not bad, but I don’t think the direction’s the best part of it.” At one point, he laments having taken on the project prior to having a director attached, “I’m still a little cool on the idea of Dearden to direct Khartoum, but we’re committed to it. One thing I must learn better: Don’t commit until you’re sure.” Yet, in the final analysis, once the filming was finished and he had a chance to view it in its polished form, he notes, “So I wound up Khartoum. I’ve learned not to try and deduce from my own reactions what the public and/or critical response to a film will be. However, I like this one.” As Heston refrains from making comment on Dearden’s directorial style while working with him, one can only deduce that, in the end, he was happy with Dearden’s conception and deliverance of the film.

Burton, O’Sullivan and Wells also see much merit in Dearden’s style of filmmaking, consistently (almost apologetically) attempting to point out the merits of his metteur-en-scène style. They insist that the existing scholarship on Dearden is inadequate, which inspired them to compile the text on his work in an attempt to address this dearth in film scholarship. It is surprising, indeed, that a filmmaker whose career spanned over three decades and produced forty-four films should inspire so little text from the academic community. The writers also insist on the gaps in the existing scholarship, noting that often Dearden is simply written off

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12 United Artists Press Package, page 3; Archival material at British Film Institute.
14 Alpert, 224.
15 Alpert, 225.
as a director of “social problem” films, when, in fact, the body of his work is much more eclectic.\textsuperscript{16} Ironically, when searching this volume for commentary on \textit{Khartoum}, it is only mentioned in passing, as with many of the other books and their discussions on Dearden.

Therefore, my analysis of \textit{Khartoum} will differ from my approach to \textit{Lawrence of Arabia}. With respect to the filmmakers’ approaches to the historical subjects of their films, far more information exists on Lean than on Dearden, likely for the reasons mentioned above. In addition, the makers of \textit{Lawrence} have had a much wider audience, a greater amount of attention, and the historiography of Lawrence is expansive, which, as stated earlier, is not the case with the makers of \textit{Khartoum}. In addition, the stylistic differences between these two filmmakers invite a variant methodology. To study \textit{Lawrence of Arabia} is to largely study David Lean and his approach to the material at his disposal. With \textit{Khartoum}, the methodology calls for a more interpretive approach, due, in part, to the paucity of the information available, and also because, as a \textit{metteur-en-scène}, we can safely assume that Dearden did not veer wildly from the scripted material and would have taken a less autonomous role in shaping the final result.

"I respect you, Gordon pasha, I make no war on you"\textsuperscript{17}

Because Dearden and screenwriter Robert Ardrey’s work focuses largely on General Charles Gordon and Mohammed Ahmed, this discussion of the historical merits of the film and its comments on imperialism will focus largely on characterization. While this may run counter to the prevailing trend of moving away from “great men” types of history, it is important to acknowledge that filmmakers often use these types of narratives as the basis of their stories. Presumably, the public finds personal stories more interesting than mass

\textsuperscript{16} Burton et al., 5.
\textsuperscript{17} Julian Blaustein, producer. \textit{Khartoum}. 70 mm, 134 min., United Artists Corporation, 1966, motion picture.
cultural studies—and therefore the analysis of the film on its own merit must derive from a character driven critique.

The historiography of General Charles Gordon has had the agenda of celebrating his efforts in China and the Sudan, producing an excess of scholarship that is comparable to that of T. E. Lawrence. While these men share a great deal, it is apparent that the mystification or ambiguity of Lawrence, which characterizes the literature about him, is not present in the historiography of General Gordon, nor is it a prevalent theme in the film. To a large degree, it is clear in the film and the historiography who Gordon was and who he was obliged to serve. Unlike Lawrence, Gordon is certain about his intentions and his rebellion against the British empire. We see little in the film or in the historiography of Gordon of any internal struggle or anguish with respect to his campaign or in his eventual refusal to comply with Gladstone’s orders. While in Lawrence of Arabia our rebellious hero consistently works within the framework of colonialism, even while attempting to deny it, “Gordon of Khartoum” directly disobeys his orders from the very top echelons of government and is martyred at the end of the narrative.

The largest questions in the historiography of Gordon are the uncertainty of events in those final months in Khartoum and whether or not Gordon was justified in his violation of Gladstone’s orders. For example, from the texts that were available to the filmmakers at the time of filming, one topic that seems to have been widely debated is whether or not Gordon went on a mission of peace, or whether he went to Khartoum with the clear intention of quelling the Mahdist rebellion. Pierre Crabites has argued that Gordon went to the Sudan with no intention to disobey orders, nor to wage war with the Mahdi. He claims, “…Gordon was neither swept off his feet by a burning desire to “smash up” the Mahdi, nor so credulous as to believe that he could hypnotize that leader into eating out of his
hand….” Yet, Anthony Nutting argues that Gordon oscillated between a mission of peace and a mission of attack, even installing a government under Zubeir Pasha. His main argument is that Gordon changed his mind regarding the overarching mission, including altering the smallest of details in how these varying objectives were to be achieved. To support his argument, Nutting quotes a letter from Lord Northbrook to Lord Baring stating, “What a queer fellow Gordon is and how rapidly he changes his opinions, “Zubair is to be sent to Cyprus before Gordon arrives…Zubair is to rule at Khartoum…The Mahdi is a good kind man…the Mahdi is to be smashed up…” Peter Malcom (P.M.) Holt agrees with this characterization, asserting that “[Gordon] had an excessive fertility of mind, and he deluged both his superiors and subordinates with detailed and inconsistent themes.” While Crabites frames Gordon as a man with a violent agenda, earlier historians such as Lytton Strachey argue that Gordon took a more pacifist stance toward the Mahdi and is thereby deserving of all his accolades as a man of colonial splendour, i.e. not seduced by the notion of “empire.” Nutting’s analysis seems to be more probable, in his assertion that Gordon altered his strategies to suit the changing environment and as new information came to light.

In the film, Gordon appears flippant in the face of Prime Minister Gladstone’s initial directive for him to evacuate all British and Egyptian subjects from the Sudan. In this conversation as well, we get hints from Gladstone as to the negative aspects of Gordon’s character, namely that he is “illogical and insubordinate,” and will likely “play tricks, exceed…orders, and in the name of some mystical necessity apparent only to [him] self, [he’ll] do [his] ingenious best to involve [British] government up to the hat band.” This dialogue suggests that the filmmakers were offering an alternative hypothesis to the existing

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18 Crabites, 253.
historiography on Gordon on this point, and also indicates a clear reluctance on the part of Gladstone to interfere in Sudan. Dearden and screenwriter Ardrey have Gladstone making these remarks as if it is a _fait accompli_ that Gordon will disobey his orders and take on the Mahdi. Yet, it is clear from the historiography that General Gordon is widely acknowledged as a hero, a man of great honor and principles, while also at the same time insubordinate and perhaps even slightly vain. It is not surprising, then, that the film attempts to characterize him in the same manner.

In addition, there are several examples in the film that seek to represent Gordon as honest and selfless; one of the most memorable is that of Gordon refusing payment of 10,000 Egyptian pounds from the Khedive Tawfiq for his re-instatement as Governor General of the Sudan, accepting only 2,000 because it is “all [he] needs.” In actuality, this conversation never took place, and Gordon never did receive or alter this offer from Tawfiq. He did, however, years before, when accepting the role of Governor-General of the Sudan from Khedive Ismail, reject an offer of 10,000 per annum, asking only for 2,000.21 This is a good example of how the filmmakers were able to touch on a major theme of the story—Gordon’s primary concern being the people of the Sudan, not compensation—even while altering the details seemingly for dramatic purposes. What is particularly salient about the story of Gordon is that he did not engage in this mission for monetary compensation, and one of the ways this is demonstrated in the historiography is his refusal of large monetary sums for his services, proving that he was perhaps more dedicated to serving and not a profiteer.

The film also attempts to demonstrate Gordon’s willingness and desire to understand and respect Islam, and, in effect, to find similarities between his own Christian

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faith and the Muslims of the Sudan. Indeed, in actuality, Gordon's relatively non-judgmental approach to Islam appears to be one of the reasons for his intense popularity in the Sudan. This sentiment is revealed both in historiography and in the film, and is exemplified in the contrast between his approach and the approach of many of his colonial contemporaries.\textsuperscript{22} Gordon's reunion with his domestic worker Kahleel is one example from the film which demonstrates Gordon's flexibility and openness to discussions relating to religion. The scene is charming. Kahleel, who has been studying the Bible, brings up the notion that Jesus said that "when a man is struck upon one cheek, he must turn another," and then gesticulates that when Gordon is hit, he not only strikes back, but twice as hard. Gordon then replies that "I must tell you Khaleel...I am not Jesus Christ." The impression is not only that Gordon is open to theological and philosophical discussions with his employees, but also that the filmmakers are not shy in casting doubt upon Christianity while making comments on Islam.

The historiography of Gordon echoes these observations, noting as well that there existed a definitive struggle within the man to attempt to respect local traditions, while also fulfilling the mandate set before him as an agent of colonialism. Alice Moore-Harrell has argued that, while Gordon was in theory a Christian presence in the Sudan, he strove to work within his post as a Turco-Egyptian, not as a British imperialist. She argues that during his first post in the Sudan in the years 1877-1880, he defended the region "from any Western involvement," being careful during his time there to appoint as few British officials as possible.\textsuperscript{23} According to Harrell, Gordon brought "morals, convictions, manners and style..."
that differed from what the inhabitants were accustomed to from previous Turco-Egyptian governors-general. His inclination to participate in the community and involve himself on a personal basis with the people he governed also contributed to his reputation. Gordon appeared to separate himself from the British while in the Sudan, taking orders from Egyptian officials, rather than his own superiors, even going to the extent of penning a document entitled “Foreigners in the Service of Oriental States,” in which he delineated a difference between a European serviceman operating under a colonial agenda and a European working under the sovereignty of an Oriental state. In this piece, he mapped out how this requires a particular detachment to the home guard and a higher level of assimilation into the local customs and culture. He states

I maintain the foreigner should, for the time, entirely abandon his relations with his native land; he should resist his own Government, and those of other powers, and keep intact the sovereignty of the Oriental state whose bread he eats; he should put himself into the place of a native when he has to advise the Sultan, Ameer, or khedive, or any question which his own, native, or any foreign Government, may wish settled, and his advice should be sealed by—first, what is universally right throughout the world; and secondly, by what is best for the Oriental state he serves. I do not mean best for the ruler of the Oriental state, but best for the people.

These themes are evident throughout the film, not only in the warm welcome that greets Gordon and his entourage at Khartoum and Berber, but also in the way in which Khaleel treats him, and also the deference with which the ulama of Khartoum have in dealing with Gordon, seemingly trusting him implicitly.

Thus, it is safe to say that, in addition to Gordon not possessing the ideology of a full-fledged Orientalist, he was to some degree, like T. E. Lawrence, critical of the imperial

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26 Moore-Harrell, 233.
machine. The film and the historiography would seem to indicate that Gordon had no intention of “modernizing” the Sudan, nor to change the cultural norms of the people, nor to convert them to Christianity. Gordon’s accelerated understanding of Islam is, in some ways, quite remarkable. This makes the subject of the film, Gordon and his intentions in the Sudan, the perfect vehicle to display British colonial intentions as not entirely malevolent.

When reflecting upon Islam in his journal, Gordon noted, “Our bishops content themselves in saying [Islam] is a false religion, but it is a false religion professed by millions on millions of our fellow creatures...The God of the Muslims is our God.” This sentiment is reflected in the film after his meeting with the Mahdi. Gordon’s character then realizes that he and the Mahdi are not so different in how they approach their missions. He states, “I am a man who will question anything except my own religious convictions, the Mahdi is no different...I seem to have suffered from the illusion that I have a monopoly on God.” In this way, the film has artfully captured the essence of Gordon’s willingness and aptitude for seeing beyond his own ethnocentrism, which is evident in his own writings and is apparent as well in those who have observed him. That the meeting between the Mahdi and Gordon did not in actuality occur is not as important as the over-arching theme that Gordon saw in the Mahdi a formidable foe for whom he had some respect. The filmmakers were able to truncate a wealth of material on Gordon’s views of Islam and the Mahdi into one meeting, without altering this important aspect of Gordon’s worldview.

It should be noted, however, that the film not only displays Gordon as being reticent to go to the Sudan, but it also depicts Prime Minister Gladstone as extremely unwilling to take part in any colonial endeavour, surprisingly even including Egypt. When faced with the

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question of how to protect Egypt from the Mahdist uprising, Gladstone asks, “why in heaven’s name can’t Egypt protect herself?” inferring that he sees the “moral responsibility” toward Egypt more as a nuisance than an obligation. Yet clearly, Britain held a firm grip on Egypt from 1882 to 1952 in order to keep control of the Suez Canal, and, in order to protect these interests, Britain needed to protect Egypt. Eve M. Troutt Powell has referred to British interference in this area as an “eternal greed,” and notes that there existed an “emotional jihad” in Britain to avenge Gordon’s death, and, as such, the “reconquest of the Sudan was not organized by Egyptian leaders, but by British officials.”

The film, then, depicts reluctant imperialism not only with respect to General Gordon’s character, but also in its attempts to “soften” British intentions to some degree.

East vs. West

It could be argued that the film is incredibly Orientalist, as, indeed, parts of it are. It stereotypes many of the Sudanese peoples, deprives them of a voice, and treats the Mahdi as a mysterious “creature.” The most salient question, however, is whether or not the filmmaker, and Gordon himself, were Orientalist in their policies or partially critical of the colonial project. Steven Caton’s theoretical rubric of “dialectical criticism,” discussed in the previous chapter, is useful and will be applied to some extent here. In Caton’s view, scholars need to adopt a more fluid approach to post-colonial studies, one that breaks down dichotomies such as colonizer/colonized, patriarchy/women, and East/West in order to stress the importance of “identify[ing] those aspects of the work—if any exist at all—where it seems to be engaged in a criticism of its own hegemonic project.”

29 Caton, 56.
30 Caton, 15.
recognize that the ideas and actions of those colonial agents are self-critical. Indeed, as Caton has argued effectively, this idea of being at once Orientalist and anti-imperialist is evident not only in T. E. Lawrence, and in David Lean's depiction, but also in General Gordon's actions and Basil Dearden's representation of those actions.

The film certainly possesses an East versus West dichotomy, as personified in the Gordon and Mahdi characters, both in the film itself and in the promotional posters used to sell it to the public. Each of these posters, to varying degrees, depicts a standoff between Gordon and the Mahdi and, in effect, a battle between the East and the West. The official poster of the first release in 1966, and the most ubiquitous of the three, is an obvious attempt to highlight the showdown between these two characters with the Mahdi staring menacingly at the viewer, and Gordon directly to his side shooting a pistol. Another poster also highlights the clash between Gordon and the Mahdi by depicting the two characters' heads side by side, seemingly rising above a war torn and fiery area below. In addition, this poster also alludes to the Nile River as the great dividing factor not only between the Mahdi and Gordon, but also between the forces of East and West.

As historian David Levering Lewis has noted in his analysis of the film, Khartoum, really only falls short in one area, and that is in providing a contextual premise for the standoff between Gordon and the Mahdi. This ellipsis contributes to the Orientalist bent on the story because it fails to give the reasons for the Mahdi's uprising to begin with, which allowed the filmmakers to build on a structural Orientalist understanding of Islam and Middle Eastern peoples. For example, because the film does not account for the most salient reason of the Mahdi's success (formulated in response to Egyptian hegemony in the area),
the filmmakers almost unwittingly give the Mahdi a more sinister and mysterious characterization than is merited. 31

The film, however, also seeks to undermine this notion in several ways, and incorporates important aspects of the historiography to do so. One important way is to stress Gordon’s refusal to leave Khartoum to “the sickness and the misery in which I once found it.” Although some commentators, like Lord Wolsely, the man commissioned to relieve Gordon at Khartoum, thought that Gordon was being insubordinate or even “childish” in his stubborn refusal to leave Khartoum, many others have noted that this refusal was indeed out of concern for the people of that city, coupled with a desire to stop the Mahdi’s forces from swallowing up the Sudan entirely. 32 Gordon himself stated in a telegraph to members of the British government that he wanted to “smash the Mahdi up” because he was “most unpopular,” stating also that in order to do so the British government must intervene, rather than allow Egypt to fend for itself. 33 In this way, the confrontation that the promotional film posters display is not overstated, reflecting, at least on the part of Gordon, a desire to engage in a confrontation for unselfish, seemingly non-imperialistic reasons.

However, the reasoning for Gordon’s desire to take on the Mahdi in this way was not for the British to attain control of the Sudan, but rather to save the Sudan from what was believed by local ulama as a “false prophet,” a leader that many did not want to follow. 34 Gordon stated in his journal that he would not leave Khartoum unless the entire city was to be evacuated, rather than just the Egyptian and European civilians. He states, “I say nothing

33 Chenevix Trench, 230.
34 Chenevix Trench, 198.
of evacuating the country. I merely maintain that if we do so, everyone in the Soudan, captive or hemmed in, ought to have the option or power of retreat.” It therefore seems that Gordon was acting out of concern for the people of Khartoum, rather than out of a desire for Britain to solidify its control over Egypt, by asserting hegemony over the Sudan. One historian has noted that, in light of the fact that Gordon was supposed to be operating under British pretences, he had in fact “taken up the cause of [the Sudan],” hence the reluctance on the part of Prime Minister Gladstone and other members of his cabinet to send relief forces to aid his endeavours in Khartoum. Therefore, the portrayal in the film of Gordon as a British rebel/hero, a man who was not afraid to question his government or act on his own free will when he thought that it was morally right to do so, is not that far off the mark. In addition, Dearden’s portrayal of Gordon is dialectically critical of the colonialist enterprise, as indeed Gordon himself appeared to be.

Winston Churchill, who participated in Egypt’s solidification of control over the Sudan at the eve of the nineteenth century, compared General Gordon and the Mahdi, proclaiming that they were very similar people. He noted that both were “earnest and enthusiastic men of keen sympathies and passionate emotions...both exerted great personal influence on all who came in contact with them...both were reformers.” The film, in fact, in showing the face-off between the Mahdi and Gordon, seems rather understated, compared to the historiography of the events of Khartoum. In the film, at the fictitious meeting between the two, the Mahdi states that he “respects” Gordon and that he “makes no war on [him].” The written evidence of the Mahdi seems to indicate that he did in fact respect Gordon. The correspondence between the two clearly shows that the Mahdi

35 Gordon, 77.
36 Garrett, 212.
attempted to convince Gordon over a ten month period to leave the area with dignity and
give up the fight, and that he gave orders to spare Gordon’s life at the siege in Khartoum.38

Although the Mahdi did seem hesitant to wage war on Gordon, Gordon did not
appear to have the same inclination toward the Mahdi, though this was not the case from the
beginning. Upon arrival at Khartoum, Gordon sent a package to the Mahdi, including robes
and a letter offering him the Sultanate of Kordofan, which the Mahdi had recently
conquered. The Mahdi’s response was thoughtful, assertive, and rejectionist. The Mahdi was
insulted by Gordon’s offer of the robes and the Sultanate; after all, who was Gordon to offer
him something he already had? He called for Gordon to “turn back on your non-Muslim
faith and turn instead to Allah and his messenger...then I will take you as my friend and
brother....”39 The Mahdi even went so far as to make a counter-offer to Gordon’s initial
proposal by suggesting that, if Gordon surrendered to him, he would take him under his
wing, so to speak, and “award [him] a rank.”40 The Mahdi also returned the robes, enclosing
the plain clothes, or jibba of the Mahiddiya for Gordon’s consideration. Apparently, this
angered Gordon so much that he kicked the parcel across the floor, before settling down to
write a reply.41 This reply, discussed as a declaration of war by one historian,42 deserves a full
quote:

Very soon you will be tested by armies beyond your abilities. You will be the
one who has to account to God for the bloodshed. There was no
requirement for me to address an ungrateful, dishonest man like you but I
was clinging to the hope that God would reveal your ambitions to be

38 Fergus Nicoll, The Sword of the Prophet: The Mahdi of Sudan and the Death of General Gordon (London: Sutton
39 Nicoll, 190.
40 Nicoll, 190.
41 Nicoll, 194. Garrett, 204.
42 Garrett, 204.
degenerate and that you would accept the sultanate. I am ready for you. I have men here with me who will cut off your breath. 43

Yet, other than the meeting between the Mahdi and Gordon near the beginning of the film, there exist no such harsh words between Gordon and the Mahdi. If anything, the Mahdi’s words in his tent at the beginning gave Gordon pause for thought in reconsidering the essence of the Mahdi’s true intentions. Near the end of the film, the Mahdi calls on Gordon again, this time to stress that Gordon should leave Khartoum because he has received a “vision” with instructions to “attack Khartoum with fire and sword.” It is evident from this scene that the Mahdi does not want to attack Khartoum with Gordon in it. This is a clear example of how filmmakers are able to truncate data from written history into effective visual and audio performances, which, in the space of minutes, enact what normally takes numerous pages to write. Although the meetings between Gordon and the Mahdi did not actually occur, it is worthwhile to note that the director used these scenes to get across a very important point. According to David Levering Lewis, producer Julian Blaustein was so concerned with authenticity that he sent a copy of the script to the Mahdi’s grandson. In his reply to Blaustein, he noted that this meeting had never taken place, yet that “it was a very fine script.” When Blaustein responded that he was dismayed by this scene being inaccurate, that the meeting never did take place, the grandson replied “Ah, but Mr. Blaustein, they should have!” 44

This interplay underscores two of my major points in discussing this film, and film and history in general. First, while it is important to be rigorous to a certain degree in retelling historical narratives on film, it is wasteful to become bogged down in the details. Second, as the Mahdi’s grandson’s reply suggests, films exist, in part, for people to fulfil

43 Nicoll, 194.
44 Lewis, 162.
hopeful illusions, or perhaps to provide a forum in which historical fantasies can actually be played out and conjectured, which is not a pastime that most historians will allow for themselves.

Conclusion

The historiography of the events at Khartoum, General Gordon, and the Mahdi of the Sudan is a rich and textured bulk of literature including primary sources, popular history books and academic material. Scores of words and stories have been written, countered, and re-written to highlight the various polemics surrounding General Gordon and the Mahdi, and the death of Gordon at Khartoum. So much is this the case that many authors preface their accounts of these events by making a clear justification as to why their work fills some tiny niche that somehow has been neglected in this intensely prolific bulk of scholarship. It is easy to see why this is the case. The events at Khartoum have all the ingredients for a great story: intrigue, ambition, vanity, and war.

It is also understandable then why Dearden and screenwriter Robert Ardrey chose this story to put to the screen. The film reflects many aspects of the historiographical material, while also engaging in a “dialectical critique” of the colonial project, effectively reflecting the practices and views of Gordon himself. Gordon’s liberal views, vis-à-vis his contemporaries, regarding Islam and the people of Khartoum, reflect just the type of reluctance to imperialism that appealed to North American and British audiences during this decade. That the film depicts Britain as being reticent to control Egypt and lacking very little desire to exert any hegemony in the Sudan is also a case in point. While the film’s main character is a suitable vehicle to depict “reluctant imperialism,” as a fairly accurate reflection
of the historiography of Gordon, it is clear that the filmmakers made overt changes to the
British attitude toward their control over Egypt and, as a corollary, the Sudan as well.
CHAPTER THREE: 
AMERICA'S NEW ROLE IN OTTO PREMINGER'S EXODUS

Introduction

When the ship Exodus set sail from France in July 1947, the journey immediately
became a media frenzy. For the entire passage, the passengers on the ship endured
hardships, many fell ill, and some perished. As the drama unfolded through their trip to
Palestine, and then on their journey back to Europe on three British ships, Western media
outlets tracked their progress, and the Western world was shocked at the trials and
tribulations endured by the passengers. The British, in compliance with their immigration
laws regarding Palestine, had attacked the ship while still off the port of Haifa, causing much
sympathy throughout the Western world. At the time of the Exodus' sailing and capture,
United Nations officials, the UNSCOP Commission, were touring Palestine, evaluating the
situation for prospective resolutions to the discord that had been occurring between the
Arab and Jewish populations for decades. The officials eventually proposed partitioning the
mandate into two separate states, one Arab and one Jewish. According to historian Tom
Segev, Golda Meir "later wrote that in attacking the Exodus the British made a notable
contribution to the commission's final recommendations."¹ There is no doubt that news
coverage of the troubled journey of this ship considerably helped the Zionist cause.

Otto Preminger's film, based on the Leon Uris novel, had much the same effect
when it was released in 1960, in that it was remarkably influential and contributed much to

the Zionist project. In many ways, the film and the themes therein have influenced the way in which Israelis and diaspora Jews viewed themselves in the post-Holocaust era, when the horrors of World War II made a strong, self-reliant Jewish identity crucial to the character of the newly formed state.

In this way, Exodus is markedly different from the two films discussed above. Unlike Lawrence of Arabia and Khartoum, it is expressly political, whether intentional or not. While the two previous films discussed reflect the political climate of the 1960s and were influential in shaping understanding of their respective historical events, Exodus, I argue, is more overtly political. It influenced the understanding of a historical event, yet also contributed to the notion of a new cultural identity and justifies a colonial endeavour in the post-colonial age. As will become clear, the film was, and remains, an integral pointer in Israeli identity, even for those who do not necessarily identify themselves as sabras, or “new Jews.” For many, Ari Ben Canaan represented this “new Jew”—a strong, alpha-male, righteous figure—a symbol of what Jews could be like in the post-Holocaust world, a strikingly attractive alternative to the bumbling, victimized schlemiel DP of Europe. It gave many Jews a sense of what could be achieved, despite the horrors and humiliations of the concentration camps.

Yet, like the other films in this discussion, Exodus is a celebration of a myth, and the British role in the film is certainly one of reluctance. While Khartoum and Lawrence of Arabia celebrate lone, British figures in the colonial era, Exodus celebrates colonialism, perhaps the last form of direct colonialism of its kind, even while continually downplaying the role of Britain in this project. This film, like the others, depicts British officers as “reluctant imperialists,” particularly with respect to General Sutherland’s character. At the same time,
Ari ben Canaan and the haapla activists contribute to the formation of what we might call the “new colonialist,” i.e. Zionist, with distinctly drawn American ties. While the notion of rhetoric has been given a rather subjunctive role in the discussions of the two films above, it will take on a more prominent role in this discussion. It is not too much to state that, as this film has played such a central role in Jewish identity and its ties to the state of Israel, it has contributed to the success of the Zionist project, as did the event itself.

“When the showdown comes, we always stand alone”

Ari ben Canaan states these words early on in the film, while he and the other members of the proto-military wing of the Haganah are planning the escape of the Star of David (later renamed The Exodus). One of the most explicit themes in Exodus is the notion that the Jews stand alone in the world, as is evidenced through several scenes in which characters like Kitty and Major Caldwell display varying levels of anti-Semitic sentiment.

This view is also reinforced in a later scene, in which Ari ben Canaan is transporting the passengers from the Star of David (the fictional name of the ship that had been redirected to Cyprus at the beginning of the film) to embark them on the new ship, the Exodus. In this scene, Ben Canaan, masquerading as a British officer, speaks to the overtly anti-Semitic Major Caldwell, who is tricked into thinking that Ben Canaan is not Jewish. Ben Canaan plays along with the role and, as a result, makes a fool of Caldwell, who claims to be able to “spot a Jew from a mile away,” while peering into the eyes of Ari. The scene is effective in that, while it is meant to be comical, it also drives home the point that in every sector of society you will find some form of anti-Semitism.

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2 This refers to those Haganah officials who were responsible for bringing illegal immigrants into Palestine.
In fact, Caldwell’s character serves as a symbol of anti-Semitism writ large, in that in each piece of dialogue he drops virulent off-hand remarks. In addition to the above scene, he also makes comments about General Sutherland’s family tree “having a Jew in it,” as well as exclaiming to Kitty that [the Jews] are “all ruddy beggars, I don’t see how you stand them.” Caldwell’s insistence on demarcating Jewish people from seemingly “all others,” and his penchant for applying negative comments to all Jewish people, effectively sets the tone and background for the Zionist project as depicted in the film. The viewer feels repugnance towards Caldwell and his comments, and is then primed to accept the events of the remainder of the film in which the Zionist fight is seen as righteous and justified. In fact, the notion of Jewish people being alone due to anti-Semitism is used throughout the film to lay the foundation for the resolute need for the creation of the Jewish state.

In his summary of the journey of The Exodus, historian Tom Segev continually stresses the importance of propaganda to the success of the mission, asserting that the haapla activists that were in charge of choosing the passengers for the trip did so taking into consideration certain dramatic elements. At the very least, when a drama did unfold on the Exodus, those in charge made sure that the press knew about it. He notes, “when the first baby was born on board, the news was telegraphed to the entire world.” Segev also discusses the notion that British actions toward the ship also “played into Zionist hands” by damaging and shelling the ship while off the coast of Haifa. Later, the poet Natan Alterman would make the final victim of the ship, a one-day old baby boy, into a national hero.

This notion of publicity for the Exodus, in accordance with the success of the Zionist project as a whole, is a hallmark of the film as well. One of the earliest scenes in the

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3 Segev, 130.
4 Segev, 130.
5 Segev, 131.
film depicts the sailing of the Exodus in a grand fashion, one that is meant to deliver an epic message. When Ben Canaan meets with the handler at Caraolos for the first time and declares that he wants to ship all 611 passengers from the Star of David on the Exodus within a week’s time, he is met with shock and disbelief. He then conveys his reasoning: “David, the United Nations will vote on the Palestine issue before the end of its present session, between now and then we have to show the world that thousands and thousands of homeless Jews in Europe are not going to accept any solution that bars them from Palestine.” Not only does this give the film dramatic tension by introducing a time limit on the mission, it also underscores the notion that the sailing of the Exodus is not simply an attempt to rescue the refugees, but it is also politically motivated and has a larger, global political context.

This notion is further elaborated by Ben Canaan in a conversation that he has with Kitty while the Exodus is anchored offshore Cyprus in the midst of the standoff between the ship and the British officials. He states, “Each person on board this ship is a soldier, the only weapon we have to fight with is our willingness to die.” When Kitty questions the purpose of such an exercise, Ben Canaan states, “Call it publicity...yes, publicity, a stunt to attract attention, a letter to the newspapers, a help wanted ad to the official journal of the United Nations; wanted by six hundred men, women, and children...a country.” The film, then, accurately reflects the propagandistic and political motivations that surrounded the Exodus event as it unfolded in 1947. As Loshitzky notes, “The journey of the Exodus with its heavy symbolism...served its purpose from a Zionist point of view: it has persuaded the world that the Jewish people needed their own state.”6

“We British have shown throughout our history an extraordinary talent for troublesome commitments.”

Though the film would have you think otherwise, the British were indeed invested in the Palestinian mandate, and were committed to controlling it to the best of their ability. They sought control of the mandate, as laid out in the Sykes-Picot agreement to buttress French and (then) Soviet influence of the region, and, additionally regarded Palestine as critical to retaining control of Egypt, as well as having “special importance.” Tom Segev has noted that one British official claimed that “Palestine for most of us was an emotion rather than a reality.” And while the British could not have predicted the difficulties in controlling this particular part of the former Ottoman Empire, nor that they would eventually opt out of the mandate in 1948 without leaving a functioning government in place, it was a cognizant choice on their behalf. The mandate system did not simply fall into the laps of the British, they forcefully and mindfully sought the mandates, including Palestine, to solidify their own interests. Included in this, was, of course, the commitment of many members of the British government, whom D. K. Fieldhouse has referred to as “Gentile Zionists” to the creation of the Jewish state. It was, however, only after the “strategic advantages in prolonging British control of Palestine were eventually outweighed by the problems of controlling it,” that they retreated and allowed the Palestinian Arabs and Jews to work out the issue of statehood amongst themselves.

Yet, the film clearly displays a reluctance on the part of the British to be involved in controlling the mandate. This aspect is best represented in General Sutherland’s character.

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7 Otto Preminger, producer and director. Exodus. 70mm, 208 min., United Artists, 1960, motion picture.
Throughout the film, he consistently shows sympathy for the Jewish refugees on Cyprus while still obeying the rules set before him, i.e. not allowing illegal entry of Jews into Palestine. In this respect, he works successfully within the colonialist framework, while still displaying distinct sympathy for the Jewish plight, and in this way is as “dialectically critical” as the lead characters in the other two films. He is the one that convinces Kitty to volunteer her services as a nurse, and is the one to call her on her “soft” anti-Semitism when she professes to “feel weird among them,” meaning Jewish people as a whole. On an emotional level, Sutherland’s character is meant to provide a “buffer” between the overt anti-Semitism of Major Caldwell and Kitty’s “strange” feelings towards the Jews. His character serves as a “politically correct” symbol, reminding the viewer that not all British, and indeed not all goyim, display varying levels of anti-Semitic tendencies.

On a political level, the reluctant nature of the British venture in Palestine is made clear in a dinner conversation between Kitty and General Sutherland, when she asks him to explain why he cannot just let the ship with the 611 refugees sail on to Palestine. He begins by making his claim regarding the British “talent for getting involved in troublesome commitments,” making it sound as though Britain has very little agency in these matters. He goes on to say, more explicitly, that “Palestine is a British mandate, imposed upon us by the League of Nations,” thereby eschewing the aggressive nature of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, along with other back-door deals made with full agency on the part of the British to seize hold of an area that they felt would bring them political gain.

Later on in the same conversation, Sutherland goes on to explain how the British made several promises during World War I and how Britain was “fighting for her life” at that time. He refers blithely to the Husayn-McMahon correspondence when he states that the “Arabs also have their claims.” This section, in which Preminger is quite explicitly trying
to be even-handed, is undermined by the next phrase uttered by Sutherland, that "Arabs are fanatical on the subject of Jewish immigration," which plays into various stereotypes of Middle Eastern people, that they are irrational and passionately small-minded. The phrase also underscores the notion that Zionism is borne out of sympathy for the Jewish state, and distracts from the aggressive and successful diplomatic policies of earlier Zionists, like Chaim Weizmann, and their work to create a homeland for the Jews. Sutherland completes his monologue by stating "the sooner I stop operating detention camps the happier I'll be, and that goes for every British officer and soldier I know." This completes the picture of Britain and its colonial minions as being almost non-complicit in the whole affair and allowing the United Nations to have control over the partition of Palestine. This is more reflective of the policy of Britain in the early 1960s towards Israel as a whole than of British policy during the latter days of the mandate. According to historian Tore Petersen, for Britain, "relations with Israel were almost a non-policy; concerned with Israel's security, its main goal was to stay aloof of the Arab-Israel conflict. After the Suez crisis, Britain made but little effort to broker any peace between Israelis and Arabs."11

"Kitty, you're getting to be quite the Zionist"

As Yosefa Loshitzky has outlined in her work, the three-fold Zionization process in *Exodus* is depicted in the characters Dov (symbolizing the Zionization of the Holocaust survivor), Taha (the Zionization of the Arab), and Kitty Fremont (the Zionization of America).12 It is in the last of these Zionization symbols that the viewer can discern that the film also strives metaphorically as well as explicitly to strengthen the "special relationship" between Israel and the United States that was building in the early 1960s. In this sense, while

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11 Petersen, 5.
12 Loshitzky, 121.
the viewer celebrates the victory of Zionism over the British, the notion that a new relationship has formed is also prevalent, particularly in the romantic affair between the ultra all-American girl, Kitty Fremont, and the ultra-militant sabra, Ari Ben-Canaan.

Kitty, the female lead character undergoes the transition from a “soft” anti-Semite to falling in love with Ben Canaan and, in the end of the film, is sporting an automatic rifle for the Zionist cause. As Loshitzky has argued, she has, by this point in the narrative, been “Zionized.” She argues that Kitty’s character and the love relationship between her and Ari, “can…be read as an allegory to the growing involvement of the United States in the Middle East beginning in the 1960s and America’s increasing support of Israel.”13 The treatment of the love story also symbolizes America’s new found place as one of the superpower influences in the region (along with the Soviet Union), and the complacent role of the British in the film can be seen as symbolic for the reduced influence that Britain realized after the political defeat at Suez.14

“We shall work together in the free state of Israel!”15

As Loshitsky points out, however, the Zionization of the different characters and their symbolism does not end with the Zionization of the holocaust survivor (Dov) and America (ben Canaan and Kitty), but also includes the transformation of the indigenous population of Palestine, the Arabs. In the film, the main Arab character, Taha, is characterized as part of the landowning elite, and someone who welcomes the Jewish settlers to the region with open arms. In the film, Tahas demonstrates this “brotherly love” by giving the Ben Canaan family the land upon which the fictional Gan Dafna kibbutz is built.

13 Loshitzky, 124.
14 Loshitzky, 125.
15 Otto Preminger, producer and director. Exodus. 70mm, 208 min., United Artists, 1960, motion picture.
and is seen as in league with Ari and his family, not with the Arab fighters who “prey” upon the kibbutz at random. This portrayal makes two very important statements regarding the Arab population. First, those who are friends of Zionism and its practitioners are moral and benign human beings. Conversely, any Arab that fights against Jewish immigration is seen as immoral and fanatical. The “obvious message is not that the Zionists took Arab lands, but, on the contrary, the Arabs (their brothers) gave them the land because they knew that the Jews would bring progress to the region.” In one of the final scenes in the film, after the U.N. partition vote is broadcast throughout Palestine, Taha demonstrates a change in character. When Ari questions him on this, Taha responds by saying, “now where shall my people go?” Ari then attempts to persuade him out of his fear by saying, “Don’t you see, we need to prove to the world that we can get along together. If we don’t, the British are right, we cannot govern ourselves.” Taha is unconvinced and is called out of the room. Ari then exclaims to Kitty, “now that it means everything, I can’t reach him.”

This sentiment of “enlightened colonialism” is strengthened at the end of the film when Taha is killed by Arab fighters and he is depicted as a martyr for the Zionist cause.

The unreality of the situation is further punctuated by the funeral scene, aptly named in the DVD as “Sharing the Land,” in which Taha is buried next to Karen. This is a statement that is clearly meant to indicate the Jewish propensity for all-inclusiveness, even in the face of such animosity from other groups. As Loshitsky has pointed out, however, this funeral could never have taken place in reality as, “according to Jewish laws, Jews cannot be buried with non-Jews.” While this may seem to be a minor point, the symbolism of this scene reaches far beyond this discrepancy. It suggests that the Arabs who identify with the Zionist project

16 Loshitsky, 124.
17 Loshitsky, 125.
are to be accepted and treated as “their brothers,” leaving the fate of those who do not unresolved. Yet, according to the speech given by Barak ben Canaan upon hearing the results of the vote in the UN on partition, the feeling on behalf of the Haganah was one of equality and brotherhood. He states, “we implore you, remain in your homes, and in your shops and we shall work together as equals in the free state of Israel.” This is a problematic assessment of the situation in a contemporary context, given that current historiography reflects a vastly different narrative. Due to the work done over the past two decades by Israel’s “new historians,” particularly the work on the Palestinian refugee crisis by Benny Morris, more and more Western academics, including Israeli scholars, are embracing the argument that at the very least, many Palestinians Arabs were forced to leave their homes—either through fear of expulsion or direct threat. At the time of filming however, the historiography, largely shaped by scholars such as Shabtai Teveth and others, reflected the myth that the Arab inhabitants of mandatory Palestine fled of their own volition, or because their leaders told them to. It is not surprising, then, that the film is laced with these kinds of assertions, no matter how inaccurate they may seem to contemporary viewers.18

The most problematic of scenes involving a high level of Arab characterization is the scene in which Tahas is discussing the attack on Gan Dafna with a Nazi official. The conflation of the Mufti of Jerusalem’s orders to the Arab populace of Palestine and Nazism is a pure fabrication on the part of the Preminger and Leon Uris. The Nazi official claims that he has eighty stormtroopers under his command and he demands that Tafas provide three hundred more in an attempt to take over Gan Dafna, as per the Mufti’s orders. This scene, incorporating the supposed “marriage” between Nazism and the Palestinian Arab

revolt against the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine, is a far cry from the blatant racism of the novel. As Melani McAlister has noted, the "novel is simply vicious, littered with every imaginable stereotype—from Arabs who smell like goats to the once-beloved Arab friend who dares to desire a Jewish woman." The playing down of the anti-Arab sentiment in comparison to the Uris novel was an intentional move on the part of Preminger. He notes "the book was in many, many incidents anti-British and exaggerated, also anti-Arab... I think that my picture... is much closer to the truth." While this is a troubling statement on several levels, mostly concerning the question of historical "truth," which is a problematic assertion to make when discussing the historiography of any event, is it decidedly so in discussing the creation of the state of Israel. It is important to note, however, that there remains a stark contrast between Arab representation in the book and in the film.

In discussing Exodus, Ella Shohat has categorized the film as part of the "heroic-nationalist" genre of Israeli cinema. An important aspect of the success of the film and one of the more troubling aspects of the Zionist project as depicted in the film, according to Shohat, is this very scene. She states that "such images are calculated to appeal to the stock responses of uninformed spectators, while also catalyzing for the post World War II spectator the release of negative emotions toward the Arab image as a corollary of the Nazi." In effect then, the Arab of Palestine becomes the Nazi, allowing for a source of satisfaction to the Israeli viewer in that "the depiction of a militant Israel punishing its enemies could provide a cathartic feeling of vicarious vengeance for centuries of humiliation now exorcised on the backs, not of the Nazis, but of the Arabs." Thus, this important

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19 McAlister, 161.
22 Shohat, Israeli Cinema, 71.
“staple of Zionist rhetoric” functions to Zionize the audience as well as the characters Tafas, Dov, and Kitty.

*Exodus* did indeed have an important effect on many American and Israeli Jews. The box office success of the film, combined with critical acclaim and Academy Award recognition, all speak to its success. *Exodus* earned fifth spot out of the Top Ten Money Makers for 1961, grossing over seven million dollars, and that does not include the first month of its release, December 1960. In addition, Sal Mineo earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor and claimed the Golden Globe for his portrayal of the disturbed Irgun-recruit, Dov Landau. Regarding critical success, the film also made its way onto the Top Ten Lists for both the *New York Times* and *Time* Magazine.

McAlister has noted that prior to the film’s release, Americans had “paid relatively little attention to [Israel],” but that, with the film’s release, it became “the primary source of knowledge about Jews and Israel that most Americans had.” The film’s importance, then, should not be underestimated, nor viewed as a by-gone blockbuster. Although it did not enjoy the canonical success of *Lawrence of Arabia*, it has had an emotional impact on many of its Jewish and American viewers.

In 2001, Rick Lyman of *The New York Times* performed a series of screenings and interviews with well-known producers and directors, concerning their favourite film. The viewing of the film was intended to be a discussion point of the interview, yet it also served to engender a personal account of the filmmaker’s world view. Harvey Weinstein, famed creator of Miramax films, by far the most successful of all the independent film studios in

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24 Steinberg, 233.
25 Steinberg, 177.
26 McAlister, 159.
contemporary Hollywood, chose *Exodus* for his film viewing. After seeing the film, Weinstein remarked on faults he found in Preminger's direction, but noted that "When you're a young Jew living in Queens and you see Paul Newman as a Jewish commando, you see women fighting alongside men, you see the commitment. I guess it made Jewish Americans proud to be Jewish, proud of Israel. It did me."27

Weinstein's remarks regarding this new vision that he had for himself and his people are an important point in discussing the film's responsibility for disseminating the notion of the "new Jew" and the part that this played in American acceptance of Israel, and that of American Jews in particular. Many observers have remarked on the centrality of this film and book to the creation of the "new Jew." Henry Gonshak has argued that the film and the book are responsible for the creation of the "new Jew," which he claims is not a product of "Israeli, European or American Jewish culture, but of Hollywood, modelled after the Western cowboy hero and such cinematic super-spies as James Bond."28 Gonshank also rails against the film and book for skewing perceptions of Jews, portraying a false image by "Rambowitzing" Jewish culture, rather than representing it as it "truly is."29 Loshitsky affirms this assertion, stating that Paul Newman's character laid the groundwork for subsequent Israeli films, such as *They Were Ten* (1961), based upon "the compelling new image that the Preminger film created."30

While it is important to note the effect of the film on Jewish identity, perhaps more in American culture than in Israel, these comments fail to address the legitimate sabra subculture in Israel that pre-dated the film, and, in fact, pre-dated the state of Israel itself. In

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29 Gonshank, 10.
30 Loshitsky, 119.
his intensive study of *sabra* culture, Oz Almog notes that this phenomenon began with the offspring of the first Jewish settlers in Palestine, or the “pioneer generation.” The offspring of these settlers slowly became known as the “Sabra generation,” and together they formed what is known as the “Hebrew Revolution.” According to Almog, these children include Jews who were “born in Palestine toward the end of World War I through the 1920s and the 1930s who were educated in social frameworks belonging formally or informally, to the labor movement of the Yishuv....”31 Ari’s character closely mirrors this description of the “Sabra generation.” Ari is depicted as a man in his 30s who was raised, educated and socialized in the manner of the *kibbutzim*. Almog paints a picture of the iconic *sabra*, which reveals a striking resemblance between the literary hero Zehavi and the depiction of Ari in the film. The author begins his novel in the following way:

When blond, handsome, fearless Yaron Zehavi, commander of the Hasamba gang, defied the evil British policeman Jack Smith, who threatened to throw him and his valiant comrades in jail, how different he seemed from the cowed and pious diaspora *yeshiva* boy in Europe! Here was the new Jew, born and bred on his own land, free of the inhibitions and superstitions of earlier ages; even his physique was superior to that of his cousins in the old country.”32

The film, then, is not so much an instigator for a new Jewish way of thinking, or self-reflecting, it was simply a vehicle through which to portray this new identity sympathetically to the world on a larger scale. So, to viewers like Harvey Weinstein, this image would have appeared to be new, perhaps a construction needed to give Jewish people a sense of pride and justice, as he suggested during his interview. Yet, it is clear that rather than Preminger:

32 Almog, 1.
creating the “new Jew” through his film, he was reflecting an important subcultural reality that already existed in Israel.

Lina Khatib argues that Israelis fail to deserve the status of “ethnic myth” because the Zionist project is itself an invention and, instead of restricting itself to the cultural realm, it has extended to the political. In her book, which deals with Hollywood cinema and the politics involved in filming the modern Middle East, she states that Hollywood films about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict fail to show a difference of cultural understanding between Israelis and diaspora Jews, and also does not allow for a distinction between those who adhere to Zionism and those who do not. Here is yet another way in which *Exodus* is unique. While the overarching theme of the film is certainly to sustain and support the Zionist cause, it does show difference in opinion between militaristic/terroristic tendencies in the yishuv (the Irgun), and those who seek a more peaceful means to gaining the state (Haganah). This is an important point. While many films about particular cultures tend to paint “the other” with the same brush, *Exodus* seems to take pains in order to point out not only the differences that existed in pre-Israeli society, but also provides a complicated storyline that depicts the existing tensions in a way that resonates realism. This is largely achieved in the portrayal of the Ben Canaan brothers, Barak and Akiva; Barak being the hardworking kibbutzim, Arab-friendly Haganah supporter, and Akiva, the more nationalist and militant leader of the Stern Gang. The fact that Otto Preminger took heat from both sides on this strongly suggests that the film is even handed in its representation of both camps. According to Preminger, “I had a big argument in Israel when I made the picture. The ruling group did

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33 Khatib, 109-112.
not like the idea that I gave any credit in the picture to the terrorists. Later, the terrorists also made it difficult for me. They felt they did not get enough credit...°

Rachel Weisbrod has argued that Exodus is distinctly a “melodrama,” based on the following: “melodrama is characterized by a highly visualized outlook, one in which the world is divided between good and evil. With no pretense at realism, melodrama portrays the characters in black and white, and character traits are divided along predetermined lines, with little psychological depth.” Adams. Admittedly, Exodus is a highly stylized motion picture. It has sweeping landscapes; there is much emphasis put on lighting, shots, and musical accompaniment; the camera travels rather than stays put in one spot: there is no doubt that this film is highly directed.

Yet, Weisbrod’s assertion that Exodus is a melodrama, based on its simplistic, or “black and white,” characters seems to miss the mark. The film is painstaking in its attempt to delineate highly different characteristics to the disparate “sides” in the film. The British, who are to be seen as the definitive “villains” in the picture, are not presented as purely evil. While Major Caldwell shows distinct signs of anti-Semitism, particularly in the “eye scene” with Ari ben Canaan described above, his counterpart, and senior and more powerful officer, General Sutherland, shows a distinct sympathy toward the refugees on Cyprus and the closed doors of Palestine. Both of these character traits are surmised from a few lines in a scene early on in the film in which Major Caldwell states to Kitty Fremont that Sutherland’s “quirk about the Jews” gives credence to the rumour that “if you gave a good shake to his family tree, you’d find a Jew up there.” In this scene, Caldwell’s anti-Semitism is introduced, as is Sutherland’s sympathy, particularly in juxtaposition to the scene prior, in

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34 Gerald Pratley, 135.
35 Rachel Weisbrod, “Exodus as Zionist Melodrama,” Israel Studies, Vol. 4, Issue 1, Spring 1999,
which Sutherland demonstrates humanity towards the Jewish plight by stating that he
“shouldn’t like to have a hand in sending a Jew back to Germany” and suggesting to Kitty
that she volunteer at the refugee camp on Cyprus.

In addition, the British, in the film, allow the Exodus to disembark to Palestine, albeit
after much contestation. This is in stark contrast to what occurred with the actual ship’s
journey. As Tom Segev has noted, the real Exodus did not make port at Haifa with all its
passengers seemingly disembarking and entering the country without issue, as is depicted in
Preminger’s vision. The actual boat was halted at the port of Haifa after one of the British
ships “rammed the hull,” and “its soldiers took the ship by force using live ammunition.”36
After some retaliation by the passengers on the Exodus, the British fired on the ship and
killed three passengers, including a boy in his mid-teens.37 Adding pain to punishment, the
British then disembarked the passengers, and put them on three separate boats headed for
the same port in France from which they had originally sailed. As the French were not keen
on forcing the passengers to disembark if they were unwilling, the British then re-directed
the DP’s to camps within Germany. As Segev notes, “…two months after leaving the DP
 camps, the people of Exodus found themselves on the shores of a “cursed” country, as they
called Germany, in two fenced-in camps not far from Lubeck….”38

In the film version of these events, the ‘picture’ stands in marked contrast to these
events as laid out by Segev and other historians. In the film version, the ship is held at bay in
Cyprus for approximately one week with a promise for “provisions and medical supplies,”
provided they remain in Cypriatic waters and do not try to rush the blockade. This is still
further evidence of Preminger wanting to “soften” the reality of British opposition to illegal

36 Tom Segev, “The Seventh Million”
37 Segev, 131.
38 Segev, 132.
entry to Palestine and harsher measures that the colonial office used in attempting to thwart such access to the mandate.

Conclusion

In comparison to Lawrence of Arabia, Exodus has, for a large portion of North Americans, been forgotten. It has not achieved canonical status, nor is it seen topping any critic’s “Top 10 Films of All Time” lists. For this reason, perhaps, Exodus does not herald the same litany of scholarly material that films with a more “classic” appeal garner. Yet, as has been discussed in this piece, Exodus is a film that should and must be revisited for the historian who is interested in the formation of Jewish perceptions of Israel, and the formation and adoption of the sabra identity.

That Exodus is a pointer for many American Jews in the formation of their identity and, as one historian has suggested, is the foundation from which many people in North America formed their opinions of the newly formed state, makes it worthy of more critical attention. As Gideon Bachmann has noted, Exodus “was the best promotional campaign Israel ever had.”

As I have shown, the film operates on several levels to instil certain perceptions in the audience. Exodus incorporates important themes from the history of the event to portray a narrative of courage in the face of diversity, and the struggle to overcome insurmountable odds. It depicts a Hollywood-esque hero, Ari, in a love relationship with Kitty, which serves semiotically to evoke images of the new and “special relationship” between Israel and the United States that was in the process of being developed in the early 1960s. In addition, by downplaying the fiendish role of the British in the film, it eschews polemics, while still

depicting a "struggle to overcome" formula that has reeled in audiences since the dawn of narrative cinema. The fact that this was a cognizant choice on the part of Preminger speaks to the reality that he was operating within a framework of "friendship among imperialists" that existed in the 1960s, when Britain lost political might and the United States firmed her grip on the Middle East. *Exodus*, as a propaganda piece for the creation of the state of Israel, was successful then and now, resonating *seritas* on several levels to the viewers it was most meant to influence, those in America.
CONCLUSION

Films contribute to our understanding of history and can be an invaluable tool for the analysis of historical events and eras. As my study has shown, if films are popular, like *Exodus*, or achieve legendary status, like *Lawrence of Arabia*, then the historian can look to them to learn not only what they indicate about the pasts that they narrate, but also what they say about the culture in which they were created. My study has analyzed three films in their filmic and historicized contexts—*Lawrence of Arabia* and the 1918 Arab Revolt, *Khartoum* and the Mahdi uprising in the Sudan, and *Exodus* and the creation of the state of Israel. These films provide myriad opportunities for analysis and interpretation that simply cannot be replicated in the written word.

Since the 1970s, Hayden White has argued for a re-visioning of the historical process to include a stronger acceptance of the notion that historical writing has a firmer basis in narrative than proponents of empiricism would have us believe. He counters the assumptions that “writers of fiction invent everything in their narratives—characters, events, plots, motifs, themes, atmosphere and so on” and that “historians invented nothing but certain rhetorical flourishes…” with the argument that fiction and historical writing have much in common by sharing, at their core, “semiological apparatuses that produce meanings.”¹

Many historians have applied White’s theories to the study of historical fiction and popular novels, such as the work produced by Robert A. Rosenstone, Natalie Zemon-Davis and Robert Brent Toplin. More recently, this practice has been extended to the study of

historical films. At the core of this argument is the assertion that historical films and the writing of history, while two completely different approaches to looking at the past, share many commonalities.

Even with a shared foundation, filmic history and professional historical writing are different. A film could never be as comprehensive as a book, or even a journal article. Furthermore, due to time constraints, it is not possible for a film to capture the interplay among scholars, give supporting evidence, nor be peer reviewed. What film can do through various filmic devices such as lighting, editing, acting and dialogue is give a general impression through themes and narrative, a “picture,” of a historical event or phenomenon. Quite simply, films can give us an audiovisual representation of these events that is simply not possible through books and journal articles. Through David Lean’s direction in Lawrence of Arabia the viewer can really visualize and imagine how hot the Nefud desert was when Fasisal’s army was travelling through it, or to even simply gain an appreciation for the desert itself. Similarly, in Exodus, the role of the actor plays into the viewer’s ability to see the pain and frustration in the face of Ari which allows for a more emotive experience (and hence more sympathy) which is a powerful tool. These poetic aspects of filmmaking also serve to spark interest in the subject area, fuel discussion, and can give prominence to historical events that the public may not otherwise be exposed to. For this reason, it is important to consider how well the film accurately represents contemporary historiography, but a high level of “accuracy” is not essential, nor is it the most important aspect in viewing a historical film. Often a discrepancy between a filmic representation of an event and the event itself can be just as suggestive of the culture in which it was created, as one that seems to fall more in line with the historiography.
My study of these films reveals a common theme of reluctant imperialism. None supports colonialism or imperialism directly, even though the protagonists are a part of the imperial machine. The characters that rebel in the face of British imperialism are the true heroes and the ones with whom the viewer is encouraged to empathize and identify. This reluctance on the part of the characters in these films to be engaged in the colonialist enterprise is reflective of what McAlister has referred to in her work as a “post-Orientalist model of representing the Middle East,” a paradigm that sought to distinguish American imperialism from that of the old colonial powers. These “representational dynamics” were meant to sell this benevolent vision to Western, mostly American, audiences regardless of how malevolent and direct American imperialism played out in reality.

Thus, these three films can be read as signifiers of what occurred in the political and cultural climate of the day. In the 1960s, global political control was shifting Britain and other European nations to a Cold War context which had the United States and the Soviet Union vying for power in the oil-rich Middle East. Each of these films depicts this change from British colonialism to a more “soft,” seemingly more indirect, American-style imperialism. These films all reflect this theme in different but equally important ways.

In *Lawrence of Arabia*, this changing hegemony is demonstrated in the depiction of Lawrence as a reluctant imperialist throughout the film. Lawrence is first and foremost loyal to the Arabs and the Arab cause. He studied “the Arabs” at Oxford and, in the film, is depicted as enjoying the flaunting of his knowledge and passion for Arab language and culture from the very first frames. However, he does so while being a British soldier and, therefore, must find a way to assist his Arab allies while still maintaining the appearance of loyalty to his country. What we see throughout the film is Lawrence struggling to serve these

2 McAlister, 40.
two masters. This inner struggle is the mainstay of the film, the historiography, and the major theme that David Lean wished to explore. The result is a film that captures Lawrence and the enigma of his personality and explores him, rather than attempting to define him.

Steven Caton’s paradigm of dialectical criticism is extremely useful in analyzing this film, as it allows for the notion that a servant of empire can also be critical of the imperial machine. David Lean was adamant on this score, as was discussed in Chapter One, insisting that Lawrence not be depicted as a flat character, but rather a man of nuance and mystery. Key to achieving this is his portrayal of Lawrence’s struggle and visible anguish in aiding the Arab Revolt while still being a member of the British army. The dialectical criticism that Lawrence displays throughout Lawrence of Arabia is a quality of what I have referred to as “reluctant imperialism” that defines this and the other two films.

General Gordon’s character in Khartoum is similar in this respect, although not nearly as imperialistic as his compatriot Colonel Stewart appears to be. Firstly, Gordon declines the offer to go to the Sudan and only does so due to his love for the area and its people who were being challenged by the Mahdist uprising. Gordon is not depicted as the loyal British imperialist sent on an Orientalist adventure to recreate the Sudan as a mirror of British society. Rather, he goes there on a mission of peace to save the Sudan from the grip of the Mahdi, the British and the Egyptians. Throughout the film, he continually defies orders, makes his own decisions, and confronts the Mahdi without any assistance from the British army. For Gordon, there is no inner struggle; he is simply opposed to British intentions (or, in this instance, lack thereof) in the Sudanese region. His character ventures, like Lawrence’s, to save indigenous people from imperialistic ambitions, British or otherwise. Yet, Khartoum’s reluctant imperialism is much more overt in two ways. Firstly, the British are depicted as being reluctant to take part in this affair, which is revealed through Prime Minister
Gladstone's character and his keen desire to try to quell the Mahdist revolt with as little manpower and ammunition as possible; hence his decision to send Gordon. Thus, on the state level, the British are depicted as not wanting to interfere. Secondly, on a more personal level, Gordon’s aversion to imperialism in the region is depicted by his genuine appreciation for the area, his disobeying of Gladstone’s orders, and his refusal to leave Khartoum even when it becomes obvious that he could very well perish there. Gordon’s reluctance is, in some ways, more of a refusal.

*Exodus* does not follow this mold exactly, but it does give the impression of a reluctance toward imperialistic ambitions. In this film, the British presence in Cyprus and Palestine is meant to be viewed with derision and we are sympathetic to General Sutherland’s character since he dislikes being in control of the refugees and the mandate. Sutherland clearly demonstrates reluctant imperialism in each piece of his dialogue in the film. He states overtly that he does not want to be in Cyprus controlling refugees, he sympathizes with Kitty’s confusion regarding the halt on Jewish immigration to Palestine, and he encourages her to assist in the camps.

The heroes of this film are clearly the Jewish refugees and Zionism as a whole. We are meant to sympathize with this different kind of colonialism that is clearly tied to the new American style of imperialism. In the film, this bond is depicted symbolically through the Zionization of Kitty and her relationship with Ari, which results in her final acceptance of the Zionist project. *Exodus*, most clearly of the three films, demonstrates the shift of power in the region during the 1960s through its depiction of this final act of British imperialism and the embracing of the new American presence in the Middle East.
Films can say as much about the environments in which they were created as they do about the stories that they depict. The films discussed in this thesis demonstrate that much can be garnered concerning public views on changing geo-politics, and the influence of contemporary world views on our reading and understanding of the past. If the historiography of a given event is truly never “finished,” then films that are produced to appeal to wide audiences can and should be investigated to further enhance our understanding of what these events mean in a given context. The treatment of feature films as a low-brow product of society not worthy of academic attention is no longer a useful paradigm. As we continue our quest to understand culture and the past, we must expand our “toolbox” to include cultural expressions that appeal to the largest of audiences, and film is one of the most important.

Most contemporary academic writing that concerns Western representations of Middle Eastern peoples focuses on the Orientalist aspects of specific genres—painting, film, or literary works. Alternatively, the current work by historians on film and history has mostly focused on American films made about the American past and subsequent implications for the American public. This study combines the critique of Orientalism and the method of historical film analysis in order to provide a succinct investigation of three Anglo-American films dealing with imperialism in the Middle East. While I have addressed the approaches of these filmmakers to the “Orient,” I have refrained from making this the focus of the thesis. I have also provided a historiographical analysis which discusses each film’s merits vis-à-vis the contemporary historical writings. In addition, I have demonstrated that these three films evidence the degree to which the viewing public accepted the political changes at this time. The three films show that the American, and Western, public accepted the notion that old-style colonialism was “bad” and the new soft imperialism was a step in the right direction.
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