

Awakening the Heart inside the Mind: A Comparative Movie Review

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Your eyes are open, but your mind is closed. You breathe, see, think, feel; but a link to reality is lost. There is a thick barrier between you and those around you. You can try to break through-to make a connection-but you are not capable. Yet, you are not alone. According to the World Health Organization, "neurological disorders...affect up to one billion people worldwide," which means that fourteen percent of your fellow humans experience similar challenges. On the other hand, the majority has little understanding as to what you go through. Most people cannot fathom what your life is like. Communication through media is often the most effective way to portray medical mysteries like neurological disorders and a number of movies attempt to provide a realistic account. Two such movies are *Iris* (2001), directed by Richard Eyre, starring Kate Winslet, Judi Dench, Jim Broadbent and Hugh Bonneville, and *Awakenings* (1990), directed by Penny Marshall, starring Robert De Nero and Robin Williams. The former focuses on Alzheimer's and the latter focuses on Encephalitis Lethargic. Both are inspired by real-life experiences and work to present the truth to the audience. Yet, it is easy to see that one of these educates the audience more thoroughly. One movie reigns over the other in providing an informative account and evoking deep emotions from the viewer. While both *Iris* and *Awakenings* clearly illustrate the daily lives of people with neurological disorders, *Awakenings* triumphs in intriguing and enlightening viewers with medical information.

Iris focuses more on a love story, so it does not succeed in emphasizing disease related information. The movie was based off of *Elegy for Iris*, a book John Bayley wrote about his wife Iris Murdoch. The movie switches back and forth between the couple when they are young and when they are elderly. The story begins with the young Iris; she is talkative, charming, bright, intelligent and charismatic. One evening at a social dinner event, she and John meet. She appears lovely and beautiful while the older John keeps to himself and stutters his words. It is an unlikely match. Yet, they begin to converse, and soon become friends. On a professional level, Iris is a philosopher of love and passion, fears and freedom. However, on a more personal level she is a promiscuous woman. As time goes on Iris and John enjoy one another's company and their friendship strengthens. Iris shines with her ambitions and dreams and John supports her as any good friend would. But, he cannot help being bothered by her various love partners. Iris feels she can trust John and he is the first person she allows to read her book. They are a happy pair, and eventually decide to get married.

A switch back to the elderly Iris and John effectively shows a different side of the story. Iris continues writing and John continues supporting her through it all, but the audience can see a gradual change in Iris. Slowly, she becomes puzzled and confused. Next, she loses her thoughts midsentence, and then loses her ability to focus and repeats phrases. She loses the ability to communicate,

and the audience sees the effects of Alzheimer's on this lovable character. The movie portrays the neurological disorder well by illustrating Iris's inability to reason, forgetting where she is, and wandering around without a destination or purpose. But, the main focus of the movie is John dealing with Iris's new character, and there is limited information about the disease. The viewer becomes sad that Iris is losing connection with reality and with her love. But, the movie offers no hope in a treatment or medical advice. There is very little information about Alzheimer's disease and its effects on the brain. The movie would have been more valuable and interesting if it educated viewers by bringing up amyloid plaques or tau tangles. So although the movie succeeds in evoking a reaction of sadness that Iris has a neurological disease, there is no understanding or connection as to why she is changing. It fails to intrigue viewers with the science behind the mind.

The second movie, *Awakenings*, is based on the book *Awakenings*, by Doctor Oliver Sacks. This drama accounts a doctor's experience with patients suffering from Encephalitis Lethargica. Dr. Slater comes into an interview at the local hospital as a fully capable professional; that is, fully capable of working on plants. The last place he wants to work is in a clinic with human patients. Yet he attains the job and soon finds his passion. The clinic he works in is full of sick, inactive patients. It seems like a dead end, yet one day Slater observes some interesting behaviors in a mute and wheelchair-ridden patient. Soon he finds there is a group of patients with identical behavior. Suddenly Dr. Slater feels prompted to work off of a sliver of hope, and his ambition and persistence lead him to a world of medical discovery. With the pill L. Dopa, and a patient named Leonard, Dr. Slater breaks the barrier of silence and awakens new life in patients previously incapable of experiencing the joys of reality. All the patients previously afflicted with the neurological disorder Encephalitis Lethargica are pulled out of their mental grave. We watch a miracle unfold as they suddenly walk, talk, laugh, and let out years or decades of ideas, thoughts, and jokes. In their excitement they reach out to embrace life for all it can be. Yet Mother Nature will not allow all of this happiness and bliss to continue. After a set amount of time, L. Dopa fails to perform. The patients' neurological conditions take a swift turn back toward their previous state. As the viewer felt the patients' hope and visions rise and broaden, they suddenly see the patients deteriorate back to a world with no connections to real life- a life with no laughs, no love, no hope. Dr. Slater tries to alter the treatment plan, but all attempts are in vain. The story shows that medical treatment is not always as it appears. At times science is nothing more than a dreadful mystery, but we have to take it for what it is. The mind is a great, wonderful, and at times, horrible entity. Looking back on the highs, countered with sudden loss and emptiness, Dr. Slater expresses, "You told [Leonard] I was a kind man. How kind is it to give life, only to take it away?" The viewer is reminded of a simple truth: "It's given to and taken away from all of us."

If you have some free time and want to watch a movie, but do not know exactly what you are looking for, other than that it better be interesting and fun, you should absolutely watch *Awakenings*. This movie exemplifies a medical mystery and is an account of a true miracle. The movie explains a medical mystery in great detail, and delves into the natural, scientific wonders of diseases in the mind. This story gets straight to the heart, and draws out important

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thoughts on how we, the other eighty six percent of the world, choose to live our lives. Take advantage of your connection to reality. Open your eyes, and open your mind.

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