

Art in Film:
Peter Weir's
The Year of Living Dangerously

There is a surrealistic quality about all film, because film is the manipulation of images, sounds and time. Like dreams, film has the power to penetrate the subconscious and to reveal truths we are incapable of discovering as we go about from one day to the next, from one repetitious task to another. What is remarkable about film, when it is well-conceived and well-executed, and what makes film an art, is that it transcends the printed page, the canvas, the symphony hall, even the stage because it has the capacity to project more completely the imagination. It is the one art form that sources all the other arts. And for the audience, film is more easily experienced; it costs less than most cultural events, it is easily accessible (located at a shopping mall or video store near you) and it does not require literacy, which is not to say that it requires less attention or intellectual effort than reading a novel or seeing an opera. Film, like the drama for the Elizabethans, is the one art form which can be experienced by both the truck driver and professor, whether they be white, black, yellow or red, rich, middle class or poor. Film, like the *wayang* for the people of Indonesia, is a form of entertainment, moral instruction, cultural communication, historical documentation and mythological revelation, and both are created by the projection of light and shadows (images) on a screen. It is with a performance of the *wayang* that Peter Weir begins his film *The Year of Living Dangerously*.

Peter Weir is a very special and rare filmmaker. He is one of the first Australian

directors whose films made a successful immigration to America, and whose films are entertaining, intellectually stimulating, and commercially and critically successful. Most of his films (*Gallipoli*, *The Last Wave*, *Witness* and *Mosquito Coast*) have at their heart the same basic conflict -- the clash of two distinct cultures and its effect on the characters who are acting the story. *The Year of Living Dangerously* is no exception. Unlike *Witness*, where a Boston cop hides out at an Amish farm, *The Year of Living Dangerously* takes an Australian journalist to Jakarta at the height of its anti-imperialist, anti-west fervor.

Based on the novel of the same name by C.J. Koch, *The Year of Living Dangerously* (which Sukarno pronounced the year 1965) is the story of three people living in Jakarta during the tumultuous last days of the reign of Sukarno in Indonesia. Photographed in predominantly medium shot and close-up, with the use of long shot to establish setting or to provide a greater view of what the characters are seeing, *The Year of Living Dangerously* is a film crafted in the realist tradition. It is, above all, a love story, a film about people and their relationships to one another and to their surroundings. In fact, in many of the reviews in video stores, it is referred to as a "classic Hollywood love story." And for many moviegoers, it is a classic love story: boy meets girl, boy gets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back and one hopes they live happily ever after. But the story of ABS journalist Guy Hamilton, British military attache assistant Jill Bryant and cameraman Billie Kwan, who is a Chinese-Australian dwarf, is far more than a simple love story, it is a contemporary playing out of the *wayang*, where Guy and Jill represent Prince Arjuna and Princess Srikandi and

where Billie plays a dual role as Semar the dwarf and the puppet master.

"If you want to understand Java," Billie says to Guy in the low-lit intimacy of Billie's bungalow, "you have to understand the *wayang*, the sacred shadow play." This scene in Billie's bungalow -- "everything here is your basic Indonesia" (except the air conditioning) -- is the core of the entire film. It explains the few scenes which have come before and prefigures the possibilities of what is to come after. It is a scene which belongs to Billie Kwan as he is portrayed by Linda Hunt, and to the Billie Kwan who symbolizes the *dalang*, the playwright, producer, principal narrator, and director of the *wayang*.

Billie Kwan is unlike any character who has been cast in celluloid. He is, in Guy Hamilton's words, "a funny little *guy*"; he is a dwarf of Chinese and Australian parents who is "a normal man, of normal intelligence who is capable of having normal children but whose body is a joke."

"One great advantage of being a dwarf," Billie says to Guy, "is that you can be wiser than other people and no one envies you."

"You're not a dwarf," Guy responds.

"That's what I like about you Guy. You just don't care or maybe you don't see."

Billie represents all that is beautiful about mankind and all that is so very fragile. He is intelligent, sensitive, passionate, cultured, moral, talented, idealistic and loving, and, in the end, tragic. Yet it is Guy who represents the hero, which Peter Weir establishes during this seminal scene.

It is a scene shaped with great intimacy and tension. The lighting is natural and eerie, a single lamp and lantern. There is more darkness than light; color is muted,

unobtrusive. It begins in long shot, at night, with Guy and Billie walking side by side toward the camera along a street lined with creaking bamboo. The two men enter Billie's bungalow, a light is turned on, and as Guy enters so does the audience. Another light is turned on and the audience sees, along with Guy, stark black and white photographs of dwarves, poor and starving Indonesians and one of Billie dressed as Sukarno. "A hero of mine," Billie confides.

"You should exhibit these," Guy says.

"I don't care about the photographs, it's content I care about. There's the real Jakarta, the story you journos don't tell."

"Nobody wants to hear it," Guy says.

"Tell them anyway," Billie responds. (And eventually Guy does.) But to change the subject, Guy shifts his attention to the shadow puppets. Photographed in medium shot and close-up with quick editing cuts rather than a lot of camera movement, Billie explains the *wayang*.

"The shadows are the souls and the screen is heaven. You must watch their shadows, not the puppets -- the right in constant struggle with the left, the forces of light and darkness in endless balance. In the west, we want answers for everything, everything is right or wrong, good or bad. But in the *wayang*, no such conclusions exist. Look at Prince Arjuna, he's a hero but he can also be fickle and selfish. Krishna says to him: 'All is clouded by desire, Arjuna: as fire by smoke, as a mirror by dust. Through these it blinds the soul!'"

During Billie's explanation of the *wayang*, which is sensuously underscored

with the sounds of Indonesian music composed by Maurice Jarre, Billie's voice becomes a mysterious and profound force. Peter Weir captures this by using reaction shots of Guy combined with his response, "Pretty heady stuff" -- a reaction which the audience is probably undergoing since most westerners have little knowledge of Indonesian culture. Billie continues his teaching. "This is the Princess Srikandi, noble and proud, but headstrong. Arjuna will fall in love with her."

Guy gets out of his chair and pulls another of the puppets from the wall. "Who's this?" he asks.

"Ah," Billie says, "he's very special. Semar, the dwarf."

"What does he do?"

"He serves the Prince." There is a pause and then the camera quickly moves to a photograph of Jill on Billie's nightstand and then immediately cuts to a bright, colorful daylight scene around a pool at a European hotel where Billie introduces his "special friend" Jillie to Guy.

What has Peter Weir established in this scene? The conflict between the east and west and light and darkness, that content is more important than aesthetics, that to understand another culture you must understand its mythology and symbolism, and, that Guy Hamilton will be taking the hero's journey and will be served by Billie. He also shows that Billie feels some kind of shared spirit with Sukarno as well as with Guy. "We look alike," he says to Guy, "we have the same color eyes." Weir also foreshadows that Guy will fall in love with Jill.

What kind of film techniques does Weir use to express his imagination and to capture the audience's? How does he tell his story in an entertaining way without

being didactic? Because *The Year of Living Dangerously* is a film about people, "people who will become other people, people who will become old, betray their dreams, become ghosts," it is the people who dominate each frame, with their thoughts, their expressions, their actions, what they see and what they don't see. When Jill receives a message over the teletype at the British Embassy of an expectant arms shipment to the PKI, signalling civil war, the camera follows her through the streets of Jakarta during a downpour. The audience feels her pain and the pain that will affect the innocent lives of the people she sees.

Rain, water imagery is an important symbol throughout the film (and most of Weir's films) to suggest a number of archetypal themes. He uses it to signal death and love. (Jill's walk through Jakarta ends in a desperate and passionate love scene with Guy.) Guy has a dream in which Tiger Lily, a beautiful Indonesian woman who works in his office, dives into a pool; she doesn't surface so Guy dives in after her. As he swims toward her to save her, she tries to drown him. He wakes up and realizes the people he works with are PKI, and then in the next scene is told he is on a PKI death list. The water the people who live along the canals drink from is diseased, contaminated by people bathing and relieving themselves in it. Yet when a child Billie has sort of adopted dies, water scented with frangipani blooms is used to clean his body. Baptism and rebirth. Water also symbolizes nature. And nature is ultimately uncontrollable even if man can create ways to tame it -- "civilizing" climate and man through air conditioning. (A theme Weir pursues more profoundly in *Mosquito Coast*.)

The most compelling device Weir uses, however, is the combination of

narration and interior monologue, which is created by Billie reading from the dossiers he keeps on the people he cares about. Weir makes Billie the storyteller, the *dalang*. It is his voice (June 25, 1965. Dossier H-10. Hamilton, Guy. Born: 1936, under the sign of Capricorn....) that introduces the audience to Guy as he gets off the plane and enters Java. It is his analysis of Jill which provides greater insight into her character: "Born: 1938, under the sign of Pisces. Little religious feeling yet has a reverence for life. This is a spirit like a wavering flame, which only needs care to burn high. If this does not happen, she could lapse into the promiscuity and bitterness of a failed romantic." It is also Billie's voice which provides exposition and reveals the escalation of this own tragic end. "What then must we do?"

In the early part of the film, upon Billie and Guy's first meeting, Billie tags along with Guy as he enters the slums of Indonesia at night. The streets are populated by the poor and starving, the crippled and the dejected. Billie murmurs, "What then must we do?" "Pardon," Guy says. " 'What shall we do then? Luke, chapter three, verse ten. 'What then must we do?' Tolstoy asked the same question. He wrote a book with that title. One night he went into the poorest section of Moscow and gave away all his money. You could do that now. Think what five American dollars could do." "It would just be a drop in the ashes," Guy says. "That's the same conclusion Tolstoy came to, but I disagree. I support the view that you don't think about the big issues, you do whatever you can about the misery in front of you. Add your light to the sum of light."

This early exchange between Guy and Billie in many ways is repeated as the film reaches its turning point, only this time it shows the unraveling of Billie and

Guy's friendship, and Billie's hero worship. It is again night. Billie has caused a scene in the bar by denouncing Sukarno, and angrily divulging one of his fellow journalists penchant for Indonesian boys. As Guy enters, Billie runs away. This time Guy follows Billie into the streets. When he finally catches up to him, they are alone, in long shot, in front of a defaced poster of Sukarno. They circle one another. It is Billie who speaks. "I believed in you. I thought you were a man of light, that's why I gave you those stories you thought were so important. I made you see things. I gave you my trust. So did Jill. That's why I'm taking her back." Guy is shocked, he protests. Billie says, "I created you," and runs away to the left leaving Guy standing completely alone on the right side of the screen -- the opposite *mise en scene* which began Billie and Guy's friendship.

Weir uses a variety of patterns to reinforce themes and to show connections. Billie's bungalow provides a sense of enlightenment and intimacy -- it is where Guy learns of the *wayang*; it is where Jill and Guy make love. The bar where all the journalists hang out reeks of red light and western male adolescence and decadence. "What then must we do?" introduces Billie Kwan's philosophical sensibilities, then the same question is cried by Billie before his final act and death. In Billie's file on Guy, there is a cut-out photograph of Guy next to a paper shadow puppet of Prince Arjuna. The contrast of American rock 'n roll and traditional gamelan music, the creation of a pulsating and romantic Indonesian/European sounding music theme for Guy and Jill, Billie's playing of a recording of Richard Strauss' last composition *September* sung by Kiri Te Kanawa -- all keep the characters, storyline and themes connected to the greater whole -- the director's vision. This is the stuff that dreams are made on and that

makes great movies.

In a recent article in *Insight Magazine*, George Szamuely angrily calls to task the film's ending. "... the last scene with Mel Gibson and Sigourney Weaver getting on a plane out of Jakarta made nonsense of the film either as being in any way seriously political or as a thriller in which the hero, defying great odds, achieves something commendable." Szamuely sat in the theater thinking, "What a classic, hokey Hollywood ending. Guy risks losing an eye for Jill, for love. He leaves everything, possibly the greatest story of his career, even his tape recorder with a recording of the report that brought him success, to fly away with Jill." However, *The Year of Living Dangerously* is neither a thriller nor a political polemic, it is, unashamedly, a love story wrapped inside the journey and education of the hero. If Billie's life is not to have been lived in vain, if love is not to be forsaken by ambition, then Guy must complete the hero's journey to enlightenment, which Weir effects with skill of a Greek dramatist.

In Guy's desire to report the crushing of the PKI and the military takeover, a soldier hits Guy in the eye with a rifle butt. He is knocked down. With the help of the soldiers and his driver, he is dragged back to the car. Blood is spilling out of his eye and staining his hands and clothing. He tells his driver to take him to Billie Kwan's, where a doctor examines him and bandages both his eyes. "The retina has detached from the eye," the doctor tells him. "If you don't remain still for two weeks, you may lose the vision in your eye." After his driver leaves out of fear of being killed, Guy is left alone, in darkness. A shaft of sunlight is shown filtering down

through the creaking bamboo and Billie's words are heard in voice-over. "All is clouded by desire, Arjuna; as fire by smoke, as a mirror by dust." It is an archetypal theme: the loss of sight to gain vision. And in the end, love triumphs over ambition, and Billie's spirit causes the lives of Jill and Guy to be transformed. And maybe the lives of some of the people in the audience. This is art in film.