

Searching for Meaning in the Inevitable

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When looking for a quiet movie to reflect upon, the medical docudramas *Iris* (2001) and *The Diving Bell and The Butterfly* (2007) make ideal choices for a night full of insight on mortality. Through the award-winning performances of the main characters, *Iris* Murdoch (portrayed by Kate Winslet and Judi Dench) and Jean-Dominique Bauby (portrayed by Mathieu Amalric), these films separately convey the fragility of the human mind while paralleling their messages of the sanctity of life and the strength of the human spirit. The hardships brought on by their debilitating neurological diseases are conveyed with both accuracy and clarity, bringing a real-life level of connection to the audience's hearts.

"My life is here. A constant repetition in this place. Had I been deaf and blind?" So was Jean-Dominique Bauby's lament for the amends he never made and felt he now never would with his sudden onset of "Locked In" Syndrome. The narrative style of *The Diving Bell and The Butterfly* places the audience inside Bauby's completely coherent thoughts while he lays trapped in his own body, and giving them a very limited perspective: his. Only when he escapes into his memories or his imagination is the audience released as well, unaware that they had been held captive. This concept of captivity is foreshadowed with Bauby's early desire to adapt *The Count of Monte Cristo* after his stroke; this story of wrongful imprisonment becomes a reflection of his own reduced life. This unprecedented turn in his previously carefree life brought new perspective to the meaning (or lack thereof) of his existence.

Locked In Syndrome, in the case of Jean-Dominique Bauby, was caused by an inexplicable stroke that left him completely paralyzed except for eye movement. Despite having the appearance of being in a coma, Bauby retained unaffected mental capabilities and eventually learned to effectively communicate through blinking (National Organization for Rare Diseases, 2010).

"It will win." From the first sign of *Iris* Murdoch's descent into age-induced Alzheimer's disease in *Iris*, the inevitability of her situation was quite apparent. The heartbreaking degeneration of a brilliant mind was almost overemphasized by her scholarly standing and previous intelligence. As a writer, the loss of her words, and the essential meaning of her life, creates an emotional bond with the audience that leaves no avoidance of her agonizingly tragic condition. What started as trivial absentmindedness, gradually progressed through the rest of Murdoch's brain, destroying the vital pathways needed for cognitive function. While her body was fully functional, her mind was literally being eaten away by Alzheimer's disease. Eventually, Murdoch regressed to a childlike state of mind that could barely communicate or operate outside of itself. Similarly, watching Murdoch's relations with her loved ones, especially her husband, degenerate with her disease showed the hell the disease wreaked upon bystanders as well.

Both *Iris* and *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* accurately and, more importantly, respectfully document the contrasting experiences of two very different neurological

diseases. The film industry has a tendency to dramatize the unfortunate parts of life to the point where they become parodies of the truth in order to increase revenue. However, the simple,

genuine portrayals of Alzheimer's and Locked In Syndrome in these two movies should be celebrated for their respect for the disease over the dollar. From the medical scenes to the individual experiences of the patients, both movies made a point of properly communicating and educating the audience about the plights of the diseases. The only discrepancy is that *Iris* seems to overemphasize the sparse medical scenes to make up for the larger focus on the psychological and philosophical aspects.

Both movies make grand efforts to emotionally engage the audience, taking separate (but equally effective) approaches. *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* makes an excellent point of connecting the audience to the struggles of the main character through his own narrative. At the beginning of his treatment, Bauby declares that he wants death, which outrages his speech therapist, Marie. On the surface, the audience can certainly sympathize with Bauby's perspective, some even considering that they would want the same were they in his shoes. As the movie progresses, Bauby comes to realize how precious life is through the amazing process of writing his book. Despite being completely paralyzed and unable to communicate, he found that he was able to go forth with his life in a new, fulfilling way (although a little differently than he had planned). Where *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* focuses on what the main character failed to do, *Iris* places its attention on the full life Murdoch had lived through Murdoch's interactions with the people of her past and present life. Through the use of flashbacks, the audience is taken back to Murdoch's days as a rebellious, independent young woman. Here, the value of life is shown through how much she achieved, rather than how little. Comparatively, despite their physical or mental limitations, the perseverance of the characters in these movies highlights fundamental values that all humans can empathize with: courage, compassion, and respect.

Although *Iris* does not necessarily have the shocking impact of *The Diving Bell and The Butterfly*, or of waking up one day to find yourself trapped inside your own body, it holds its own terror in its prevalence in our lives. The odds of developing the rare *Locked In Syndrome* are slim to none. However, what are the odds for developing Alzheimer's? One in ten, which only goes up with the introduction of other factors (Fischer Center for Alzheimer's Research Foundation, 2011). For this reason alone, *Iris* strikes a harder resonance in the hearts of the audience as she forgets her friends, her husband, and her life. Because Alzheimer's is not an unfortunate rare occurrence like *Locked In Syndrome*, it is a hard slap of reality that many will one day face.

Thus, *Iris* wins the recommendation for its high level of emotional connection, its tasteful method of storytelling, and its philosophical insight. However, *The Diving Bell and The Butterfly* takes the trophy for cinematography and musical score. Neither movie has the makings of an action-packed blockbuster, so therefore they both move a little slowly, but such is the way of thought-provoking films.

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