



## Movie Club

### The Bridge on the River Kwai (1957)

1. The Bridge on the River Kwai is unique among war films:

*“Most war movies are either for or against their wars. ‘The Bridge on the River Kwai’ (1957) is one of the few that focuses not on larger rights and wrongs but on individuals. Like Robert Graves’ World War I memoir, Goodbye to All That, it shows men grimly hanging onto military discipline and pride in their units as a way of clinging to sanity. By the end of ‘Kwai’ we are less interested in who wins than in how individual characters will behave.” (Ebert, [April 18, 1999], [The Bridge on the River Kwai \[Review\]](#)).*

If you were to describe in the film as a war movie, how would you describe the film’s stance on war? Is it pro-war, anti-war, a balanced look at both sides? How do the characters represent different aspects of war? Think of the words and actions the three main characters Nicholson, Saito, and Shears. Although Ebert asserts that “Kwai” does not focus on the rights and wrongs but on individuals, does that not in itself present a view on war?

2. Honour features prominently. It determines both Nicholson’s and Saito’s positions, with each questioning the other’s understanding of the concept. Saito, perhaps being in a position of authority, speaks most freely in his accusations: “Attention, English prisoners! Notice I do not say ‘English soldiers’. From the moment you surrendered, you ceased to be soldiers.... Your officers will work beside you. This is only just. For it is they who betray you by surrender. Your shame is their dishonour.”; “I hate the British! You are defeated but you have no shame. You are stubborn but you have no pride. You endure but you have no courage.”; “Do not speak to me of rules. This is war! This is not a game of cricket!” Saito even weeps at one point for what he considers his failure, as well as preparing himself for seppuku if the bridge is not a success with the first train. But Nicholson has some very clear ideas about it as well: “Without law, Commander, there is no civilization.” He sees the bridge not simply as labour but as a way to “rebuild the battalion” after having become “a rabble” with “no order, no discipline”, as a way of maintaining that order, that law to maintain civilization, but also linking the men’s sense of pride with morale (“It’s essential that they should take a pride in their job”). Although having different ideas of honour, in the end there is a kind of admiration and camaraderie between Saito and Nicholson, sharing personal histories and reflections on their careers, and even to the point of Nicholson siding with the Saito when the bridge faces demolition. What is honour ultimately worth? Did it, as

Nicholson believed, provide a way for the troops to maintain morale, and in turn the law and “civilization”? Or is it more in keeping with Ebert’s assessment that soldiers used “discipline and pride in their units as a way of clinging to sanity”?

3. The film presents a counterargument to Saito and Nicholson’s talk of honour. In contrast we have the cynical Major Shears and the pragmatic Major Clipton. Shears makes it clear he has contempt for war and the military throughout the film, but it is best represented in his first scene:

*“Oh, yes... Here lies Corporal Herbert Thompson. Serial number zero-one-two-three-four-five-six-seven. Valiant member of the King's Own... or the Queen's Own... or something. Who died of beriberi in the year of our Lord, 1943. For the greater glory of... [pauses, looking stumped. Looks at Weaver] What did he die for?”*

When admonished for mocking the dead, Shears clarifies that he doesn’t “mock the grave or the man... May he rest in peace. He found little enough of it when he was alive.” Clipton, by contrast is nowhere near as hostile, instead trying to keep as many people alive as possible, but doing so has doubts about Nicholson’s methods. Of both Saito and Nicholson’s talk of honour and heel-digging he asks “are they both mad? Or am I going mad? Or is it the sun?” In the end, Shears becomes heroic, playing by the rules until the job of demolishing the bridge is complete and giving his life for it. Clipton, equally, gains the final voice on the events in the film, and his assessment is far from favourable. Are Saito and Nicholson right to value honour, even at the expense of their (and others’) lives? Is Shears just a cowardly malcontent, not willing to adhere to any principles, or is his contempt a moral position in itself? What do we make of his shift later in the film that sees him sacrifice his life for the completion of the mission? Does this contradict his earlier remarks and actions, or is there some consistency that rounds them out?

4. What do you make of two of the final lines in the film, Nicholson’s “What have I done?” and Clipton’s “Madness! Madness!”? To what is Nicholson’s question referring to? What is the “madness” Clipton is describing? Some have viewed this as a damning conclusion to the film. One contemporaneous critic asked:

*Has no one else found it highly peculiar that damn near everybody's choice for the best movie of (let's say) the decade should be dedicated, inferentially but absolutely, to the proposition that Courage is Madness and Cowardice is Best? (Tallmer, J. August 27, 1958, “[Notes a Bit Late on 'River Kwai'](#)”. *The Village Voice*. Vol. III, No. 44)*

This is by no means a general reception of the film (as the quote itself implies), and many have praised the film for the fact “that its courageous hero is shown from all angles, in all kinds of mirrors. He is strong, stubborn, fallible, maniacal, silly, and wise; and in the end he is pathetic, noble, and foolish.” (Roth, P. January 27, 1958. [The Playing Fields of Thailand](#). *New Republic*.) Added to this is the fact that when the bombs are detonated, despite his “awakening”, they are done so from Nicholson collapsing from his wounds. The act does not appear intentional in anyway despite the moment of “clarity” experienced just before. The final destruction arises “not out of the agony of choice but out of mere physical

circumstance.” (Roth, “[The Playing Fields of Thailand](#)”). Wherein lies the madness? Is it the characters who become (or are) mad? The codes and rules they adhere to? Is it war (or more specifically *The War*) that is mad?

5. Two characters refer to war in regards to games. First is Saito, who reminds Nicholson to “not speak to [him] of rules. This is war! This is not a game of cricket!” The second, taking the opposite view, is Shears, who, when he admonishes Major Warden for his “heroics”, his “stench of death”, asserts:

*This is just a game, this war! You and Colonel Nicholson, you're two of a kind, crazy with courage. For what? How to die like a gentleman, how to die by the rules - when the only important thing is how to live like a human being!*

How would you compare these two views? Are their criticisms the same? Both uses are meant to belittle what Nicholson and Warden value, but for different reasons. Saito views his duty as an honourable exercise that transcends the rules that Nicholson seems to cherish. Alternately, Shears views it more like children playing soldier too much, with the lethality all being part of some game that has been blown out of proportion (“I'm not going to leave you here to die, Warden, because I don't care about your bridge and I don't care about your rules.”) Is war a game, or at least, do people play it as such? How does the notion of honour and pride discussed earlier play into this? Is this a kind of madness, a kind of pathology? To what extent are Saito and Shears partaking in this game?