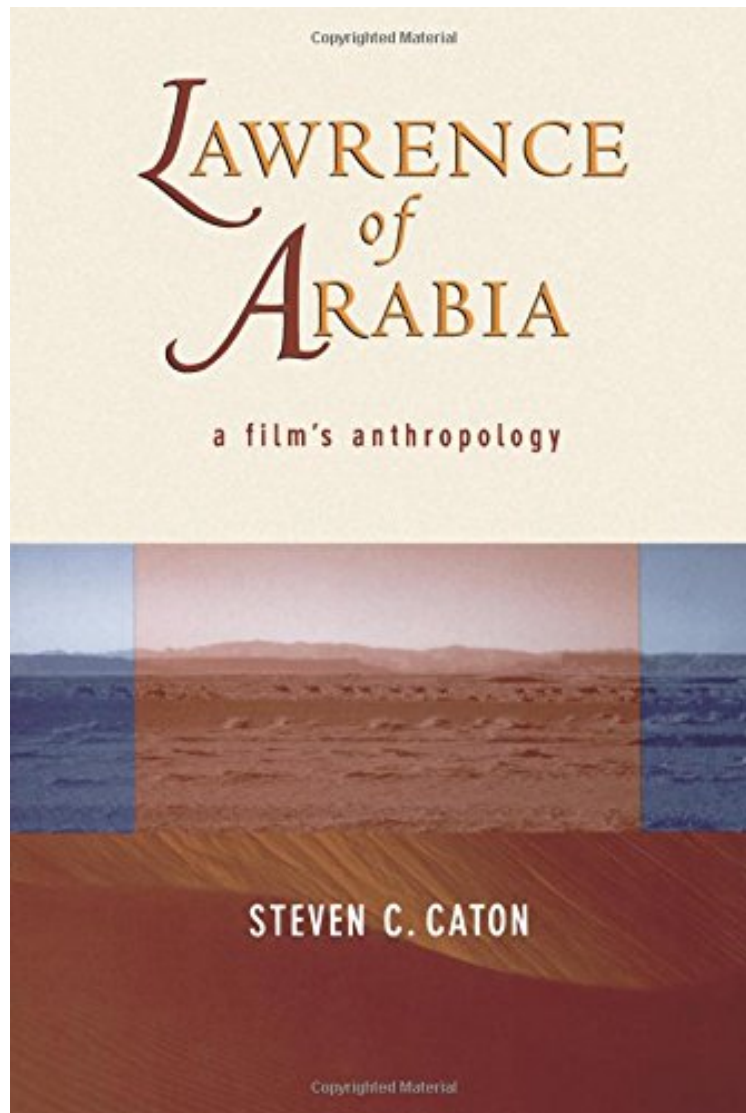


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Lawrence of Arabia: A Film's Anthropology

Steven C. Caton

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Steven C. Caton : Lawrence of Arabia: A Film's Anthropology before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Lawrence of Arabia: A Film's Anthropology:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy Daniel G. MadiganA great book about a great film. Fabulous, you cannot do without it.7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Teeming with ideas (not all of them good)By Stephen O. MurrayAlthough lurching from topic to topic, the opening chapters of Caton's book include a lot of interesting information on the economics of film-making during the diffusion of television, the attempt to keep audiences going to move theaters with epics, the aims of David Lean, the career of blacklisted screenwriter Michael

Wilson, the performances in the film of Peter O'Toole and Omar Sharif, the critical responses to the film on its original release (dismissal from auteur theorists, howls of outrage by the Allenby and Lawrence families, but, apparently not Lowell Thomas's, banning in Jordan, where much of it was filmed, and Beirut), Brechtian "alienation devices," Arab nationalism, imperialism, and "tribal feuding," anthropological fieldwork's parallels to Lawrence's immersion in Arab culture (and ambivalent heroism), Caton's own Ali in Yemen, criticisms of "Orientalism," and much else. I would say too much, but despite the swirl of topics and some very strained transitions, I never found the book dull. (I should add that I may not be typical in this, because I am exactly the same age as Caton, so, like him, saw and was awed by the movie when I was 13, and am interested in the questions of cultural representations, hybridity, culture shock, and the enterprise of anthropology that are central to him.) The writing is sometimes clunky and often jargonistic. The chapter "Maskulinites" is startlingly ignorant (coming from a specialist on Yemen) about the importation and sexual connoisseurship of light-skinned males by the elite of the Ottoman Empire (of which Yemen was a part from 1513 to 1916). Also I find many of Caton's statements about "The Bridge on the River Kwai" very dubious, and the stills from the film in this book are atrociously reproduced. Despite my rejection of arguments in the "Maskulinites" chapter and doubts about some others, there is much that is interesting about the history of colonialism, the Arab world, "Operation Desert Storm," international film-making, gendered film-viewing, and other topics in this book. Caton is an interesting companion to thinking about "Lawrence of Arabia," even if some of his ideas are dubious and he darts from idea to idea. 15 of 16 people found the following review helpful. Viewing the spectacle: Caton's take on 'Lawrence of Arabia' By S. Williams Who could forget the astonishing spectacle of 'Lawrence of Arabia'? Certainly not the teenaged Steven Caton, who, some years later, has produced this book - 'Lawrence of Arabia: a film's anthropology' - as tribute to its power. Essentially a detailed critique of the film and its motives, it delves deeper to measure the impact such an epic has upon the dispossessed. Caton examines LOA as a product out of its time, shot when audiences were abandoning the epic genre. The film's division into two halves presents us first with an heroic and idealistic Lawrence, the conqueror of Akaba - thus, our epic expectations are met. The second half reverses this image, deconstructing Lawrence and presenting him as riddled with self-doubt and anguish for his failures. Is this our hero? The film becomes an epic anti-epic, layered with anti-imperialist and pro-Orientalist readings. Caton discusses these issues and highlights the politics that ordered them, along with how the final script was shaped by the writing pedigrees and political beliefs of Wilson and Bolt. He also draws out the nuances of Lean's symbolism - his motif of the 'recycled gun', also seen in 'Bridge on the River Kwai'; the use of the compass and its loss to emphasise Lawrence's slip into instability; the many character and event parallels within the film (e.g., Lawrence/Ali, Allenby/ Turkish Bey, motorcycles at the start and end of the film). Caton underlines the main thrust of the film - Lawrence's complex personality - by reference to the constant question, "Who are you?" that reverberates through the epic. He develops this further by examining Lean's camera-play to suggest the interactions between the viewer and the viewed, both within and outwith the celluloid reality. He also addresses the sexual ambiguity of O'Toole's Lawrence (the sporadic black eyeliner and bottle-blond hair is no accident!) and the way in which the public of 1962 received it. As an epilogue, Caton shows the film to groups of high school children. Their remarks are perceptive, bearing out much of what he discussed in the book: Lawrence is terribly lonely and a little bit crazy, trapped between two worlds and unable to return to either one. Caton says that this is why the film had such a profound effect on him, a young German migr to the U.S., and to the children (many from broken families) that he interviewed. This is a very personal book, yet authorial intrusion is welcomed rather than resented as the narrative swings along at a cracking pace. Enjoyable to read, Caton wears his own scholarship lightly and takes nothing too seriously. The only criticism concerns the illustrations - mainly screen-shots scanned in at a low resolution - which mar the presentation of the text. To summarise: a loving yet honest and lucid critique of the greatest desert epic ever made, a sensitive and subtly-nuanced reading of O'Toole's Lawrence, and surely a blueprint for film studies everywhere, regardless of genre.

Combining ethnography, film criticism, and his extensive knowledge of the Middle East, Steven C. Caton presents an innovative and fascinating examination of the classic film, Lawrence of Arabia. Caton is interested in why this epic film has been so compelling for so many people for more than three decades. In seeking an answer he draws from situations in his own life, biographies of the film's key participants, and analyses of issues relating to class, gender, colonialism, and cultural differences. The result is a many-prismed book that poses important questions of ethnographic representation and the discourse of power. Caton's approach is dialectical, and his readings of the film are situated within different historical periods, from the early 1960s to the present. Among the subjects he highlights are travel and colonialism in fieldwork and filmmaking, orientalism in the representation of the Other, and the film's ambiguous handling of masculinity and homosexuality. Caton looks at his own reactions to the film at various stages in his life and offers a thought-provoking account of the film's reception by today's high school and college students.

"This distinguished book measures the profound impact David Lean's widescreen masterpiece has had on the author--and on audiences--for almost four decades. . . . An inspiring companion to a film that is equally spellbinding, "Lawrence of Arabia is a fascinating study."--"Filmbill From the Inside Flap" Caton's imagination was deeply affected

by the power of *Lawrence of Arabia*, a cinematic classic that he knows intimately . . . and analyzes intelligently. Having read his multi-layered critique of Lean's epic masterpiece, we'll now be viewing our old favorite with new insight and appreciation." L. Robert Morris and Lawrence Raskin, coauthors of *Lawrence of Arabia: The 30th Anniversary Pictorial History*