

# *Le Scaphandre et le Papillon*

## The Diving Bell and the Butterfly

### (Schnabel. 2007 France)

#### Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives (AL)

#### Component 2: European Film (AS)

#### Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

#### Rationale for study

- A beautiful and heart-wrenching film about the remarkable, true, story of a Jean-Dominique Bauby who suffers a massive stroke and 'locked-in syndrome' yet manages to write a book about his situation. The film positions us, largely, within the mind of Bauby as he alternates between reality, memory and fantasy. The film received huge acclaim from critics and won many awards for its breathtaking use of visuals and powerful performances. It is a tragic and, at times, comic tale which students will love exploring the unique aesthetic style of.

#### STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- The fantasy sequence Jean- Do talks about his paralysis. 00:40-00:44
- The Fathers' day sequence 0.53.03-1.00.48

#### CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

#### Cinematography

- In the sequence (00:40-00:44) the use of statically-framed long and extreme-long shots at the beginning suggest the distance that Jean-Do feels from the world around him. He and his nurse are isolated within the frame reflecting Jean-Do's isolation.

- In Jean-Do's fantasy sequence we are brought into his mind by the use of close-ups, initially, to position us intensely close to the butterfly as it emerges from its chrysalis. A series of mid-shots then give way to wider and wider shots as Jean-Do's imaginative scope widens. We are presented with epic views of fantastical images that give the sequence a grandeur and poignancy.
- In the Father's Day sequence we see more use of camera movement and handheld cinematography to reflect Jean-Do's dynamism and movement as he shaves his father, this contrasts with the much more static point of view shots we see in the second part of the sequence as Jean-Do is forced to watch his children, in his paralysed state, on the beach.

#### Mise-en-Scène

- In the sequence (00:40-00:44) when Jean-Dominique talks about how his eye, his imagination and his memory are the only things not paralysed, the sequence begins in the cold and windy exterior of the hospital reflecting the uncomfortable and harsh situation that Jean-Do is in because of his paralysis. The performances are static and inexpressive to further reflect the nature of Jean-Do's situation.
- As Jean-Do begins to fantasise in the 00:40-00:44 sequence we see his thoughts on imaginative freedom reflected in the use of visual fantasies. A collage of fantasy lifestyles and places reinforces the contrast with his real situation in the hospital.
- In the Father's Day sequence, we see the expressiveness of Jean-Do before the stroke contrasted with the impassivity of Papinou. Set in a staid apartment we are encouraged to understand their distant relationship. In the next scene we see a similar juxtaposition of performance styles as Jean-Do's children visit him. He is forced to be inexpressive because of the stroke and the children are animated. This cues a complex response as we experience Jean-Do's pain but also his ability

to understand the stoicism of his father better.

### Editing

- In the sequence (00:40-00:44) when Jean-Dominique talks about how his eye, his imagination and his memory are the only things not paralysed a superimposed montage sequence of archive and original footage is used to create a beautiful representation of hope and optimism. The motif of the butterfly is shown in this sequence as a butterfly emerges from a chrysalis suggesting the rebirth of Jean-Do's positive outlook on life after his catastrophic stroke. The accompanying music creates a sense of beauty and wonder to reinforce the meaning.
- At the end of the fantasy sequence we are presented with a montage of photographs of Jean-Do's face at various points in his life. The images are presented in reverse chronology taking him back to the age of a baby, reminding us of a life that has had a tragic end.
- Towards the end of the sequence on the beach the camera leaves Jean-Do and pans across the beach as though to end the sequence but then the film cuts to an extreme long-shot of Jean-Do in his wheelchair on a platform surrounded by the sea. The surprising juxtaposition and use of discontinuity is comic yet also tragic as we suddenly are reminded of his absurd situation.

### Sound

- In the fantasy sequence, the pace and rhythm of the non-diegetic music reflects the sense of progression we see visually as the butterfly emerges and begins its life. The music becomes more expressive and louder as the sequence develops to reflect the scope and sweep of Jean-Do's imagination.
- The lack of music in the first scene at Jean-Do's father's apartment creates an austere impression of Papinou and forces the spectator to focus on the minimally expressive dialogue between the two characters. The lack of emotional connection is clear. The light-hearted use of major scales and French jazz music, later, contrasts with the children's distress at seeing the father and creates a bitter-sweet experience for the spectator.
- The music at the end of the Father's Day sequence is melodic jazz which, at first, complements the upbeat family beach scene and even the rather dark humour of Jean-Do describing himself as a 'zombie'. As the scene ends, we see Jean-Do being taken away from his family and the music fades

out to leave us in near silence creating a bleak and stark end to the family 'outing'.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

### Representations

- The film uses subjective narration to force an alignment between the spectator and the character of Jean-Do and the use of a 'true' story of a man with almost total paralysis, further, encourages a sympathetic emotional response but certain representations of characters in the film allow for more active responses at times. In the Fathers' day sequence (0.53.03 - 1.00.48) we see Jean-Do shaving his father and Jean-Do with his own children at the beach. We are cued to see Jean-Do's father as unemotional and rather distant but this becomes more complex as we see Jean-Do's forced distance from his own children.
- In the scene when Jean-Do gets a wheelchair for the first time (0.17.09-0.21.47) the doctor and Jean-Do are open to different spectator responses. The Doctor appears professional but, perhaps, rather patronising whilst Jean-Do is spiteful and distant towards Celine. The spectator may lose any allegiance with Jean-Do at this point.
- The wife of Jean-Do (Celine) is portrayed as devoted and tolerant particularly in the scene in which she holds the phone for Jean-Do and translates a loving message from him to Ines. The use of dialogue, performance and cinematography reinforces the painful but devoted actions of Celine, later we see Celine sobbing and freezing on an empty train track. In the same scene we see Ines represented as an archetypal selfish and uncaring 'mistress' through her use of dialogue especially when we are told that she cannot bear the sight of him in his paralysed state. The representations of the wife and mistress reflect the expectations of the social context.

### Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including Visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Schnabel is a painter as well as a film maker and candidates may refer to the aesthetic use of colour, image and cinematography in some of the non-diegetic sequences, particularly those involving the shots of the Diver where colour filters of blue and green are used to

express the sea and the idea of submersion.

- The scene in which Jean-Do shaves his father may also be used by candidates who point to a key influence on the making of the film according to Schnabel. He received the screenplay when his own Father was dying and felt an emotional connection to it that inspired his version of the book and screenplay. Schnabel points to this particular scene as being directly influenced by his own personal experience.
- A montage of archive footage using different coloured filters and saturation levels in addition to the use of slower motion creates a fluid and visually attractive aesthetic to suggest the emergence of Jean-Do's sense of hope as he talks about 'emerging from his Diving Bell'.

### CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

#### Social

- The film is set in the upper-middle classes of French society which affects the ways in which Jean-Do's marriage to his wife and his relationship with his 'mistress' is represented. In reality it was the 'mistress' (Florence Ben Sadoun whose name is changed to Ines in the film) who was devoted to Jean-Do in the hospital not his wife. The director felt that a devoted wife suited the upper, middle-class French social context more.

#### Historical

- The ways in which the film departs from the 'real' story for dramatic purpose can be an interesting area to explore. The switching of the wife and the mistress in the role of carer is most significant but there are changes to the actual events and even the number of children that Bauby had. The historical legal battles of rights and royalties between

Bauby's family and the book's publishers can provide useful contextualisation too.

#### Political

- The representations of Bauby's wife and mistress and their function within the film's narrative can be explored from a feminist critical approach. Both women, and the nurses, in the film are objectified by Bauby and the spectator is clearly positioned with a patriarchal and, at times, blatantly sexist character yet we are clearly encouraged to form an allegiance with him because of his situation. In a political context of gender equality this can be explored as a problematic aspect of the film.

#### Technological

- Despite the availability of digital technology and processing, Kaminsky largely opted for traditional photochemical and in-camera techniques. He argued that digital filmmaking 'can easily start to look too manipulated, and it can detract from the story. It doesn't look organic. You could never make this movie digitally. You would have a totally different sense or aesthetic, and people just wouldn't respond to it the same way they respond with film'.

#### Institutional

- The film was originally to be produced by Universal Studios, the screenplay was in English and Johnny Depp was slated to play Jean-Do. Universal dropped the project and Pathe took up the rights. Schnabel insisted on changing the screenplay into French and even learnt French himself because he believed the richness of the language would work better. Candidates may point to the scene in which Jean-Do and his father resolve their relationship as a particularly poignant and emotionally powerful use of dialogue.