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NOT QUITE THE END OF THE LINE: THE PRISONER-OF-WAR FILM FROM DAVID LEAN TO THE PRESENT

“There is a deep and sad irony here: that the best-known, most popular and notable account of the prisoner-of-war experience under the Japanese should happen to be the least authentic.”

—Roger Bourke, *Prisoners of the Japanese* (2006)

RAGGED-CLOTHED AND BENT DOUBLE, a group of men plod through the jungle. They are carrying rocks—*too many, too much for me, just a little further*—and their minds have turned rocklike in turn, ossified by the weight. Not far behind, others perform stationary activities: stick-humans who hack and chisel, their tanned skins turned varicoloured beneath the sweat, the dust, the slime, the soil, the unnameable effluvia. Both groups are methodical, purposeful in the literal sense, but so utterly drained of energy that “purpose” is an open question—or would be, if they had the energy to ask it. In another time and place they worked many professions and spoke many languages, but at this point they speak the language of the forced labourer, which is a silent language made up of glances, gestures, and hand signals: *Help me a moment. Careful, he’s coming. Get out of the way. I’m doing the best I can. Put him over there.* The guards know enough of it to make their wishes plain, though they too are long since numbed by the endlessness of it all. For them, another day simply means another few tracks hammered down. Tomorrow will be much the same.

This scene might or might not be familiar, depending on which books one has been reading or which films one has been watching. It is my mental image of the Burma-Siam Railway, one of the many construction projects on which Allied prisoners-of-war (POWs) were put to work by their Japanese captors during WWII and, in terms of mortality rates, one of the costliest.

As far as strategy was concerned, the idea was sound: recently acquired, the territory of Burma would be joined to Axis-aligned Thailand via a railway so as to provide a land route in support of a Japanese invasion of British India. To this end, a sliced-out passage through the jungle would be a necessary first step for the laying of railway track, as would a labour force to make it happen. Statistics covering matters such as death rates and the national groups who made up the labour force offer a degree of insight into the situation, as they do in all studies of atrocity. One can find them, if one knows where to look. Historians such as Gavan Daws, Yuki Tanaka, Brian MacArthur, and Laurence Rees, each of whom has published a book-length study of the POW experience, rightly pay attention to these figures (for POWs as well as the still larger number of Asian labourers).

The gathering of statistics is an unenviable task that is made even more so by the risks that go along with it. An overly conservative estimate would be an intolerable erasure of human history, while an overestimate would weaken the position of those who advocate better acknowledgement of what took place. Numbers are head counts. As such, they are inherently political and where there is a mismatch between one analysis and another there are usually vested interests intruding into the calculus. Put another way, the world of numbers and the world of stories are seldom as separate as one might suppose. For proof, just look at the vignette that began this essay. It contained a few “hidden numbers” too, not in the cryptic sense but within the imaginative process on which reading and writing depend. How large did that group of prisoners appear in the mind’s eye? How many days or months had they been working? Will the same number start work tomorrow as today? If not, what would be the probable reason and what sort of “accountancy” would explain it?

War stories are susceptible to exaggerated and prejudicial renditions in their telling and retelling. This is to some extent inevitable for any medium, but cinema deserves special consideration because the eye of the camera stands in for the imaginative eye or “I” of the written word and therefore has tremendous power to include or occlude. It can make a single part of a story look fully whole, a one-sided perspective the main perspective. At its worst, this can be quite nauseating, as Roger Bourke points out in his literary history of the POW genre. In the epigraph that precedes this essay, Bourke laments the hold that David Lean’s film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) retains over the public image of the POW story. Bourke plainly has strong

feelings on the matter and is up front in expressing them, to the point of granting Lean's film a status that is something close to preeminent. In a work of formal scholarship this attribution is surprising, as most scholars evince a certain wariness when it comes to pronouncing a particular cultural production "popular." It is, after all, a slippery concept. In the case of Lean's film, however, there can be little doubt that Bourke's presumption resoundingly applies, for the accolades include numerous restorations and affectionate parodies, as well as inclusion in several "all-time best" lists drawn up by the American Film Institute. Popular it is, apparently.

This matters a great deal, not least because the narrative in question was so singular and the era of its release comparatively early. The fact that Lean's film was based on the French novel *Le Pont de la rivière Kwai* (The Bridge over the River Kwai, 1952) by Pierre Boulle should occasion no surprise, for no story of atrocity is the intellectual property of the victims in question. Steven Spielberg's background as an Orthodox Jew may have helped *Schindler's List* (1993) to appear more "authentic," but it was based on the novel *Schindler's Ark* (1982) by the Australian Gentile author Thomas Keneally. That film, it's worth remembering, was released in the 1990s, and by then cinemagoers had some notion of the genre in question. In the 1950s, by contrast, the POW genre was only just beginning to become well-known, Lean's film having been preceded by the film adaptation of Nevil Shute's novel *A Town Like Alice* (1950), which was released the previous year. It is therefore little wonder that the film left such an indelible impression on audiences throughout the anglophone world.

It was also a work that took considerable liberties with history, though the discrepancies may have been difficult to discern beneath the catchy musical score, the psychological tensions of the main characters, and the picturesque images of the Ceylonese jungle. Even now, first-time viewers are often mesmerized by Alec Guinness' disjointed walk from "the oven," Sessue Hayakawa's violent explosions of temper, and the remarkable "solidness" of the completed bridge that spans the river (itself a sort of all-consuming character that looms over everything). The best way to grasp the essential conceit that lies at the heart of the narrative is to imagine, for the sake of contrast, another version of *Schindler's List* made some forty years previously. In this alternate version, the plot revolves around a mad rabbi whose incessant drive to earn the respect of his Nazi overlords leads him to design the best furnace he possibly can. In pursuit of this end, all attempts to sabo-

tage the project are nipped in the bud and the SS Commandant is reduced to tears in the face of superior Jewish engineering. Of course, there are a few subplots to liven things up a bit. Some plucky inmates realize that Schindler has lost his mind, so they swim across the English Channel, holiday in Brighton, and agree to parachute back into Nazi Europe in order to blow up the camp—just as another train arrives. This they do entirely by themselves. Well, almost entirely. There are a few scantily-clad Polish wenches who help them along with lustful sighs and sidelong glances.

If the Italian film *Life is Beautiful* (1997) had been directed by Quentin Tarantino then this plot might have worked as black comedy. However, it would have been directed and marketed as black comedy or some heavily stylized fusion of genres with a good deal of self-reflexivity at every turn. Lean's film, on the other hand, was in no sense comedic. In order to appreciate the drama that unfolds one is actually expected to believe that Lieutenant Colonel Nicholson's regiment will follow his vainglorious scheme instead of quietly offing him or rallying behind another officer. Needless to say, surviving POWs have been especially attuned to the discrepancies and have pointed them out, albeit rather belatedly. In 2000 literary scholar Ian Watt published an article in which he noted, among other things, that no actual prisoners had been as well-fed as Lean's on-screen characters appeared to be. Healthy and energetic, they look more like Charles Atlas bodybuilders than the playthings of Japanese soldiers. Yet Watt also saw no particular reason why a Hollywood film should have paid attention to the accounts of former POWs. Films were for entertainment and, as such, nothing to get worked up about. Watt's judgement was thus both magnanimous and detached. He was also distancing himself from a larger question, as pertinent today as it ever has been: namely, whether it is reasonable to expect—demand, even—more accuracy from films set in the past.

Given that *The Bridge on the River Kwai* was among the earliest cinematic depictions of the POW experience, one could argue that the film bore a greater educational responsibility than would have been the case had it been produced later that century (at which point some cinemagoers, at least, might have already become acquainted with the more brutal truths of life in captivity). This step-by-step picture of an ever-widening degree of artistic license (X axis) plotted against the passage of time (Y axis) is reassuring to those who nurture a desire for regulated artistic practices. In an open society, however, it is wholly unreasonable. No filmmaker of Lean's

talent and resources would have willingly submitted to the constraints of an educational platform when there was a good story to tell. Besides, the results of such interference are almost invariably sterile.

Be that as it may, I still find myself sympathetic to Bourke's judgement, even allowing that it tacitly invests in a conservative notion of the filmmaker's responsibility. To be specific, the idea of a "close fit" between a film and its model (a play, novel, or actual events) nominally falls under the rubric of "fidelity"—a lofty term that carries a forbidding payload of marital and judicial connotations. Woe unto the filmmaker who strays from the content of an original model, for the eyes of informed audiences will look sternly thereon, and much chastising will be found in newspaper columns and social media platforms as a consequence!

Filmmakers, like spouses, are seldom complimented for dutifully observing the strictures of fidelity. That, after all, is their job. It is only when a breach occurs that tongues start wagging. In the lofty spires of the ivory tower, however, things are rather different. There, poking holes in fidelity theory has become par for the course among film scholars, so much so that it is sometimes necessary to remember that the idea has not yet been retired, and may never be, among the hoi polloi below. Nor should this occasion much surprise. Who, after all, can truthfully say that their memory of reading *Anna Karenina* (1873-1877) or *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) had no bearing whatsoever on their opinion of the respective film adaptations?

Original models are important—on that much, everyone can agree. It is the point at which fidelity leaves off and creative inspiration takes over that occasions controversy, though it must be said that for the vast majority of films there is no controversy whatsoever. The stakes just aren't high enough. Dedicated players of the Pokémon video game might tut-tut at the liberties of the umpteen film adaptations, though I rather doubt that these misgivings, if indeed there are any, could be termed a controversy. For tempers to flare, added factors must come into play. Where literature is concerned, one might call it "the integrity of the classic." Most readers of *The Dalhousie Review*, I venture to guess, will recall at least one literary classic from the canon of great masterworks that moved them sufficiently for a slight frown to crease the brow on hearing that a film adaptation was in the offing. Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but the results don't always look flattering to a third party.

Then there is the film that is "based on" a true story. What is meant

by this perennial claim is anyone's guess, but in trying to unpack it critics will usually refer to the "historical record" at some point. Admittedly, historical films are not usually judged adaptations unless they are based on a particular source text. Thus *Gone with the Wind* (1939) would qualify as an adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel of the same title, whereas *The Last Samurai* (2003) would not qualify as an adaptation because it took no cultural production—be it a poem, opera, biography, or children's toy—as its progenitor. No matter. Films set in the past, particularly war films, involve a similar set of considerations for those who critique them because they purport to represent that past.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that at the 2016 Emirates Airline Festival of Literature in Dubai the British historian Antony Beevor drew specific attention to the ways in which "inaccurate" Hollywood war films exploit the ignorance of today's "postliterate" societies. To prove his point, Beevor cited two films in particular, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *The Imitation Game* (2014), which are both set during WWII. This war, one suspects, occasions particular vigilance among a certain class of cinemagoer. My own case-in-point would be the film *U-571* (2000), which told the story—rather, its own story—of the capture of an Enigma machine from a German submarine during WWII, but stirred up a maelstrom of controversy because it rendered the operation an American affair. British veterans and historians were especially put out because the historical record of the period of code-breaking that was most crucial to the war effort reveals few if any American activities in that area. The clicking of tongues became steadily more audible, eventually resounding in the Houses of Parliament, at which point President Bill Clinton felt obliged to write a letter in which he stated that the film's plot was "only" a work of fiction.

Again, stories are political. Details matter. The filmmaker's prerogative to exercise a vigorous artistic licence cannot be denied, but the past does not recede as a factor in what audiences expect of certain genres, topics, and narratives. Consequently, a balance must be struck—or, more truthfully, goes on being struck—imperfectly and arbitrarily right up to the present day. For the POW genre this process is especially significant partly because no subsequent film has made as striking an impression as Lean's but also because memories of imprisonment motivate calls for apologies from Japanese officials. It was not until 2015 that senior executives from the Mitsubishi Corporation issued a public apology for using American POWs as forced

labourers in WWII, and this statement came roughly six months after the premiere of Angelina Jolie's film *Unbroken* (2014), which includes scenes of grimy American POWs hefting bags of coal onto Japanese barges. The Mitsubishi logo does not appear anywhere in the film, nor should one assume that the film had any direct impact upon the official apology. My point is not that these films have the power to influence current affairs, but rather that our knowledge of history, however imperfect it may be, makes them more important to us.

As for who I mean by "us," an underappreciated feature of the POW genre is the degree to which certain productions have striven toward inclusiveness, particularly with regard to the representation of female prisoners. At least four films for the big screen, *Three Came Home* (1950), *A Town Like Alice* (1956), *Seven Women from Hell* (1961), and *Paradise Road* (1997), attempt this project, while *Empire of the Sun* (1987) looks at captivity from a young boy's perspective. That said, there has been no anglophone production that addresses the plight of East Asian or Southeast Asian captives, civilian or otherwise. This is a gross omission given the higher numbers of POWs from that quarter, and one finds the same trend in the literary history of the genre, beginning in the immediate postwar decades when the earliest fiction writers were themselves former POWs. These men, such as Boule and Shute, wrote about the historical episodes that were closest to their life experiences, much as Chinese writers and filmmakers would demonstrate an enduring concern with events during or leading up to the Second Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945.

The complete absence of any feature-length work dedicated to the plight of Southeast Asian POWs is, to my mind, the most noticeable, egregious, but also most correctible feature of the genre. Indeed, the work currently being done by Malaysian writers like Tan Twan Eng could serve as a ready model for filmmakers. Besides this matter, however, there is an equally enduring trend that is less easily addressed. It is particularly evident when contrasting the two most recent productions, Jolie's *Unbroken* and Jonathan Teplitzky's *The Railway Man* (2013), though it was perceptible before their arrival. The earliest POW films located events squarely within the captivity narrative, which is to say that most of what took place was set in a Japanese-run camp or on the railway. One of the most striking aspects of these narratives, true to the original novels and the historical record alike, was the way in which prisoner communities tended to voluntarily segregate into their respective

national groups. Having done so, certain characteristics came forth in ways that contemporary audiences might think rather hackneyed or politically incorrect: the Americans become ruthless gangsters, the British build up a wall of snobbish classism, and the Australians take pride in their expert thievery. Macho posturing and in-your-face theatrics are the inevitable result, bullish stuff that was recently given a new lease on life in Guillermo del Toro's science fiction monster film *Pacific Rim* (2013). What is not borne out by the historical record, however, is the figure of the American hero who survives against the odds, facing down his captors or escaping their clutches altogether.

William Holden's character in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* is the archetypal example. He is a man who valiantly drags himself through the jungle and then drags himself away from a red-hot romantic encounter to return to the same place that he had initially sought to escape. The same character type was later reprised in *Battle of the Coral Sea* (1959), the plot of which ostensibly concerns an information-gathering mission gone wrong but fixates just as much on an American Captain's romance with a Eurasian woman. One may be thankful for small mercies, inasmuch as romance has tended to diminish as a theme over time. However, the "core" story of daring-do has remained essential to the American versions of the POW genre. For example, *No Man Is an Island* (1962) presented audiences with the example of an American coastwatcher who stays behind after the Japanese invasion of Guam, evading capture throughout the war years, while *Farewell to the King* (1989) went further still, imagining an American POW who escapes imprisonment and, having been subsequently crowned king of a Borneo tribe, makes war on the Japanese in his own name. The list goes on.

Through all of this, one senses that the most significant escape attempt of all involves not the Americans outwitting the Japanese but rather American filmmakers trying to wriggle free from the confines of the POW genre. In other words, there is something about the story of life in captivity that just doesn't sit well with what they presume American audiences want to watch, and so what audiences have been given instead are alternative stand-in stories: gripping scenes of combat, survival at sea, passionate embraces, headlong rushes through the jungle, and so forth. Needless to say, there is nothing wrong with mixing things up a bit. Indeed, bold creative ventures are necessary in order to prevent the genre from becoming moribund. However, if something essential gets left behind in the process then this selfsame

creativity risks becoming a symptom of the problem rather than a solution to it and the mold remains, well, “unbroken” is as good a word as any.

I first became acquainted with Louis Zamperini’s extraordinary story through reading his autobiography *Devil at my Heels* (2003), co-written by David Rensin. That work, as much as Laura Hillenbrand’s novel *Unbroken* (2010), made it readily apparent that Zamperini was a man who defied any form of conventional identity or categorization. His life journey as an Olympian, wartime bombardier, crash survivor, POW, and religious convert was breathtaking by any standards. It came as no surprise to hear of the planned film adaptation, and I looked forward to it in the confidence that, with a succession of stories bound up in a single volume, little could go wrong. In retrospect, I do not find this assumption misplaced, for the result was true to the substance and spirit of the original, even though I subsequently felt that Jolie might have done better had she borrowed a few ideas from Ang Lee’s film *Life of Pi* (2012). The image of a raft adrift in the Pacific Ocean for more than a month followed by the savagery of a Japanese Corporal known as “The Bird” seemed almost to cry out for magical realist treatment. Perhaps I was letting my own imagination run away with me, yet the enigmatic, misty landscapes of Nagisa Oshima’s film *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1983) show, if nothing else, that the genre does not always have to be tied to a realist mode of depiction.

One can dwell too long in a make-believe world of alternative scripts, locations, budgets, and film crews. Far better to judge a film on its own terms. As it stands, there is something lacking in *Unbroken* that the biography made clear but the film left out altogether. Call it the “unconscious dimension.” Before getting to that, it must be admitted that Jolie’s film goes further than most American productions when it comes to illustrating the hardships and cruelties endured by POWs. Zamperini is starved, beaten, verbally bullied, and singled out for special treatment by “The Bird.” Japanese singer-songwriter Takamasa “Miyavi” Ishihara does rather well in the part, though the real-life commandant was most likely mad as well as bad. Still, at no point does one get the impression that Zamperini’s mind was in any way compromised by the ordeal. In the film version, the actor Jack O’Connell portrays him as stalwart and defiantly erect at all times. To see him face down “The Bird” while holding a plank of wood aloft is stirring stuff, and that is precisely the problem. Zamperini doesn’t hit rock bottom. He remains heroic, not escaping in the literal sense (as William Holden’s

character did back in 1957) but remaining essentially intact.

Admittedly, there is a moment when O'Connell's character swoons a bit on realizing that the commandant of the second camp to which he has been sent is the same as the first. But one has to read the written accounts to understand just how horrifying this discovery truly was, how it pushed Zamperini to the brink of despair or over it (depending on how one reads his mindset at the time). I also found myself not at all satisfied with the simple statement at the end of the film that he had suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder on returning to the U.S. Again, if one has read the written accounts one knows that this falls far short of the mark. Zamperini endured mood swings, disturbed sleep, obsessive thinking, bitter disappointment on finding that he was no longer up to Olympic standards as a runner, and the sense that his marriage was failing. One might call these happenings "after-thoughts" in the literal sense that they followed the war years and took place on an interior level, yet they were fully integral to Zamperini's story and, on that basis, deserved to be shown.

If anyone doubts that these aspects are important, *The Railway Man* provides the necessary correction. British and Australian films have acknowledged the diversity of character types among Japanese servicemen (the 1989 film *Return from the River Kwai* being a notable example) and have also illustrated that the fate of survivors, both Allied and Japanese, is a pertinent question (the 1990 film *Prisoners of the Sun* being set in the immediate postwar months). *The Railway Man* delves into both aspects, beginning not in the lush jungles of Burma-Siam but in a greying veterans' club in England. There the middle-aged Eric Lomax ponders how to locate the woman with whom he has fallen in love. He promptly does so and finds that his feelings are reciprocated but also that his nightmares of torture and captivity intrude into his new marriage, testing his wife's nerves as well as his own. The gulf of silence separating veteran from non-veteran threatens to become a chasm into which his marriage will topple and fall. Lomax sleepwalks, hollers with pain, forgets to pay his bills, tersely rebukes his wife, and finds solace in the male-only camaraderie of the club. His life is one of routine, partly because his mind naturally inclines that way, partly because of his background in the military, but at least as much because habits—good, bad, or any other kind—provide a refuge from the memories of violence that the Japanese wreaked upon him. In his world of memorized timetables, change is unwelcome.

Lomax's autobiography, first published in 1995, has been acclaimed for the model of step-by-step reconciliation it offers. For example, Solomon Schimmel was moved to quote Lomax at considerable length in his study of repentance and forgiveness, *Wounds Not Healed by Time* (2004). Having been similarly moved myself, I was irritated by the vengeance fantasy that Colin Firth, as Lomax, visits upon Takashi Nagase in Thailand. Readers of the autobiography will know that Lomax certainly entertained such thoughts, for he is quite frank about the less edifying sides of his character that held sway when he first learned of Nagase's whereabouts. If Lomax had been wealthy enough to journey to Thailand unannounced before establishing the correspondence that preceded the actual reunion then he might have tracked down Nagase and attempted something reckless. However, such a meeting never took place and it was only with the financial support of the Sasakawa Foundation that Lomax was finally able to meet Nagase as a civilian. By that time, the two had gotten used to hearing from one another through letters, measuring each other's sincerity and appreciating the motives involved. When they did meet, subsequent to those initial steps, it was not the violent role-reversal that one sees in the film adaptation but rather a well-planned and dignified affair. At times, the two men were alone together but never with knives and rubber hoses. It's also worth remembering that Lomax's wife had taken the initiative in writing to Nagase and was thus a good deal more than the tearful spectator that Nicole Kidman's character becomes.

There is nothing pedantic about wishing to know how forgiveness and reconciliation work, for there is no universally agreed-upon methodology between human societies. Even if the English-speaking world could claim to have arrived at a consensus, the complexity is multiplied many times over when the respective parties herald from different national cultures or religious traditions. In the absence of a roadmap, the only certainty is that forgiveness and reconciliation are matters of process more than single events. To the extent that *The Railway Man* acknowledges the existence of such a process the film constitutes an advancement. I still find myself flinching at the fictive confrontations, but better to have those, I suppose, than a film in which the postwar years have been amputated altogether.

Time will tell whether the POW genre advances any further in film productions, particularly with regard to the stories of American POWs and their postwar lives. There is no reason to presume that it cannot and every

reason to hope that it may. After all, if American audiences seldom encounter depictions of veterans confronting post-traumatic stress disorder, then how will they appreciate the challenges facing veterans who have returned from more recent conflicts? If apologists for Japan's imperial expansion are presented with depictions of unflappable he-men who shrug off their time as POWs, then how can one expect them to take calls for apology or restitution seriously? If prisoners are forever wisecracking, escaping, or thumbing their noses at the enemy, then what does that say about the fragile insecurities of those who believe such distortions to be true and accurate?