

**Viewing Notes for *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*  
Directed by Julian Schnabel, France/USA (2007)**

As you watch, remember that the story of Jean-Dominique Bauby is true and that the film is based in part on his memoir *Le Scaphandre et le Papillon*, the composition of which is depicted in the movie. The director Julien Schnabel is American, but he wanted to film in France with a French cast and crew and maintain the French sensibilities of the story.



**VISUALS:**

- Note the use of variations in focus and filters in the present-day scenes from the protagonist's point of view vs. in the flashbacks in memory. Both types of scenes use this technique, but with variations in focus, light, color filters, and camera angles.
- Another nice camera technique is the creation of close-up and uncentered "portraits" of the people in his life—whether friend, wife, or health care worker. His physical isolation makes it so that he can only sit and witness, a parade of faces and a barrage of words to which he cannot respond. Consider how the filmmaker and the actor depict Jean-Do's reactions to and frustrations about these "portraits."
- The antique diving suit appears periodically as a visual metaphor for his feeling of isolation. Notice the other images used outside of the narrative to convey Jean-Do's psychological and emotional experiences, such as the footage of a glacier breaking up, insects, and quick camera pans across photos and drawings.
- For the first third of the movie we are locked in with Jean-Do and only see the protagonist in glimpses or fragments: a distant shot in flashback where we can't see his face clearly or a close-up of just his eye or mouth. When we finally see him full-on, from an exterior view, how does the narrative change and how does our relationship with his character evolve?
- Some critics find the first scenes of experimental camera work depicting the interior experience of Jean-Do too gimmicky. Do you agree?

**SOUND:** includes the moods created by soundtrack music, individual songs, and sound effects, but the most important sound is the incantatory quality that French letters take on through the repetition of the spelling exercise.

**THEMES:**

This film offers a slightly different take on our theme of reconciliation, because the conflicts are mostly internal. Jean-Do must reconcile his expectations for his life with the reality forced upon him. Notice how the tone of the film undergoes a kind of metamorphosis throughout this process of reconciliation, from bleak and disorienting to life-affirming and creative.



Roger Ebert said of this film, "At the end we are left with the reflection that human consciousness is the great miracle of evolution, and all the rest (sight, sound, taste, hearing, smell, touch) are simply a toolbox that consciousness has supplied for itself."

This film raises questions about our sense of self: how much of our identity is in our minds and how much is derived from our actions and what we do in the world?

Recommended listening for after the film: a radio documentary piece about the relationship between the mind and the self, "Who Am I?"

<http://www.radiolab.org/story/91496-who-am-i/>