



# Empire Of The Sun

Thursday 25th March, 9.15am and 12.45pm.  
Cinemobile, Shannon.

Study Guide **Alicia McGivern**

## **Study Guides**

# Introduction to Study Guides

The films brought together for this year's Festival all have 'war' as a central theme. Addressing this theme is perhaps timely, given the ongoing global conflicts which have cultural, economic and religious difference at their core.

For the young person who finds themselves in a place and time of conflict, they must walk a difficult path. Regarded as not yet old enough perhaps, to make decisions for themselves, they are pushed around by the vagaries of the conflict and find themselves adapting to external events, out of their control. This absence from the decision-making process leaves the young person in a precarious position.

The three films being screened in the Festival; *Ivan's Childhood*, *Empire Of The Sun* and *La Vita È Bella /Life is Beautiful* find the young people dealing with the circumstances they are presented with. Their relationship to their families is crucial when we look at the films as a group: Ivan's parents are dead – he has made a new

'family' within the war; in *Empire...* Jim has been separated from his family and is trying to find them; and in *La Vita...*, Giosué is protected by his father as they attempt to deal with the horror that is unfolding before them. In each instance, the boys relationship to his family dictates or has dictated how they will negotiate the conflict.

All too often in conflict situations, we find family's split up. The mass movements of people are a consequence of war and lead to untold misery. One of the interesting aspects of these films is that they show the lack of normality in day-to-day living during a time of conflict. People adapt to their situation, but it seems as if their lives have been put on hold. They dream of days before the conflict came and wait patiently for it to end, in order that they can continue on their journey.

We do hope you enjoy the films being presented. If you haven't had a chance to see them, try to get down to your video/dvd store and rent them out. It'll be worth your while.

**Brendan Maher**

Features Programmer

## Study Guides

### Empire Of The Sun

USA, 1987

#### Cast

Christian Bale  
John Malkovich  
Miranda Richardson  
Nigel Havers  
Joe Pantoliano  
Leslie Phillips  
Masatô Ibu  
Emily Richard  
Rupert Frazer  
Peter Gale  
Takatoro Kataoka .  
Ben Stiller  
David Neidorf  
Ralph Seymour  
Robert Stephens .

**Jim**  
**Basie**  
**Mrs Victor**  
**Dr Rawlins**  
**Frank Demarest**  
**Maxton**  
**Sergeant Nagata**  
**Jim's Mother**  
**Jim's Father**  
**Mr Victor**  
**Kamikaze Boy Pilot**  
**Dainty**  
**Tiptree**  
**Cohen**  
**Mr Lockwood**



Steven Spielberg

#### Crew

Steven Spielberg

**Director**

J.G. Ballard (novel)  
Tom Stoppard (screenplay)

**Writing Credits**

Kathleen Kennedy  
Chris Kenny  
Frank Marshall .  
Robert Shapiro  
Steven Spielberg

**Producer**  
**Associate Producer**  
**Producer**  
**Executive Producer**  
**Producer**

John Williams (BFA)  
Allen Daviau

**Original Music**  
**Cinematography**

154 minutes



## Introduction

*Empire Of The Sun* (1987) is Steven Spielberg's adaptation of JG Ballard's autobiographical novel, based on a screenplay by Tom Stoppard.

*Empire...* opens in Shanghai, December 1941, where the British and other westerners were living out a colonial existence in the International Settlement, a protected area of the city. After Pearl Harbour, the Japanese, who were already occupying much of China, invaded Shanghai. The westerners were captured and held in an internment camp until the end of the war in 1945. The film recounts life during this period as experienced by a young British boy, Jim. Having previously lived a comfortable existence with his wealthy parents, he is separated from them during the invasion and ends up with hundreds of others trying to exist in the camp. He receives guidance from Dr Rawlins, and the American Basie, who takes on a kind of rogue parenting role. Jim's childhood interest in model aircraft takes on real life

significance in the form of the fighter planes, the kamikaze pilots and finally the American bombers, which fly overhead and enthral him. The film is about war, but predominantly how war affects people and in particular, the young boy. By the time of the internees' release, Jim has seen and experienced unimaginable horrors, but he has also learnt how to survive.

The director cast the then unknown actors Christian Bale and John Malkovich in the leading roles of Jim and Basie. Their relationship lacks the sentimentality evident in much of Spielberg's other work and contributes to the film's reputation as one of the darkest and most challenging of his career.

## Director

Steven Spielberg was born in 1947. He began directing for television at the age of twenty-two and worked on episodes of *Columbo* and other major 1970s series before moving into feature film.

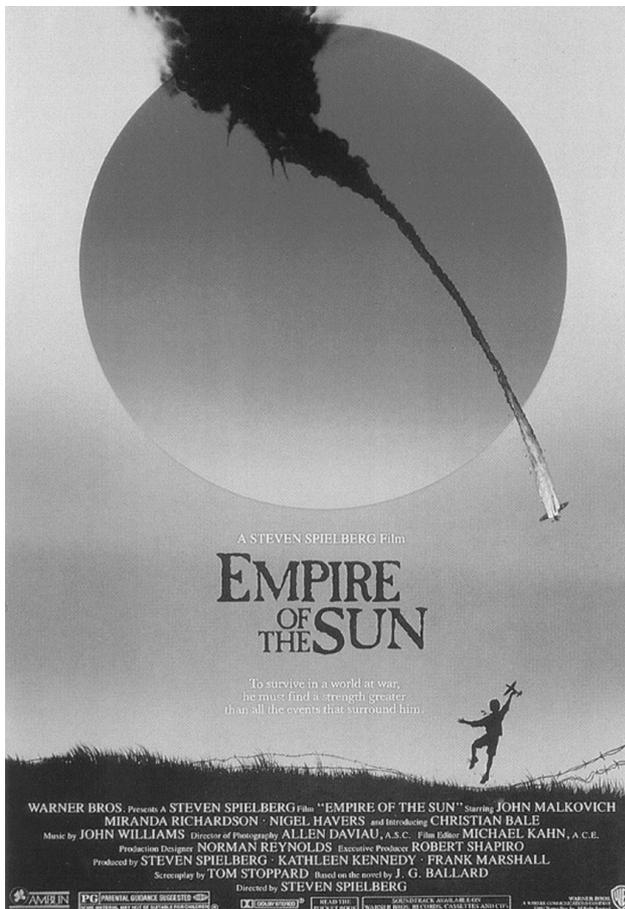
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The 1970s marked the return to the dominance in Hollywood of fantasy, horror and action genres and Spielberg was one of the directors who contributed to this revival. His blockbuster film *Jaws* (1975) confirmed the potential of a single film to attract huge audiences, despite its lack of major stars. Its impact was in showing viewers that horror and violence could occur anywhere. Then, with *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*, Spielberg began to explore the power of cinema to realise a sense of child-like wonder. His 1982 masterpiece, *ET*, was a childhood fantasy where a lonely child gains friendship and love from an alien who restores him with magic and love. Re-released in 2002 on its 20th anniversary, this awe-inspiring film shows Spielberg, whom critic Pauline Kael described as a director who could entertain, at his very best.

After the *Indiana Jones* trilogy, Spielberg changed direction and began working with more serious material. First was an adaptation of Alice Walker's autobiography,

*The Colour Purple*. Then came *Empire Of The Sun*, an adaptation of JG Ballard's autobiographical novel. Unlike his earlier films, in which he celebrated childhood, Spielberg concentrated largely on the young hero Jamie's loss of innocence through his experiences of war. The end of childhood becomes a recurrent theme in his subsequent, more serious fare, such as *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan*, both of which earned Spielberg the Academy Award for Best Director.

With *AI* (2002) and *Minority Report*, the director returned to the world of dreams and science fiction. He currently has several projects in production, including *Jurassic Park 4* and an adaptation of the bestselling novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Steven Spielberg is a director who has created some of the iconic moments of modern Hollywood cinema. The full moon of *ET*, the spacecraft landing in *Close Encounters*, the D-Day landing in *Saving Private Ryan* are instantly recognisable markers of his vast body of work. With his production company Dreamworks, he remains one of the most influential film personalities in the history of film and one of the wealthiest filmmakers in the world.



## First Impressions

*The poster of the film features a large orange sun.*

*What does this suggest?*

*What is running across the sun?*

*Does this suggest anything else?*

*Look at the boy at the bottom right hand corner of the poster. What is he doing? Where is he standing?*

*Why is he shown in silhouette?*

*What is behind him?*

*Now read the subheading: how does this fit in with the picture?*

*'A Steven Spielberg film': what does this mean?*

*What do you expect from such a film?*

*What does the title of the film suggest?*

## Storyline

Jim is an eleven-year-old boy living with his parents in the British quarter of Shanghai's International Settlement. They and their friends lead a very comfortable expatriot lifestyle. They have little contact with native Chinese except for those who work for them. Jim goes to an exclusive boys' school and is fascinated by aircraft, filling

his room with model planes and reading comics about pilots and machines. On December 7th 1941, all of this changes when Japanese troops invade Shanghai. Jim's peaceful life is shattered and he is separated from his parents, in the frantic melee to escape the city. At first, filled with a spirit of adventure, he returns to his home and enjoys a brief 'home alone' experience, until he begins to starve. He tries to surrender to the Japanese army but is laughed at. Then he meets up with a pair of scavenging American mercenaries, Basie and Frank. After Frank is killed, they and hundreds of others are moved to Soo Chow internment camp.

Despite his privileged upbringing, Jamie learns how to survive at the camp and finds out how to work the supply lines, with the encouragement and guidance of wheeler – dealer Basie. Jim runs between the American and British sections, dealing in cigarettes, shoes, and extra food. He befriends Doctor Rawlins who helps him continue his education and the dying Mrs Victor who is like a mother to him, but also becomes the object of his growing sexual awareness. Jamie shows an amazing and fearless capacity for adapting to his situation. He learns to cope with death, takes on Japanese soldiers and learns to speak Japanese. He befriends a young Japanese boy who is also fascinated by planes. To earn a place in Basie's camp, he risks his life and goes under the wire to see if there are landmines planted there. Basie is planning to escape and when the plan is discovered, he is beaten up and taken to hospital.

Despite the war, Jamie remains fascinated by aircraft and flying. He salutes before a ceremony of kamikaze pilots and then the American bombers. Watching them from a roof, he is rescued by Dr Rawlins to whom he breaks down over the loss of his parents. He then returns to the surrogate family of Mr and Mrs Victor.

Following the American bombing, the camp is broken up and the internees moved up-country. Jim learns that Basie has escaped and heartbroken, he moves on with the others. He watches his young Japanese friend pilot an aircraft then wanders half-crazed through a stadium that is filled with stolen possessions from the expatriot homes. Just when Mrs Victor dies, the nuclear bomb is dropped on Nagasaki and the war ends. Parachutes filled with supplies fall around him and he comes across his Japanese friend whose plane has been

brought down. In Jamie's eyes he was simply a friend, despite being on the wrong side, so he cannot understand when Basie turns up and kills him. In a final scene at the camp, Jamie appears detached from reality as he cycles wildly around the deserted camp. He then joins the rest of the separated children and is reunited with his parents.

## Characterisation

### Jim

Jim is the young boy at the heart of this narrative. As a wartime child, he has more in common with the lost soldier of *Saving Private Ryan*, or the concentration camp children of *Schindler's List*, than the fatherless Elliott in *ET*.

At the start of *Empire of the Sun*, Jim leads a privileged life in the British community. He is loved by his wealthy parents and is only concerned with cycling his bike, flying his model aircraft or persuading the Chinese maid not to tell his mother about him raiding the fridge. He and the other expatriot children are protected from reality. This is emphasised in the scene where they are being



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driven through the teeming streets of Shanghai to a fancy dress ball. While real China surges around the car, the children are kept separate from it and Jim only comes upon the truth of a Japanese training camp by accident, when flying his plane across the fields.

The world that Jim knows is soon shattered by the Japanese invasion and his separation from his parents. But, despite the horror of his isolation, he reacts to the situation as though he is in a kind of boys' adventure. He plays at war, by begging to surrender. We are reminded of his childishness when he avails of his parent's absence to gorge on liqueur chocolates or pretend to smoke a pipe. It is only when the Japanese have taken over his house and one slaps him sharply on the face that he is rudely awakened. He wangles his way into the companionship of Basie and Joe and then onto the truck departing for camp.

In the camp, Jim or Jamie, as Basie renames him, develops a shrewd survival instinct, something he had not previously needed. He admires Basie and yearns to be accepted by him and his friends. Basie becomes a surrogate father and rogue advisor to him as he trains him in the wheeling and dealing ways, which have, presumably, aided his own survival. Dr Rawlins also takes care of him to some extent, but later it is Jamie who defends him against the Japanese.

While other children are playing marbles on bits of scrap metal, Jim learns how to trade for real. From being the boy who refused a dead woman's shoes he becomes one who casually observes that a dead person's mosquito

net is merely passed on to the next dying one. Life at the camp causes him to rapidly shake off childhood: he seeks to be with Basie and the men rather than in the surrogate family unit offered by the ailing Mrs Victor and her husband, and he is prepared to risk his life looking for landmines in order to gain Basie's respect.

However, despite the growing up Jamie has to do, he maintains a childlike fascination for aircraft. This supersedes any other sense of loyalty and he salutes the kamikaze pilots as proudly as he later salutes the American. Friendship with the Japanese boy stems from their mutual interest in flying, so he cannot understand when Basie later kills this friend. When he is sent away from Basie's camp and returns to the Victors, Jamie reenters a 'family' situation but Mrs Victor occupies more of a sexual than a maternal role for him. Later he weeps for his own mother to the doctor, when the Americans are bombing overhead. The family situation with the Victors is short lived and Mrs Victor dies, shattering his connection with family life, and in many ways his stability. As the camp is disbanded, Jim wanders half-crazed through a field that is filled with stolen possessions. Lavish ornaments and luxury cars lie about in disarray, now totally irrelevant to the existence of their owners. The impossibly coincidental meeting with Basie fails to restore the boy and when he finally meets his parents again, his childhood has been irreparably lost.

As a character, despite his stoicism, it is hard to like Jim. From his stuck-up attitude at the start, to his desperate pleas of surrender to the incoming Japanese army, to his manic running through the camp, he fails to engage the viewers' emotions. Perhaps that was Spielberg's intention: in Jim, he has created something of a rarity, a child hero who is unsentimental or manipulative of the viewers' feelings. Physically changing from an eleven-year-old public school boy in uniform to a fourteen-year-old survivor in a battered pilot's jacket and worn out cast-off shorts, Welsh actor Christian Bale has created a powerfully memorable if not altogether likeable character.

## Characterisation Basie & Others

Apart from Jim and Basie, there are few other really substantial characters in this film. Jim's parents are thinly drawn and are largely seen in terms of their relationship to





their son. In the camp, Mrs Victor is shown as a maternal figure for Jim, then sexual and finally someone he is looking after. Even Jim's Japanese friend remains nameless – although they experience some life threatening moments together. He is depicted as a boy with the same fascination for aircraft as Jim himself.

Both Basie and Dr Rawlins assume a parental role in Jamie's life, but in quite different ways. John Malkovich plays Basie as a kind of Fagin. He takes Jim, whom he renames Jamie, under his wing and gives him survival tips. Basie's brash and cocky behaviour is very different to the English characteristics of the doctor (Nigel Havers). With his genteel manner and encouragement of Jamie's Latin, he is more reminiscent of the boy's former life than the present. He is a warmer character than Basie, lacking the latter's ruthless survival instincts and he comforts Jamie when he mourns his mother. But we never get any real sense of the man himself, outside of his fatherly relationship with the boy. Basie, on the other hand, is a more developed character. He is very definitely king among a group of American internees. He knows how to work the system and is prepared to 'teach' Jamie too. He shows no scruples in taking a dead woman's shoes – for Jamie –

and he is a master of the witty line – betting someone with his 'life' as he hands him a copy of 'Life' magazine. Basie acts as surrogate father to Jamie, but only on his terms, and the extent to which he aids his own survival. He is not unwilling to get him to risk his life by sending him into the ditch to check if there are landmines. Later, he and Dainty escape, despite his promise to Jamie and this desertion leaves the boy heartbroken. At the end, Basie shoots Jamie's Japanese friend, simply because he was Japanese, and, though he embraces the boy, at the same time he is ready to pillage whatever 'frigidaires (are) falling from the sky'. Basie is an operator, which is how he survives and this is what he passes onto Jim. However, as a character in the film, although more fully drawn, even he has disappeared by the end as his fatherly function has ceased and Jamie returns to his real parents.

### **Cinematography**

Steven Spielberg's films are renowned for their big technical set pieces, and *Empire...* is no exception. The opening scene, in which coffin wood and blossoms floating down a river are interrupted on their journey by a military vessel, to the accompaniment of a boy soprano solo, is



typical of his style. The camera pulls away to reveal a huge harbour and then zooms in on the Japanese flag of the ship, on which a sun is depicted. This image recalls the title but also the opening credits, in which there is a fading sun.

Much of the world of *Empire Of The Sun*, is as experienced by Jim. When he is being driven to a party, we are given Jim's perspective of the people outside and then a bloody chicken on a stick, which bangs off the car window leaving a trail of blood. The car moves sleekly among coolies, rickshaw drivers and Chinese people on the move, displaying in one image the stark distinction between the world of the English and the native Chinese.

*Empire Of The Sun* is a war film on a fairly epic scale and the director draws openly on some cinematic masters for reference, most notably David Lean's *Lawrence Of Arabia* and *Bridge On The River Kwai*. Yet despite Spielberg's attempt to create a serious drama from Ballard's novel, he also creates scenes in which Jim experiences a sense of wonder, recalling the director's other films. Thus, Jim stands next to Japanese aircraft at night and sparks fly. He is shown frequently staring at the aircraft in rapture, and this is later magnified by his standing on the rooftop welcoming the US B-51 with cries of 'cadillac of the sky'. Later the atomic bomb is dropped on Nagasaki and Jim stares at the bright light in awe, describing it later as 'God taking a photograph'. In one of the final scenes, Jamie is surrounded by parachutes filled with supplies falling from the sky, as though from heaven.

Cinematographer Allen Daviau, who shot *ET*, also

worked on this film. The full moon of *ET* becomes the golden globe of the sun of the fading Empire, providing a backdrop for Jim's brutal coming-of-age.

## What the viewer has seen

Watching *Empire Of the Sun* today it is difficult to view it out of context of Spielberg's extensive repertory that comprises his other 'war' films, *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan*, as well as his fantasy and sci-fi hits. In this respect, *Empire...* appears as a smaller and much darker film, with little of the hopeful ending that we have come to expect from this director. Jamie is truly a lost boy and the child who returns to his parents seems incapable of responding to their love. Despite the film containing some fairly memorable and typically Spielberg moments (see cinematography), the effect is undermined by our awareness of the boy's desperate state of mind.

The film defies easy categorisation: in many ways it is like a boy's adventure story, with the flying obsessed Jim responding to the war as though in a game. Even his response to life at the camp is gung-ho in style as he irritatingly races from place to place, saving lives, finding food, scoring bits and pieces for Basie. Yet, despite the golden glow of the fading sun that pervades so many sequences, there are times when do see the effects this life is having on the boy. He may be forced to grow up but the film does not celebrate coming of age, rather it tackles the effects of war on humanity and, in particular on Jim.

This film does not make for easy viewing; it is also over long. But what makes it fairly unique in Spielberg's body of work is its unsentimental handling of childhood.

## For Further Study

### Websites

<http://www.dreamworks.com/>

Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen's company site.

<http://www.spielbergfilms.com/>

Fan site with fori and good selection of articles

### Books

Charles L.P. Silet: *The Films of Steven Spielberg* (Scarecrow Filmmakers Series)

Ian Freer: *The Complete Spielberg* (Virgin Books )



## **Festival Cast and Crew:**

<b>Festival Director:</b>	Jayne Foley
<b>Festival Co-ordinator:</b>	Cairde Tobin
<b>Festival Administrator:</b>	Vivienne Cunningham
<b>Workshop Tutors:</b>	Conor McMahon and Miriam Garcia
<b>Features Programmer:</b>	Brendan Maher
<b>Study Guide Authors:</b>	Tony Tracy, Alicia McGivern and Sean Molony
<b>Press and Publicity:</b>	Aileen Galvin and Emma Harney at Entertainment Architects
<b>Festival Designer:</b>	Paul Callanan
<b>Website Designer:</b>	John Crowley
<b>Technical Support:</b>	Simon Maguire and David Burke at Planet TV, Dave Guy
<b>Festival Volunteers:</b>	Brid Finn and Pdraig Baggott
<b>Printing:</b>	Kilkenny People Printing

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### **Study Guide Photo Credits:**

*Empire Of The Sun* © Warner Bros

## **Thank You:**

### **The Festival wishes to express its gratitude**

**to the following:** Peter McNamara and the box office and front of house staff of The Belltable Arts Centre; Brid Finn; Annette Moloney; Declan McLoughlin at the Limerick Film Archive; John O'Leary, Kilmallock Film Archive; John Hunt and Naomi O'Nolan, The Hunt Museum; Gerry Kirby and FÁS; Sheila Deegan at Limerick City Arts Office; Joan McKiernan at Limerick County Council Arts Office; Siobhán Mulcahy at Clare County Council Arts Office; Diarmuid Moynihan at Shannon Regional Arts Office; The Skycentre in Shannon; Caoimhe Ready and the staff at Friar's Gate Theatre, Kilmallock; Joe Sheehan at Castletroy College; Maureen Kenelly and An Chomhairle Ealaíon/The Arts Council; Brian Hand at Critical Voices; all at Aerly Bird Couriers; Pat Boylan at Warner Bros; Brendan McCaul, Pat Kearns and Trish Long at Buena Vista International, Dublin; Kevin Owen at Artificial Eye; Fleur Buckley at The British Film Institute; Oliver Fisher, Filmbank; Miriam Anderson and George Rymer at Columbia Tristar; Marietta Dillon at Access Cinema; Garetti and Dee Quinn at The Cinemobile; Alan Gooden at Cinetec; Aidan Woodford at Empire Movieplex, Ennis; Rory McDermott at Limerick City Council; Chris Hurley at The Cork Film Centre; Dave Guy; All at Planet Television; Lir McCarthaigh at Film Ireland; Liz Gill; Cian Gill; Donal Foreman; Charlotte Murphy; Pat Shortt; Bob Corrigan and The Limerick College of Art and Design; The South Tipperary Arts Centre; Alicia McGivern and The Irish Film Institute; Tony Tracy; Sean Molony; Sadie Mackay at Galway Junior Film Fleadh; Unreel, Cork Film Festival; Miriam Lohan and The Limerick Youth Theatre; Glance Promotions; Andrew Mawhinney at The Limerick Coordination Office; Proactive Design and all those who helped after this programme was published.