

# The Solar Express

A man in a full-body orange-red spacesuit stands on a dark, metallic platform. He is looking upwards towards a massive, bright yellow-orange sphere that dominates the background, resembling the Sun. The scene is set in a futuristic or industrial environment, possibly a space station or a launch facility.

Danny Boyle,  
Cillian Murphy,  
Alex Garland...  
*28 Days Later's*  
dream team  
beam back with  
\$50 million space  
odyssey **Sunshine...**

WORDS MATT MUELLER

Ninety-three million miles from Earth. An outer temperature of 6,000 and a thermostat-busting inner one of 15 million°C. Most of us can summon a smattering of what they told us in school about the big yellow sky-orb. You know, the one that lets us live, eat, breathe and trash our planet however we damn well please...

But the brash filmmaking trio of director Danny Boyle, producer Andrew Macdonald and screenwriter Alex Garland weren't about to be intimidated by our solar system's shining star. When their 2002 Brit-zom flick *28 Days Later...* resulted in a big, fat hit for 20th Century Fox – especially in America, where good or bad box-office makes and breaks careers on a weekly basis – the studio rewarded them with a bigger budget for their next project. "It's a \$50 million arthouse movie," jokes Garland, but he's not entirely kidding. And while it took them five years to get it to the big screen (Boyle making *Millions* in the interim), *Sunshine* rises with... well, not quite the tsunami of buzz you'd expect from the posse that adrenalised British cinema with *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting* (both written by former screenwriter of choice John Hodge), before churning out genre-splicing hits *The Beach* and *28 Days Later...*

Is it something they said? No, more likely it's simply that *Sunshine* finished shooting almost 15 months ago (*Total Film* visited the sets for the film's spaceship, the Icarus II, in November 2005) and it's taken Boyle, his editor and the effects team this long to shape the story they wanted to tell. It's safe to say that Boyle and his crew lost the plot – literally – a few times along the way.

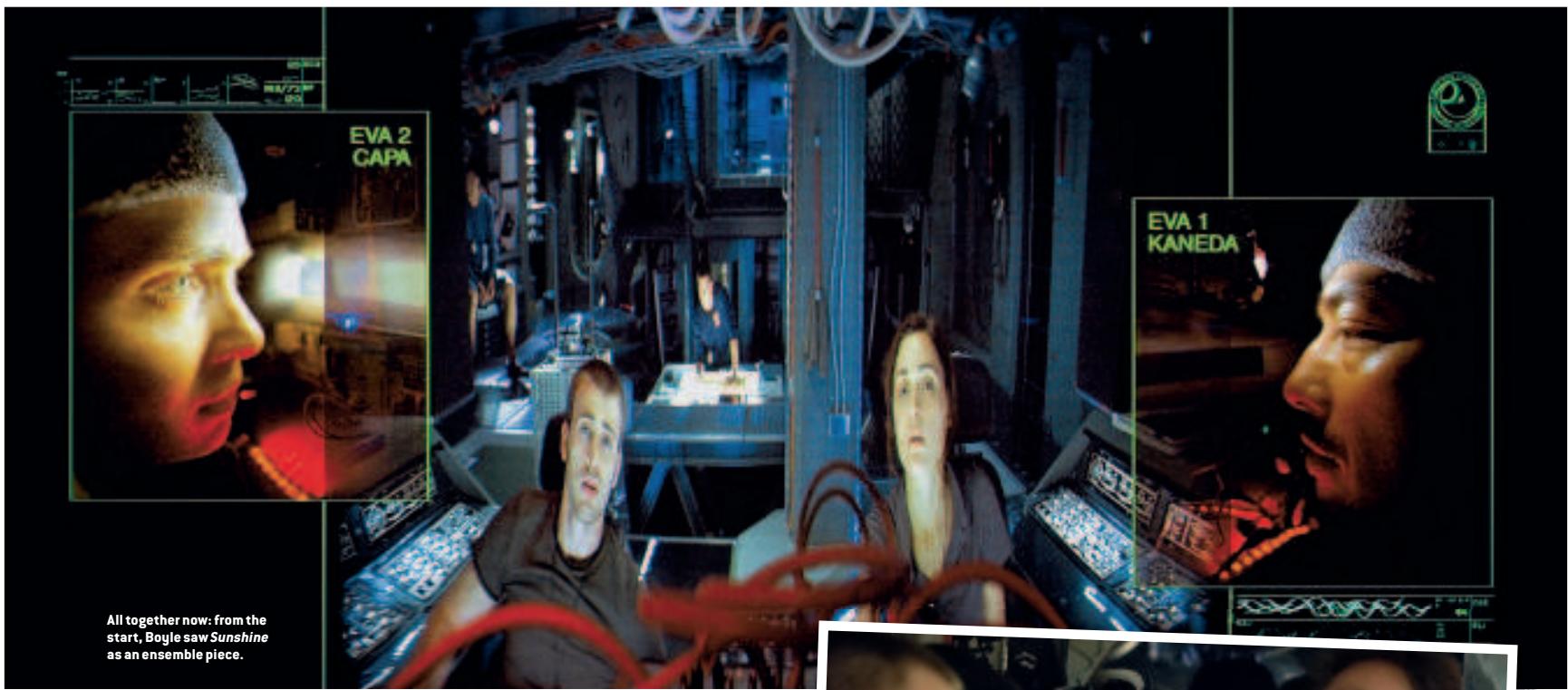
"When you show a film after three months in the cutting room, normally the notes are to do with story errors," sighs Boyle, who's finalising *Sunshine*'s sound mix at Pinewood when *Total Film* catches up with him in mid-December. "But when you show a film after three months in a non-CG version, the notes you get are completely misleading. They're all about, 'We don't know where we are on the ship.' And you keep saying, 'But you're going to get that later.' And you keep recutting the film and recutting the film – and you realise after five months, you've spent all this time doing work that is not just unnecessary but distorting! Then you get the CG in and people watch the film and say, 'See? I told you I was right. You've corrected that problem.' And you think, 'Yeah, like I said, the fucking CG will tell you where you are!'" Boyle bursts out laughing. "We edited *Trainspotting* in six weeks; this took a year. Welcome to that world!"

*Sunshine*'s fire was first lit by Alex Garland. While Boyle and Macdonald were editing *28 Days Later...*, the novelist-cum-screenscribe approached them with a space-movie idea focusing on the beauty and power of the sun. "The sun gives us all life and if it dies, we all die with it," says Garland. "It's got a God-like aspect to it. Plus it's massive, it's incredibly powerful and it's got all these paradoxes – you rely on it totally for your existence but it's the most hostile place you can imagine; it would just evaporate you in a microsecond."

It is set 60 years in the future, where Garland imagines a world where the sun is dying and an eight-person crew of "geeks and techno-nerds" are on a last-hope mission to reignite the fading star by pushing a nuclear payload the size of Manhattan into its core. A self-confessed "sci-fi freak", Garland's love of the genre meant his script encompassed nods to *Alien*, *2001*, *Forbidden Planet*, John Carpenter's *Dark Star* and even 1972's lesser-known *Silent Running*.

**'The Sun is God-like... you rely on it totally, but it could just evaporate you in a microsecond.'**

Alex Garland



## Alex Garland

**Sunshine's scripter on why the end is nigh...**

### What were the seeds of Sunshine?

I wanted to make a sci-fi film and I was just hunting around, wondering, "What's my way in?" I was reading an American science periodical, which had a long-term projection about the future of mankind. And in spite of the fact that we've survived certain kinds of catastrophe and overcome all sorts of obstacles, there's a long-term problem, which is that we rely on consuming energy to live and there's a finite amount of matter and energy in the universe.

### Bit of a worrying prospect...

And however good you get at overcoming the huge distances in space and hostile things like cosmic radiation, you still have a basic problem: eventually, we'll run out of things to consume. At that point, we'll die. That's an amazing idea because it means a point will come where we'll have the last man and when he dies all our histories become meaningless.

### This is getting cheerier by the minute...

I thought it was a mind-blowing concept and that's what I based Sunshine on. It's about a group of people facing extinction. It's an inevitability, there's no "Maybe we'll get over this!" The physicist who worked on this film had a good reduction of it; he said, "The fact that the steam engine works is why we're screwed..."

Add a dash of *The Abyss* (bickering crew) and a dusting of *Event Horizon* (one spaceship stumbling upon another) and you have another sci-fi movie with magpie tendencies. Comes with the territory, reckons Boyle, citing the unavoidable influence of his personal 'Big Three': *Alien*, 2001 and Tarkovsky's *Solaris*. "You have to find an accommodation with them because they hover over everything," says the 50-year-old Mancunian. "You want to make something completely original, but it's like a son realising you've inherited genes from your father and you'll never quite escape him. You'll turn out like him a bit, no matter what you do! To prepare for something like this, you study those films properly. They're all amazing films and *Sunshine*'s got a bit of all three."

Calling shots: Danny Boyle directs the action on set.



*Sunshine*'s little universe — the Icarus II — is populated by Irishman Cillian Murphy as the ship's physicist Capa, who's in charge of the nuke. Then there's Japanese star Hiroyuki Sanada (captain); Aussie actress Rose Byrne (pilot) and *Fantastic Four*'s Chris Evans (combative engineer Mace). Add doctor Cliff Curtis, botanist Michelle Yeoh, communications officer Troy Garity and unstable navigator Benedict Wong and you're ready for take-off. But hang on — a film about a big star without a big

## 'A space movie is the ultimate as you have to create it all.'

Danny Boyle

Which isn't to say Boyle simply rested on other people's laurels. "A space movie is the ultimate movie, because you have to create it all," he says. "*Sunshine* is very like *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting*: it's about people living in a sealed world. In *28 Days Later*... I loved having these people in the taxi sealed in a kind of weird nuclear family. Britain's a small country and we don't have the landscapes and storytelling America has. We have to find a different way of doing it. We create little universes that look out on the world."

star? It was Boyle's firm intention from the off ("Space movies suit ensemble casts; Sigourney wasn't a star when *Alien* was made") but he had to jump through a few hoops to get there. "That's one of the advantages of a hit: it allows you to say no. Because the studio's natural instinct is to cast it up." Still, in Byrne, Murphy and Evans, he's also landed a trio who could easily break through to the A-list.

"It's completely impossible, you can't do it," laughs Boyle of the implausibility of his sunbound storyline. "There's no way you could fly to the sun. You can do all the research you want but it's all bollocks because there's just no way you can get there! Only cinema can take you there!"

In the Pinewood sound mixing studio, Boyle is aurally fine-tuning an exchange between Murphy and Sanada (the doomed ex-husband in the original *Ringu*) which segues into Capa's hallucination-nightmare of plummeting into the fiery sun. Little adjustments are ordered — and the change is noticeable. "That's the difference between US and UK films," Boyle observes. "UK films spend their money and have nothing left for the sound mix, whereas even in bad US films, the sound is amazing."



Virtual reality: Sunshine makes extensive use of CGI.

## Cillian Murphy

**On sci-fi, scientists and sex...**

**Are you beaming about *Sunshine*?**

I'm thrilled with it. It's my kind of movie – proper science-fiction that looks like it cost an absurd amount of money and is also very smart.

**Must be weird making a film where half of it's added in later...**

It was my first time being involved in that kind of thing. It took a long time, but if anyone can maintain enthusiasm on set it's Danny Boyle!

**It's your second gig with Danny and Andrew Macdonald – do you feel proprietorial?**

[Laughs] No, I don't think anyone can tell them – or Alex – what to do. *28 Days Later...* was huge in terms of what I learnt and what it did for my career.

**So what was the deal-maker for you – working with Danny again or doing sci-fi?**

It was one of the best scripts I'd read in a long time. And I thought it would be interesting to see what Danny could do with the genre.

**There was originally going to be some rumpy between you and Rose Byrne's character...**

We talked about it and it just didn't seem like

the time or place, given their mission. We talked about it in *28 Days Later...* too – would you have time for shagging when it's the end of the world?

**What was it like living with the other actors during rehearsals?**

Great. We all had our own bedrooms, but we shared a bathroom and cooking area. It was all pretty basic, but we had fun.

**Danny made you watch sci-fi movies like *Alien* and *2001* as research...**

He also made us watch *The Wages Of Fear*, which was brilliant. The intensity of that film and what it does with the characters' relationships – it was very, very helpful.

**You spent time hanging out with scientists – was that as fun as it sounds?**

They're incredibly serious in their work because it's all about finding out *why*? Why are we here? What's it all about? There's a level of arrogance, but not one that's unpleasant. It's quite endearing.

**You've just done a comedy with Lucy Liu called *Watching The Detectives*...**

*Sunshine* was intense – lots of bleeding and dying – so I decided to do a little comedy, goof around. But now I'm ready to do some bleeding and dying again...

Despite its fundamental bollocks-ness, however, much in *Sunshine* is based on scientific fact. Life on the Icarus II, for instance, is sourced directly from NASA documents, down to the claustrophobic living quarters and gold Mylar spacesuits. Trips to the European Space Station also served Boyle and his research team well, while the cast lived in confined quarters – a university campus near Bow – during rehearsals to get some sense of life aboard a space vessel.

"Everyone was a little apprehensive," says Murphy. "My wife was about to give birth so I was worried about being away. But it was a canny exercise because it showed the pressures of living in a confined space..."

[Spoilers ahead!] And a more unpleasant surprise awaits when they locate the Icarus I and Pinbacker – sole survivor, of the previous, failed mission.

"Obviously they all die but it's a happy ending," laughs Boyle, who originally wanted Pinbacker to be a translucent all-CG character with visible, throbbing internal organs. But the budget wouldn't stretch, so he became a man in a suit, with optical trickery giving him the requisite creepy impact.

## 'I was agnostic before this film. Now I'm an atheist.'

*Cillian Murphy*

You have to believe that these people have been living together for 20 months; there has to be that weariness and sense of personal space being eroded."

But this is a Danny Boyle movie, so personal space is the least of their worries. It's paranoia, death and ferocious sunburn that really get to them.

"Yeah, the guy in the latex suit – Mark Strong," jokes Murphy, of the actor who brings Pinbacker to life and ends up making Capa's bomb-delivering mission a pain in the backside. "He's a fantastic actor. We spent a lot of time together, him sipping coffee through his blisters and me doing the crossword."



Science fact: *Sunshine*'s sets and costumes are based on real NASA papers.



Close quarters: Murphy in the cramped confines of the Icarus II.

"It does become quite spacey by the end," agrees Boyle. "Pinbacker is a spectral presence. He has exposed himself to such forces of light and energy that all the bits that make us up, all the protons and neutrons and electrons, have been rearranged. But whether you see that or whether that's in the characters' heads is entirely up to you." Indeed, Pinbacker's malign presence sparks a climactic science-versus-religion debate in *Sunshine*, one that chimes with its real-life participants.

"For me, this film ultimately is a battle between science and religion, or science instead of fundamentalism," insists Murphy, who hung out with scientists for his role, finding his own perceptions challenged as a result. "I was agnostic before this film. Now I'm very much an atheist. Not just because I spent time with these guys; they just confirmed what I'd always suspected."

That's Boyle's take as well: science triumphs. "I absolutely believe in science, and our ability to change our world for the better," he says. "The intention is obvious, but you try and hide it in something that's enjoyable and intense and powerful."

As for the future, Boyle – who turned down the fourth *Alien* film in the '90s ("I would have been way out of my depth then") – insists *Sunshine* is his first and last foray into science-fiction. "I'll retire before I do another one," he laughs. "I'll drive a taxi rather than go back. I mean, the pressure at the sun's surface is 450 billion times what it is on Earth and that is how much stress you're under. I wouldn't go back there – fucking hell, no way..." **TF**

*Sunshine* opens on April 5 and is reviewed on page 32.