

Portland State University

PDXScholar

Special Collections: Oregon Public Speakers

Special Collections and University Archives

5-16-1979

"Myth of the River Kwai"

Ian P. Watt

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/orspeakers>



Part of the American Film Studies Commons, American Popular Culture Commons, Comparative Literature Commons, and the Military History Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Watt, Ian P., "Myth of the River Kwai" (1979). *Special Collections: Oregon Public Speakers*. 185.
<https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/orspeakers/185>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Special Collections: Oregon Public Speakers by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

Ian P. Watt
"Myth of the River Kwai"
May 16, 1979
Portland State University

PSU Library Special Collections and University Archives
Oregon Public Speakers Collection
<http://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/11436>

Transcribed by Evelyn Birnbaum, June 24 - June 28, 2020

Audited by Carolee Harrison, February 2021

PSU Library Special Collections and University Archives presents these recordings as part of the historical record. They reflect the recollections and opinions of the individual speakers and are not intended to be representative of the views of Portland State University. They may contain language, ideas, or stereotypes that are offensive to others.

[static for about fifteen seconds] [recording starts; abruptly stops and starts again] [audience chatting in background]

HOST: Hello. Welcome to the 15th annual Nina Mae Kellogg Awards and lecture. Today we're honored to have Professor Ian Watt from Stanford University to speak to us, but first, Dr. Frederick Waller, head of the English department, will give out the sophomore and senior awards for scholastic attainment.

[shifting sounds as people move and take seats]

FRED WALLER: Thank you. A regular and very pleasant feature of the Nina Mae lecture series is the announcement of the Nina Mae Kellogg students' awards, of which there are two. First, a sophomore award in English, given to a student who, in the judgement of a faculty selection committee, shows highest standing among eligible candidates; and I'm quoting now from the terms of the award, "reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking," [laughter] "...in the English language." The senior award in English is given to a student majoring in English, about to graduate, and is based on general scholastic excellence. And both awards, I'm glad to say, are substantial. It's a pleasure to announce that the Nina Mae Kellogg sophomore award will go to William Shriver, and as confirmation of his ability in writing, he's also just won third prize, as a sophomore, in the Phyllis and Tom Burnham Creative Writing award program. Mr. Shriver?

[applause]

WALLER: And the senior award will go to Mark Jones, an English major who is graduating this spring in the University Scholars Program—in effect, our Honors program—and as evidence of his excellence and scholarship, he'll graduate with a 4-point grade point average. And even in the times of great inflation, you can't do any better than that. Mark is currently editor of the Portland State *Review*, our literary magazine, and perhaps imprudently, will begin graduate studies in English at Columbia University this fall. Mark?

[applause]

[child crying in background] [shifting sounds of people walking]

HOST: Thank you very much, Dr. Waller. It's hard to accept the fact that the major works of criticism that undertook to study "the novel" as a form—not particular novels, or novelists—were published as recently as fifty years ago. Certainly Henry James and his prefaces revealed his preoccupation with fictional form two decades before that, but by and large, it is only half a century now, that scholars, critics, theoreticians, and historians of the novel have been providing those of us who are interested in the new literary form, as teachers *and* writers, with material to help us understand this "novel" thing.

In his impressive work *The Rise of the Novel*, Professor Watt undertakes the study of realism in the works of three central figures in English literature: Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding. He does more than that, however, and the careful reading of the first two chapters: "Realism and the Novel Form" and "The Reading Public and the Rise of the Novel" should be urged upon anyone interested in the relationship between fiction and the reality it tries to imitate. The fact is that the novel, more than any other literary form, cannot be fully appreciated and understood if its study is removed from the social context it strives to describe.

It is my pleasure to learn that, besides being a distinguished 18th-century scholar—a Conrad scholar—and historian of the novel, Professor Watt is also a student of myths in the making, and it is about a new myth—one in which he was an unwilling participant—that Ian Watt will speak to us this afternoon. He had, as many will probably know by now, the bad luck to have been taken prisoner in February 1942 at the capitulation of Singapore. In November of that year, he was moved to Siam to work on the railway from Bangkok to Moulmein. And it was there, in a camp on the river Kwai, that he labored for almost 3 years until he was released from captivity, when the Japanese sued for peace.

As we shall see, all of this is related to his interest in the way things actually are; in the way fiction tries to describe, reflect, and shape these real things for its own purposes; the way the film, this upstart form that pretends an interest in reality but is more taken by verisimilitude, the appearance of reality. The way film takes the novel—once removed from reality—and, for its own purposes, aesthetic but also commercial, removes it one step further. And finally, to the way myth emerges from all of these removals. It is my distinct pleasure to introduce to you professor Ian Watt, who will speak to us about the creation of the myth of the river Kwai.

[applause] [lecture begins at 05:43]

IAN WATT: Thank you very much. I am deeply honored to have been invited to join the distinguished company of Nina Mae Kellogg lecturers and to trail in the dusty rear of such old friends of mine as Iva Richards [*I.A. Richards, 1968 lecturer at the Nina Mae Kellogg Awards*] and Robert Heilman. [*1967 lecturer at Nina Mae Kellogg Awards*]

When, some thirty years ago and in Cambridge, England, I was first confronted with the problem of how to give a lecture, I consulted one of the most famous performers and scholars in my college—St. Johns—about how to do it. He instantly replied, “I think you’ll find, Ian, that every good lecture takes 50 minutes to make three jokes and one point.” [*laughter*] I can reassure you that I will not except... exceed his time limit, but I fear that I have an inadequate number of jokes, only one in fact; and perhaps an excessive number of points: six, if my arithmetic serves. Perhaps I’ll get the joke over first.

When I found myself in Malaya by tropic seas for the first time, I had heard stories about how they were shark-infested tropical waters. I therefore presumed it might be dangerous to go in and wipe some of the sweat and mess off my body, and I asked a local rubber planter, and said, “Excuse me. I’d like to go in there and swim, but I’m told that a lot of people get eaten by sharks,” and he said, “Oh, stuff and nonsense! Stuff and nonsense! I know there’s a lot of loose talk about people being eaten by sharks, but it’s rubbish! They’re barracuda.” [*laughter*]

I’ve often been annoyed by people who worry too much about problems of classification when it isn’t directly related to the job in hand, and I’ll say very little about what I mean by the word “myth” in my title. The French structuralist Barthes has said that a myth is a story which has been elected by history, and I want to speak mainly about the process whereby the story of the bridge on the river Kwai was so elected. I also, somewhat more incidentally, want to speak about how my experiences there brought me a few glimpses of some of the more universal

and, I take it, permanent tendencies of human nature on which the humanities and their studies... and their study are based.

The Kwai is a real river in Thailand, and nearly thirty years ago, the prisoners of the Japanese, including myself, really did build a bridge across it; actually two. But [Pierre] Boulle's novel, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, and the movie based on it, are completely fictitious, although their origin can be traced back to *two* historical realities. Early in 1942, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, the Philippines surrendered, and Japan was suddenly left with the task of looking after over 200,000 prisoners of war. The normal procedure in wartime is to separate the officers from the enlisted men, and put them in different camps, but the Japanese hadn't got the manpower to spare, and they left the prisoners to organize their own prison camps, very largely. This exception to the norm was one essential basis for Boulle's story, because prisoners of war don't normally command anyone, and so they don't have anything to negotiate with in their dealings with their captors.

The other main historical reality is the building of that particular bridge. Could we have it a little darker, please? And I will see if I can press the right button. Ah. Thank you. [*talking to himself; referring to the slide projector*] I gotta go back. [*talking to the audience; showing slides*] Here is Bangkok. Here is Moulmein. And the job was to build the railway across a mountainous jungle that covered countryside both in Siam and Burma. The Japanese were trying to conquer India, they needed the railway; and so in the summer of 1942, many trainloads of prisoners from Singapore were sent up to Thailand to trace a 200-mile cutting through the jungle, along a river called the Kwai Noi. In Thailand, in Thai, *kwai* just means stream, and *noi* means small. This small stream, the Kwai Noi, joins the main tributary of the Mae Nam [Mae Klong] called the Kwai Yai, or big stream, at the old city of Kanchanaburi, some 80 miles west of Bangkok. These are the [...] near Kanchanaburi, and this is a little houseboat in the area. This is a picture of the town, or the village, the large village of Kanchanaburi.

The problem was to get the railway across the river at the junction of these two rivers, and so they started a large construction camp at a place called Tamarkan, three miles west of Kanchanaburi, as well as several other large construction camps. This is a picture... a typical picture of the prison camps. You see the mud, the bamboo and attap roofs, which were the standard feature of our lives, if we had huts at all. Like the hundreds of other Japanese camps, this one, Tamarkan, had a very small and incompetent staff. Most of them were men who, for one reason or other, were unfit for combat duty: too old, perhaps; in disgrace, or drunks.

What was special about this particular camp, Tamarkan, was that they were—and some of the others up the river—was that they were also partly controlled by Japanese military engineers

who were building the railway. These engineers usually despised the Japanese troops in charge of running the camps almost as much as they despised the prisoners. And this continual friction directly affected our ordinary lives as prisoners. Daily routine in the camps in November 1942, when the Kwai Bridge began, normally went like this: up at dawn, tea and rice for breakfast, and then on parade for the day's work. You'd wait anything from 10 minutes to half an hour for the Korean guard to count the whole parade and split it into smaller work groups. Then you were marched to a small bamboo shed where the picks and shovels and so on were kept. Under any circumstances, it would take a long time for one guard to issue tools for thousands of men under one small shed. The delay was made worse by the fact that the tools belonged to the engineers, and so two organizations were involved merely in issuing and checking picks and shovels. This could easily take half an hour, and then we'd be reassembled and counted all over again before finally marching off to work.

When we'd finally got out on the line and found the right worksite, the Japanese engineer might be there to explain the day's task; more probably not. He had a long section of embankment, or of a large part of the bridge to look after, and he probably had about 30 different working parties to supervise. He might have given instructions to the guard, but the orders might not be clear. Or they might be clear to us, but not to the guard. And there were many other organizational problems: for instance, in the early days of the railway, the total amount of earth each man was supposed to do was moving a cubic meter of earth, or dragging in so many piles, was quite reasonable. But the task often fell unequally. Some groups would have to carry their earth much further than others, or drive their piles into much rockier ground. So, as the day wore on, someone in a group with a very difficult or impossible assignment would get beaten up because the guard knew that he'd be beaten up himself if the work on his section wasn't finished on time, so he lashed out.

Meanwhile, many other prisoners would already have finished their task and would be sitting around waiting, or even worse, pretending to work. The rule was that the whole day's task had to be finished before any single work party could leave the construction site. So some more prisoners would be beaten up for lying down in the shade, when they were supposed to look as though there was still work to do in the sun. And at the end of the day, an individual prisoner might well have been on his feet under the tropical sun from 7 in the morning 'til 7 or later at night, even though he'd only done three or four hours real work. He'd come back exhausted and late for the evening meal, there'd be no lights in the huts, most of the camp guards would be off-duty so he couldn't go down to the river to wash or to bathe himself.

So our lives were poisoned, and our health was worn down, not by any calculated brutality, but merely by a specially acute form of the boredom, waste of time, and demoralization that are

typical of modern, industrial society in general. Our most pressing daily problems were really the familiar trade union issues of portal-to-portal hours of work, and the tensions that arise through failures of communication between the technical specialists, the personnel managers, and the onsite foreman.

At first, there was the same lack of understanding and communication at the bridge camp of Tamarkan, but in a month or so, this began to change, mainly because of the senior British officer in charge there, Colonel Philip Toosey. Here is... this is actually an aerial view of Tamarkan camp. Colonel Philip Toosey was tall, rather young—this was taken after the war of course—with one of those special English faces like a genial but skeptical bulldog. Unlike Boule's Colonel Nicholson, he wasn't a career officer, but a cotton merchant in Bangkok. He'd run a factory. He'd experienced the decline of the Lankish cotton industry: strikes, unemployment, the Depression. He'd even gone bankrupt himself. And all his past experience helped him to see that the problem confronting him wasn't a standard military problem at all. It had an engineering side, a labor organization side, a communication side, and above all, a very complicated psychological side, affecting the relations of the prisoners and their captors.

Refusing to work was out of the question. It would only mean some men killed and the rest punished. We'd already learned that in a showdown, the Japanese would always win. They had the power and no scruples about using it. Now, this slide shows the actual place where the Japanese headquarters was, in which there had been one of the showdowns described in the movie, where machine guns are brought in on all sides because, in this case, the officers would refuse to work. And this is Lieutenant Ino, who went back to the camp for many years afterwards and who was the officer in charge of that particular outrage.

So... but Toosey had the imagination to see that there was a shade more room for maneuver than anyone else had suspected, as long as the maneuver was of the right kind. Toosey was very brave, but he never forced any issue to make the Japanese lose face. Instead, he first awed them with his military swagger, and then charmed them with his immovable assumption that no serious difficulty could possibly arise between honorable soldiers. The right thing, from our point of view, was to improve working conditions and organize work better, and so Toosey persuaded the Japanese of things like issuing tools, or allocating the day's tasks to each individual working party, would be done much better if we did it ourselves. He also persuaded the Japanese that output would be improved if the duties of the guards were limited entirely to preventing the prisoners from escaping. We would look after our own discipline. The officers in charge of the outside working parties would supervise the construction, while back at camp headquarters, if the Japanese engineers assigned the next day's work to Colonel Toosey and his staff, they would make plans to carry it out.

This new organization completely transformed our daily conditions of life. There was much less waste of time, tasks were finished early in the afternoon, weeks passed without anybody being beaten up, and the camp became almost happy. Looked at from the outside, Toosey's remarkable success obviously involved an increase in the degree of our collaboration with the enemy, but everyone on the spot knew the real issue wasn't between building or not building the bridge, it was merely how many prisoners would die or break down in the process. And Toosey was never accused by his fellow prisoners—as Boule's Colonel Nicholson would certainly have been—he was never accused of being, what we called "Jap happy." He was not collaborationist in spirit. Some of us thought he was a little too regimental for their tastes, but he delivered the goods, and eventually in all the dozens of camps up and down the railway, Toosey became a legend. He was the man who could handle the Japs, and his general strategy of taking over as much responsibility as possible was gradually put into practice by all the other, more successful British, American, Australian, and Dutch commanders.

Toosey may reasonably be said to have employed two of the basic methods of literary scholarship: a careful and unprejudiced collection of the relevant facts and an imaginative awareness of the human meaning of those facts. He had begun with a full sense of the realities of the situation which faced him as commander, and he'd applied his imagination to them, and that imagination was not a way of avoiding reality, but of seeing its meaning. It wasn't imagination in the sense of egocentric fantasy, but of a full and sympathetic projection of the self into the lives and feelings of others. Coleridge said that the imagination is the distinguishing characteristic of man as a progressive being, and he defined the imagination as that which, "carries the mind out of self."

So much for the need to respect the real and to use our imaginations on the world outside us. My third point will concern itself with how modern mass communications tend to use the imagination in the opposite way, to obliterate the realities of a situation, and to provide unreal fantasy gratifications for the audience. But first, we must look briefly at Boule's novel, and David Lean's film. Toosey left a mark on the larger world only because a free French officer, Pierre Boule, who had never known him, who had never been near the railway, who had never been a prisoner of the Japanese, who had never been to Thailand, wrote a novel called *Le Pont de la rivière Kwai*. Though he took the river's real name, it was merely, as he told me, "Because I picked up the name of the Kwai on an atlas when I was looking up for a suitable place to locate the story I had imagined"; and as Boule recounted, in his not very explicit memoir, *The Sources of the River Kwai*, Colonel Nicholson was based not on any prisoner of war, but on two French colonels he'd known in Indochina and Vietnam who had been Boule's comrades in arms 'til the

collapse of France in '41, but who then sided with Vichy and eventually imprisoned Boule—because he was on the side of the free French—accused him of treason, and kept him—or attempted to keep him—in prison for two years, quite blind to the notion that it was they, not Boule, who had changed sides.

To stress this switch of allegiances, Boule made Nicholson's collaboration much more extreme. Nicholson, of course, in the novel and the movie, builds a much better bridge than the one the Japanese have started, and in a better place. Boule may have got the idea from the fact that the Japanese actually built two bridges over the Kwai at Tamarkan: a temporary wooden structure which no longer survives... This is actually a drawing of the building that first bridge—the wooden bridge—and this is a photograph of the building of the second bridge—the metal bridge—with the round girders. As you can see, it's not very clear. These are... all the people with the white pants are the Japanese engineers. These are the prisoners, as you see, with some kind of hat and the shirts.

Both bridges, incidentally, show up on Allied aerial photographs. Oh, I'm sorry, here is a... I've got the wrong number. This is yet another picture of the building of the second bridge, where you can see the vast scale of the operation. Nearly all this is bamboo scaffolding. This is Tamarkan camp, in the background. There is one incidental point, which we may call our fourth, to do with these last photographs that I've shown you. They were taken by a prisoner of war who would've been killed instantly if the Japanese discovered that he had what he had done. I, myself, was in a camp in Kanchanaburi two miles away, where four people were beaten to death when the guards discovered that they had a camera. And yet, after I wrote an article some time ago, about the Kwai, I was amazed to discover how many people sent me pictures and photographs that they had taken, even though we weren't allowed pencil and paper, and there were weekly searches for any signs of them.

I take it then, that the impulse to record, to bear witness, to testify, is very deep-seated. I realized this most fully two days after the war ended, when I happened to be able to go to the bridge camp, Tamarkan, and there I saw scores of people, aimlessly circling about the place, their eyes cast on the ground, like mushroom pickers. They were trying to recognize from the signs that they remembered the spot that they had buried their diaries, their pictures, their letters, their cameras, and so on to avoid the searches.

My fifth point is supplied by the main theme of Boule's novel, which deals primarily, I think, with the need for awareness of our purposes. Boule's Colonel Nicholson embodied the social paradox of how the military, like any other institutional mind, tends to generate its own objectives; objectives which are often quite in conflict with the original purpose of the

institution. And to drive this point home, Boulle invented the Allied commanders who were sent out to blow up the bridge with exactly the same expertness as had been used by their former comrades-in-arms, now prisoners, to build it. And the novel's interest for the reader comes mainly from these equal but opposite efforts of the commanders and the prisoners. We watch how well the two jobs are being done, and it's only at the end that we wake up and realize that all this marvelous, technological expertness harnessed to admirable collective effort has been leading to nothing except death.

In Boulle, Nicholson sabotages the commanders and then dies under the fire of wardens, their leaders [...] but the bridge remains. So, we see that novel is really about how the vast scale of the operations that are rendered possible, and even in a sense are required by modern technology, tend, finally, to destroy the meaning of individual action. The West is master of its means, but not of its ends. This basic critical point was lost in the changes made for the film, but there were many other elements in Boulle's narrative which became the basis of the movie's popular appeal. And especially the character of Nicholson, who was very little changed from the book to the movie. He's an amiable fellow in his way, but incurably egocentric. Admirable but ridiculous. Intelligent but basically infantile. And it was the infantile and egocentric side of Nicholson's character on which the plot revolved. The book is, after all, about a monomaniac who falls in love with a boy's hobby to build a bridge, not with an Erector set and not for toy trains.

But the question arises, how can Boulle have imagined that Nicholson can get away with his love affair for a Japanese bridge? The answer is that Boulle was writing a fantasy and knew it. And that his whole point was with the absurdity of the action. In this, Boulle reflected the general intellectual context of the post-war world. We can see this from his first collection of stories which was called *Tales of the Absurd*, and also, the existentialist perspective of the epigraph of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* itself, which is taken from Joseph Conrad's novel *Victory*. The epigraph is, "No, it was not funny. It was rather pathetic. He was so representative of all the past victims of the great joke; but it is by folly alone that the world moves, and so it is a respectable thing on the whole. And besides, he was what one could call, 'a good man.'"

Boulle's novel was published in 1952 and sold about 6000 copies annually in France until 1958. That year, sales leapt to 122,000; the movie had come out. And later, the success of the film caused the book to be translated into more than 20 languages and to sell millions of copies, and of course, it was the movie which created the myth. The movies have been great creators of myths, but they've usually been personal; myths of individual characters like Charlie Chaplin or Humphrey Bogart, or of character types such as "the cowboy" or "the private eye." But the Hungarian producer, Sam Spiegel, and the English director, David Lean, turned a little river in

Thailand that isn't marked in most atlases into a household word. So great a success obviously presupposes a very complete adaptation to the tastes of the international cinema public. And you can see this adaptive process in the differences between the book and the movie. Of course, one can't blame the movie for not showing the real life of the prisoners of wars along the Kwai. That life was too boring to be bearable, even to those who lived it. In any case, David Lean was primarily out for entertainment, and succeeded brilliantly. I'm concerned only with some incidental results of that success. Results which were, in part, based on the very nature and conditions of movie-making.

First of all, there was using the name of an actual river to suggest authenticity. The movie's version of events at the bridge seemed to the survivors a gross insult on their intelligence and that of their commanders. When news of the film being made came out, various prisoner of war associations protested, including Toosey. They said that since the name of the river was well-known, people were bound to think that the film told a true story. But history had given Spiegel a lot of free publicity, and he refused even to change the film's title; and this was vital for the growth of the myth, because in that curious limbo, collective fantasies needed to be anchored on the name of a place or a person who is thought to be, in some sense, historically real.

The movie's air of pseudo-reality was also inevitably enforced by its medium. No one reading Boulle could have failed to notice from his style alone that the book aimed at ironic fantasy rather than detailed historical realism. But the camera can't help giving an air of total, visual authenticity or surface verisimilitude, and the effect of this is to spread... it spreads beyond the visual image to the substance of what is portrayed. We all know that whenever we can check it against our experience, life isn't really like what we see on the movies, but we forget it most of the time, especially when the substance of what we see conforms to our own psychological or political wishes. In the case of the Kwai movie, it's clear that it gave no inkling of any of the unpleasant facts about the terrible poverty and disease along the real river Kwai. The audience must have taken away some vague impression that the poor jungle villagers of Southeast Asia all have perfect complexions and fly elaborately beautiful kites, but they don't. Equally unrealistically, the movie suggested that beautiful Thai girls—these were actually actresses, of course—don't have any boyfriends until some handsome white man comes along. Much more dangerously, the movie incidentally promoted the delusion, less common now than in '68... '58, that the people of these poor villages are merely marking time with their lives until they are given the opportunity to sacrifice their lives on behalf of the Western powers. All these are examples of the colonialist attitude which were also present, I think, in one of the central ideas of the novel.

Although the Japanese had beaten the Allies in a campaign that, among other things, showed a remarkable command of very difficult engineering and transport problems, Boule and the movie presented the Japanese as comically inferior to their captives as bridge builders. They contain... the novel and the movie, in fact, contained the myth of white superiority whose results we have seen most recently in that same Vietnam that Boule had known. In the movie, the bridge itself had to be transformed into a symbol of Western engineering mastery.

[referring to slides] something wrong here... Ah! No! This is actually something I should have shown earlier. This is [...] there were *two* bridges across the Kwai—this is Tamarkan camp, and there are the two bridges with the two railway lines across, of which I'll talk about later. This is merely an elephant *[chuckling from the audience]* handling teak logs. Here we have the... *[off-microphone, difficult to hear]* of course [...] the official, who was from [...], I believe, who was concerned with the building in the movie, [...] people, David Lean. The bridge itself... I don't have a color slide of that, but even in the black and white, you can see that there is a poised serenity about those two giant cantilevers that almost justifies Nicholson's love affair.

Actually, of course, such a bridge was totally beyond the technical means and the military needs of the bridge over the Kwai, but even its beauty had the effect of making the audience forget the sordid realities of the war and the prison camp, and so did the scenery. The movie makers, here, well some of them at least—Spiegel and Lean and William Holden—went to Thailand, went to Kanchanaburi, took one look at the Kwai, and saw it wouldn't do. *[laughter]* The area wasn't particularly interesting: too flat, not at all wild, and above all, there already was a bridge over the river. *[laughter]* The real one! And in any case, there wasn't any accommodation in the little town of Kanchanaburi to match the splendors of the Mount Lavinia Resort Hotel in Ceylon, where most of the movie was shot. *[laughter]*

The biggest departure of the movie, both from history and from the novel, was, of course, the blowing up of the bridge. The movie credits read, "Screenplay by Pierre Boule." Actually, though Boule got an Oscar for the screenplay, he took only a modest part in a few preliminary discussions of the screenplay. The real writer, who couldn't then be named, was Carl Foreman, who'd been blacklisted by Hollywood during the McCarthy era. Pierre Boule eventually approved their final version, but only after he'd objected to many of the changes, and especially to the one which contradicted his own main theme: that the bridge was blown up. But he was told that the audience would have watched the screen for more than two hours in the hope and expectation of just that big bang, and if it didn't happen, they would feel frustrated, and anyway, it was quite impossible to pass up "such a sensational piece of action." So, on March the 12th 1957, a beautiful bridge, that was then the largest structure in Ceylon, *[laughter]* that had cost a quarter of a million dollars to build, was blown up with a real train crossing it. Building a bridge just to blow it up again so that the movie public won't feel

frustrated seems an unbelievably apt illustration of Boule's main point about how... [laughter] ...about how our society employs its awesome technological means in the pursuit of derisory and destructive ends. Boule had made his readers think about that; the movie didn't.

Although it's true, our consciences were kept quiet by a well-intentioned anti-war message: the killing of the terrified young Japanese soldier, for example. But as we all know, you can't have it both ways. You can't turn an exotic comedy thriller into a too-true movie about war just by dunking it in blood. Very typically, the film only *seemed* to take up real problems. In the end, a big explosion showed that there was no point in thinking things out. When things are gonna work out anyway, why bother to think. And so, in the movie of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, historical, geographical, political, and psychological reality became infinitely plastic to the fantasies of the audience. And over the world, those audiences greatly responded and even caused the myth to be reincarnated where it had begun.

The decisive phase in the creation of a myth is when it wins that special status of being not exactly thought of as history, but as something which in some way really happened. And the earlier signs of this have often been the erection of shrines and the beginning of pilgrimages, and then the process of reincarnation is complete, when whatever is left of the truth which conflicts with the myth's symbolic meaning is forgotten or transformed. All this has begun to happen to the myth of the Kwai. There are now many shrines near the Tamarkan bridge, an Allied cemetery for some 7000 Australian, British, and Dutch prisoners of war, a Roman Catholic just opposite... chapel just opposite, just behind there; a Japanese memorial, a Chinese memorial. And all these shrines are much visited as you can see from the fresh flowers and incense sticks. And there's an annual commemoration service in the Allied cemetery.

And there are other kinds of pilgrims. In Bangkok, for example, I found something called the "Sincere Travel Service" advertises tour number 11 daily: 7:30 am, whole day, soft drinks and lunch provided [laughter]. The bridge over the river Kwai and the notorious Death Railway of World War fame, is at Kanchanaburi. "The tourists will definitely have the joy of their life when cruising along the real river Kwai on their way to pay a visit to the Chong Kai War Memorial Cemetery, that follows a delicious lunch by the bridge over the real river Kwai, and see the real train rolling across it. All-inclusive rate: U.S. \$20." The world-wide diffusion of Boule's novel through the cinema then, has left its mark even on the Kwai, and what we see here is a road sign which reads—it's not very clear—"Bridge over the river Kwai, 2.9 kilometers." It points to a real bridge, but it's only worth pointing to because of the bridge the whole world saw in the movie.

And in a recent pictorial guide to Thailand, there's an even more striking example of how the power of the myth is beginning to transform reality. The book gives a fine photograph of what is actually a viaduct on a gorge about 50 miles away up the line. I seem to have... I seem, alas, to have skipped one thing... I'll just try and see if I can get back to it. It's actually in the guidebook, but it calls... well, I don't know. There's a guidebook which actually calls that bridge "the bridge on the river Kwai," and it's actually a viaduct; as you can see it doesn't even go across the river. It will have illustrated, I think, the failure of the real bridge over the Kwai to live up to the beauty of the one in the movie, and so the need to relocate the home of the myth and select the most spectacular view along the railway as a more appropriate setting.

Now, for a few comments on what the myth may be said to teach. First of all, it surely documents my third point that the mass media, in general, tend to transform any reality which doesn't gratify the individual's wishes and egocentric fantasies. The movie essentially endorses the very psychological and political delusions which the prisoners had been forced to put aside. And when the movie was first televised, it grew the largest TV audience ever recorded. That was during the war in Vietnam, and millions of people must have responded to the odd notion that the ordinary people of Southeast Asia instinctively love the white strangers who've come to their lands. There was also the implications of blowing up of the bridge; however muddled we may be about our aims, advanced technology will always come out on top at the end. The big bang theory of war, of course, also upgraded in Vietnam, and what happened on the real bridge on the Kwai illustrates how far from reality that theory is.

In the summer of 1944, the new American long-range bombers—the B-29s—started bombing the bridges. To anyone who knows any military history, what happened was absolutely predictable. Quite a lot of people, mainly prisoners, were killed, but eventually the bombers got some direct hits and two spans of the steel bridge fell into the river. This is an actual picture of the bombing of the steel bridge here, and you can see one span. There's another photograph of where you can see the span has gone down into the Kwai. While, incidentally, the... that span was being repaired, we prisoners of war were put back to work there and to bringing into action, again, the low wooden bridge which you can see being used here. No, you can see the bridge here, I think we can see it moved on the next slide, there. With our labor there, the Japanese were able to see to it that their military supplies weren't delayed by the bombing of the bridge for single day, because if you can build a bridge, you can repair it; and in the long run, bombing military targets is only significant when the target can later be captured and held by ground forces.

But since 1866 and Nobel's invention of dynamite, popular credulity has attributed magical powers to dynamite. All kinds of individuals and groups have refused to see that the most you

can expect from explosives is an explosion. The big bang theory of war is rather like the colonial myth; it's essentially an expression of what Freud called "the childish delusion of the omnipotence of thought." And how the Kwai deeply reflects this delusion is my last and 6th point. In Hollywood and the advertising industry, existentialism, even what is left of the current counterculture, are alike in their acceptance of the delusion of the omnipotence of thought, and from this and its rejection of the realities outside the self come many of their similarities. They, and the culture as a whole, is ego-centered, romantic, and historical, believing in rapid and absolute solutions of human problems. They're all, in the last analysis, institutional patterns based on the posture of anti-institutionalism. These basic psychological assumptions of the myth are, perhaps, most obvious in the Colonel of the story, which the movie made much more recognizable as a universal fantasy. It's the schoolboy's perennial dream of defying the adult world. Young Nicholson cheats the mean old headmaster, a Japanese camp commander called Saito, and, of course, he gets a terrible beating. But then the other students kick up such a ruckus that the headmaster just has to give in. Nicholson is carried back in triumph across the playground, and in the end, he becomes the best student body president Kwai High ever had. [laughter]

I don't know if anything like this total rebellion combined with total acceptance has ever occurred in any educational institution, but I'm forced to report that nothing like that ever happened in the prison camps along the Kwai. There, all our circumstances were deeply hostile to individual fantasy. Surviving meant accepting the intractable realities that surrounded us and making sure that our fellow prisoners accepted them too. Why have these last two decades created this myth, and so many others, that totally subvert the stubbornness of facts and the human will to resist unreason? The basic cause, I think, is the widespread belief that institutions are bad in themselves and only serve to frustrate individual fantasies. A prisoner of war camp has at least *one* thing in common with the modern world, in general: only a limited range of practical choices is offered. No wonder the public acclaimed a film where both its heroes—Colonel Nicholson and Shears—where both its heroes did just what they wanted to do. Nicholson built his beautiful bridge, and Shears, played of course by William Holden, managed to escape. Of course, no one wants to be a prisoner. The movie suggested you don't have to be one, just get out. On the Kwai, hundreds tried to escape, most of them were killed, and no one succeeded. Obviously, if our circumstances on the Kwai had been as pliable as those of the movie, there'd've been no reason for Toosey or anybody else to act as they did.

It's probably true that at the beginning of our captivity we thought that we should revolt even if not against the Japanese, against our own military discipline and all other institutional confinements of our individual liberty. But then, circumstances forced us to see this would be suicidal. When cholera broke out, for instance—this is a hospital hut, actually in one of the

bridge camps—when cholera broke out, for instance, whole camps of Asiatic laborers were wiped out, whereas in our own camps nearby, where there was some organization to make sure that everybody used the latrines and ate or drank only what had been boiled, we often had no deaths even though we had no vaccine. Here is a picture by the cartoonist Ronald Searle of somebody dying from cholera in one of the camps that wasn't so lucky. I'm sorry, I've messed this up, that's the last slide; I don't know whether maybe we could turn that off, please.

In the myth then, the actual circumstances of our experience on the Kwai are overwhelmed by the blindness about culture and our media, not only to the necessity for institutions but the stubbornness of reality and the continuities of history. It isn't only on the walls of the Sorbonne and in 1968 that we can see the slogan, "It is forbidden to forbid." That slogan is written on all individuals at birth in the form, "It is forbidden to forbid me"; and this text has been adopted to their great profit by the movie and advertising industries. The Hollywood version, "You don't get rich by saying no to dreams," or the Madison Avenue version, "Tell 'em they're suckers if they don't have everything they want."

When I leafed through the visitors' book at one of the military cemeteries on the Kwai some ten years ago, one entry caught my eye. An American private from Apple Creek, Wisconsin, then stationed in Danang, had been moved to write a protest that made all the other banal pieties look pale. "People are stupid. Stupid, among other things, because they're mainly led by what they want to believe, not by what they know." For almost a decade, it seemed easier to go along with the implications of the movie, and believe that a big bang anywhere would somehow end the world's confusion and our own fatigue. Now that the sky is black with chickens coming home to roost, we seem to be slowly recovering from some of the political forms of the omnipotence of thought fantasy. Recently, I observed that the main audience reaction to a showing of the movie was ironical laughter. The myth of the bridge on the river Kwai shows how closely related my two negative points are. In exploiting the egocentric fantasies of their audience, the mass media are both expressing and promoting the delusion of the omnipotence of thought. What really happened when the actual bridges were built illustrates quite the opposite.

And my own impulse to testify directs me to remind you that the real man, without whom the myth could not have come into being, gave his allegiance to very different principles: to a respect for reality and to the sympathetic imagination, and to the need to think carefully about the relation of ends and means. And as a result, along the Kwai, Colonel Toosey was almost universally recognized for what he was: a hero of the only kind we could afford then and there. He was led not by what he wanted to believe, but what he knew. He observed all the circumstances of the life around him and then used his imagination to see how the experience

of the past, of history, might help the present, and prepare for a better future. He knew that the world would not do his bidding. He knew that he could not beat the Japanese. He knew that on the Kwai, even more obviously than elsewhere, we were, for most part, helpless prisoners of coercive circumstance. But he also knew that if things were as intractable as they looked, the outlook for the years ahead was hopeless. The only thing worth working for was the possibility that tenacity and imagination find a way by which the chances of a decent survival could be increased. It was, no doubt, a very modest objective, but in our circumstances then on the Kwai, the objective was quite enough to be getting on with, as it is here, now. Thank you.

[*applause*]

WATT: [*applause continues while he speaks off-microphone*] I don't know what's happened to that slide; it probably just didn't come out.

HOST: Thank you so much, Professor Watt. Professor Watt has said that he would be willing to entertain a few questions if you have some; we have a few minutes for that.

WATT: Yes.

AUDIENCE 1 [*off-microphone and indistinct*]: I noticed you didn't talk about politics as the area of... in which people think that thought is infinitely powerful. Is that because it's too obvious or too large?

WATT: Well, I thought I talked a little about what you might call the "subliminal politics" of the movie.

AUDIENCE 1: Yes, all right.

WATT: I know there are many things I didn't talk about, but what *would* you like me to say about it? [*laughter*]

AUDIENCE 2: [*coughs*] Who was the...

WATT: I mean, I think... I was going to say that it seems to me that the realm of egocentric fantasy is the basic appeal of a number of political figures today. It's also fairly... apparently including of gentlemen in my own state of California. [*laughter*] No names, no pack-drill, as we say in the British army. [*laughter*]

AUDIENCE 2: The script writer...

WATT: ...I'm not a British subject. Yes?

AUDIENCE 2: The script writer, I didn't catch his name..

WATT: Carl Foreman.

AUDIENCE 2: Oh, yes, yes.

WATT: A rather well-known person. I have the...

AUDIENCE 2: [...] [*comments in background; unintelligible*]

WATT: Mm-hmm. A man, who I may say, just hates what I've said about the movie, [*AUDIENCE 2 laughs*] and threatened to send... sent a 6 page telegram demanding a retraction to the BBC, which they didn't get. I'm sorry, there were two people...

AUDIENCE 3: Surely Pierre Boulle knew of Toosey and his exploit, right?

WATT: No. No, he didn't. This is... he'd written several other sort of fantasies of the absurd. He decided to write one about the bridge in which he did know one or two, after the war, one or two British prisoners of war. He knows English very well. He's a great admirer of English literature and so on, but he says that he didn't have any... he never knew Toosey's name. What I think happened was that it was so extraordinary that he heard of all these camps where people were being run, as it were, by themselves. It seemed to be such an example of... since it never happens in our other prison camps, it seemed to be, from a distance, just such a wonderful example of collaboration.

AUDIENCE 3: Well, I admire Boulle's sense of the English culture [...] and so forth.

WATT: Mm-hmm.

AUDIENCE 3: And he's certainly quite aware of the contrast between French and English culture, and suggests that the Western condition...

[*program ends abruptly*]