

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (Le scaphandre et le papillon) (2007)

“Words can’t express the grief that engulfs me.”

Major Credits:

Director: Julian Schnabel

Screenplay: Ronald Harwood; based on the book *Le scaphandre et le papillon*, written by Jean-Dominique Bauby

Cinematography: Janusz Kaminiski

Principal Cast: Mathieu Almaric (Jean-Do), Emmanuel Seigner (Céline), Marie-Josée Croze (Henriette), Anne Consigny (Claude), Max von Sydow (Papinou)

Production Background:

Based on Jean-Dominique’s European bestseller, which recounts his extraordinary experience coping with locked-in syndrome, the film is director Julian Schnabel’s third cinematic portrait of isolated artist figures, following *Basquiat* (1996) and *Before Night Falls* (2000). Schnabel first gained fame as a painter himself, capturing the New York art world in the 1980s and becoming something of an *enfant terrible* with his larger-than-life personality as well as his audacious, large-scale works of art. Surprisingly, his films seem to reflect a different aesthetic; reflective, humanistic, and, in the case of the most recent two, even understated.

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly was shot on location in Berck, on the south coast of France, at the actual facility where Jean-Do was hospitalized. Thus the view from the balcony is exactly the one Bauby describes in his memoir. The film’s cast is exceptionally accomplished. Mathieu Almaric had recently given acclaimed performances in *Rois et reine* (*Kings and Queen*, 2004) and *La moustache* (*The mustache*, 2005) and had appeared in more than forty European films; American audiences might recall his singular supporting role in Spielberg’s *Munich* (2005). Emmanuel Seigner has had a similarly distinguished, if less prolific film career, although she may be best known as Roman Polanski’s wife. Max von Sydow became famous a half century earlier as the star of many of Ingmar Bergman’s classics, starting with *The Seventh Seal* (1957). He has appeared in more than a hundred movies.

Commentary:

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly overcomes two obvious challenges: 1) adapting a work of literature that consists entirely of the thoughts of its paralyzed narrator; 2) focusing in every scene on a protagonist who cannot move. The cinema is not well suited to depicting illness; indeed, it is difficult to think of a single film as successful as *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* in portraying a catastrophic health issue (several reviewers cite Jim Sheridan’s *My Left Foot*, 1989). Most “illness movies” that come to mind are sentimental, either by wallowing in the sadness of the victim’s affliction or by celebrating the triumph of the human spirit in the face of suffering. A few others are simply depressing. As a man of letters, Jean-Do is self-conscious about his situation: he struggles in the first half of the film to overcome his self-pity, often with mordant humor, as when he first sees himself reflected in the hospital glass. The film’s greatest

achievement might be the way it manages to be, in the end, both intensely *sorrowful* and yet *inspiring*.

Schnabel has discovered inventive visual means to convey the book's central metaphors, the diving bell (representing Jean-Do's entrapment within his body) and the butterfly (representing his liberation through memory and imagination). Notice how the camera lens becomes precisely analogous to Jean-Do's means of perception, beginning with the striking moment very early in the film when it is stitched shut. The restricted panning shots that follow reflect the physical constraints of locked-in syndrome; the patient's peripheral vision is extremely narrow. When Jean-Do learns how to use his memory and imagination, however, the camera literally soars. Schnabel employs elaborate tracking shots, crane shots, and aerial photography to express his protagonist's new found freedom.

The film's other central metaphor—the iceberg—is entirely the director's invention, and it beautifully, movingly frames the narrative, providing an ending that is visually and emotionally stunning. Schnabel has discovered the perfect objective correlative (T.S. Eliot's celebrated term to define how a poetic image can "objectify" a particular emotion and thereby embody precisely a state of mind) for Jean-Do's realization of his own enduring humanity. "Words can't express the grief that engulfs me," Jean-Do says mid-way through the film. The film's ending provides consolation for all that Jean-Do has lost and a meaningful answer to the question he first asks when he emerges from the coma: "This is life?"

Links to Reviews:

David Edelstein, *New York* <http://nymag.com/movies/reviews/41278/>

David Denby, *The New Yorker*

http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2007/12/03/071203crici_cinema_denby

David Ansen, *Newsweek* <http://www.newsweek.com/id/72031>

Stephanie Zacharek, *Salon*

http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/review/2007/11/30/diving_bell/

Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun Times*

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071220/REVIEWS/712200301/1023>

Peter Rainer, *Christian Science Monitor*

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1130/p12s01-almo.html>

A.O. Scott *The New York Times*

<http://movies.nytimes.com/2007/11/30/movies/30divi.html?ref=movies>

Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone*

http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews/movie/14502911/review/17436427/the_diving_bell_and_the_butterfly