

Empire of the Sun

US : 1987 : dir. Steven Spielberg : Amblin / Warner : 152 min
 prod: Steven Spielberg, Kathleen Kennedy & Frank Marshall : scr: Tom Stoppard
 : dir.ph.: Allen Daviau

Christian Bale [d]; *Takatora Kataoko*; *Nicholas Dastor*; *Edith Platten*
 John Malkovich; Miranda Richardson; Nigel Havers; Joe Pantoliano; Leslie Philips;
 Masato Ibu; Emily Richard; Rupert Frazer; Peter Gale; Robert Stephens; Ben Stiller

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ ♀ Z ☼	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
2455a	10½	15	23	5,186	3 7 7 3 7	Yes	April 2001



Male bonding in a prison environment – a subtext, not a central theme. Source: *The Films of Steven Spielberg*

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996 review:

"British boy, living a well-sheltered life in Shanghai, is separated from his parents and forced to fend for himself when Japan invades China at the outset of World War 2. Sprawling, ambitious film with many striking scenes and images, and one enormous problem: We feel emotionally distant from the boy, even

more so as the film goes on. What's more, Spielberg keeps setting up big, emotional crescendoes (replete with crane camera shots and overbearing music by John Williams) that simply don't have the emotional content to warrant all that fuss. Tom Stoppard adapted J.G. Ballard's autobiographical novel (Ballard appears briefly in Beefeater costume in an early party scene). ** "



Jamie discovers that surrendering to the enemy is easier said than done

Source: *The Films of Steven Spielberg*

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"Semi-autobiographical story of an 11-year old English boy learning to grow up in a Japanese internment camp during World War II. *** "

"A masterpiece of popular cinema" - MFB

The Critics' Film Guide review:

"A spoilt expatriate 11-year old (Christian Bale) is taken prisoner by the Japanese after the fall of Shanghai, and learns to survive. A travesty of J.G. Ballard's astonishing, poetic novel. In going for epic grandeur and that glossy Hollywood look, Spielberg completely misses the darker depths which presumably attracted him in the first place: the boy he presents us with is not a child clawing towards survival but a sunny California kid, so full of joy and wonder that you keep expecting E.T. to appear and whisk him away on a bicycle. It's a pity Spielberg couldn't have brought the same sensitivity to this that he did seven years later, to *"SCHINDLER'S LIST"*. Allen Daviau's Oscar-nominated cinematography is simply too beautiful. John Williams's lush score is a still more terrible error of taste: the last word in

vacuity. You're much more likely to enjoy this if you haven't read the book. 5/10 "

"Intelligent and thought-provoking movie about the loss of childhood innocence [sic] through the horrors of war. Bale, as the boy, gives an extraordinarily believable performance."

- Halliwell

"Visually stunning, emotionally thrilling, with outstanding acting, it's filming on the grandest scale."

- Winnert

"Spielberg appears to be more interested in lighting surfaces in pretty ways than in exploring the ugly depths of the material; to him, the way the light reflects off the suitcase that Jim throws into the water in the film's last shot would seem to be more important than his reason for throwing it. Another shot - of Jim standing behind the barbed wire of the camp - looks just like a Ralph Lauren ad in GQ. To look at these images is to recognise that Spielberg has absolutely no comprehension of the life they are supposed to represent."

- Bruce Beaver, *American Spectator*

"A combination of craftsmanship and almost unbelievable tastelessness. Every time Spielberg makes a humanist statement, he falls flat on his face - not just because his statements are so

naïve, but because they go against the grain of

- Pauline Kael



Ballard's material."
The local dockworkers union elect Jamie as their president

Source: *The Films of Steven Spielberg*

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

"Steven Spielberg directed this epic drama about the experiences of Jim Graham, a privileged 11-year old English boy who survives internment in a Japanese prison camp during World War II. The demanding role is carried impressively by young Bale, who appears in

almost every scene. Malkovich co-stars as fellow prisoner Basie, a cynical adventurer who hustles precious commodities in the camp. The film is well crafted in Spielberg's dreamy style, particularly in terms of its spectacular set pieces, beautiful cinematography and haunting images. The narrative, however, suffers from Spielberg's attempts to be profound. Academy Award

nominations: John Williams, Best Music Score; Allen Daviau, Best Cinematography; Norman Reynolds and Harry Cordwell, Best Art Direction; Bog Ringwood, Best Costume Design; Michael Kahn, Best Editing. *** "

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"J G Ballard's autobiographical novel, about his experiences in the WW2 Japanese concentration camps in China, is a mild version of the events he witnessed; Spielberg's is milder still. Young Jim (Christian Bale) is Ballard, an obnoxious ex-pat brat separated from his parents as the war overwhelms Shanghai. His world of balsa-wood models and servants is blown apart and replaced by prison camp brutality. Stripped of its sci-fi trappings, Ballard's text is about what shits we may become in order to survive. Spielberg includes a strand of populist heroism, yet even this fails to dent the awful message. And the budget makes itself seen, as does Bale's superlative Jim.

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"Steven Spielberg sometimes appears obsessed with telling his stories from a child's point of view¹. Here it's newcomer Christian Bale as an 11-year old boy separated from his parents and having to survive an internment camp after the Japanese invade China during World War Two. There's no denying the power of the amazing set-pieces (especially the evacuation of Shanghai) in this adaptation of the epic J G Ballard novel, but on a human level, the film is less happy. John Malkovich's opportunistic "KING RAT" type threatens to become a fully developed character but never follows through. There's a strong English contingent - including Paul McGann in an early role, but it's Bale who takes most of the attention. His flight through swamp scrub outside the prison camp in which he spends most of his time is one of the film's few highlights. *** "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Story of an 11-year old boy stranded in Japanese-occupied China during World War II is based on J G Ballard's autobiographical 1984 novel which marked the first non-science fiction book by author. Both it and the film clearly are the work of sci-fi artists channelling

their imaginations into a more traditional framework.



Now universally known as "Jim", he interrupts a solemn kamikaze ceremony with a burst of Welsh choirsong – courtesy of Aled Jones

Source: *Film Review* July 91

Leading the first troupe of Hollywood filmmakers ever into Shanghai, Steven Spielberg turns the grey metropolis into a sensational film set as he delineates the edginess and growing chaos leading up to Japan's entry into the city just after Pearl Harbour.

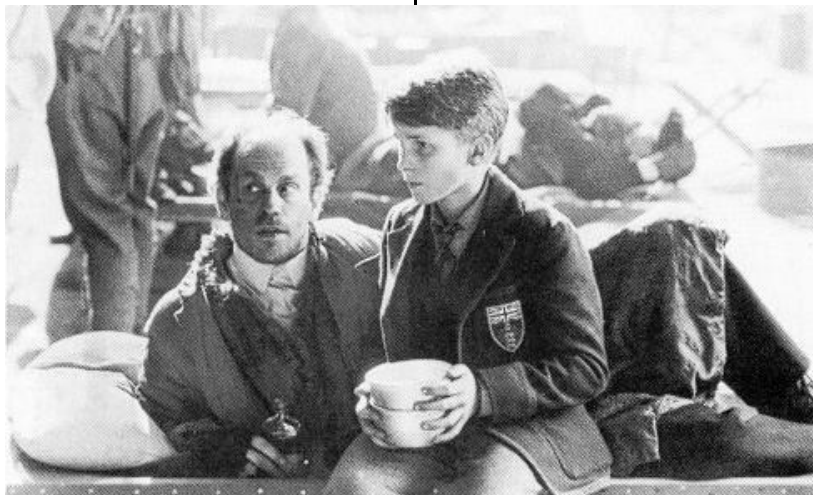
Jim (Christian Bale) is in every way a proper upper-class English lad but for the fact he has never seen England. Separated from his parents during the spectacularly staged evacuation of Shanghai, Jim hooks up with a pair of American scavengers, with whom in due course he is rounded up and sent to a prison camp for the rest of the war. It is there that Jim flourishes, expending his boundless energy on creative projects and pastimes that finally land him a privileged place among the entrepreneurially minded Americans.

John Malkovich's Basie, an opportunistic King Rat type, keeps threatening to become a fully developed character but never does. Other characters are complete blanks, which severely limits the emotional reverberation of the piece.

¹ That is, he had done so in just **one** of his previous films – "E.T."

No special use is made of the talents of Miranda Richardson, Nigel Havers, Joe

English thesp Bale to engage the viewer's interest, which he does superbly."



Pantoliano and the others, so it is up to young

Top: The right people find themselves suddenly in the wrong place.

Centre: Shanghaied by Basie and Frank, the fraught English schoolboy looks on while

they attempt to sell him - but hungry urchins are ten a yen in the occupied city.

Bottom: *Thrown together in the internment camp, Basie trains his willing disciple to collect food rations for dead people.*

Source (all above stills): John Willis Screen World vol.39

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"J G Ballard's harrowing autobiographical examination of life in a World War II Japanese prison camp has been given the Hollywood treatment by director Steven Spielberg, who took his film crew to Shanghai for some stunning location work. Young Christian Bale stars as Ballard's boyhood self, who is separated from his parents during the Japanese invasion of Shanghai and winds up in a concentration camp for four years. Too much surface gloss prevents this from being a genuine classic, but it nonetheless contains scenes of surprising power and poignancy. Rated "PG" for language and intensity. ***1/2"

The Virgin Film Guide review:

"This adaptation of J G Ballard's quasi-autobiographical novel witnesses WWII through a child's eyes, and does so through a visual means more akin to silent than to modern film-making. Spielberg's vision is no longer one of innocent wonderment; instead, **"EMPIRE OF THE SUN"** concerns the end of innocence - a young boy thrown into adulthood and an entire generation thrown into an atomic age².

The film opens just before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941. Jim Graham (Christian Bale) is a nine-year old English brat³ who has lived all his life in Shanghai with his aristocratic parents. Although adventurous, he is also wholly dependent on his parents and servants. Later, as the Japanese conquer Shanghai and the war intensifies, he is separated from his parents and meets Basie (John Malkovich), an opportunistic merchant seaman reminiscent of Dickens's Fagin, who somewhat reluctantly takes Jim under his wing and teaches him the most Darwinian methods

² A doubly inappropriate cliché - the term "innocence" applies neither to the boy's state of life prior to detainment, nor the waging of war prior to the development of nuclear weapons. Innocence and ignorance are not synonymous. It's a glib analogy.

³ Translation: Jamie Graham is an eleven-year old English boy who has lived all his life in Shanghai with his upper middle class parents..

of survival - methods that help Jim endure a lengthy stay in a Japanese prison camp.

The most emotionally complex film of Steven Spielberg's career, **"EMPIRE OF THE SUN"** is not a traditional blockbuster. In fact, with its unknown lead, barely known supporting cast and near-plotlessness, it breaks Hollywood's rules.. Further, Spielberg adapted an admired but little-read novel, set it in far-off Shanghai, and made his lead character a Briton who idolises the Japanese. As Jim, Bale delivers a stunning performance; he appears in virtually every frame and truly seems to grow over the course of the film from a coddled rich child to a calculating, almost feral creature who will ally himself with whoever wields the most power in a given situation.

Working on a grand canvas in the tradition of the David Lean epics, Spielberg includes several of his own distinctive visual epiphanies but the usual sense of wonder threatens to slide into madness. Spielberg also displays a progressive and sophisticated awareness of issues of class and race that may be viewed as an apology for the casual imperialist and racial assumptions of his **"INDIANA JONES"** series⁴. ****1/2 "

Full credits courtesy of **John Willis Screen World vol.39** (1988), which regrettably does not supply any details on the content of the films it catalogues:

"EMPIRE OF THE SUN"

(WARNER BROS.) Producers, Steven Spielberg, Kathleen Kennedy, Frank Marshall; Director, Steven Spielberg; Screenplay, Tom Stoppard; Based on novel by J. G. Ballard; Executive Producer, Robert Shapiro; Photography, Allen Daviau; Designer, Norman Reynolds; Editor, Michael Kahn; Music, John Williams; Associate Producer, Chris Kenny; Costumes, Bob Ringwood; Casting, Maggie Cartier; 2nd Unit Director, Frank Marshall; Assistant Directors, David Tomblin, Roy Button, Patrick Kinney, Ken Shane; Production Manager, Ted Morley; Casting-USA, Mike

⁴ That is, by those critics who mistakenly believe any such apology is called for.

Fenton, Jane Feinberg, Judy Taylor; Production Coordinators, Margaret Adams, Jennie Raglan; Sound, Colin Charles, Tony Dawe; Art Directors, Charles Bishop, Frederick Hole; Set Decorators, Harry Cordwell, Michael D. Ford; Assistant Art Directors, Gavin Bocquet, Clifford Robinson; Special Effects, Kit West, David Watkins, Yves De Bono, Trevor Neighbour; Stunts, Vic Armstrong; Associate Editors, Colin Wilson, Martin Cohen, Craig Bassett; Assistant Editors, Danny Farrell, Nicholas Moore; Orchestrator, Herbert Spencer; Additional Optical Effects, Industrial Light & Magic/Dennis Muren, Michael Pangrazio, John Ellis; "Suo Gan" performance, The Ambrosian Junior Choir, Soloist, James Rainbird / Arranger-Conductor, John McCarthy; Songs by various artists; Soundtrack on Warner Bros. Records; from Amblin Entertainment; Dolby Stereo; Technicolor; Rated PG; 153 minutes; December release

CAST

Jim.....**Christian Bale**
 Basie.....John Malkovich
 Mrs. Victor.....Miranda Richardson
 Dr. Rawlins.....Nigel Havers
 Frank Demerest.....Joe Pantoliano
 Maxton.....Leslie Phillips
 Sgt. Nagata.....Masato Ibu
 Jim's Mother.....Emily Richard
 Jim's Father.....Rupert Frazer
 Mr. Victor.....Peter Gale
 Kamikaze Boy Pilot ... **Takatoro Kataoka**
 Dainty.....Ben Stiller
 Tiptree.....David Neidorf
 Cohen.....Ralph Seymour
 Mr. Lockwood.....Robert Stephens
 Yang.....Zhai Nai She
 Sgt. Uchida.....Guts Ishimatsu
 Amy Matthews.....Emma Piper
 Mr. Radik.....James Walker
 Singing Prisoner.....Jack Dearlove
 Mrs. Gilmour.....Anna Turner
 Mrs. Phillips.....Ann Castle
 Mrs. Lockwood.....Yvonne Gilan
 Mr. Partridge.....Ralph Michael
 Mrs. Hug.....Sybil Maas
 Mr. Chen.....Burt Kwouk
 Colonel Marshall.....Tom Danaher
 Chinese YouthKong-Guo-Jun

 Japanese Truck Dnver.....Takao Yamada
 Japanese Sergeant/Airfield.....Hiro Arai
 Lieutenant Price.....Paul McGann
 Frenchman.....Marc De Jonge
 Amah.....Susan Leong

Paul.....**Nicholas Dastor**
 Paul's Sister.....**Edith Platten**
 Chinese Cook at detention centre
Shirley Chantrell
 Mr. Pym.....John Moore
 Mrs. Pym.....Ann Queensberry
 Mrs. Partridge.....Sylvia Marriott
 Mrs. Hug's Father.....Frank Duncan
 Mr. Chen's Aide.....Ronald Eng

and Eric Flynn, James Greene, Simon Harrison, Barrie Houghton, Paula Hamilton, Thea Ranfi, Tony Boncza, Nigel Leach, Sheridan Forbes, Peter Copley, Barbara Bolton, Francesca Longrigg, Samantha Warden, Kieron Jecchinis, Michael Crossman, Gary Parker, Ray Charleson, Za Chuan Ce, Shi Rui Quing, Lu Ye, Guo Xue Liang, Ge Yan Zhao, Adam King, Shane Fry, Roy Merchant, Dickey Beer, Wendy Leech, Wayne David Michaels, Nick Gillard, Keith Harvey, Michael Durrant

[no listing in "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89"]

Radio Times reviews:

"Steven Spielberg's sweeping epic from J.G. Ballard's autobiographical novel about a young English boy (Christian Bale), separated from his parents in the Second World War, who learns to survive in a Japanese internment camp with the help of John Malkovich. Visually stunning, emotionally thrilling, with outstanding acting from a strong support cast which includes Nigel Havers, Miranda Richardson, Leslie Phillips and Robert Stephens. It's filming on the grandest scale. **** "

"Steven Spielberg's version of J.G. Ballard's tale of a young English boy (Christian Bale) in a Japanese internment camp. Visually stunning, thrilling, and with outstanding performances."

"Now considered a trial run for the more moving, horrifying and involving "SCHINDLER'S LIST", Steven Spielberg's drama set in China during the Second World War is a glossy and rather tame affair, based on J.G. Ballard's semi-autobiographical novel. Bland Christian Bale⁵ plays an 11-year old who ends up in a Japanese internment camp. As you'd expect from Spielberg, the film has its fair

⁵ To dismiss Bale's performance as "bland" is flatly ludicrous.

share of heroic moments and scenes that depict the horror of war through the eyes of a child, but, despite the presence of talents like John Malkovich, Miranda Richardson and Nigel Havers, this never really depicts the true effects of armed conflict. *** ”

“A young boy (Christian Bale) goes on a journey of self-discovery in war-torn Shanghai.”

“Second World War drama starring Christian Bale and John Malkovich. China, December 1941: 11-year old Jim Graham enjoys a comfortable life with his family in Shanghai’s International Settlement. But when the Imperial Japanese army marches into the city, his family is forced to flee and Jim becomes separated from his parents. *** ”

“Linear adaptation of J.G. Ballard’s semi-autobiographical novel of wartime Shanghai.”

What’s On TV review:

“Young Christian Bale gives a beautifully natural performance as the boy interned in World War Two China in Steven Spielberg’s epic treatment of J.G.Ballard’s autobiographical novel. The story affirms the resilience of children as it follows Bale’s transition from pampered schoolboy to resourceful camp urchin. Highlights include Bale’s first sight of a B-52 and the fall of Shanghai. 333”

“Drama based on the autobiographical novel by J.G. Ballard. A British boy living in Shanghai is imprisoned by the invading Japanese at the start of World War Two.”

Sunday Times note:

“J.G. Ballard’s account of the Japanese invasion of Shanghai and the internment of a British boy is given an epic treatment that occasionally threatens to overwhelm the narrative. The young hero (Christian Bale) turns from pompous brat into resourceful survivor.”

“An English boy is forced to grow up quickly in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.”

Source uncertain:

“When Japanese troops march into Shanghai’s international settlement, an 11-year old English schoolboy is separated from his parents and scuffs for survival in an internment camp. The wartime childhood of author J.G. Ballard is turned into an epic journey of discovery by director Steven Spielberg who, in a succession of vivid scenes, strikingly conveys the confusion and terror of the time. But of the many characters involved, only the boy (Christian Bale in a touchingly grave debut) makes contact with the audience. *** ”

Article from uncertain tabloid source –

“Sun sinks on Christian’s empire”:

“Shy schoolkid Christian Bale’s life changed forever four years ago. The 14-year old from Bournemouth was chosen out of 4,000 other youngsters by movie millionaire Steven Spielberg.

Hollywood’s top director cast Christian, then aged 14, in his £16 million epic **“EMPIRE OF THE SUN”**. And that signalled an end to the teenager’s days as an unknown child actor living on England’s south coast. Now Christian has moved to California where his screen career is moving from strength to strength.

Tonight BBC1 screens the network TV premiere of the all-action thriller that set him on his way to stardom. Christian plays in nearly every scene in the two-and-a-half hour film which tells the tale of the harrowing survival struggle of an English boy taken prisoner by the Japanese in Shanghai. His character, Jim Graham, gets caught up in the traumas of World War II as international tension mounts. And Christian’s performance in the story lives up to Spielberg’s every expectation.

At the London premiere of the movie Christian got to meet the Queen. Now it seems further honours lie in store for the young lad in America. One of his friends says: “Christian has been living out in America for most of this year. His American agents are handling his career and they’re keeping him pretty busy.” ”

The Films of Steven Spielberg essay:

“Based on J G Ballard’s highly acclaimed novelisation of his childhood in Shanghai during World War II, **“EMPIRE OF THE**

SUN" tells the story of a young boy, Jim (Christian Bale) who is separated from his parents in the chaos and confusion that follows the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. After a few days foraging in the deserted houses along the avenue in which he lived, Jim runs into two opportunistic Americans, Basie (John Malkovich) and Frank (Joe Pantoliano), who are living on their wits in a war-torn Shanghai. When they all return to Jim's house, they find it occupied by Japanese guards and are captured. They are sent to a detention centre and then to an internment camp, where Jim will spend his next four years.

Predictably, Spielberg immediately fastens on the child's point of view. As in John Boorman's **"HOPE AND GLORY"** (1987), the tragedy of war is given a fresh perspective by being viewed through the innocent *[sic]* and inquisitive eyes of a young boy, for whom danger and suffering are often offset by a sense of unusual freedom and adventure.

On one level, the narrative is an unsentimental education, in which the boy discovers with indecent haste the ways of the world. From Dr Rawlins (Nigel Havers), he begins to sense the fineness yet fragility of human compassion; from Mrs Victor (Miranda Richardson), the mystery of moody femininity; from Basie, the cunning that goes into a burning will to stay alive. More remarkable is the boy's complete transformation. Beginning the tale as Jamie, an imaginative but immaculate English schoolboy in a smart school blazer, he will become Jim, an Americanised, quick-witted survivor, invariably begrimed and occasionally deranged. At the end, when parents are being reunited with their children, his father at first walks past him without recognition – and, by this time, Jim has forgotten what his parents look like. Only in his mother's embrace can he close eyes that have seen too much. At last his restless spirit has found some rest.

The part of Jim is an extraordinarily demanding role, not only because he appears in every scene but because of its emotional range. The boy must appear strange, exasperating and difficult, resilient and resourceful. Christian Bale, who has something of the look of the young Jean-Pierre Léaud at his most rebellious (for example in Truffaut's **"400 BLOWS"**), gives a performance that is hard to imagine being bettered. **"EMPIRE OF THE SUN"** confirms Spielberg as one of the contemporary cinema's great directors of children.

In some respects this is an unusual Spielberg movie. It is in a sense his first international production. It is certainly an unorthodox war movie, partly because of the particular theatre of war it chooses, but also because of its singular difference from the usual American pattern. There is relatively little stress on action, no thrilling escape subplot (the only escape occurs offscreen), no love interest and, most strikingly, no clear demarcation between heroes and villains. Curiously, the child's perceptions in **"EMPIRE OF THE SUN"** seem to make the issues of right and wrong more, rather than less, complex. The Japanese are occasionally brutal, but the Americans are also unscrupulous, and the British are lethargic and helpless. It is a world of unpredictable moral relativity in which Jim often has more admiration for his Japanese captors than for his fellow British and American prisoners. Basie seems as if he is being set up to play the role of Jim's surrogate father, but he is displaced as Jim's best friend by a Kamikaze boy pilot (Takatoro Kataoka). War does indeed throw up some strange alliances.

One of the features of Ballard's language in the novel is the extensive use of cinematic imagery: indeed, at one stage, we are told that the whole situation in Shanghai looks to Jim as if it is taking place in a film. Spielberg seizes on this concept to justify making full use of the tale's elements of spectacle. A gun-battle in the streets of Shanghai and an air-raid on the internment camp are two of the most thrilling action set-pieces of recent cinema. Elsewhere he scrupulously reproduces vivid images from the novel: the beggar at the gate of Jim's home, an omen of the penury the family is shortly to face; the footprints in the talcum powder on the bedroom floor, which alert Jim to the fact that his mother has been captured. Most memorable of all is the white light that suddenly suffuses (like "a second sun") the deserted Xanadu-like stadium at which Jim and his fellow prisoners are required to rest. It is the atomic bomb dropping on Hiroshima, signifying the end of the war, and maybe the end of God's universe.

Spielberg's visual craftsmanship is as consummate as ever. There are many visual motifs that are unobtrusive and natural in context but subtly bind the structure together: recurrent images of flames, to suggest Jim's whole childhood as a baptism of fire; shots through windows and veils that drape a cloak of

protective innocence over Jim's premature confrontation with death and sex;⁶ two moments when Jim is stopped dead in his tracks, the first to mark his first real involvement in the war, the second to mark its end. The technical excellence of Allen Daviau's photography, Michael Kahn's editing and Norman Reynolds' production design are, of course, indispensable to the realisation of Spielberg's vision.

The film has been very well cast. John Malkovich's Basie has a cheeky competitive-ness but also the ruthless streak of the survivor that can be dangerous to anyone in its path. Basie is an unsettling mixture of charisma and corruptions: Malkovich blends the ingredients astutely. Equally well-judged performances come from Nigel Havers as Dr Rawlins, having just the right quality of fussy, pompous decency that gets on Jim's nerves; and from Miranda Richardson as the enigmatic Mrs Victor, epitomising Ballard's conception of the character as "a handsome if frayed blonde" whose "nerves were always stretched."

If ultimately the film gives a sense of greatness not quite achieved, the reason perhaps is that the film, in striving so hard to be an epic, rather glosses over the original's introspective power. Tom Stoppard's screenplay is an elegant exercise in tasteful transposition, but it lacks the imaginative touches that distinguish the adaptation of **"THE COLOR PURPLE"**. John Williams's score has its haunting and awesome moments, but Williams is not as good as Jerry Goldsmith at getting under the skin of a complex drama: his music here offers a moving but rather generalised emotional display. There is sometimes a similar sense of dramatic inflation about Spielberg's direction, as in the boy's reaction to the death of the Kamikaze pilot. It is great cinema, but does it ring emotionally true? It is instructive here to compare **"EMPIRE OF THE SUN"** with Elem Klimov's Soviet film, **"COME AND SEE"** (1985), which also details the horrors of war as seen through the eyes of a child. They are both the work of exceptional cineastes, but the emotional atmosphere is different – the difference between the work of a man who knows war basically through war movies, and one whose country's wartime suffering has indelibly scorched itself on his consciousness. Nevertheless, **"EMPIRE OF THE SUN"** still

succeeds as a potent picture of childhood in extremism.

What of the future? One of the most noticeable aspects of Spielberg's recent development has been the widening stylistic gap between the movies he produces – as he puts it, movies he would like to see but not direct – and the movies he personally makes. In 1986, the new production included Barry Levinson's **"YOUNG SHERLOCK HOLMES"**, Richard Benjamin's **"THE MONEY PIT"** and the Don Bluth cartoon, **"AN AMERICAN TAIL"**. More recently, we have had Joe Dante's **"INNERSPACE"** (1987), William Dear's **"BIGFOOT AND THE HENDERSONS"** (1987), Matthew Robbins's **"BATTERIES NOT INCLUDED"** (1987), and a cinematic compilation from his unsuccessful television series, **"AMAZING STORIES"** (1987), with Spielberg himself directing an episode.

These are rather similar in feeling to the live-action Disney features of the 1950s and 1960s: wholesome family fare, with a flavouring of fantasy and a spoonful of sentiment. Likeable enough, but standing in relation to Spielberg's real potential rather in the way those Disney films stood in relation to his great cartoons: that is, recognisably from the same stable but surely not from the same mare. The temptation for Spielberg to retreat into family fantasy might be great after the gruelling controversy precipitated by **"THE COLOR PURPLE"** and the disappointing commercial performance so far of **"EMPIRE OF THE SUN"**. Yet both movies are bold attempts at very difficult subjects and an encouraging indication of a deepening curiosity about character. The Disney-like, escapist side of Spielberg is probably a permanent aspect of his artistic personality, but his last two features reveal different dimensions and a new maturity. Peter Pan has come of age."

⁶ *He's 13 at this point – scarcely "premature"*

Maltin's review pretty well hits the nail on the head as regards the strengths and flaws of this one, as does the phrase "too much surface gloss". From a lesser director than Spielberg, "**EMPIRE OF THE SUN**" would have been a very commendable effort, but part of the price of his astonishing success is that he generates very high expectations and occasionally, as with "**HOOK**", falls very far short of them. Any patronising arguments about Spielberg not having the gravitas to tackle a serious theme were comprehensively trashed with "**SCHINDLER'S LIST**", but by comparison with that work this one seems loud, smug and immature.

True, it has moments of graceful economy - as when Jamie reads the fate of his mother in the spilt talcum powder of her bedroom, or when he finds himself dwarfed by a gigantic, pristine street poster for "**GONE WITH THE WIND**" amid the chaos of Japanese-occupied Shanghai - but these nuggets are far outnumbered by showy puffed-up sequences which suggest a very obsequious editor: the British residents driving to a costume ball through streets choked with starving refugees is a telling image, but one well-judged shot would have sufficed to convey the idea. Spielberg gives it two minutes. When Jamie is separated from his parents in a fast-flowing river of jostling bodies, when he is pursued relentlessly by a street arab for his shoes ("No mama, no papa, no whiskey soda!") these sequences are quite needlessly stretched out. And worst of all, approaching the end of the film, when Jamie attempts to revive his shot Japanese friend by heart massage, he repeats the mantra "I can bring everyone back" so often, to a drowning crescendo of angel-song, that one prays for a falling food canister to catch him on the back of the head.

John Williams' rich scores have become inseparable from Spielberg's box office juggernauts - who can think of "**JAWS**", "**CLOSE ENCOUNTERS**" or "**RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK**" without their attendant musical themes? Here, for perhaps the first time though, John Williams lost his surefire touch. His score is intrusive, over-lush and badly misjudges the emotional tempo. It is perhaps intended as counterpoint to the squalid, downbeat events played out on the screen, underscoring the themes of heroic survival, the humanity of the enemy, etc. But it falls on the ear like a theme to some escapist romantic weepie somehow inexplicably switched for the right one at the last minute.

One of the key themes of "**EMPIRE OF THE SUN**" is duality. Jamie is torn between admiration for the Japanese, with their rigid, hair-trigger sense of honour, and admiration for the sublimely unprincipled Basie, his American King Rat, who teaches him the squalid laws of self-preservation at any cost. His docile, complacent life in Shanghai is replaced in turn by his hyperactive, uncertain life in Suchow prison camp, but he becomes equally well-adapted to both, and behaves identically when these two states of being are snatched unceremoniously away from him. Where he surrenders insistently to the Japanese at the beginning, he finishes by surrendering to the Americans. Basie's pragmatic attitude to warfare points out these dualities to him - first one side is feeding you while the other tries to kill you, and then at some point the roles are reversed. The time in between is a cinch.

Although wily John Malkovitch shamelessly steals the film, it is Christian Bale who is on screen from first to last, and must carry the entire emotional weight of its two and a half hour running time on his young shoulders. And the emotional landscape he has to cross in that time would be a challenge for any seasoned actor - it's a quite amazing debut performance from so young a boy, and nothing short of a disgrace that Bale did not win any major award for his effort. If Jamie has his overwrought moments, as in the climactic "Cadillac of the skies" air raid scene, the fault is not Bale's, but the director's for pumping him up to that pitch. The silent, harrowing face of grief which follows it packs a far greater emotional wallop, and Bale deserves the credit for that.

See subject index under **ASIA, DIRECTORS, FLIGHT, PRISON, REFUGEES / EVACUEES, SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS** and **WAR**.