

Cinematographic Protocol

Viewpoint: Special needs and rehabilitation
Film title: Le scaphandre et le papillon (2007)
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Synopsis

The true story of Elle editor Jean-Dominique Bauby who suffers a stroke and has to live with an almost totally paralyzed body; only his left eye isn't paralyzed. (synopsis imdb.com)

The movie directed by Julian Schnabel, located and produced in France, tells the story of an accomplished man who at the height of his career one day awakens to find himself facing the biggest challenge in his life. A life event, which forces him to think, think about life, think, since thinking suddenly is the only thing left for him: The only things I still have are my imagination and my memory. The story is about coming to terms in the wake of a devastating news: You have survived due to the advances of technology. You had a cerebral stroke. And now, are you ready, Jean-Do?, now you are reduced to what people out there call a vegetable. What kind of vegetable? Une carot? Une patate? Une cornichon? There is hardly anything you can do about it. You are locked in. You are exposed to the good will of the people around you. You will have to swallow their jokes, the stupidities. Everything. You can not speak, you can not run, not hide, not rebel in any way.

Reason for this film

The film is based on the autobiographical work of the protagonist. Jean Dominique has lived an extroverted and accomplished life up until he had a stroke. In many senses he was an outstanding person enjoying his accomplishments as much as the glamour that came with being the editor of French fashion magazine Elle. Thus, he lived the life of a movie protagonist per se. The dramatic turn of his fate led him to write his life story which in this way became available to the public. Julian Schnabel in an interview talks about his motivation to the movie being his changing relation to death. He talks about the death of his mother and his father and thinking how he would be next: "I knew about the book for years, but I had no intention of making this movie. I'd been terrified of death my whole life - like my father. And I guess I was next on the conveyor belt, so I figured I'd better straighten this out before I go, because it can't just be sex, chaos and nothingness. So I made this movie and you know, I'm not scared to die. Maybe it's totally illogical that I feel like that, but if someone wants to come up and kill me right now, I won't be scared. I think it taught me how to live in the present ..."

Cinematography - Timeline

0:02:00 Waking up - Don't be afraid you are in a hospital
0:06:00 Preparing the room & Ines
0:07:20 Television cartoon
0:08:00 The repulsive neurologist
0:11:00 Physiotherapy
0:12:00 Henriette & Marie
0:14:40 Yes. I was the editor of Elle
0:15:20 Eye surgery & the skiing vacation in St. Moritz
0:16:40 First time wheel chair & first time seeing himself in the mirror
0:26:30 Marie: Blow me a kiss.
0:29:50 Pierre Roussin & Beirut
0:31:30 Confession and affinity
0:32:10 Hold fast to the human inside you.
0:33:00 Henriette: Vous voulez mourir?!
0:35:00 First time he laughs: the funny black friend
0:39:40 Henriette: Merci.
0:40:00 First total with wheelchair - the imagination and the memory
0:42:00 The beauty of life - rising spirit, overcoming lethargy
0:42:42 Ca - c'est moi!
0:43:00 First call back to the world: the publisher
0:45:00 Getting to work
0:46:00 Prose and fantasy of the hospital
0:47:40 Cine-citta
0:49:00 Night: the black friend reads (as opposed to the test-image of the television)
0:50:00 Intrusion of the banal: phone company dudes, defensive Henriette and amused Jean-Do
0:52:00 The fly on his nose
0:53:00 Looking back - shaving the father
0:58:00 Father's day - seeing the children on the beach (tom waits) & true love
1:04:00 TV: soccer - turned off
1:18:00 Shit - it was only a dream
1:20:00 Father calls - locked in the apartment
1:26:00 Together on the boat - another nice day
1:30:00 Happy birthday - pneumonia
1:43:00 How it happened
1:45:00 The book is out
1:47:00 Death

Cinematography - Techniques

The movie begins with blurry, shaky images in a room. Special effects are used to distort the amorphous group of people in the room to uncanny ghost like shadows. The moment of waking up, where the eye and the mind need time to adjust and to grasp the situation, is portrayed and the viewer understands that what he sees is the perspective of a person who comes to be the main character. Then suddenly the figures in the room discover the waking of the person and approach his visual field. We see faces looking at us, they appear strange in their acting. They look at you, we can now see their mimic, and begin to address the person. Thus the feeling in the viewer of being a self, a person starts to intensify. It reminds of a sequence of birth: Rising awareness and a gradual orientation in space and time. It takes time to understand the situation. The uninterrupted monologues of the ghosts have the effect of increasing the grotesque of the situation.

Don't be afraid you are in a hospital - says the first character who then turns out to be the head of the medical staff assigned to the character. The message in itself contains a double-bind: apparently something devastating has happened to me, I have good reason to be worried, as I have no idea about my condition. It will take a long time before Jean-Do, the character who we come to be locked in with, will get a glimpse on his appearance when he accidentally passes a mirror on the occasion of his first wheel-chair transport across the hospital. Throughout the movie the personal perspective of being Jean-Do will remain the main carrier of the narrative. Alternatively there are short aesthetic instalments of scenes, where Jean-Do is seen from the outside. These shots convey emotions: Him in his wheelchair on a wooden platform on the beach in the water of the sea, isolated, seen from the back, looking out into the sea. At other times these shots are used to show an event: Jean-Do strapped to a physiotherapeutic exercise machine in a weird upright posture, eventually a fly lands on his nose, upon which he is frustrated enough to suddenly be able to slightly move his head which then is taken up by his care taking surrounding and enlarged to a hilarious celebration of progress. (00:52:00)

The viewer is taken through the drama through odd, blurry perspectives. The protagonist is paralysed, he has to resort to extreme movements of his left (over) eye. When he is shown, we can see his effort to target his vision. The camera takes up this effort. The shots are taken from odd angles, oblique unfinished perspectives and forceful movements dominate the shots. In contrast to this, sequences of blending back into his past are introduced, where we can see Jean-Do as a lively, active, maybe charming womaniser. His loving relationship to his father is displayed in this manner. Here the camera is an outside observer, relationships, real and imagined ones are portrayed. Sensuality and activity shown are inserted as a contrast to his current inert state. At times there are shots which give space to his memory and imagination, which in a turning moment of the plot he comes to understand are the only things still left to him. (00:40:00) We are led to a wonderful sequence where he introduces us the history of the hospital, tells us about princesses and acrobats, frames the patients as a heroic population, and these dreamscapes are woven into the fabric of the cinema with a continuity, and only the change of the costumes make us realise that we have left the delirium of the daily routine and are now taken to his world of fantasy. (00:46:00)

Dramaturgy

The first half of the movie is bizarre and is dominated by introducing his antiseptic hospital routine. His right eye is being sewed up in a dramatic shot which we see from behind his eyelids (00:15:00), staff enters and goes, he is left at their various degree of mercy and thoughtfulness. In this part it is the loss of his autonomy which is foreground, his despair, the difficulty of communication with the outside world, and the prospect of having to continue life devoid of movement. You are the talk of the town. They are saying Jean-Do is a vegetable. - Oh, a vegetable?! Which kind of vegetable?! Une patat?! Une carot?! Une cornichon?! (00:35:00). The second half is based on the content of his book, which opens up to deliver us a wide angle view of his life. Here previous experiences are intermingled with stories in the hospital. Yet, here the character takes over the narrative. His prose and his fantasy are the basis of the cinematic shots, and thus the camera is allowed to branch out from the locked in perspective, is allowed to tell stories, to describe beautiful things. Here the writing of a book that he dedicated himself to becomes the driving force of the narrative. The excitement and agitation of organising the writing infrastructure, the encounters with the publisher (00:43:00) and the phone-company dudes (00:50:00) set the emotional dynamic to a pro-active attitude.

The third and closing part is a culmination of the events. Just when he comes to terms with his condition and starts to enjoy his life with his children and his partner, he is faced with pneumonia. By this time he has completed the book, which appears in solid print form on his death bed. A text can only exist, if it is written. His work is done, his energy is used up, Jean-Do dies having accomplished one last challenge.

The closing sequence is used to finally reveal the onset of the story. During the entire film, the viewer is kept to speculate on how the cerebrovascular stroke has erupted. The voyeurism, kept at bay in order to focus on the drama triggered by the event, is granted satisfaction when everything else which was important has been told. The final scene begins innocent as a drive in a luxurious Jaguar cabriolet across picturesque French landscape. We see him in a worry-free dandy dialogue with his son. The scene is shot from above, from a helicopter. Just as we come to be really jealous about this paradisiac life, we come to understand that this is the setup: eventually he has to pull over and stop the car, the son realises something is wrong. Jean-Do's last thought before falling into coma is that he has to cancel the theatre tickets for that evening.

The drama that the film depicts is the gradual acceptance and coming to term with one's fate in the light of a devastating experience. The position of the protagonist is a young white male, who seemed to have it all and one day awakens to find that his life is degraded to observation. He is locked in his body. Yet, eventually he learns that he is out of options. The first sentence he dictates to Henriette, his young and attractive speech trainer is a sentence of resentment: I want to die. (00:33:00)

The movie uses the appearance of characters as allegoric carriers of ups and downs. His first encounter is with the laconic doctor who welcomes him in the hospital. Then comes the repulsive and intrusive neurologist who breaks the news of his current condition with cynic cruelty: (00:08:00) Hello, Jean-Do! Your friends call you Jean-Do, so I can call you Jean-Do? Just think of me as a friend. No one has told you the hard truth. Thats my job. You have had a cerebrovascular stroke and normally you would be dead. Thanks to the advances in rescutation technology, you have a life. But I wont minze my words Jean-Do, you are paralysed head to toe. Now, next up two beauties will visit you, and when I say beauties... And so on. Then

eventually Marie, his physiotherapist enters the scene and provides for one of the erotic highlights in the movie. The film includes the genre specific must-have of the love scene and adapts it in a very intelligent way to convey the barrier to the world of bodily sensations. Marie has to teach Jean-Do to learn to swallow again. This she does with a highly eroticised exercise. We see her in full close-up exercising her tongue and blowing a kiss. (00:26:00)

Message conveyed by the movie

It is about how dreams can keep us alive, how we can hold on to our capacities of memory and imagination when deprived of everything else. There is the wonderful parallel drawn when a former acquaintance of Jean-Do comes to visit him. Pierre Roussin has spent over four years as a hostage in Beirut. How he got there was that Jean-Do left him his seat on the airplane which then was hijacked. Roussin comes to visit Jean-Do and tells him about being locked in a cell, living in isolation and deprivation. Hold on to the human inside of you, he tells him. It is not only about dreams, but also the about the transcendence of a life as a dream, it is the victory of the ego over the self. Leaving a meaningful message behind, making a difference, communicating with the world outside even when there is no more material benefit to be expected. The movie shows us, how we in the wake of annihilation, by focussing all the energy left, still can manage to pull one more outstanding act.

Personal opinion

I left the film with a deep melancholy. I am not sure if that was the intention of the movie, but in the end, Jean-Do, who we come to know as a person who is so much loved and cared for, has risen one more time, gathered all his life energy for to complete one last thing on this earth. The capacity to focus, to be disciplined, and to achieve things way beyond expectations is truly admirable. Yet in the end we learn that his immense effort could only last as long as he would accomplish the one thing he still could achieve. He strived to leave a legacy, to show it one more time, and to leave something of him behind: his story, his book. That was what still kept him alive. The story was built around the point and pointlessness of life in general and of his life in particular. He could find a point, hold on to it, grow in a state where not only growth but movement as such seemed impossible.

The film I suppose is a true inspiration for those who are free to move as much as it is for people who suffer severe impairments at a point in their lives. The circumstances yet are highly idealised and eventually one will begin to dissociate with the character just due to the fact that even in his critical moment he is given so much care and attention: He lands in an idyllic setting surrounded by loving and caring wonderful ladies to whom he apparently means a lot. Yet most of everyday patients might just might not be that lucky and will eventually have a higher dose of phone-company characters and annoying befriending neurologist buddies and a lesser dose of beach and light towers.

I don't mind you to drag me to the bottom of the ocean 'cause you are my butterfly: Maybe I should tell this more often.