

## When Fascinating Science Combines with Powerful Emotion

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Two movies arose at the beginning of the twenty-first century that translated the deep emotional anguish felt when a loved one is taken by a devastating neurological disease. *Awakenings*, making its cinematic debut in 1990, is directed by Penny Marshall and produced by Columbia Pictures. It boasts such cinematic all-stars as Robert de Niro and Robin Williams (imdb.com). This movie tells the emotionally charged story of Malcolm Sayer, a character based on real life neurologist Oliver Sacks, who, while at his new position as a doctor at a hospital in New York City, strives to find a cure for a special group of comatose Parkinson's Disease patients. *Iris*, premiering just over ten years later, directed by Richard Eyre and produced by British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), follows the gradual onset of Alzheimer's in the world-renowned Irish philosopher, Iris Murdoch. With Judi Dench and Kate Winslet as the old and young Iris, respectively, and Jim Broadbent as Iris' husband John Bailey, *Iris* delivers a strong, heart wrenching performance. Both *Iris* and *Awakenings* provide a look at what life altering diseases can do not only to the unfortunate person who contracts them, but also to his/her loved ones who fight to stay at their side at every turn.

In *Awakenings*, the audience is captivated as it witnesses Leonard speak for the first time: "Hello, my name is Leonard Lowe. It has been explained to me that I have been away for some time." Leonard beams with euphoria and excitement, suddenly, as a smile forms across his once expressionless face. "I'm back." Leonard's speech is slurred and child-like, but just 24 hours ago, he was unable to feed himself, let alone speak. One of many who survived an encephalitis epidemic from the 1920's, Leonard closely embodies the emotion involved when experiencing the effects that a neurological disease can have on a person. Robert de Niro and Robin Williams portray Leonard Lowe and Dr. Sayer, respectively, by studying the real life neurologist, Dr. Oliver Sacks', old video recordings of his patients (imdb.com). Their performance sends the audience through a rainbow of emotions from the moment when Leonard first speaks all the way up to the ending credits. Juxtaposing the hope and happiness felt in *Awakenings*, *Iris* treks slowly and painfully through Murdoch's gradual descent into complete dementia. "I...wrote?" asks Iris confused. "Yes, my darling...you wrote books!" John replies. "Books...I wrote?" From being a respected student thinker, to an even more respected philosopher and novelist, Iris' dramatic and emotional loss of cognitive ability sets in the viewer a kind of dread of having to deal with such a devastating event, as they watch John, Iris' husband struggle desperately to not only help his wife in gathering her wits, but also his own. If *Awakenings* is a rainbow of emotions, *Iris* is more like a work of Picasso as it becomes hard to cope with such erratic emotions towards the films melodramatic close.

*Awakenings* plot focuses on Dr. Malcolm Sayer who is an introverted and reclusive neuroscientist. He jumps for a job offer at a hospital in the Bronx and even though he has nearly no clinical experience, he is ultimately chosen for

the opening. Finding it hard to connect with any of the other patients, Dr. Sayer begins focusing on a small group of individuals who all appear to be in a comatose, vegetative state and are all survivors of a 1920's encephalitis epidemic. After discovering some interesting characteristics in the patients, such as "borrowing the will" of an object, Dr. Sayer stumbles upon a new drug, L-dopa, that yields promising results when given to Parkinson's patients. Dr. Sayer, particularly fascinated by the case of Leonard Lowe, begins feeding him the new drug. Within a short period of time, Leonard suddenly breaks from his cerebral prison. Upon seeing the positive results exhibited in Leonard, Dr. Sayer convinces the board of physicians to allow him to treat all of the encephalitis victims with the promising drug. However, a short time after everyone "awakes" from their elusive slumber things begin to go downhill as Leonard begins to exhibit some grim side effects.

*Iris*, jumping from the philosopher's risqué college years to her later years where she is affected by Alzheimer's, begins by showing Iris' deep insight into love and philosophy as a college girl and a world renowned novelist. She is first presented in a way that portrays her mind as being almost impermeable to any sort of dementia or neurological degeneration. However, by the end of the first quarter of the movie, the telltale signs of Alzheimer's begin surfacing. She repeats phrases for no apparent reason, she cannot recall how to spell certain words, her thoughts become disorganized and it becomes more and more difficult for her to write. Finally, at the climax of the movie, under the hot lights of the television studio and at the scrutiny of the interviewer sitting opposite her and the whole world, she exhibits full loss of all short term memory and runs home in utter confusion. It is at this point that the once steady slope into cognitive decline observed in the once thoughtful and passionate romantic, turns into a steep and unrelenting descent into complete and total dementia. With flash backs of her days at college and her many "relationships" with her fellow students sprinkled throughout the film, the sadness felt by the audience for Iris is accentuated as they see the lively being she once was.

Unlike *Iris*, the emotional climax in *Awakenings* occurs towards the end of the film. "You could wake up tomorrow morning and it won't be there!" yells Dr. Sayer as he explains to the increasingly aggressive Leonard, unable to keep still due to constant ticks, how he can easily take away his medicine. After achieving success with L-dopa, the haunting side effects of the miracle drug now become blatantly evident. From completely breaking free from a comatose prison, as if getting a new lease on life, Leonard now stares at the gates of his mind's own prison, as the effectiveness of the drug begins to wear off. Dr. Sayer's words rock Leonard's world. Before, when Leonard was still afraid to go to sleep, as he thought he might not wake up, Dr. Sayer would tell him that it was okay, he'll wake up and it would be another morning. As the beginning of the movie only briefly shows Leonard's initial lapse into paralysis, this turning point in the movie sums up the entire emotions one may feel when losing a loved one to a neurologically degenerating disease. Dr. Sayer is angry, but as he yells at Leonard, his face contorts in an effort to hold back the tears of sadness. He is seeing this once fun loving and lively man become paralyzed into a shell of a human being. This is perhaps the most powerful moment in the movie because after showing the audience the innocent and charismatic personality of the newly awakened Leonard, they are shown

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him being reduced to the catatonic lump of a human being that he originally was. This aspect of neurological disease is also conveyed in *Iris*. After remaining as calm and composed as he can with his deteriorating wife, John finally bursts, as Iris repeats, "help me, help me" but simultaneously pushes him away in fear. He yells at the peak of his voice, "I'm trying to help you!" and storms out of the room. This scene, as with the scene from *Awakenings* gives the audience a true sense of the position the victims loved ones are in. At every turn they try to help them, but they are human, too. Their patience can only go so far. John, providing the viewer with an exceptional example of a truly loyal companion, replies to Iris' attempts at apologizing with "No, no, I'm sorry. It's not your fault," explaining to her and realizing himself, that it was nothing that she did that caused her to contract such an unfortunate disease.

Even though *Iris* may be a very well made movie, with stunning performances by all of the actors and actresses, it does not convey the same amount of emotion that *Awakenings* does. I found that there were too many emotions thrown at the viewer in too short amount of time and the character of Iris was not built up in the same way that the character of Leonard was. Iris is shown to be a rambunctious and a rather unfaithful companion, as a younger woman, throughout the movie. I found that I didn't feel nearly as connected with her character as I did with Leonard's, perhaps due to the disorganized spectrum of emotions throughout the film, compared to the rather smooth transition of emotions in *Awakenings*. When it comes to teaching the viewer about neurological disease, *Iris* goes about this task in a rather subtle way, with short instances of hospital scenes where the doctor explains briefly what is happening to *Iris*. *Awakenings* being set in a hospital, teaches the audience a lot more about the disease exhibited in the movie. Ultimately, I lean more towards recommending *Awakenings* as *Iris* proves to be a phenomenal theatrical performance, teaching the audience quite a bit about emotion, but a very little bit about science and *Awakenings* not only provides the audience with a heartwarming performance, but at the same time teaches them about the science behind the disease.

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