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EMPIRE OF THE SUN

Directed by Steven Spielberg

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ABOUT *ONE FILM*

ONE FILM is the Free Library of Philadelphia's new film education program. Operating in partnership with *One Book, One Philadelphia*—a project of the Office of the Mayor and the Free Library of Philadelphia—*One Film* is a two-week program taking place from February 21 through March 6, 2008. The mission of *One Film* is to inspire Philadelphians to pursue visual literacy in their own lives and to think critically about the visual media they encounter every day.

By encouraging Philadelphians to watch, discuss and study a single film, *One Film* aims to promote film education, library usage and community building through dialogue and analysis.

The 2008 *One Film* Selection Committee has chosen Steven Spielberg's *Empire of the Sun* as the featured title for this inaugural year of the *One Film* program. During the *One Film* program period, *Empire of the Sun* will be shown at libraries, theaters, and schools throughout Philadelphia and the surrounding area. DVD copies of *Empire of the Sun* will also be available at all Free Library of Philadelphia locations, providing access to the film in every neighborhood of our city. Additionally, audiences will be encouraged to draw connections between *Empire of the Sun* and *What Is the What*—the featured selection of the 2008 *One Book, One Philadelphia* program—as testimonials of the experiences of children in war zones.



2008 FEATURED SELECTION

EMPIRE OF THE SUN



A BEAUTIFUL AND COMPELLING FILM directed by Steven Spielberg, *Empire of the Sun* presents a vision of war through the eyes of a child. Jim Graham, a young British expatriate, is separated from his affluent family during the Japanese invasion of Shanghai in 1941. He eventually finds himself in a Japanese internment camp, where his experiences are colored by his dream of becoming a pilot—a dream so intense that he even longs to be inside the planes of his captors as they fly overhead.

Jim's spirit and resourcefulness help him develop unlikely friendships with his fellow prisoners. Through these relationships, Jim begins to understand issues of class, national identity and death.

Empire of the Sun's cinematography is spectacularly rendered, presenting arresting images that encompass both the brutality and the beauty of wartime China. The contrasts between these alluring images and their grave subjects mirror Jim's inner conflicts; the result is an intimate coming-of-age tale with the proportions of a war epic.

Originally released in 1987, *Empire of the Sun* was adapted for the screen by the acclaimed playwright Tom Stoppard from the semiautobiographical novel by J.G. Ballard published in 1984. Directed by Steven Spielberg and starring Christian Bale, John Malkovich, and Miranda Richardson, *Empire of the Sun* was nominated for seven Academy Awards in 1988—including Best Cinematography—and in 1989 received BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) Awards for Best Cinematography, Best Score, and Best Sound.



WHY STUDY FILM?

BY RUTH PERLMUTTER, PH.D.

AS A PROFESSOR OF FILM, I have witnessed a significant transformation in my students after they study a film. Many students embark on a course of film study as untrained viewers, focusing on plot and story in an attempt to identify with characters. By the end of a semester of film study, many develop into critical viewers able to untangle underlying meanings, think critically, and reach enlightened conclusions about films. Ultimately, they are able to achieve a far more satisfying and enjoyable viewing experience.

I hope *One Film* will provide Philadelphians with a set of skills that will allow them to critically analyze not only *Empire of the Sun*, but other films they see in the future.

In beginning to teach a film like *Empire of the Sun*, I would direct students to notice that the beginning and the end of the film are bracketed by the image of the sea, and then ask them to think about how these scenes are microcosms of larger meanings. *Empire of the Sun* opens with an image of floating flower wreaths and makeshift wooden coffins pushed aside by the prow of a Japanese warship.

These images of death and war convey both the power of empire builders and the plight of the innocent; they also foreshadow events to follow.

These metaphors are ironically reinforced by the offscreen ethereal chanting of a boys choir that moves into a church, and focuses on the young protagonist Jim singing the solo of a Welsh lullaby (“Suo Gan,” a parent’s prayer to protect children from harm). We have learned from the narrated prologue that the film concerns the Japanese invasion of Shanghai, but we are unprepared for the establishing shots thereafter that denote the luxurious world of Brits in the assaulted city—the sleek limos, slavish Chinese servants, and elegant homes.

As Jim rides home, there is a lingering shot of him looking at an old Chinese beggar sitting on a street corner. Internally, we intuit that this



moment will be significant later. Indeed, after the Japanese takeover, it is meaningful to Jim when he looks in vain for the beggar, whose absence bodes a warning of dire events to come. In just a few minutes and without the aid of dialogue, we receive many messages and predictions that will resonate as the film progresses.

The last scene of the film repeats the shot of the sea. This time, unthreatening small boats sail peacefully by Jim's battered suitcase which holds his meager possessions from the prison camp. The image reminds the viewer of Jim's years of loneliness and suffering. The ending, in contrast to the beginning, denotes the resumption of the flow of life, a sense of hope and peace, a relinquishing of childish ways and mementos of troubled times. As the boats and the suitcase pass, the viewer has a sense that Jim's past agonies are washed away with relief, and this release of tension will follow Jim to his maturity.

This is but one example of how to make sense of the visual messages in a film.

Recognition of cinematic techniques is valuable, but it is more important to dismantle the underlying philosophy, metaphors and themes that result from cinematic images and technical processes: the editing strategies, camera techniques, lighting, and other formal choices that compose a film.

There are more questions to be asked that situate the film within film history. How is the film like or unlike films by the same filmmaker? By others? How does it conform to a style or genre?

Creative film analysis is the attempt to dismantle meanings not perceived or predicted by an initial viewing.

The spectator's challenge is to expose how much more the film can mean, especially upon a second viewing. Then, the predictable experience of the outer shell of story, character, and emotional reinforcement, is transmuted into deeper recognitions not previously noticed. An alternative world emerges beyond the political and social issues of our current realities.

Discovering the hidden patterns and secret meanings of a film is a triumphant (*eureka!*) experience, and film literacy is, indeed, empowerment.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The class divide between the Graham family and the larger population of Shanghai is clearly established in the beginning of *Empire of the Sun*. The Grahams' house is enormous and filled with servants, a surplus of indulgent foods, and extravagant belongings. After the Japanese declare war on Shanghai, all of the Grahams' wealth is lost, and their house is taken over by the Japanese Army. Does the film propose that war destroys class boundaries, or does Jim's class standing remain "intact" through the war? Are there class divides within the internment camp? How does Jim's privileged background affect his experiences during the war? How does the film use material goods and belongings to communicate messages about class?

Throughout his stay in the internment camp, Jim pays special attention to Mrs. Victor, who seems reluctant to give him attention or affection. How does Mrs. Victor act as a surrogate mother for Jim? How is the role of the mother given special emphasis in *Empire of the Sun*? What do Jim's mother and Mrs. Victor have in common? Do these commonalities contribute to a certain idea or perception of motherhood?

When Mrs. Victor dies, Jim mistakes the blast of the atomic bomb on the horizon for her spirit ascending to heaven. Does the association of the mushroom cloud with Mrs. Victor's spirit code her character as a martyr? What does this moment reveal about Jim's view of war? In what ways does the film keep war at a distance? In what ways does it deal with war more directly?

Despite taking place in Japanese-occupied China, the characters in *Empire of the Sun* rarely interact directly with their Japanese captors. Jim is repeatedly filmed gazing through the fence that surrounds the internment camp, and is dared by the Americans to crawl under it to the other side. The Americans act as spectators to this venture, placing bets on Jim's life. They watch Jim through a large, round window as he hides in the mud almost directly under a Japanese soldier. Does the camera encourage viewers to align with the Americans, the Japanese soldier, or Jim? How does the film use physical barriers to represent intangible barriers?

In the internment camp, the American bunk functions as a kind of "boys club" into which Jim longs to be accepted. After Basie allows him to move into the American bunk, Jim begins to dress and act differently. How does the film use this situation to explore issues of national identity? In what ways does Basie act as the arbiter of the "American voice"? How is American culture imported into the camp, and what effect does it have on the dynamics between the prisoners?

Jim passionately longs to fly the Japanese planes and communicate with the Japanese fighter pilots. His fascination with the planes is so intense that it influences every aspect of his life in the internment camp, including his interactions with his captors. When an air attack is launched on the camp, Jim unknowingly risks his life when he runs to the top of a tower to be nearer to the planes. How does this scene function as a climactic moment in Jim's coming-of-age? Is Jim changed by this incident? Does Jim's obsession with the planes represent naïveté, delusion, imagination, or something else?

When Jim is reunited with his family, his mother embraces him as his father regards the two of them unflinchingly. Mr. Graham's face is stern, and it appears as though he may not even recognize his own son. What does this reunion say about the importance of the nuclear family unit? In what ways does the Graham family stay intact? In what ways are they "destroyed"?



EXCERPT FROM CITIZEN SPIELBERG

BY LESTER D. FRIEDMAN, PH.D.

(University of Illinois Press, 2006)



Empire of the Sun represents an important turning point in Steven Spielberg's career, a conscious attempt to stretch himself creatively and emotionally. When reflecting on the genesis of the film, Spielberg remarked:

“I really had to come to terms with what I've been tenaciously clinging to, which was a celebration of a kind of naïveté... But I just reached a saturation point, and I thought *Empire of the Sun* was a great way of performing an exorcism on that period” (Friedman 129).

Though detractors often categorize Spielberg as a sentimental romantic or a cynical merchandiser, he is acutely aware of the contradictions, the yings of popular acclaim and yangs of artistic aspiration, that vie for his attention: “I have that real pull between being a showman and being a filmmaker and there is a tough netherworld between both titles. It's filled with contradictions and bad choices” (Friedman 131). In choosing to direct J.G. Ballard's story, he was aware that it conformed to the patterns he had already established in his work; but, he recognized its uniqueness as well: “I had never read anything with an adult setting...where a child saw things through a man's eyes as opposed to a man discovering things through the child in him” (Friedman 128). In fact, the story showed precisely the opposite of his earlier films: the death of innocence rather than its rebirth.

Let me pick just two seemingly straightforward scenes to demonstrate the special and subtle aspects of *Empire of the Sun*. Spielberg begins the final sequence with a sweeping shot above the roof of the building that houses the displaced children, a sprawling glass arborum whose missing panes provide an apt emblem of the physical, as well as the psychological, damage sustained by people during the war. He allows us to peek through these jagged holes in the disfigured exterior to glimpse the children below. Quickly, he cuts to a group of adults swiftly passing through the outer gate, hopeful of finding their missing children still alive. Mrs. Graham immediately recognizes her Jim, and almost silently whispers his name; Mr. Graham, however, walks right past him. Even upon identifying his boy, the father utters not a word to his long lost child, offers him neither a greeting nor an embrace. As Jamie touches his mother's hand, then her lips and her

hair, Mr. Graham soundlessly observes them; mother and son reconnect physically and emotionally while the father lingers behind them. Even when the weary Jim draws his mother into an embrace, and she wraps her arms tenderly around him, Mr. Graham never touches either his wife or his son. Mr. Graham can only watch—soundlessly, separately, helplessly.

This moment epitomizes a typical misconception on the part of Spielberg's most strident detractors, many of whom castigate the director for such supposedly maudlin reconciliations at the conclusions of his films.

Often these commentators simply fail to look closely at the delicate complexity of the director's images. Superficially, the ending of *Empire of the Sun* would seem yet another example of Spielberg's tendency to over-sentimentalize by tying up his narratives with brightly colored ribbons that blot out the harsh realities that preceded them. Yet a closer examination reveals a decidedly harder edge and a far more sophisticated understanding of family dynamics, not merely a romanticized portrait of the loving nuclear family recuperated and renewed after traumatic events. Mr. Graham's physical exclusion and Jim's hollow eyes provide subtle but unmistakable counterbalances to the mother's warm clasp and the son's apparent relief. It is a backhanded tribute to Spielberg's visual skill and to the emotional power of his artistry that even critics hostile to his work get drawn into his cinematic embrace and, in struggling to escape, often miss the intricate subtleties they praise so lavishly in the works of other directors.

Consider another far more subtle way Spielberg unobtrusively layers our response to Mr. Graham and offers an implicit meta-critique of his actions.

Early in the film, Jim's parents come to his bedroom to say goodnight. As both Clarke and Rubin note, Spielberg fashions the scene into an unmistakable replica of one of his favorite paintings, Norman Rockwell's *Freedom from Fear* (1943), a wartime image meant to provide

comfort for frightened Americans and to raise the nation's spirits. But distinct differences remain between Rockwell's and Spielberg's images of parental protection. For one thing, Rockwell optimistically shows light in the corners of the frame illuminating the darkness, while Spielberg's image appears far more somber, the windows shuttered, the ceiling crowded with wartime aircraft, and the shadows replacing the light evident in its original source.

In looking over Spielberg's career, it seems clear that his experience making *Empire of the Sun* proved the necessary transition, along with *The Color Purple*, that allowed him to become a more mature filmmaker. Yet, it remains the least explored and most undervalued of Steven Spielberg's best films.

For me, repeated viewings always provide sustained pleasures in varied realms of thought and feeling: technically, visually, emotionally, thematically. Each time I watch the movie, I discover something new and worthwhile, some subtle movement or startling moment or revelatory image. I inevitably shed tears at its conclusion, as Jim Graham (Christian Bale) enters his mother's embrace and, at long last, closes his eyes and rests—at least temporarily. These are honorably earned tears, for I have accompanied this hollow-eyed boy along a winding and treacherous path filled equally with despair, desperation, and triumph. I have watched him driven from his pampered existence in Shanghai's English enclave, seen him survive ragged years as a prisoner of war, borne witness with him to the atomic bomb's fearful light, and joined him in his mother's enfolding arms. We have been companions, he and I.

Spielberg's visual sensibility endows the film with a series of indelible images that remain etched into my heart and mind long after they have faded from the screen.

I would argue that the film deserves a place among his best works. It stands as an extraordinary accomplishment of artistry and substance, a striking example of Spielberg's ability to blend form and content organically into an emotionally and intellectually satisfying whole.

WORKS CITED

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Clarke, James. *The Pocket Essential Steven Spielberg*. North Pomfret, VT: Trafalgar Square Publishing, 2001.
Friedman, Lester D., and Brent Notbohm, eds. *Steven Spielberg: Interviews*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000.
Rubin, Susan Goldman. *Steven Spielberg: Crazy for Movies*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

RELATED MATERIALS



All materials listed below are available at the Free Library of Philadelphia. Visit www.freelibrary.org for Library locations and general information.

Fiction

Empire of the Sun BY J.G. BALLARD

The original source material for Steven Spielberg's film adaptation—the 2008 *One Film* featured selection—this semiautobiographical novel by J.G. Ballard recounts the author's experiences in a Japanese internment camp near Shanghai, China, during World War II.

Farewell, Shanghai BY ANGEL WAGENSTEIN

(translated by Elizabeth Frank & Deliana Simeonova)

Farewell, Shanghai details the lives of German Jewish refugees in Japanese-controlled Shanghai during World War II. This novel features an ensemble cast of characters whose lives intertwine to create a compelling portrait of international history and personal hardship.

Shanghai Shadows BY LOIS RUBY

This young adult novel spans five years in the life of a Jewish teenage girl and her family, Austrian refugees living in Japanese-occupied Shanghai during World War II.

What Is the What BY DAVE EGGERS

The featured selection of the 2008 *One Book, One Philadelphia* program, *What Is the What* is an epic novel based on the life of Valentino Achak Deng, who, along with thousands of other children—the so-called Lost Boys—was forced to leave his village in Sudan at the age of seven and trek hundreds of miles by foot, pursued by militias, government bombers, and wild animals, crossing the deserts of three countries to find freedom.

When We Were Orphans BY KAZUO ISHIGURO

A British boy who is orphaned in Shanghai returns there as an adult in the late 1930s, hoping to uncover the mysterious disappearances of his mother and father.

Nonfiction

Citizen Spielberg BY LESTER D. FRIEDMAN

In this comprehensive, critical study of the work of Steven Spielberg, the author discusses what it means to be a scholar of Spielberg in today's academic film community, considering Spielberg as a modern-day auteur and offering nuanced insights into the meanings of his major films.

The Films of Steven Spielberg EDITED BY CHARLES L.P. SILET

This collection of critical essays brings together hard-to-find writings from film publications and journals, including Andrew Gordon's "Steven Spielberg's *Empire of the Sun*: A Boy's Dream of War."

Goodbye, Darkness: A Memoir of the Pacific War

BY WILLIAM MANCHESTER

This memoir by celebrated biographer and historian William Manchester recounts the author's experiences as a Marine sergeant in the South Pacific during World War II.

The Good Man of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe

BY JOHN RABE (translated by John E. Woods)

This collection of the translated diaries of John Rabe tells the story of a German businessman who saved the lives of 250,000 Chinese during the siege on Nanking. He petitioned the German Army to stop the slaughter of Chinese citizens, and is often considered the Oskar Schindler of China.

One Hundred Years of Chinese Cinema:

A Generational Dialogue BY HAILI KONG

This book takes a generational approach to studying Chinese cinema, offering a broad picture of the evolution of Chinese cinema in its historical context, as well as thorough and insightful analyses of representative films from different generations.

The Rape of Nanking:

The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II BY IRIS CHANG

This book recounts the events that took place after the eastern Chinese city of Nanking fell to the Japanese on December 13, 1937, wherein the Japanese army killed hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians and soldiers.

Ten Green Bottles: The True Story of One Family's Journey from War-Torn Austria to the Ghettos of Shanghai

BY VIVIAN JEANETTE KAPLAN
During the first years of World War II, approximately 20,000 European Jews became refugees in Shanghai. Kaplan narrates her parents' experience as Jewish refugees in Shanghai from the perspective of her mother.

Documentary Films

The China Odyssey: Empire of the Sun, A Film by Steven Spielberg

DIRECTED BY LES MAYFIELD (1987, 49 MIN.)

This documentary about the making of *Empire of the Sun* is included in the special features of the *Empire of the Sun* DVD.

The Directors: Steven Spielberg

DIRECTED BY BRAD TURNER (2000, 60 MIN.)

Part of the American Film Institute's *The Directors* series, this film contains extended interviews and insights into Steven Spielberg's accomplished career.

Shanghai Ghetto

DIRECTED BY DANA JANKLOWICZ-MANN & AMIR MANN (2005, 95 MIN.)

Survivors of World War II are interviewed about their experiences as Jewish Refugees in Shanghai in this emotional documentary which incorporates archival footage, letters, and pictures.

Feature Films

DIRECTED BY STEVEN SPIELBERG

Amistad (1997, 152 MIN.)

Based on historical events, *Amistad* tells the story of a mutiny by African captives aboard a transatlantic slave ship in 1839. Once in America, they are imprisoned and tried as runaway slaves in a case that reached the Supreme Court.

Munich (2005, 164 MIN.)

At the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, 11 Israeli athletes were murdered by a Palestinian terrorist group known as Black September. *Munich* depicts the Israeli government's retaliation, examining how individual men experience their personal morality while caught in a cycle of violence spinning out of control.

Schindler's List (1993, 195 MIN.)

During World War II, Oskar Schindler saved more than 1,000 Polish Jews from being deported to concentration camps. This heart-rending film is widely considered one of the most important portrayals of the Holocaust and is renowned for its innovative use of black and white cinematography.

STARRING CHRISTIAN BALE

Rescue Dawn DIRECTED BY WERNER HERZOG (2007, 126 MIN.)

Twenty years after his performance as Jim Graham, Christian Bale portrays the fighter pilot Dieter Dengler, who becomes a prisoner of the Pathet Lao after a failed mission to Laos. After giving up hope that he and his fellow prisoners will be released, Dengler stages an elaborate escape. In this film, adapted from Herzog's documentary *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, Bale delivers another outstanding performance as a prisoner of war and exhibits the development of the extraordinary talent that was already apparent in *Empire of the Sun*.

CHILDREN'S VISIONS OF WORLD WAR II

Au revoir, les enfants DIRECTED BY LOUIS MALLE (1987, 104 MIN.)

In this semiautobiographical film, French New Wave auteur Louis Malle presents the story of a group of young boys in a Catholic boarding school in the French countryside. As the war begins to infiltrate the walls of their classrooms and dormitories, the friendship between one boy and his Jewish classmate is forcibly destroyed. Without ever venturing outside the walls of the school, Malle depicts, with unapologetic honesty, the tragic loss of innocence caused by war.

Hope and Glory DIRECTED BY JOHN BOORMAN (1987, 114 MIN.)

Hope and Glory is a semiautobiographical film about a nine-year-old London boy growing up during the Blitz, who takes advantage of the disorder around him, finding adventure and liberation on the home front.

My Name Is Ivan DIRECTED BY ANDREI TARKOVSKY (1962, 95 MIN.)

This first major film by canonical Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky presents the story of a 12-year-old boy working as a spy on the Eastern Front. Poetic and haunting, the film contrasts the horrors of war with scenes from Ivan's former home life.

The Last Emperor DIRECTED BY BERNARDO BERTOLUCCI (1987, 160 MIN.)

Winner of nine Academy Awards, this biopic from renowned Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci chronicles the life of Pu Yi—the last emperor of China—who was appointed emperor at the age of three, and over the course of his life witnessed great upheaval, including the Japanese occupation and the emergence of the People's Republic of China.

Life is Beautiful DIRECTED BY ROBERTO BENIGNI (1999, 116 MIN.)

When an Italian Jewish man and his son are taken to a concentration camp during World War II, the father keeps up his son's spirits by pretending that they are part of an elaborate game. Incorporating elements of historical drama, comedy, and fable, *Life is Beautiful* emphasizes the powerful effect imagination has on a person's ability to survive, and the immeasurable value of a child's perspective.

CHINESE CINEMA

Black Sun: The Nanking Massacre

DIRECTED BY TUN FEI MOU (1995, 91 MIN.)

This uncompromising film depicts the massacre of the Chinese army and civilians by the Japanese Imperial Army during the Nanking Massacre of 1937. After their parents are murdered, two young brothers escape from the Japanese Army and flee for their lives. Mou's film is filled with disturbing imagery that will deeply affect and impact audiences.

Devils on the Doorstep DIRECTED BY JIANG WEN (2000, 139 MIN.)

Winner of the 2000 Cannes Film Festival's Grand Prize of the Jury award, this boldly shot, black and white antiwar epic tells the story of two prisoners held in a rural Chinese village during the Japanese occupation of China.

Ruth Perlmutter, Ph.D., Co-Director
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One Film was established in memory of Archie Perlmutter, founding board member of the Philadelphia International Film Festival and former artistic director of the Philadelphia Jewish Film Festival. *One Film* honors Archie's spirit by supporting two of the causes to which Archie was most dedicated—promoting film literacy and serving the Philadelphia community.



For more information about the 2008 *One Film* program, please visit our website at www.freelibrary.org, where you can view our calendar of events, read biographies and selected filmographies of the actors in *Empire of the Sun*, and learn more about the film's director, Steven Spielberg.

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