Gene D. Phillips,
*Beyond the Epic: The Life & Films of David Lean.*
ISBN: 0 8131 2415 8
US$39.95 (hb)
545pp
(Review copy supplied by University of Kentucky Press)

What is David Lean’s standing now, I wonder? Filmmakers such as Steven Spielberg claim to revere his later works; he has attracted a couple of critical works, now out of date and possibly of print; there are accounts of working with him and a couple of light-weight surveys; and above all there is Kevin Brownlow’s magisterial biography of 1976. This latter set a new benchmark for film-related ‘lives’ so that one can’t but wonder at Gene Phillips’ even considering a further ‘life’. But as to the films, it seems to me some time since I came across any sort of serious reappraisal, and I fear that this book doesn’t fill the gap.

The title of Phillips’ book is worth considering. What does ‘Beyond the Epic’ signify? That one needs to look beyond those vast last films for real insight into Lean? What in fact does the author mean by ‘epic’: does he just use the term to designate films that cost a lot and took ages to make and are scenically impressive? Or does he mean to draw attention to a grandeur of concept (not the same as ’size’), a narrative that draws on heroic exploit with a protagonist of more than ordinarily human traits, and a treatment which matches these commonly held marks of the epic? It is not clear from this book exactly what Phillips has in mind by this key word in his title. *Lawrence of Arabia* (UK 1962) has an extraordinary hero, but can one say the same of *Dr Zhivago* (USA 1965) or *Ryan’s Daughter* (UK 1970)? He certainly fails to make any critical case for the epic quality of these films, just assumes it as a given.

The other matter the title raises, in the hindsight of having read the book, is the notion that this is a ‘Life’. It is arguable I suppose that, in Lean’s case, the films essentially are the life. Even so, the brief sketches of the Quaker background (invoked often later and arbitrarily to explain some perversity or other) or of the serial womanising that incorporated no fewer than six wives scarcely qualify the book to be called a ‘Life’. Having known two of the earlier wives, the actresses Kay Walsh and Ann Todd, I’d have said there was matter very much worth exploring in the kinds of relationship each had with him. Walsh in particular was a woman of considerable intelligence and perception, and by several accounts very influential in Lean’s development at a critical early stage of his career. In this book, she enters and leaves the scene with this influence unexamined. The marriage with Todd, a more solipsistic character than Walsh, gets pretty cursory treatment considering that she starred in three consecutive films for him: why did this marriage end so bitterly? The next three wives, including the sixth who has written a memoir of her life with Lean, are similarly shadowy figures. In the annals of show-business biographies, one could be often grateful for a bit more concentration on the work that made one interested in reading the life in the first place; here the balance is tilted the other way. And it’s not just the wives and mistresses; the other working relations and friendships seem to have no connection with Lean the man as distinct from the filmmaker. Maybe that’s the way it was, but that too would have been worth pursuing.

The book’s structure offers a kind of parallel with Lean’s career. It is relatively trim (no, I won’t use that famous pun) on the early films as editor and sometimes uncredited director (e.g., on *Major Barbara* [UK 1941]) and the first eleven films as credited director. That is, on those British films that made his name: on *In Which We Serve* (co-directed with Noël Coward, 1942), *This Happy Breed* (1944), the indelibly poignant *Brief Encounter* (1945), the classic Dickens adaptations, *Great Expectations* (1946) and *Oliver Twist* (1948), the teasing ambiguities of *Madeleine* (1950) and so on. All this part of Lean’s career, that body of work which stamped him as one of the leading lights of the postwar British cinema, is dealt with in half the book’s inordinate length. The book then billows out in tune, as it were, with the vast films that made him an international figure – and rich. This period can be dated from *The Bridge over the River Kwai* (1957); after that, there was no holding Lean, for whom size now seemed to matter more than anything, and Phillips, desperate to establish that Lean’s is really a ‘Hollywood career’ on the basis of these films, devotes half his book to the last five films. In the insistence on ‘Hollywood’, one is tempted to say that Hollywood is welcome to him and them.

The book’s general approach in its first half, after the skimpy treatment of the early years in the first forty of the over-all 440 pages, is to devote a chapter to each one or two of the films in chronological order. Each of these starts with more background than many will feel they want about the precursor texts and authors from whom the films are derived: is there a big demand among the likely readers of this book for quite so much stuff about H.G. Wells’ life and work as precedes Phillips’ account of *The Passionate Friends*? This kind of material is followed by a lengthy chronicling of the production history of each film, and these are the sections I found most rewarding, in the sense that they contained some new information, new to me anyway, about the actual making of the films. Information, rather than analysis, is Phillips’ forte. The third section of each of
these accounts is a very tiresome, pedestrian ‘story-telling’, occasionally interspersed with a comment about how this or that effect was achieved. This is followed by a perfunctory critical round-up, with unhelpful comments such as ‘an excellent scene well dramatised from the novel’ and a general tendency to sound like Variety reviews. The best one can say of the survey of the films is that there is some new information but not much in the way of new insights.

My dissatisfaction with this book may be a reflection of my own attitude to Lean’s oeuvre, which involves a passionate admiration for Brief Encounter, which after sixty years still has an impressive sense of emotional truth as articulated in a perfectly judged screenplay and a central heart-breaking performance, and a gradual but perceptible growth of boredom as the films got bigger and costlier – and emptier. The kind of artistic elephantiasis which begins to be felt in River Kwai and reaches its acme (or nadir, if you’re with me) in Ryan’s Daughter leads to a seepage of the personal and the intimate in favour of the sprawling and self-consciously epic. I’d rather spend the evening in intensive care than be subjected again to Ryan or Zhivago, and the book feels interminable when it gets to this phase of the career, picking up a little, as (for me, anyway) the career did with A Passage to India (UK/USA 1984). There is a feeling that Lean no longer cares for anything but the vast panorama, and is distrustful of holding our interest in what goes on between people. His wish to make Ryan’s Daughter a sort of Celtic Madame Bovary comes unstuck because he insists on placing his banal little triangular romance against the background of the Irish ‘troubles’ whereas Flaubert sees his Emma as absolutely embedded in her society. Phillips simply goes along with Lean’s approach, accepting uncritically the parallel with the French author.

Along with the missionary zeal with which he wants to claim Lean for Hollywood goes Phillips’ simplistic and old-fashioned obsession with the idea of ‘auteur’ status for Lean. From the outset (or ‘the get-go’ in his favoured usage), he insists on rehearsing long-outmoded notions of the centrality of auteurism. On page 4, he tells us, as if it is something we may not be aware of, ‘The auteur theory maintains that the director is at the center of the film-making process.’ Go on! Like the tongue to a hollow tooth, he returns to the business of proving Lean an auteur: his ongoing interest in protagonists who ‘decline to accept defeat … is one sure sign that David Lean is an auteur’. And later, in the face of the empty spectacle of Zhivago, he tells us that, ‘like any auteur, Lean oversaw every aspect of the production of a film made on the grand scale of Zhivago just as personally as he had in the days when he was making “smaller” films’.

Stylistically, the book is a wearying read. The ‘critical’ judgments are apt to be as fatuous as the one that tells us, as if it is something we may not be aware of, ‘The auteur theory maintains that the director is at the center of the film-making process.’ Go on! Like the tongue to a hollow tooth, he returns to the business of proving Lean an auteur: his ongoing interest in protagonists who ‘decline to accept defeat … is one sure sign that David Lean is an auteur’. And later, in the face of the empty spectacle of Zhivago, he tells us that, ‘like any auteur, Lean oversaw every aspect of the production of a film made on the grand scale of Zhivago just as personally as he had in the days when he was making “smaller” films’.

David Lean may or may not belong in the canon. A book like this will do little to persuade those not already willing to bend the knee to the maker of Lawrence are unlikely to be persuaded by this trudge through the decades of his peaks and troughs.

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