Spielberg's Empire of the Sun fails to live up to its powerful potential

Directed by Steven Spielberg, starring Christian Bale and John Malkovich, Empire of the Sun, released on Friday, January 8, 1988, is Spielberg's newest film. It is a fascinating mix of genre styles, blending historical fiction with a genre Spielberg seems to have grown away from in recent years: a World War II melodrama. This film, the first in what Spielberg hopes to be a trilogy, starts out with a bang, featuring an epic opening sequence that sets the stage for a film that promises much but fails to deliver. The opening scene, a montage of Chinese laborers being forced to build a railroad, sets the tone for the film, which is rife with over-the-top performances and a storyline that meanders from one plot point to another.

The story is told from the perspective of a 10-year-old boy, Jim (Christian Bale), who is sent to a prison camp along with his father's fellow British soldiers. Jim is forced to mature by his exploits in the camp, earning a reputation as a virtual hero among his fellow prisoners. However, when the war ends and the prisoners are freed, Jim is left behind in a state of disrepair. At first, the camp has created a sense of separation between Jim and the other prisoners, but as the film progresses, Jim begins to realize that he is not alone in his suffering.

Spielberg's film is a technical marvel, featuring state-of-the-art special effects and a cast of thousands. However, the film falls flat when it comes to its narrative. The story is disjointed and lacks a clear direction, leaving the audience feeling confused and frustrated. The film is also guilty of squandering its potential, with over-the-top performances and a storyline that meanders from one plot point to another.

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