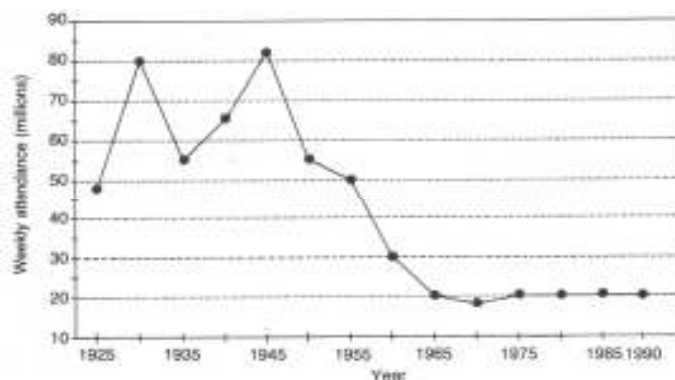


Contexts and Histories of Adaptation: A study of artefacts related to Boris Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* and David Lean's 1965 adaptation.

By Olivia Gray

When set the assignment to explore one film in relation to original artefacts held in the BDC I decided to choose an epic blockbuster film with a large box-office ratings and David Lean's *Dr. Zhivago* seemed an interesting choice due to its huge success despite the hundreds of negative reviews. The artefacts that I finally decided upon (as there are so many) provide insight into the positive marketing of the film by Hollywood's largest studio, offering a fascinating commentary of the movie industry in the 1960s.

In 1956 the Russian poet and writer Boris Pasternak completed his controversial semi-autobiographical novel *Doctor Zhivago*. The novel was instantly banned in the Soviet Union but was smuggled out of Russia to be published in the West, receiving great praise. Producer Carlo Ponti later bought the rights to Pasternak's celebrated novel and swiftly made a deal with Metro-



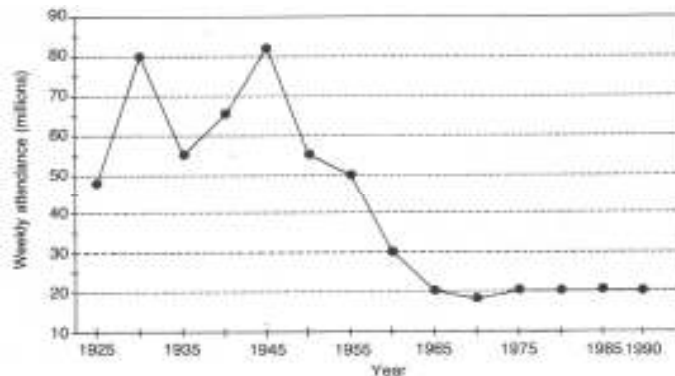
Goldwyn-Mayer, who were in need of a successful film after recent financial failures in 1962 (Brownlow 499). Their instant directorial choice was the renowned David Lean, who eagerly accepted, and was given the trusted honour of '*carte blanche*' in

making the film. (BFI).

Cinema in the 1960s was still adjusting to the industry changes since the end of the studio system in the 1950s, the result was that “the logic of movie production changed, encouraging companies to concentrate on more lavish and spectacular features that would play for longer runs at higher ticket prices, and earn bigger grosses” (Maltby 74). MGM were relying on Lean’s epic film to save them from selling out to conglomerates, which can be seen through MGM’s intensive marketing of the film. The three artefacts concerning *Doctor Zhivago* that I will be exploring; an original press book, an advertising poster and a review of the film; enable us to gain a greater insight into the process of the making of the film of *Zhivago*, the marketing of the film, and finally the reception of the film.

Fig. 1 Weekly cinema attendance in the United States.

Source: Maltby 67



PRESS BOOK: ‘Facts for editorial reference about the making of David Lean’s film of Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*’ (1965). **Item: 76251**

Firstly, we must note that this booklet was solely designed for a small but crucial section of the film’s audience, the critics. Its purpose was to determine the critics’ first impression of the film, and this is clearly evident as specific attention is drawn to the four most marketable aspects of the film, the novel it is adapted from, the producer, the director, and the highly distinguished cast. They are utilized as commercial commodities, automatically creating an aura of prestige around the film.

The booklet primarily recognizes the source of the film with a summary of the controversial background of Pasternak’s novel and its success. The language used is utterly positive as it repeatedly praises and promotes



Pasternak, comparing him to the most respected and famous Russian writer, Tolstoy. The article

aims to give stature to the original novel in order to give greater distinction to the adapted film. MGM are employing a common marketing technique here that acts as cross-promotion for the film and the original novel.

Similarly, David Lean is praised as the “ideal director” for this film due to his recent successes with *Bridge over the River Kwai* (1957) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), and his multiple awards. A reference to awards is a common publicity technique, acting as a certification of success and reputation. The article goes on to highlight the involvement in *Zhivago* of various significant crewmembers of the highly successful film *Lawrence*, such as Robert Bolt (screenwriter) and John Box (production designer), and this acts as a two fold means of promotion. Firstly, it draws a parallel between the box office success of *Lawrence* and the film the critics are about to watch, and secondly, it gives Lean and his films a sense of authorship, a respected directorial quality. Lean’s total control and particular preferences define his films, and this consequently signifies the power shift from the producer to the director that was occurring in filmmaking during this period.

The making of the film in Madrid and Finland, and the various obstacles faced during production, are described in great detail. ‘Runaway productions’ were common during the 1960s as “an ‘international’ element in Hollywood’s production became even more attractive than it had been before the war, but instead of bringing European stars to Hollywood, American production migrated abroad” (Maltby 69). *Doctor Zhivago* was a product of its time in this sense as it too took advantage of the exotic locations, the reputable stars, and cheaper production costs that Europe could provide. Great pride is taken in the account of the creation of Moscow in Madrid, “one of the largest and most impressive film sets ever constructed by a motion picture company for location shooting”. A whole page is dedicated to facts and figures relating to the

grand scale of making the authentic set. The booklet is aiming to express the ‘epicness’ of this picture, stating, as it does, that Lean and MGM had done something utterly original and on a vast scale, that crossed the limits of normal filmmaking.

The booklet closes with a photo and an account of each member of the cast, above which a critic is quoted as saying “*Doctor Zhivago* - the film that is making stars”. The cast are being marketed as ‘stars to watch’ and the press book is predicting their future success. Their training, previous films and award successes define the cast members. The marketing of *Zhivago* heavily utilizes the power of the star ideology, the attraction of Hollywood heroes (Omar Sharif), the appeal of respected British theatre actors (Alec Guinness, Ralph Richardson), and the excitement at the prospect of a new leading lady (Julie Christie, Geraldine Chaplin).



POSTER

Item: 37385

The second artefact I am focusing on is a reproduction of the original promotional poster of *Doctor Zhivago*. The poster is intended to act similarly to the press book, as they both aim to project a positive image of the film to the wider world.

However, the press book was designed for the critics, whereas a poster has a wider release and is aimed at the cinemagoing public.

The MGM publicity department carefully constructs the poster in order to attract the attention of the



public, both consciously and subconsciously. Image and word are combined in a way that summarizes the film. Taking central place on the poster is the relationship between Yuri and Lara, as their bodies intimately lean against one another. To the left background is an illustration of the Moscow streets, which acts as the central home of the action over the thirty year period that elapses during the film. This image reaffirms, in the same way that the press book does, that this recreation of the Moscow streets was one of *Zhivago's* greatest achievements, and therefore has a significant place on the poster.

To the right of the lovers is an illustration of Yuri's wife, Tonya, looking towards her husband and his mistress with sadness and a feeling of exclusion. The final component of the poster's central design is an illustration of the fighting coming from the right, towards the lovers. The war and the revolution have a huge effect on Yuri and his relationships. Yet even so, the war scene holds second place to the central image of the lovers, the poster is telling its potential audience that this film is primarily a romance, but with war as its sub-genre. The poster highlights what will appeal to the prospective audience. A large portion of the space is dedicated to the list of cast members and the film's director, using their fame to catch the public's attention, whereas the lesser known original author, Boris Pasternak, is sidelined with a smaller font type.

I have outlined some of the publicity methods surrounding *Doctor Zhivago* that act to attract audiences and public acclaim, but these artefacts are not able to give us a reliable contextual view of Lean's adaptation, as they are heavily constructed by the industry in which the film is created. In order to attain a truthful insight into the success of *Zhivago* I will look at an artefact that is more distanced from the film.

'FILMS IN REVIEW' (Jan 1966).**Item: 25549**

“*Doctor Zhivago*: Confused, but a must-see, and it has Julie Christie.”

The final artefact I am discussing is a review of Lean’s film from the magazine ‘Films in Review’. The magazine originally provided “media for the expression of the public’s opinions about films and their cultural and social effects” (back cover), which enables us now to gain access to the contextual surroundings of *Doctor*

Zhivago. The various reviews and articles about the stars of the period illustrate the mood towards the films and industry at the time. *Zhivago* was clearly considered to be an important film, as Julie Christie’s beautiful face dominates the front cover of the issue.



The use of Christie’s iconic face acts as cross-promotion for both the film and the magazine. The editor is placing faith in her ability to sell the magazine, which in turn promotes the film.

Contrary to this active promotion on the cover, the review of the film inside does the opposite.

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The review is rife with negative comments concerning Lean’s directing, Bolt’s screenwriting that “fails to clarify Pasternak’s real intentions”, the “odd” casting (except for Christie), the overtly British and non-Russian cast, and finally Pasternak’s literary source “which many people found unreadable”.

In a similar way, the press book lists the actors’ names with an accompanying comment about them, but unlike the press book’s praises (“Rod Steiger, one of America’s most versatile stage and screen actors” for instance), this review criticizes; “Rod Steiger is ridiculous as

Komarovsky". Where the press book uses the actors' Britishness as prestige, the critic says it adds only "inanition". The review is signed "H.H", which could possibly signify the editor Henry Hart - this would make sense as despite his aversion to the film his admiration for Julie Christie is evident, thus explaining her position on the front cover.

MGM's marketing of *Zhivago* operates in three particular ways, firstly, by promoting the film as a work by an established 'auteur' director, secondly, by utilizing the stars and the expectations that they hold, and thirdly, by highlighting it as an adapted novel. The film relies heavily on the controversy surrounding the novel, which was often referred to as the 'Pasternak Affair', and the prestige that is created when the film is linked to the literary (Bolt 15). Everything that is marketable, in and around the film, is exploited for publicity and consequently for commercial and economic gain. The negative review shows us that the film's marketing of the stars actually works, as despite the reviewers dislike of the film, the magazine still actively promotes the film by using Christie for their own promotion.

The marketing of the film by MGM is typical of the 1960s, blockbuster movies were rarer in those days, and they saw this film as a potential major money-spinner. MGM's marketing of the film concentrated on the many positive aspects of the film, so that when the first reviews were not all positive, success was nevertheless assured as the publicity that the studio engendered had created so much interest. My explorations of these artefacts not only offers insight into the context and history of *Doctor Zhivago*, but furthermore enriches my understanding of the adaptation as it moves beyond simply reading the book and viewing the film into everything that surrounds the two. In consequence, my experience of *Doctor Zhivago* is increasingly more personal.

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