

1452 words/ 10 minutes

Introduction of Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously*

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

President, Indiana University

IU Cinema

Sunday, October 9, 2016

6:30 p.m.

1. INTRODUCTION

Thank you, Jon.

And let me once again commend you and your staff for your commitment to highly innovative programming that has helped the IU Cinema become one of the finest university cinemas in the nation, not just in the view of thousands of us who frequent it regularly, but also in the opinion of such legends of the cinema as Meryl Streep and Glenn Close. The Cinema has very quickly become one of the jewels of the Bloomington campus.

I am delighted to be here tonight to say a few words about the films I have selected as part of this semester's President's Choice Series, "Reporting Conflict," and to introduce the first film in the series—Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously*.

2. REPORTING CONFLICT: THE MEDIA ON FILM

Just last month, we dedicated the magnificent renovation of Franklin Hall, one of the iconic buildings of the historic Old Crescent. IU's new Media School, which was established in response to the dramatic changes that the media industry has undergone

in recent years, moved into Franklin Hall over the summer, and the building is now once again a vibrant hub of academic life.

In celebration of The Media School's move into its new home, I have selected three films that explore the power and influence of the media. The media has long been an attractive subject for filmmakers, but some of the noteworthy Hollywood films that first come to mind—*All the President's Men*, *Broadcast News*, and *Network*, for example—are quite well known. So, for this series, I have selected three international films—set in Indonesia, Greece, and West Germany—and made in three different decades. These critically-acclaimed films are, perhaps, less well known, but between them they explore a range of fundamental issues that remain relevant in today's media environment—and in doing so, they show the media at its very best and its very worst.

Next month, the cinema will screen the 1975 German film, *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*, based on the novel of the same name by Nobel Laureate Heinrich Böll. The film deals with the sensationalism of tabloid news and the political climate in the wake of Red Army Faction terrorism in 1970s West Germany. It depicts the media at its most despicable, as the tabloid press—through lies, sensationalism, and distortion—persecutes and destroys the career of an innocent woman. Any of us in public life are especially familiar with such behavior.

The film is a devastating critique of the tactics of Springerpresse, the German media conglomerate founded by Axel Springer, and, in particular, its tabloid publication, *Bild*, which was denounced for “catering to primitive human emotion (and) pandering to the coarsest tastes.”¹ The film was directed by Volker Schlöndorff, who went on to win an Oscar for *The Tin Drum*, and Margarethe von Trotta, one of Germany's foremost female directors, and one who has made a number of films that address feminist issues.

¹ Bruce C. Van Voorst, “Press Lord Axel Springer is a German Problem,” *The New York Times*, March 17, 1968.

In December, the cinema will screen Costa-Gavras' 1969 masterpiece, *Z*. It is based on the true story of a photojournalist and a government investigator who uncovered and courageously exposed evidence of the assassination of an opposition party leader in Greece—and it demonstrates, in dramatic, rapid fire fashion, how they achieved this. It won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film and was the first film to ever be nominated in both that category and the Best Picture category. I first saw the film at a time when the coup in Greece and the subsequent repressive crackdown by the military junta were fresh on the minds of the global community.

3. PETER WEIR'S *THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY*

The film you are about to see tonight, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, was directed by Peter Weir, who visited the IU Cinema last year to speak as part of the Jorgensen Guest Filmmaker Lecture Series and for a retrospective of his films.

Weir first earned international acclaim as one of the central figures in the Australian film renaissance known as the Australian New Wave. He is also one of many veterans of the Australian film industry who have gone on to broader success in Hollywood and around the world.

The Year of Living Dangerously was adapted from the novel of the same name by Australian novelist, Christopher Koch. It was, incidentally, one of a number of films in the 1980s that focused on the lives of foreign correspondents, including Roger Spottiswoode's *Under Fire*, Roland Jaffe's *The Killing Fields*, and Oliver Stone's *Salvador*.

The film was originally backed by the South Australian Film Corporation and the Australian Film Commission—two state film development corporations that played a major role in the Australian film renaissance of the 1970s. When the SAFC withdrew,

MGM/United Artists, which was already slated to handle the film's international distribution, came on board as the major financier, making *The Year of Living Dangerously* the first Australian film to be financed by an American studio.

The film is also one of the very few major movies set in Indonesia—I can think of no other. It tells the story of events that occurred in 1965—events that are unfamiliar to most Americans, but that were quite familiar to me, living, as I was, in Australia at that time. It takes place at a time when the regime of President Sukarno, who had ruled Indonesia since it declared independence in 1945, had become increasingly autocratic—and at a time when there were rumors of a potential coup by the Indonesian Communist Party, the PKI, which had the protection of Sukarno. Indonesia was also in the midst of an undeclared war that stemmed from Sukarno's opposition to the creation of Malaysia. This violent conflict—known as the “Confrontation,” came to involve troops from Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain. The eventual collapse of Sukarno's regime led to a major change in the geopolitics of Southeast Asia and, ironically, 30 years of rapid economic development in Indonesia rivalling the most rapid in all of Asia.

The film stars Mel Gibson, fresh off his performance in Weir's *Gallipoli*, as Australian journalist Guy Hamilton, who, along with a group of other foreign correspondents, is covering the increasing unrest in Indonesia. Hamilton, who is new to the assignment, is befriended and assisted by freelance newsreel photographer Billy Kwan, played by actress Linda Hunt in her first major film role. Hunt was primarily known at the time as a New York stage actress. Weir had auditioned Bob Balaban and Wallace Shawn for the part, but when he saw Hunt's headshot, he invited her to audition. Hunt won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her performance, of which Roger Ebert wrote that she “enters the role so fully that it never occurs to us that she is not a man. This is what great acting is,” Ebert continued, “a magical transformation of one person into another.”²

² Roger Ebert, “The Year of Living Dangerously,” June 1, 1983, as reprinted in *Roger Ebert's Four-Star Reviews, 1967-2007*, (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2009), 872.

Sigourney Weaver also gives a wonderful performance as British Embassy officer, Jill Bryant. Weaver has said that her lifelong commitment to fighting human rights abuses stemmed from her experience working on this film.³

After permission to film in Jakarta was denied, the majority of film was shot in the Philippines. The production encountered difficulties there because Muslims who were concerned that the film would be anti-Islam, picketed the set. After Weir and Gibson received death threats, filming was completed in Australia.

The film was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the 1983 Cannes Film Festival.

Joel Meares wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review* that the film accurately depicted a number of elements of the journalism profession. "The collegial competitiveness between the foreign correspondents is wonderfully realized," Meares writes, and "at the center of this story ...journalists make difficult decisions out of knee-jerk reporter's instincts, for personal gain, and sometimes because, to their eye, it is the right thing to do."⁴

As you will see, through a combination of social realism and beautiful artistic symbolism, the film explores what it means to practice ethical journalism—and how the nature of love, trust, commitment, and loyalty can sometimes conflict with the professional journalist's commitment to objectivity and truthful reporting.

In his critical monograph on Weir's films, Don Shiach wrote: "For critics and moviegoers accustomed to thinking in compartmentalized genre terms, *The Year of Living Dangerously* is something of a puzzle. Is it a political thriller, a love story, a film about

³ Cliff Rothman, "A Down-to-Earth Star Explores Other Worlds; Sigourney Weaver Broadens Her Acting Range in Two New Movies," *The Globe*, January 14, 2000, R4.

⁴ Joel Meares, "The Year of Living Dangerously," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July 8, 2011, Web, Accessed October 6, 2016, URL: http://www.cjr.org/critical_eye/the_year_of_living_dangerously.php

journalists, or a serious social problem movie? Perhaps,” Shiach continues, “it is all of these things because it takes aspects of different genres and mixes them up effectively to produce a richly textured movie with different layers and strands. That,” Shiach writes, “is part of its fascination.”⁵

I hope that you will find it equally fascinating.

Now, please enjoy *The Year of Living Dangerously*.

⁵ Don Shiach, *The Films of Peter Weir*, (Charles Letts & Co. Ltd., 1993), 103.