



Finding Your Way: The Films of Peter Weir

# The Year of Living Dangerously

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

## The Year of Living Dangerously

Director: Peter Weir

Production Companies: McElroy & McElroy, MGM/UA Entertainment

Development Assistance:

Australian Film Commission

Producer: Jim McElroy

Unit Manager: Murray Francis

Production Manager: Tim Sanders

Production Supervisor: Mark Egerton

Production Co-ordinator: Carolynne Cunningham

Production Co-ordinator (Philippines):

Lope V. Juban Jr

Production Co-ordination (Philippines):

PMP Motion Picture Productions

Production Liaison: Jaime Dela Rosa

Location Manager: John Wiggins

Location Manager (Philippines): Jesse Cuneta

Production Consultant (Philippines):

Celso Al. Carunungan

Production Assistants: Monica Pellizzari,

Sandra Alexander

Assistant Directors: Mark Egerton,

Chris Webb, Michael Bouchier

Assistant Directors (Philippines): Wayne Barry,

Ulysses Formanez, Ken Richardson,

Robert Woolcott, José Angeles

Screenplay: Alan Sharp, David Williamson,

Peter Weir, C.J. Koch

Based on the novel by: C.J. Koch

Director of Photography: Russell Boyd

2nd Unit Photographer: John Seale

Camera Operator: Nixon Binney

Special Effects (Philippines): Danny Dominguez

Editor: William Anderson

Associate Editors: Jeanine Chialvo, Lee Smith

Design Co-ordinator: Wendy Weir

Art Director: Herbert Pinter

Scenic Artists: Billy Malcolm, Michael Chorney

Costume Designer: Terry Ryan

Costume Supervisor: Anthony Jones

Wardrobe: Jenny Bolton

Wardrobe (Philippines): Vic Cabrera,

Ramon Alonzo, Gina Garcia

Standby Wardrobe: Phil Eagles, Roger Monk

Make-up: Judy Lovell

Special Make-up Effects: Judy Lovell,

Bob McCarron

Title Design: Fran Burke

Music: Maurice Jarre

Synthesizer programmer: Andrew Thomas Wilson

Music co-ordinator: Sven Libaek

Sound Recording: Gary Wilkins

Sound Recording Supervisor: Ron Purvis

Dialogue Mixer: Peter Fenton

Effects Mixer: Phil Heywood

Scoring Mixer: Gethin Creagh

Sound Editor: Andrew Steuart

Technical Adviser: Pudji Waseso

Studio: Artransa Park Film Studios,

Mort Bay Studios

Cast:

Mel Gibson (*Guy Hamilton*)

Sigourney Weaver (*Jill Bryant*)

Linda Hunt (*Billy Kwan*)

Bembol Roco (*Kumar*)

Domingo Landicho (*Hortono*)

Herminio de Guzman (*immigration officer*)

Michael Murphy (*Pete Curtis*)

Noel Ferrier (*Wally O'Sullivan*)

Peter Weir has always been a filmmaker in the grand manner. In retrospect, this was clear as early as *The Cars That Ate Paris*, where Something Bigger – something vaguely allegorical – was constantly striving to break through the surface of what was, at first glance, an idiosyncratically open-air Australian version of an Old Dark House story. With *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the mystical and allegorical elements proved more interesting than the ‘story’, while in *The Last Wave* they quite literally overwhelmed it. It was not until *Gallipoli*, however, that Weir’s grander ambitions became fully apparent: to tell the story of two men by setting it against and simultaneously trying to turn it into the story of their time, their country and (one sometimes felt) mankind in general. *Gallipoli* was an uneasy compromise, partly because expecting an Australian director to make a film about Gallipoli that was both commercial and personal is a little like expecting a British director to do the same about Dunkirk; and partly because Weir never managed to strike a satisfactory balance between the general – history and landscape – and the personal (an exercise in problematic male bonding). The metaphor of running was simply too slight to bear all the strain.

*The Year of Living Dangerously* represents a triumphant return to form. It is Weir’s most accomplished film to date, very much in the grand manner, with an almost overreachingly broad canvas and a tri-partite central relationship – between Guy, Billy and Jill – where the characters have a depth which is thematic rather than psychological. The whole enterprise has something of the feel of a classic mid-period Hawks – *Only Angels Have Wings*, perhaps – where the true story is located somewhere between the formulary dialogue interchanges and the straightforward excitement of the action background. Of course, there are any number of objections one can make to Weir’s film. It reduces a moment in history to a backdrop of surging masses and artfully located slogans (‘Smash British and U.S. Imperialism’ reads a banner at Jakarta airport as Guy arrives, but the rest of the film seems content to focus on the crises of the imperialists and their chroniclers), however impressively those masses may be filmed. To put it bluntly, we are, at the end, expected to be more concerned about Guy losing his eye than about Kumar losing his life; and the film closes with a romantic rebirth as Indonesia enters the dark age of Suharto’s New Order.

On a different level, women are marginalised just as emphatically (and with less justification) than they were in *Gallipoli*. Sigourney Weaver’s Jill seems grafted on to the story merely as a way of focusing Guy’s growth and his rather crudely presented journalistic dilemma (‘You can’t use this,’ she warns him about the secret telex; ‘Then you shouldn’t have told me,’ he rejoins before going off to do so). And the device of using Billy, the Chinese-Australian dwarf (a truly extraordinary – in the best sense of the word – performance by American actress Linda Hunt), as our and Guy’s guide to the mysteries and ambiguities of Asia leads to some heavily explicit and literary dialogue. ‘Most of us become children again when we enter the slums of Asia,’ he tells Guy on the latter’s first night in Jakarta, as we/he are treated to the only real tour of the underside of Sukarno’s Indonesia. ‘Don’t take it personally: you’re just a symbol of the West.’

Paul Sonkkila (*Kevin Condon*)  
Ali Nur (*Ali*)  
Dominador Robridillo (*Betjak man*)  
Joel Agona (*palace guard*)  
Mike Emperio (*President Sukarno*)  
Bernardo Nacilla (*dwarf*)  
Bill Kerr (*Colonel Henderson*)  
Coco Marantha (*pool waiter*)  
Kuh Ledesman (*Tiger Lily*)  
Norma Uatuhan (*Ibu*)  
Lito Tolentino (*Udin*)  
Cecily Polson (*Moira*)  
David Oyang (*Hadji*)  
Mark Egerton (*embassy aide*)  
Joonee Gamboa (*naval officer*)  
Pudji Waseso (*officer in café*)  
Joel Lamangan (*1st security man*)  
Mario Layco (*2nd security man*)  
Jabo Djohansian (*Doctor*)  
Agus Widjaja (*roadblock soldier*)  
Chris Quivak (*airport official*)  
Australia-USA 1982  
115 mins  
35mm

#### With thanks to

Peter and Ingrid Weir

*The Cars That Ate Paris* and *The Plumber* will be released on BFI Blu-ray on 25 May

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But Billy is, of course, the key to the film's ambition, and its most audacious and successful element. It is he who crystallises the central theme of seeing and doing (or reporting and intervening). He is a photographer, professionally committed to recording his world, but personally committed to changing it. 'What, then, must we do?' he asks himself in one of his nightly communings with his ancient typewriter (Guy, the radio journalist, is, significantly, a tape-recorder man), before answering: 'We must give with love to whomever God has placed in our path.' At the same time, Billy acts as a kind of surrogate for the great *dalang* (puppet-master) Sukarno, who is glimpsed only once, staring down quizzically from the palace roof at Guy. Billy manipulates Guy and Jill for their own good (and his), much as he sees Sukarno (whom he admires) manipulating the situation in Indonesia, 'holding the left and right in balance'.

Javanese shadow puppets – the *wayang kulit* – are the visual metaphor for this process, both personal (Billy) and political (Sukarno). They appear behind the credits, are demonstrated to Guy by Billy, and occasionally enter directly into Guy's life (sending his first broadcast back to Australia, we see him as a silhouetted shadow against the office window; later, in exactly the same configuration, he kisses Jill against the same window, and again we see the shadow, not the people). In the *wayang kulit*, Billy tells Guy, 'You must look at the shadows, not the puppets.' It is the same with Weir's film, and it is a measure of both his ambition and his confidence that he is prepared to encourage us to view events in this way. It is, to an even greater extent, a measure of his achievement that we can do so and remain fascinated, not so much overlooking the deftly executed romantic flourishes of the central 'story' – Guy's headlong drive through the Jakarta curfew with Jill and his crashing of an army roadblock; his *Casablanca*-style reunion with her at the end – as accepting them as a narrative structure within which the deeper concerns are located.

For *The Year of Living Dangerously* is very much a commercial movie, the first Australian film to be entirely financed by a U.S. major (MGM). But it is also, in an (auteurist?) tradition that has all but vanished from the contemporary scene, a highly personal one, where the style and energy of the telling offset any shortcomings in the material. Weir has lost none of his power to create complex and striking tableaux – the U.S. Embassy demo, where the ABS car is battered by a bulldozer and pummeled by the angry crowd; the abandoned Dutch villa in the mountains, its swimming-pool clogged with weeds, which comes to represent the decay of colonialism; Guy's near fatal attempt to get to the presidential palace and his nightmare drive to the airport past the army execution squads beginning their murderous round-up of the new regime's opponents – but here they have none of the picture-book flatness of those in *Gallipoli*.

As Guy's failure to 'see' becomes more acute (finally symbolised by his loss of an eye), we are treated increasingly to glimpses of the things he will not/cannot see and which Billy believes he can hold in the permanent balance which is the *wayang kulit*'s main theme. Thus the mourning ceremony around the dead child (a bowl of flowers, a pot split by a knife), Guy's abrupt introduction to anti-imperialist feeling in a Jakarta bar, Billy's abortive and fatal protest against Sukarno's failure, and the breakdown of Western immunity at the airport from which Guy, against all the odds, escapes. In the end, it is doubtful that Guy *does* see: the events on the way to the airport are merely obstacles along his route to Jill and freedom. But we do.

Nick Roddick, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, June 1983