

# Epic Films of David Lean

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**Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad**

**2017**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Zadar / Sveučilište u Zadru**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:162:588152>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2025-02-20**



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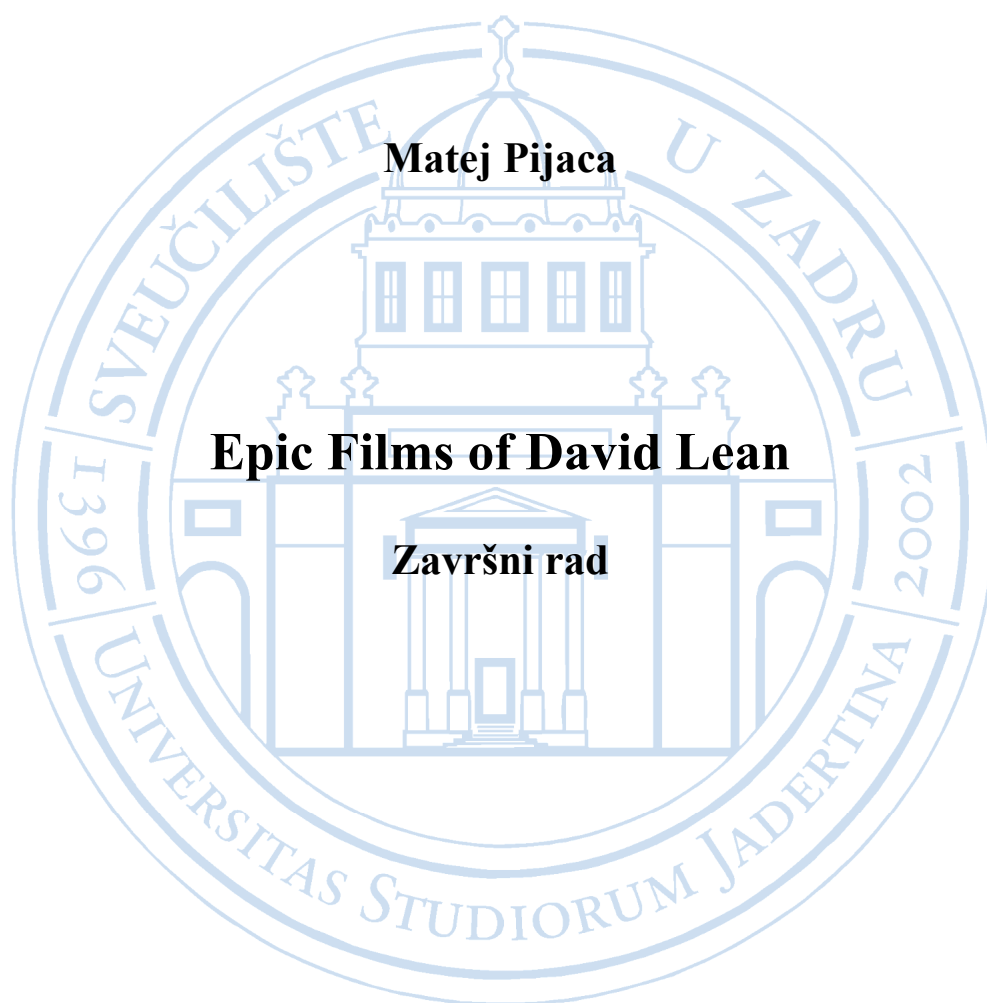
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Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za anglistiku

Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)



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Epic Films of David Lean

Završni rad

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Zadar, 2017.



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Zadar, 19. rujna 2017.

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## **1. Introduction**

David Lean is one of the greatest British directors of all time. He belongs to that rare breed of filmmakers whose films constantly managed to please the critics, his peers, and the audience. Several of his films were the highest grossers of their respective years while also earning him two Academy Awards out of the staggering eleven nominations. The aim of this final paper is to analyze the reasons of Lean's enormous appeal with the emphasis being on his most successful films: the epics.

Lean's rise was slow but hard-earned, starting from the very bottom and slowly working his way up through the various assisting jobs and learning the crucial mastery of editing. Even his directing beginnings were gradual: co-directing at first and slowly getting more and more freedom and his early films were a definite sign that he would become one of the greats. Films such as *Brief Encounter* (1945) showed his tendency to portray flawed characters and to tackle controversial subjects like infidelity while *Great Expectations* (1946) and *Oliver Twist* (1948) displayed his unique visual style in addition to allowing him to hone his skill of adapting great literary works.

Once Lean got a taste of the epic genre he never returned to the smaller films. This paper offers an in-depth analysis of three of his epics as well as an exploration of his contribution to the evolution of the genre. In *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), he used an array of tragic characters to create an anti-war farce, *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) is an exploration of a larger-than-life, but deeply troubled and war-scarred individual, while *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) is a tragic love story set during a turbulent time of Russian history. The three films' differences seem to be vast but they are a clear representation of a unique mind and they share a great deal of thematic and visual aspects. This paper seeks to analyze the themes and the characters of these three epics as well as their visual style.

## 2. Before the Epic<sup>1</sup>

David Lean was born in Croydon, a suburb South of London, on March 25, 1908 in a Quaker family, which meant that he was not allowed to see films as a child. Nevertheless, he took on photography as a hobby at a young age and once he was sent to boarding school, he was regularly sneaking out and going to the theatre to see the newest movies. He was enamored of films, especially Maurice Elvey's *The Hound of the Baskerville* (1920) and Rex Ingram's *The Four Horsemen of Apocalypse* (1921) and he got his first job in the film industry at Gaumont studio at the age of nineteen. His first tasks were menial such as bringing coffee to the cast and crew but he very quickly made his way to being an assistant director and assistant camera operator before assisting Elvey in the editing room. Lean's timing to join the film industry was very fortunate as it was a transition period between silent movies and 'talkies', which had become dominant by 1930. Lean quickly adapted to editing talking pictures and was soon regarded as one of the best in the business. Michael Powell, who hired Lean to edit a couple of his movies, praised his method of concentrating of the pictures rather than following the actors and their lines (Phillips 21). At this point he became a 'film doctor' on many movies, when his role was to save the movie in the editing room, which is where he learned the art of cutting all the unnecessary footage in favor of pacing, a skill he utilized in all his directed movies. Throughout the 30s and in the early 40s he worked on more than two dozen films as the sole editor,<sup>2</sup> when he honed his craft to perfection.

He directed several montage sequences for Anthony Asquith's *Pygmalion* (1938) and Gabriel Pascal's *Major Barbara* (1941) in addition to editing said pictures. Shortly after that he got his first real opportunity with *In Which We Serve* (1942) when he started his collaboration with Noël Coward. Since Coward was primarily a playwright and was also starring in the movie

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<sup>1</sup> All biographical data can be found in Phillips, Shail, Silver, and Brownlow.

<sup>2</sup> As opposed to the usual practice of the director taking the lead in the editing room with the editor assisting.

he needed a co-director to set up the shots and pick the lenses while he concentrated on the actors (Phillips 52). Lean's good work earned him a chance to direct a companion piece *This Happy Breed* (1944), based on a play by Coward. Both films were made during World War II exploring the thematic of war and both were huge hits at the box-office. In 1945 he made his last two movies for Coward: *Blithe Spirit*, a comedy about contacting a ghost of a deceased wife, and *Brief Encounter*, a romance which explores adultery. In *Brief Encounter*, which is considered to be one of Lean's best films and which earned him his first Oscar nomination, a middle-aged married woman falls in love with a married doctor who she keeps meeting at the train station on her way back from work. The pair spends more and more time together but never fully consummates the relationship. In the end, they decide that it would be best that they both return to their families. It is debatable whether this ending represents a triumph of decency over adultery or a "tragic victory of conformism over desire" (Leach 50). Some of these themes can be seen in Lean's later work, especially in *Doctor Zhivago* (1965).

After adapting four Coward plays in his first four movies as a director, Lean decided to tackle something different and his choice fell on Dickens. His first Dickens adaptation was *Great Expectations* (1946), a story set in Victorian Britain of an orphan boy being brought into high society by a monstrous-looking criminal and a secluded old lady. The film was certainly a departure from Lean's previous movies which all had realistic tones. Dickens' story, on the other hand, features a number of mysterious elements and Lean had to adapt his style to reflect the darker tone and he did so by using natural light from windows and candles to create a mystical atmosphere. He then proceeded to do another Dickens adaptation: *Oliver Twist* (1948), a tale of an orphan boy who is brought into a pickpocketing ring by the villainous Fagin. These two films were Lean's first adaptations of large source materials and it could be said that he mastered the skill which he will later use on his epics on them. It should also be said that Lean gave Alec Guinness, an actor who would star in most of his epics, his screen debut in his



Dickens films. Guinness showed great screen presence and versatility in two very different roles even though he had been exclusively a stage actor until then.<sup>3</sup>

The next period of Lean's career is filled with some of his less known work. The *Passionate Friends* (1949), adapted from the novel by H.G. Wells, explores similar themes to those in *Brief Encounter*, while *Madeleine* (1950) is a courtroom melodrama which also features themes of infidelity. Shail describes the execution of these two films as "cold" which may have been the reason of their relative failure (130). His next film *The Sound Barrier* (1952), his first movie made at Alexander Korda's production company, was more ambitious. The film is a fictionalized story of breaking of the sound barrier and features some impressive action and visuals. *Hobson's Choice* (1954), his second and final comedy, is a story of a rivalry between a stingy shoemaker and his daughter which ends with an impossible choice for the old man. His most interesting film in this period is *Summertime* (1955), a film about a middle-aged American woman holidaying in Venice and having an affair with a local married man. The film indicated the direction in which Lean was going as it featured a major Hollywood star Katharine Hepburn and was filmed entirely on location in Venice.

Lean then entered the final phase of his career, a phase which will bring him the most fame, recognition, and money: the phase of the epics. His first three epics: *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), and *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) were the most successful ones and will be the subject of a thorough analysis in the following chapters. His follow-up to *Zhivago* was *Ryan's Daughter* (1970), a love story set in Ireland during the Irish resistance to British rule in the early 1900s. It was a financial success but it was critically panned as many believed that the slight love story was undeserving of the gargantuan four-hour runtime (Shail 131). The film's reception caused Lean to take a fourteen-year hiatus from filmmaking

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<sup>3</sup> Guinness played Pip's young and noble friend in *Great Expectations*, while taking on the role of the old villain Fagin for *Oliver Twist*.

and he returned with 1984's *A Passage to India*, which proved to be his last film. *Passage's* reception was much more favorable and it brought Lean three Academy Award nominations. A number of his projects during the long hiatus failed to realize, such as a *Mutiny on the Bounty* and a *Nostramo*<sup>4</sup> adaptation. Lean was knighted in 1984 and died in London on 16 April 1991.

### **3. *The Bridge on the River Kwai: The Pointlessness of War***<sup>5</sup>

1957 saw Lean take a leap from smaller budgeted films to grand Hollywood epics with *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, an adaptation of Pierre Boulle's novel by the same name. *Kwai* is a war movie which depicts a group of British prisoners led by colonel Nicholson building a bridge in a Japanese prison camp deep inside the Burmese jungle. The film was a great critical and financial success, winning seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Director, Actor, and Screenplay, while also being the most successful movie of that year when it comes to box-office receipts. It was voted as 11<sup>th</sup> greatest British film of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the British Film Institute, while the American Film Institute ranked it 13<sup>th</sup> in 1998 and 36<sup>th</sup> in 2007 on their lists of best American movies.

The film appearing on both the British and the American film institutes' lists is peculiar to say the least. However, solid arguments can be made for both cases. Firstly, *Kwai* was financed and distributed by Columbia, an American production company. Additionally, the principal producer and the man who initiated the whole thing, Sam Spiegel, was an American. On the other hand, the British director as well as the almost exclusively British cast and the British subject might be enough to make this a British film. When all that is summed up we can

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<sup>4</sup> URL2.

<sup>5</sup> All biographical data and information regarding the production process can be found in Santas, Phillips, Harper and Porter, and Brownlow.

see merits for both arguments and can conclude that there is no definitive truth; the film is both British and American. A similar thing can be said for all Lean's films from this point on.

### **3.1. Production Madness**

The movie's production was troubled from before the start due to producer's Sam Spiegel's failure to find an agreeable director, with rejections by the likes of Fred Zinnemann, William Wyler, and Carol Reed. It was not until Katharine Hepburn, with whom Lean had worked on *Summertime*, recommended him to her friend Spiegel that the production started rolling. Spiegel was known as a hands on producer and one who liked to have as much creative control as possible so naturally he and Lean had quite a few disagreements during shooting. However, even though they were not on the same page all the time, their working relationship was very successful and the two men had great respect for each other, which is evidenced by their continued collaboration beyond *Kwai*.

When he signed on, Lean demanded to be heavily involved in the writing of the film as he wanted to "rescue Col. Nicholson from being depicted either as a lunatic or a traitor... and give his character a sympathetic and heroic dimension" (Phillips 225; Harper, Porter 134), Lean was dissatisfied with the first draft written by Carl Foreman,<sup>6</sup> mainly because he felt like most characters were "cardboard cutouts", especially the Japanese Colonel Saito (Phillips 229). After weeks of collaboration, Lean finally demanded a replacement writer who was provided in the form of Calder Willingham,<sup>7</sup> who he found to be an even worse fit than Foreman. Finally, Spiegel agreed to send a third writer: Academy Award winner Michael Wilson<sup>8</sup> with whom Lean got along extremely well, and he was the one to finalize the script. One issue that arose was that both Foreman and Wilson were blacklisted at the time and were not members of the

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<sup>6</sup> Writer of Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952).

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957).

<sup>8</sup> George Stevens' *A Place in the Sun* (1951).

writer's guild so Spiegel had to give the writing credit to Boule, who did not speak a word of English, for which he won an Oscar. Later on, both Foreman's and Wilson's credits were restored and they received their Academy Awards posthumously in 1985.

The movie is set in 1943 in a Japanese prison camp in the middle of a Burmese jungle where a regiment of British soldiers led by Colonel Nicholson is tasked with building a bridge over the river Kwai for the Japanese. However, a conflict between Nicholson and Colonel Saito, the Japanese leader, over a clause of the Geneva convention which states that officers cannot participate in physical labor arises and Nicholson is sent in "the oven", a type of solitary confinement, to be tortured both physically and mentally. When Saito realizes that the British are not performing adequately without their leadership and that they would not meet his deadline he releases Nicholson and agrees to his demands. After his victory, Nicholson decides to prove to the Japanese that British engineering is superior and uses all available resources to build the bridge on time, even some of his wounded soldiers. At the same time, a plot thread involving Major Shears, an American escapee from the prison camp is unfolding. After having barely escaped the prison, he is recruited by Major Warden, a leader of a British sabotage company, to destroy the bridge which Nicholson is building. A small group of four are sent to navigate the jungle and find the bridge. When they arrive and set the explosives, Nicholson becomes suspicious and tries to stop them. A huge gunfight ensues and most the major players are killed, some of them by Warden's mortar fire. Warden also wounds Nicholson who realizes that he should not be fighting the British and stumbles over the detonator which blows up the bridge. It is still unclear whether Nicholson fell on the detonator on purpose or if he had already lost all control over his body at that point.

### **3.2. An Epic Transition**

*The Bridge on the River Kwai* was not only a sign of change in David Lean's filmography, but it was also a turn within the epic genre. At the time, most epics were Biblical or Roman/Christian themed, exemplified by films such as *Samson and Delilah* (1948), *Quo Vadis* (1950), *The Ten Commandments* (1955), *Ben-Hur* (1959), and *Cleopatra* (1963). Santas claims that *Kwai* started the transition to a war/adventure theme in the post-World War II years (2). Roger Ebert points out *Kwai's* focus on individuals rather than on a larger fight, which differentiates it from other war epics.<sup>9</sup> The emphasis is placed on characters and performances rather than on exotic locales and spectacle. Those defining aspects of epics are still present of course: the movie was filmed entirely on location in Ceylon and it features a grand final action sequence, but those elements are the backdrop to the characters and their conflicts rather than the focus of the movie. These characters also vastly differ from those featured in other epics from that time, who were often larger-than-life icons fighting a clear-cut fight between good and evil (Santas 2). In *Kwai* we have characters who are principled but flawed, and whose main goal is not defeating the forces of evil, but finding meaning in their current situation.

Roger Ebert praises the movie for its complex characterization of both its heroes and villains.<sup>10</sup> The two main heroes, Nicholson and Shears, are vastly different characters but both are interesting in their own way. Nicholson is a proud and stubborn British officer who is ready to sacrifice his life for the well-being of his men, even though an argument can be made that his primary concern is upholding the law. Whatever his reasoning may be, he outlasts Saito in their battle of wills and is given command over building the bridge. Then, instead of focusing on halting the Japanese advances in the war, he rushes the construction of the bridge to show the ingenuity of British engineering under the pretense of raising the troops' morale. Nicholson

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<sup>9</sup> URL1.

<sup>10</sup> URL1.

constantly walks the thin line between a hero and a madman which was precisely what Lean had in mind when he started re-writing the script (Phillips 225). He is not a flawless do-gooder with whom the audience can easily relate like the heroes in the Roman/Biblical epics were. On the contrary, his actions can be questioned throughout the whole movie and even the agency of his final turn is debatable but it elevates the movie and plays a big part in its universal acclaim.

On the other hand, the movie's other most prominent hero, Shears, shares very little with the hardheaded British colonel. First of all, he is a mere sailor instead of a major which he claims to be. He assumed the identity of a deceased officer in order to achieve better living conditions in the prison camp where he even bribes the guards to stay on the injured list. Having escaped, he tries to use his perceived rank to get a medical discharge before being discovered and recruited by Major Warden. In the end, however, he sees the objective clearly, unlike Nicholson, but dies trying to achieve it. Shears is certainly a more conventional hero than Nicholson but he is far from a typical one in the context of epic films. He is a deceiver, smooth-talker, sarcastic, cares only about saving his own skin, and likes to spend time with beautiful women.<sup>11</sup> He is much more similar to a big screen icon which emerged several years after *Kwai*: James Bond, than to heroes of other epic features. However, as he travels through the jungle with the demolition squad and the native bearers, he has a change of heart and actually starts believing in the cause of war after seeing the devastating results of the Japanese aggression. Ebert states that Shears' plot thread is not as successful as the one in the prison camp and criticizes Holden's turn early in the film while praising his heroic turn.<sup>12</sup> In the next chapter I will go into more detail regarding Shears' vital role in the overall message in the movie and why his "shirker" phase deserves a closer look.

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<sup>11</sup> Lean included Shears' Ceylonese affair with a nurse on the request of Columbia studio head Harry Cohn who refused to greenlight an epic without a love interest (Phillips 232; Harper, Porter 134).

<sup>12</sup> URL1.

The movie's villain is Colonel Saito, another extremely well-developed character. His portrayal would have probably been vastly different in hands of a different director as both in the novel and in Foreman's script Saito was depicted as a drunken babbling buffoon (Phillips 228-29). Because of that it was one of Lean's top priorities to develop his character fully and make him a three-dimensional villain. To do so, he first gave him the backstory of having studied in England which gave him a better understanding of the prisoner's culture. Furthermore, the motivation to finish the bridge as swiftly as possible lies in his orders rather than in a maniacal whim. It is further explained that if he fails to complete the project on time he would have to kill himself for failing to honor the *bushido* samurai code. He is still very strict and demanding but the audience is never frustrated by his actions because they all make perfect sense and that is why his philosophical battle with Nicholson is intriguing to watch. Saito is portrayed by Sessue Hayakawa, a famous child actor from the silent era. His understated performance is made even more impressive by the fact that he was 68 when he played the role and that he spoke very little English and had to memorize his lines phonetically.

### **3.3. A Lesson in Futility**

It can be said that the movie's main theme is the futility of human life (Santas 20). From the very first scene, where Shears is burying a fellow prisoner while asking himself "what *did* he die for?" to the very last scene where the bridge one group of heroes had built is destroyed by the other group of heroes. Most war movies try to depict that there are no winners in war but this one goes above and beyond to prove that point: neither the Allied or the Japanese forces gain anything from the events depicted, neither of them are any closer to winning the war than they were at the beginning; the only thing that has changed is that they lost precious men, time, and resources. The whole thing plays out like a very tragic farce.

The movie's circular structure is best evidenced in the character of Major Shears who, after orchestrating a nearly impossible escape from the prison camp and nearly dying in the process, is forced to go back to complete a mission he cares little about. However, through interactions with Major Warden and the natives he becomes fully devoted to the mission and dies in the process of completing it. But when it is revealed to him that Nicholson is the one responsible for the swift completion of the bridge, the true tragedy of his character comes to light: he grows from being a self-centered survivalist to being ready to give up his life for his country and its war but ends up fighting his delusional ally in the end. He returns to the place he fled at the beginning of the movie to stop a man he thought was on his side and he fails. Even though his character grows during the film, his fate is the ultimate lesson in futility of life and war. He fully commits to the war goal but his demise teaches us that the whole war is pointless and that he should have stayed the sarcastic survivalist he was at the beginning of the story.

The most prominent character who epitomizes futility is Colonel Nicholson. Near the end of the film, Nicholson opens up to his adversary Colonel Saito about the meaning of his life and the fear that he has "not made any difference at all." This sentiment offers something of an explanation to his misguided and delusional behavior earlier in the film when he collaborated with the enemy and unintentionally helped them immensely with the excuse of keeping his troops' spirit high. But as he opens up to the man he had defeated we can finally truly see how tragic the existence of this man is: he has served in the army for twenty-six years, gave his whole adult life to his country, and yet he has nothing to show for it, no legacy at all. The bridge, however, finally gives him something to be proud of, something that will last for hundreds of years, something that people will remember him for. His final words: "What have I done?" reveal his overdue realization that his victory over Saito could have never been anything more than pyrrhic and that he should not have sought glory or meaning as a prisoner



of war, at least not in a way which would aid his enemy. His death and the open-endedness of his dive for the plunger is an appropriate epitaph to his sad life. And even if his final action grants him redemption, it did nothing more than restore the status quo.

#### **4. Lawrence of Arabia: Delusions of Grandeur**<sup>13</sup>

Following the success of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, Lean decided to continue in similar fashion and do another war epic: *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). Unlike the fictional *Kwai*, *Lawrence* is a historical film based on the British World War I officer T.E. Lawrence who played a key role in the Arab revolt against the Turkish dominion. The film repeated *Kwai's* success at the Academy Awards, bringing in seven Oscars as well, including those for Best Picture and Best Director. The film is still highly regarded; it was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> greatest British film of all time by the British Film Institute in 1999, while the American Film Institute placed it 5<sup>th</sup> in 1998 and 7<sup>th</sup> in 2007 on their lists of best American movies of all time.

##### **4.1. Re-arranging the Pieces**

Lean continued his collaboration with Sam Spiegel and Columbia Pictures which is once again the reason for the film's dual existence on the British and American lists. Lean also kept quite a lot of his crew from *Kwai* and his other earlier films. However, some of the key players were replaced, a move which proved to be extremely successful as the newcomers helped shape some of the film's most iconic elements. Freddie Young, whose keen eye captured the striking images of the Jordanian desert, replaced Jack Hildyard as cinematographer while John Box was brought on as production designer. This was also the first major project for Hollywood legends Anne V. Coates and Maurice Jarre who edited the film and arranged the musical score

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<sup>13</sup> Production details found in Phillips, Santas, Brownlow, and Jackson.

respectively. All of these people fit Lean's bill of being "dedicated maniacs" and all of them received their first Oscars for the film (Phillips 289).

Following their great rapport during the writing of *Kwai*, Lean decided to keep Michael Wilson on as the screenwriter. Wilson first had to write a treatment of the story based on the romanticized biographies due to Lawrence's brother's<sup>14</sup> reluctance to sell the rights to Lawrence's autobiography *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926). A. W. Lawrence was delighted with the treatment and agreed to sell the rights to Spiegel. However, he would revoke his blessing once the screenwriters got a hold of the much more controversial autobiography, but it was too late to hurt the film. Lean was not satisfied with Wilson's first several drafts of the full screenplay. He disliked the lengthy office scenes bogged down with political discussions which were responsible for the possibly mammoth length of the film and since Wilson was unable to eliminate those and concentrate more on the character of Lawrence, he had to be replaced. Spiegel complied and brought on Robert Bolt,<sup>15</sup> who heavily revised Wilson's script though mostly keeping the narrative structure intact which would later cause a dispute over the credit for the script. In any case, Lean was delighted with Bolt's dialogue and his ability to streamline the film by combining characters and reducing the amount of politics. Bolt would continue his collaboration on almost all Lean's future projects.

The film in its original form clocks in at nearly four hours and is divided in two parts. It opens with Lawrence's death and funeral in 1935 after which we are transported into the Middle-Eastern World War I setting. Lawrence, a British Army lieutenant stationed in Cairo, is sent on a mission to assess the Arabian revolt against the Turks led by Prince Feisal. He meets Feisal and other Arab leaders such as Sherif Ali and Auda Abu Tayi and asserts that the Arab tribes are far too involved in petty squabbles to ever unite. This is why he assumes leadership

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<sup>14</sup> A. W. Lawrence, a well-known archaeology professor.

<sup>15</sup> A playwright (*A Man for All Seasons*) with no prior experience in screenwriting.

in the seemingly impossible task of crossing the Nefud desert and taking the port town Aqaba without barely any resistance. The first part ends with Lawrence's return to Cairo and a lengthy discussion with his superiors where we are shown a glimpse of the political games that will take place in the rest of the film.

While the first part chronicles Lawrence's rise in a fairly straight-forward fashion, the second part is much more episodic and is centered around his fall. The fragmented nature of this part helps explore multiple facets of Lawrence's character. The railroad sabotage scenes show his delusions of being a god while his imprisonment in Deraa explores his masochistic side. The climax of the film occurs when Lawrence orders and participates in a slaughter of defenseless retreating Turkish soldiers in order to take Damascus ahead of the British. However, when the Arabs take Damascus they show a lack of administrative efficiency and cannot hold on to it for more than a few days. In the end Lawrence is shown as a ghost: he is no longer useful after winning the war. The movie ends with the foreshadowing of his fatal motorcycle accident signifying that his life has essentially ended with the conclusion of the war.

#### **4.2. Evolution of Style**

In recent years, filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino and Christopher Nolan have been on the forefront of the film versus digital debate with their choice to film their movies *The Hateful Eight* (2015) and *Dunkirk* (2017) on 70 millimeter film using Panavision lenses.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, Panavision's cameras were one of the defining aspects of Lean's visual style as he was one of the pioneers of the process. It was his explicit wish to film *Lawrence* in 70 millimeter Panavision as it provided a larger image than CinemaScope which he used on *Kwai* (Phillips 287). This is not to say that Lean changed his style considerably between two pictures, on the contrary, it can be considered to be a slight evolution. Lean thought that the vast desert

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<sup>16</sup> URL4.

locations had to be projected in the largest format available and Panavision was luckily there to provide it. *Lawrence* is famous for its spectacular long takes of the desert and it can be safely said that those shots would not have been as impressive in other formats available at the time.

The first instance where the full extent of the Panavision camera's power can be seen is our and Lawrence's first encounter with the desert. It occurs some fifteen minutes into the film after a series of visually dull interior scenes at the military headquarters in Cairo. The whole transition is very deliberate in its goal to contrast the effect that these two settings have on Lawrence: in Cairo he is perhaps a peculiar cartographer but he is not striving for greatness while in the desert he is reborn into the now immortal persona. All of this is evident in the cut from Lawrence's blowing out the match and the image of the sunrise accompanied by the until then absent Maurice Jarre's bombastic score.

Another memorable scene and perhaps the most widely known one is the entrance of Sherif Ali – the so-called “mirage” shot. The scene lasts approximately five minutes during which Lean alternates between a long take of Ali approaching Lawrence and his guide and medium shots of the two. We first see Ali as a small black dot in the distance emerging from the shining water-like “mirage” effect. We watch him slowly cover the distance to Lawrence through his eyes and the tension, since this is a largely silent sequence, is built through cuts to the concerned faces of Lawrence and his guide (Santas 46; Phillips 294). In fact, the sequence could have been twice as long as it stands now but Lean, notorious for his cuts in the editing room, decided to halve the length, a decision he later regretted (Jackson 66; Brownlow 437).

### **4.3. Warts and All**

Unlike *Kwai*, which depicted a hypothetically possible real life situation but featured only fictional characters, *Lawrence* is fully historical which presented a challenge to the production – most notably the acquisition of the book rights from Lawrence's brother.

However, Lean was never going to budge to outside pressure and remove some of his hero's flaws just because his relative does not want his image to be controversial. This "warts and all" approach was always one of the most widely praised aspects of Lean's filmography; Phillips compares it to Ken Russell,<sup>17</sup> who disliked the usual biopic representation of characters with no inner conflict and said that "Showing the personal struggles out of which the hero's accomplishments grew is more of a tribute to him" (273). This approach can be seen in most of Lean's films but it is best examined through Lawrence since we can compare "film Lawrence" to the real life version.

One of the major issues A.W. Lawrence had with the film was the depiction of T.E.'s homosexuality. This aspect of Lawrence's life has never been definitively confirmed but there are many solid indications including him dedicating *Seven Pillars of Eternity* to "S.A." meaning Salim Ahmed, a young boy he knew in Syria. His homosexuality is never explicitly confirmed in the movie either but we can draw the conclusions from his relationship with his two young servants Daud and Farraj. After the conquest of Aqaba, Lawrence treks across the Sinai desert with the two boys when Daud is tragically swallowed by quicksand. This considerably shakes Lawrence and he becomes extremely protective of Farraj when they arrive in Cairo, even insisting that he drinks at the officers' bar and that they give him a room at the headquarters. Even more traumatic was the death of Farraj during a sabotage mission when the boy misplaced a detonator in his pocket and Lawrence is then forced to shoot him so that he does not become a Turkish prisoner. Farraj's final words: "Daud will be angry with you" and Lawrence's tearful reply: "Salute him for me" are an indication of the strong bond Lawrence had with the two boys and a confirmation of his homosexuality.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> British director best known for biopics of famous composers such as *The Music Lovers* (1970).

<sup>18</sup> For more information, see Phillips 266-67, 313-14.

Phillips believes that Lawrence's masochism was an instrument of repressing his homosexuality (307). We can first see this character trait when he extinguishes a match using his fingers saying that "The trick is not minding it hurts" upon his introduction at the Cairo headquarters.<sup>19</sup> Later on, he is forced to execute Gasim, a man he had previously saved against all odds from the Nefud desert, in a scene which at first seemed traumatic to him. However, he later reveals to general Allenby that he enjoyed executing him. Perhaps the most important scene in the movie is his capture and torture in Deraa, a capture perhaps desired by Lawrence since he deliberately drew attention to himself on what was supposed to be a covert mission. During his interrogation, the Turkish bey notices his white skin and blue eyes and makes sexual advances which he repels with a punch to the gut, thus ensuring his torture. The bey then leaves the room but leaves the door open so that he can observe this sadomasochistic ritual which, Phillips claims, Lawrence seems to enjoy (310). The scene concludes with implied rape which brings Lawrence to a breaking point and reminds him of his limits.<sup>20</sup>

Possibly the single most important line in the movie could easily be written off as a trivial one: the simple "Who are you?" shouted by the motorcyclist after Lawrence's trek across the Sinai. The line is significant for being dubbed by Lean himself and Lawrence's lack of response signifies that our protagonist's identity is still a mystery for both men (Phillips 309). Lawrence described himself as a "dreamer of the day" saying that he "acted his dream with open eyes, to make it possible" (7). This description perfectly encompasses two of his most important characteristics: his determination and his vanity. Lawrence is fully motivated to help the Arabs form their own state which is best evidenced by his almost suicidal trek back into the Nefud desert to save Gasim. However, the success and fame that his heroics bring him feed his ego enormously and he starts having delusions of being godlike. After the taking of Aqaba, he

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<sup>19</sup> A scene which was famously subverted later on when he blows out the match in a scene discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>20</sup> See Phillips 307-10, Santas 35-41, Jackson 103.

decides to cross the Sinai because “Moses did it” and ignores Auda Abu Tayi’s remark that “Moses was a prophet and beloved of God.” As discussed previously, the Sinai crossing proves fatal for Daud.

Another scene where his delusions of immortality are evident is when he climbs atop a wagon of a raided train and gets shot in the arm by a Turkish soldier. This scene is significant because Lawrence cannot believe that blood is coming out of his body. However, his torture in Deraa seems to change him and by the time of the massacre on the road to Damascus he realizes the extent of his delusions. Lean uses clever visual storytelling to illustrate this point: he juxtaposes Lawrence looking at his dirty and bloody reflection in the blade of his knife to an earlier scene when he did the same thing right after he was given the now famous costume. The scene reflects his moral state: he is not the pure-hearted hero anymore, war has made him dirty and blood-thirsty.

In the end, we can see many similarities between Lawrence and Colonel Nicholson: they are both highly determined and proud individuals, and they are also both tragic figures. The strongest link between the two is their remarkable willpower to overcome impossible odds and refuse to admit defeat under any circumstance. Lawrence is thus able to win the war with almost no resources and an uncoordinated army but is scarred in the process and is soon discarded by both his countrymen and his war comrades. Much like Nicholson’s, his victory is pyrrhic as the Arabs are unable to hold Damascus for more than a few days and are forced into a much inferior position when negotiating with Britain and France.

### **5. *Doctor Zhivago: Love in the Time of Revolution*<sup>21</sup>**

After the real life story of Lawrence, Lean decided to go back to fiction and adapt Boris Pasternak’s Nobel-winning novel *Doctor Zhivago*. The movie is a love story set in the time of

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<sup>21</sup> Production details found in Phillips, Santas, Brownlow, and Christie.

the First World War and the Russian revolution in which the title character, a doctor and a poet, participates in said wars and falls in love with the fatal Lara. At the time of release, the film was Lean's least successful epic critically, but the most successful commercially: it grossed more than \$200 million worldwide on a budget of \$15 million and is thought to be one of the best ticket sellers of all time.<sup>22</sup> The movie garnered ten Oscar nominations, winning five: Best Screenplay, Cinematography, Art Direction, Costume Design, and Musical Score. However, it failed to repeat *Kwai's* and *Lawrence's* wins in the two most important categories: Best Picture and Best Director. The American Film Institute dubbed it the 39<sup>th</sup> greatest film of all time in 1998 and 8<sup>th</sup> best love story in 2002 while the British Film Institute ranked it 27<sup>th</sup> in their 1999 list of greatest British films.

After two successful collaborations, Lean was growing tired of Sam Spiegel and his hands-on approach to producing. In addition to the constant interference, Lean was having suspicions that Spiegel was under-estimating the grosses of their pictures in order to pay him less for his back-end deal. The news that the rights to adapt Pasternak's novel were in the hands of prolific Italian producer Carlo Ponti came as a blessing to Lean. Ponti trusted Lean fully and after suggesting that he cast his wife Sofia Loren as Lara, which Lean rejected, he never even visited the set. Ponti set up a deal with MGM to finance and distribute the movie and their president Robert O'Brien was also very forthcoming regarding Lean's usual tendency to go over budget. Lean also commanded a huge salary, reportedly earning upward of \$10 million for the picture, more than on all of his previous films combined. All in all, the production was unusually smooth for a Lean epic, partly due to the fact that most of the behind the scenes personnel remained unchanged: John Box as production designer, Phyllis Dalton as costume

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<sup>22</sup> According to [boxofficemojo.com](http://boxofficemojo.com), as of August 2017 it is 8th highest seller of all time in the US, having sold more than 124 million tickets. Also, see Santas 55, Phillips 357-58.



designer, Freddie Young as cinematographer, Maurice Jarre as composer, and Norman Savage as editor.<sup>23</sup>

Robert Bolt also returned and his task of adapting Pasternak's bulky novel was extremely difficult. His first step was to remove many of the novel's numerous secondary characters and combine others, a technique he had already used in *Lawrence*. In contrast to his extensive abridgement, he had to add a "framing device" in the form of Yevgraf Zhivago searching for his half-brother's long lost daughter in order to make the movie's plot complete. The most challenging aspect of adapting Pasternak's novel was retaining the poetic tone, since Pasternak was primarily a poet and *Doctor Zhivago* was his only novel. Bolt thought that "the film too must be a poem" and that the narrative must be told in images seen through the eyes of a poet (Santas 58). This is why Yuri Zhivago is a passive protagonist; he merely observes the action and rarely influences it. Bolt also thought he had to improve on Pasternak's love story which he thought had to be heartbreaking. Both him and Lean were aware that they must avoid the novel's sappiness at all costs and instead create a love story with tragic overtones. Bolt criticized Pasternak's storytelling methods mainly due to his overreliance on coincidences, something Lean was familiar with from his Dickens' adaptations. However, in the context of treating the film as a poem Bolt decided to keep the "odd incidents". Bolt was widely praised for his ability to condense the novel into a manageable runtime and received an Academy Award for it. Anderegg thought that the film improved on the novel regarding compelling characters and also praised the flashback structure and Yevgraf's narration (123).<sup>24</sup>

The plot of *Doctor Zhivago* is easily the most difficult to summarize out of the three films covered in this thesis due to the fact that the characters have no influence over the major

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<sup>23</sup> Savage had previously been assistant editor on *Lawrence*, but stepped in the main chair since Anne Coates was unavailable at the time.

<sup>24</sup> "Bolt's notes" can be found in Santas 58-75, and for more information about the writing of the screenplay see Phillips 326-29.

developments in their world. Yuri Zhivago becomes entangled in two major conflicts: First World War and the Russian Revolution but cannot influence the outcome, he can merely observe the horrific scenes and help the wounded. However, the characters can influence their personal lives and the moving force of the movie is the love triangle between Yuri, Tonya, and Lara. Tonya is the daughter of Yuri's adoptive parents and his eventual wife with whom he will have two children while Lara is the elusive love of his life. Yuri first encounters Lara when his mentor takes him to a house visit to Lara's mother who had tried to kill herself because she pushed Lara in a relationship with her former lover Victor Komarovsky, an influential politician. However, Lara manages to escape the abusive relationship by shooting Komarovsky, though barely wounding him, and marrying the young and idealistic Pasha Antipov. First World War then breaks out and Yuri is sent to serve as a medic. Pasha enlists too and when he goes missing, Lara signs up to be a nurse and is paired up with Yuri in a makeshift hospital. They fall in love but never consummate it since they are both married and do not want to break their vows. Yuri comes back home to his now wife Tonya and son Sasha to find out that the Bolsheviks, who had taken power during the war, have divided their house to other families and left them with only a small room. This is when he first meets his half-brother Yevgraf, a Soviet officer, who warns him that his poems have been deemed dangerous by the Communist party and suggests that he move to his adoptive father's estate Varykino in the Urals.

The rest of the movie is set at Varykino and the nearby town of Yuriatin. Yuri's family rides a train to their remote destination and has to travel in an overcrowded wagon. During the ride, Yuri meets Strelnikov, a rogue Soviet commander, who turns out to be Lara's supposedly missing husband Pasha who tells him that Lara is living in Yuriatin too. This time, however, they cannot resist consuming their relationship. But when Tonya becomes pregnant again, Yuri decides to stop his involvement with Lara. Having decided to live a peaceful life in the countryside he is forced into service by the communist Red Army who had been fighting the

royalist White Army in a brutal civil war. He serves for two years before deserting and returning to Yuriatin only to find out that Tonya and his children had been deported to France. He finds out that Tonya knew all along about his relationship with Lara and she gives them her blessing. However, with Yuri being a deserter and Lara being the ex-wife of the infamous Strelnikov, their position is extremely fragile. At this point, Victor Komarovsky, who somehow survived the regime change and secured himself a spot in the new government, returns and offers to smuggle them out of the country. Yuri refuses and moves with Lara to the now frozen palace in Varykino where he is finally able to write poetry again. He writes a collection dedicated to Lara but the happiness is short lived as Komarovsky arrives with news that Strelnikov is dead and that Lara is in immediate danger. Yuri lets Lara go with Komarovsky to the train station telling her that he would be right behind but he never joins her, not knowing that she was pregnant with his child. He dies of heart attack several years later after seeing someone resembling Lara on a train in Moscow. The film concludes with Yevgraf concluding that Tonya, the girl he was telling the story to, is indeed Yuri and Lara's long lost daughter so the film offers a happy conclusion after the tragic end to the love story.

### **5.1. Style and Substance**

Lean's visual style shines once again, especially during the second half at the picturesque Varykino estate where Lean and Young show magnificent Finnish snow-filled vistas as well as the incredible Spanish set built by John Box. Similar to other Lean films, these neat shots and cuts always serve the advancement of the story or characters. For example, when Yuri first decides to visit Lara in Yuriatin and the frosty flowers on the window dissolve to a field of golden daffodils, it shows the beginning of spring as well as the effect Lara has on Yuri. In addition to that, the visual style is tailored to emulate the poetic style of the novel. For instance, when Yuri and Lara move to Varykino at the very end of the movie, the icy house

looks like it belongs in Disney's *Frozen* (2013) rather than in a serious war movie. However, these kinds of sets and shots serve to reinforce Bolt's claim that the film is a poem and that its focus is on the love story and that the war is merely a backdrop.

Lean extensively uses windows as framing devices to illustrate the relationship between characters. Yuri's first glimpse of Lara is through a window when he sees her sitting in the dark with only her arm lighted. Freddie Young commented that the shot was "Not realistic. Magic. Sensual Delight" (Christie 45). Their first meeting tells us that their connection is special even though the circumstances (Yuri saving Lara's mother after attempted suicide) are very grim. Another magical window shot occurs after Lara's shooting of Komarovsky where we see Lara and Pasha in a dark room lit only by a candle on a rainy night. The scene then cuts to Yuri and Tonya in a carriage passing by their apartment in a way which suggests a connection between Yuri and Lara. A less 'magical' but equally important window scene occurs during the train trip when Strelnikov is looking out the train window at Yuri. This window acts as a box for the once idealistic Pasha who is now a prisoner of the system and to whom Yuri seems free.<sup>25</sup>

## **5.2. Silently Judging**

Unlike most heroes in other epic movies, Yuri Zhivago is extremely passive. This is because he was modeled after Pasternak himself, a poet who stayed out of the spotlight and the political struggle in his homeland. Everything in his life was chosen for him: his wife, his profession, everything except Lara, even though it took many happy coincidences for them to be together. Zhivago is similar to Pasternak in this regard too, as the then married writer fell in love with another woman who inspired him to write his first novel (Christie 10). The list of choices made for Zhivago is nearly countless: the massacre of protesters outside his apartment, the wars he cannot influence, being picked up by the Red Guard when he is literally on a

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<sup>25</sup> For more on the window scenes see Christie 44-57.

crossroad between Tonya and Lara, and of course Tonya's deportation to France and her blessing of his relationship with Lara. The few signs of activity occur near the end of the movie: when he pushes Komarovsky down the stairs after his first visit at Yuriatin and when he chooses not to accompany Lara and Komarovsky on their journey to the far East.

We have seen in Lean's previous films that he prefers to build his movies around flawed heroes. This is why *Zhivago* at first does not fit in, as Yuri is in essence a good man living in a cruel world. However, Yuri does have one flaw and a fatal one at that: Lara. Both he and Lara are unable to give up their relationship even though it is hurting them and could cost them their lives since they were already being watched by the Soviets (Santas 61). Their short-lived romance is in line with the film's poetic and magical tone given how coincidental some of their encounters were and how they achieved it despite all obstacles (Christie 49). In the end, though, their love proves tragic as it takes a toll on Yuri's heart which gives up several years after his parting with Lara after seeing someone who looks like her on the street. All three heroes in Lean's first three epics die because of their passions: Nicholson because of the bridge, Lawrence is reduced to a ghost due to his deeds in the revolt, and Yuri's love for Lara is what kills him in the end. However, all of them were mostly aimless men before getting the possibility to achieve greatness: Nicholson thinks the bridge will stand for hundreds of years before realizing his delusions, Lawrence accomplishes things which make him famous but has delusions of immortality which play a role in his downfall, while Yuri manages to write his masterpiece shortly before having to give up the woman who gave him the inspiration to write it. Yuri is the only one who lives on though, as his daughter with Lara carries on his poetic talent, playing the balalaika without ever being taught to do it, just like her father.

## **6. Conclusion**

Ever since the ancient times of Homer the epic has been considered the most prestigious form of literary expression. Naturally, filmmakers have also been infatuated by the genre which allowed them to tell stories of great wars between good and evil or portray larger-than-life and inspiring characters. However, David Lean found the genre in dire need of innovation, with many filmmakers spending their gigantic budgets on lavish sets and exotic locations while neglecting the most important parts of a film: story and characters. He recognized that an epic must be visually stunning but changes were necessary in many other areas. Lean was not interested in flawless characters conquering the forces of evil; his characters are troubled and often tragic individuals whose flaws prevent their triumphs to be anything more than short-lived. Their shining moment inspires us but their downfall reminds us of the harsh world we live in.

This paper has analyzed three of Lean's most successful epics and all of them had a similar start to their production: with Lean working overtime to perfect the script while gathering a crew of "dedicated maniacs" behind the cameras. He always took his time shooting his epics too, even though his experience as an editor allowed him to shoot very few scenes which would be cut in the editing room. But the wait was always worth it and the films always delivered, winning the hearts of both the general audience and the critics.

His first epic, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), delivered a strong anti-war message while also being an entertaining action movie. The film's strongest points are its complex characters and the tight plot which leads them to converge in a dramatic ending. Colonel Nicholson, a deluded British officer who ends up aiding his enemy while believing he is helping his own troops, is possibly Lean's best and most complex character. His death is a brutal indicator of Lean's most prominent theme: the notion that war is simply a no-win endeavor.

*Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) can be seen as a continuation of the same theme, but is also an evolution in almost every aspect. Visually, it is one of the most breathtaking films of all time, with Lean's camera catching the stunning desert shots which sometimes last for minutes. Character-wise, it manages to portray many aspects of the troubled Lawrence, some of them using subtle editing or clever camera placement. It also delves further into the politics of war, which sometimes proves to be even more disheartening than the killing and the torture of the actual battlefield.

*Doctor Zhivago* (1965) features the anti-war sentiment too, but everything is presented in a much different way due to the passive nature of the hero, a poet who merely judges the atrocities happening around him without trying to stop them. He survives the wars but finds his downfall in love. Lean masterfully adapts the poetic tone of the source novel by using his visual style with many magical and spellbinding shots which contrast with the cold Russian landscape.

In conclusion, David Lean brought some major changes to the epic: he infused it with flawed characters and a more realistic worldview. Along with his technical mastery and his keen eye for visual storytelling, this is what brought him many accolades during his lifetime and makes him one of the greats.

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**Abstract**

## Epic Films of David Lean

David Lean is one of the most prominent British directors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a career spanning over fifty years. During that time, he took an interest into many different film genres, but his biggest contribution was in the epic genre. With films such as *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), and *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) he brought innovation and modernization to a genre stuck in ancient times. Lean was not interested in great fights between good and evil and rather concentrated on individual conflicts while portraying complex and tragic characters who achieve short-lived victories before experiencing their inevitable downfall. He always combined those narrative elements with breathtaking visuals to create some of the best films of all time.

*Key Words:* Lean, epic, war, triumph, tragedy.

## Sažetak

### Epski filmovi Davida Leana

David Lean je jedan od najistaknutijih Britanskih redatelja dvadesetog stoljeća čija je karijera trajala više od pedeset godina. U tom periodu okušao se u više različitih filmskih žanrova, ali najviše je doprinio epskom žanru. U filmovima kao što su *Most na rijeci Kwai* (1957), *Lawrence od Arabije* (1962) i *Doktor Živago* (1965) uveo je novine i modernizirao žanr koji je zapeo u antičkom dobu. Leana nisu zanimale velike bitke između dobra i zla već pojedinačni sukobi između složenih i tragičnih likova koji postignu kratkoročnu pobjedu te ubrzo potom iskuse neizbježan pad. Lean je te narativne elemente uvijek kombinirao s veličanstvenim prizorima te tako stvorio neke od najboljih filmova svih vremena.

*Ključne riječi:* Lean, epski, rat, trijumf, tragedija.