

## Brain Disease: A Lethal Story

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Media portrayal of neurological diseases offers audiences an opportunity to experience a life that is not their own. This portrayal can shape the audience's perceptions of the disease, creating a stigma, which makes it important that these movies provide fairly accurate representations. Although the following two movies may not be complete depictions of the diseases they showcase, the films provide respectable accounts of individuals living with a neurological ailment. In 2015, Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, in collaboration with Killer Films, released *Still Alice*, starring Julianne Moore and Alec Baldwin. In this film, where a linguistics professor is diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's. Preceding that film, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, released in 2007 and directed by Janusz Kamiński, followed the true story of a magazine editor who suffered a stroke and subsequently locked-in syndrome. Though both movies offer an insightful view into the lives of two patients dealing with very different neurological disabilities, *Still Alice* was more effective educationally regarding the neurological disease. This movie explicitly provides an explanation about Alzheimer's and showcases accurate mental deterioration, whereas *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* illustrates a more personal perspective of the disease and evokes a stronger emotional response.

To provide some background, Alzheimer's disease from *Still Alice* occurs when protein processing goes wrong. Simply put, the first protein involved is amyloid-beta that turns toxic and builds up in the brain, disrupting neuron functioning (St George-Hyslop, P. H., 2000). The second protein, tau, is a key player in cellular structure and the delivery of nutrients throughout the cell. During the disease, the shape of tau is twisted, ruining the microtubules and ultimately impairing their function (St George-Hyslop, P. H., 2000). Locked-in syndrome, emulated in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, causes complete paralysis with limited eye movement but leaves the patient's consciousness intact (Surdyke, L., et. al., 2017). The latter movie centers on Jean-Dominique Bauby's experience with the rare disorder. His story is told through first person perspective, offering insight into his altered view of the world (Schnabel, J., 2007). On the other hand, *Still Alice* tells the story of Alice and her family coming to terms with an incurable disease that will slowly degrade her memory and well-being (Glatzer, R., & Westmoreland, W., 2015).

In more depth, *Still Alice* details the life of a seemingly healthy professor at Columbia as she begins to lose her train of thought as well as forget names and words. These symptoms force Alice to come to terms with her diagnosis of early onset Alzheimer's. When Alice tries to understand her symptoms, the neurologist she visits takes the proper steps in diagnosing her. For example, he takes a PET scan and administers a memory test. Once Alice is diagnosed, the neurologist describes her PET scan results and discusses amyloid-beta plaques and the role that these plaques play in causing the disease. The neurologist also talks about familial Alzheimer's, which is the reason that Alice experienced symptoms at such a young age (Glatzer, R., & Westmoreland, W., 2015). This is an educational scene we do not necessarily get from *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. This movie in turn showcases the life of Jean-Dominique from both the past and the present. His life prior to the stroke is told in flashbacks while he occasionally remembers his former job and relationships. In the present, we see Jean-Do's adjustment to life with locked-in syndrome, especially how he learns to communicate by blinking his left eye and eventually writes a memoir. Interestingly, the camera angle is set as the same perspective as Jean-Do for a good part of the movie, which allows the audience to connect with his sudden changed perspective of the world (Schnabel, J., 2007).

Although each movie has its strengths, *Still Alice* educationally and *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* emotionally, I felt one important concept is that each movie is still well-rounded in both aspects. To be more specific, *Still Alice* had an emotionally heavy scene in which Alice and her husband are at their beach house getting ready to go on a run, but she has to use the bathroom and cannot find it, so she urinates herself and breaks down (Glatzer, R., & Westmoreland, W., 2015). I resonated with

the character when I watched her go through that because it would be terrifying to lose your memories and never get them back. *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* does have an informative opening scene in which doctors explained to Jean-Do that he had a cerebrovascular accident that stopped his brain stem from working, leaving him completely paralyzed (Schnabel, J., 2007). However, the camera angle gave this movie an upper-hand emotionally because, right from the start, the audience is thrust into the viewpoint of the main character (Schnabel, J., 2007). This directing decision amplifies that sense of living with the syndrome because the audience sees exactly what Jean-Do sees. Only rarely did we see a third-person perspective of the main character, which carried a powerful tone (Schnabel, J., 2007).

Overall, I would recommend both movies because they both accurately depict the neurological condition at hand. *Still Alice*, in my opinion, does a superior job of educating the audience about the pathology of Alzheimer's disease, while *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* is more emotionally effective. However, that is not to say that *Still Alice* lacked in emotional intelligence, as there were plenty of scenes that provoked a range of emotions like the aforementioned bathroom scene. Contrastingly, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* left me with a sense of what locked-in syndrome felt like; however, I did not finish the movie with a complete understanding of the disorder. The main goal of the movie centers on how he perceived the world after the stroke. This movie did an excellent job of showing what it is like for Jean-Do to handle locked-in syndrome due to the fact that it was a true story. I enjoyed both movies because of this integration of education and emotion. More often than not, those who have no connection to any neurological disorder only see a one-sided story that is mainly scientific. It was captivating to see the disorders' effect on families and life beyond the diagnosis. In summation, these movies raised a degree of awareness to each of the neurological disorders that they represented in an intriguing way and connected audiences to something that they may not have had much prior knowledge about.

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