Back in the Body: on Julian Schnabel's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* and the Possibility for a "Future Bodies" Critique of Filmic Disability Representation

> When his body became his prison … his life changed in the blink of an eye …. His imagination set him free.
>
> —from the official trailer
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> It was a self-help device. . . to help me deal with my own death. And it worked.
>
> —Julian Schnabel, *Charlie Rose* interview
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> I think pushing that point of view for as long as we do is a little painful for the audience, but you feel so connected. It's worth the journey once you're out of it because you know you've lived in his shoes, you've been in that hospital bed, you've had those clothes put over your head. So I think there was an urgency and immediacy that it all helped create.
>
> —John Kilik, Producer: "A Cinematic Vision"

As a representation of disability, Julian Schnabel's film (hereafter referred to as *Diving Bell*) provides viewers with a prolonged and intense first-person experience of disability. Schnabel achieves this disconcerting embodiment through camera positioning and voice-over monologues which lead to scenes of abstract visual imagery and real-time flashback sequences shot in a more traditional third-person point of view. By frequently placing viewers in front of rather than behind the camera, Schnabel forces the audience to enter the film not as voyeur but from *within* the very body of one-time *Vogue* fashion editor Jean-Dominique Bauby, whose ingeniously crafted memoir about living "locked-in" after a stroke left him paralyzed and mute serves as the film's primary textual source.

As producer John Kilik claims, such an experience of Bauby's consciousness, heightened by periodic asides and the voice-overs of actor Mathieu Almaric, is purposefully painful: Schnabel wants to show as precisely as he can what it looks and *feels* like to see the world from the vantage of one so often cast as "other" in filmic representations of disability. While he may have had little concern for Bauby's memoir or the subject of Bauby himself as representations of disability,[1] his method nonetheless reverses point of view, situating his audience within the disabled body, thereby otherizing the able-bodied characters surrounding and caring for Bauby. From the first shot of the film, the viewer takes in the stern-faced doctors peering at the spectacle soon revealed to be Bauby's disabled body. As the viewer apprehends the film's inverted vantage, as the doctors and the turquoise walls of the hospital room come hazily into focus, it's impossible to deny the urge to rub one's eyes.

The film reinforces this compulsion in one extended scene shot in first-person. Positioned inside Bauby's body, we're spoken to directly by the actors. Doctors shine a light into the lens of the camera—Bauby's eyes—and urge Bauby to follow the pen light's tip and say his own name and the names of his children. The circumstance of Bauby's disability slowly dawns on the viewer as the doctors inform Bauby that a "severe cerebrovascular event" has paralyzed his body—the body we've been made to inhabit for the duration of the film. All that's left to Bauby, we learn as Bauby is told, are slight facial-muscular movements such as the blinking of both eyes. Soon even this slight ability becomes limited, and we're made to look out in horror as the doctor, speaking leisurely of a recent ski trip, sews shut Bauby's right eye. Bauby's protests ring out more loudly than do the doctor's words, but because Bauby's voice is the sound of his own mind, the doctor neither hears nor heeds Bauby's words. The world tilts precariously to the left thereafter. As we watch orderlies wash and tug Bauby's disabled limbs into the wool sweater sleeves and slacks, we're reminded of our own

[1] Indeed, Schnabel's motives for reinforcing his audience's identification with Bauby seem to have derived from his own otherization of Bauby's disabled body. More on this later in the paper.

limbs, which tingle in recognition of the sensations which no longer register to Bauby. By the time the scene shifts yet again to the traditional third-person limited camera position, the viewer has already internalized the experience of Bauby's body's limitations.

Because the film's cinematography enables its audience to connect physically with its subject, the film presents an example of disability representation that at once seems distinct yet strangely familiar. Whereas some scholars have argued that even the most conscientious representations of disability rest on assumptions of able-bodied normativity, others maintain that such readings discredit the body as a source of knowledge equal to or greater than the mind in providing individuals with a point of reference to the physical and social world. In his article on dismodernism and the end of identity politics, Lennard Davis writes that "what is universal in life, if there are universals, is the experience of the limitations of the body" (32). Echoing Davis, I contend that the social construction theory of disability, which regards the body as subordinate to dominant social and cultural attitudes toward otherness[2], contributes too readily to reductive readings of culturally relevant representations of disability such as *Diving Bell*. Such films, while fraught with many of the difficulties associated with attempts to render lived experience artistically, have exposed critiques attempting to locate cultural, class, racial, or gender stereotypes in textual subjects for failing to account for ways bodies act as agents through which individuals mediate connections between one's self and others and the world and one's place in it. As phenomenological film theorist Vivian Sobchack argues in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, the body contributes as much to our "sense" of the world as our intellect; furthermore, because mind and body inform each

[2] In "Disability Studies and the Future of Identity Politics," Tobin Siebers paraphrases David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's assertion that "the push to link physical difference to cultural and social constructs, especially ideological ones, has actually made disability disappear from the social model." Siebers additionally cites Susan Bordo, who "argues that the widespread notion of the body as 'malleable plastic'—'free to change its shape and location at will'—obscures the physicality of the body in favor of a disembodied ideal of self-determination and self transformation." Within a Disabilities Studies framework, a body that able transcend and self-determine "is rarely disabled" (74-5). This prefigures my argument that while *Diving Bell* risks succumbing to the notion of the body subsumed by will, the film skirts such risks by framing Bauby's body as a primary source of knowledge.

other, to denigrate the body is to deny ourselves access to an essential source of knowledge about the world and our place in it.

Such arguments suggest that the conversation on disability has begun to shift from identity politics toward a view of the individual as embodied being. Davis's and Sobchack's insights coincide with recent work in the philosophy of embodiment. Mark Johnson has argued that "the body is not just a site where cognition and feeling can occur, as if they could occur elsewhere but just happen to hang out in bodies. Rather, our embodiment shapes . . . who we are in such a way that it is implicated in all of our possible self-descriptions" (166). That Johnson's view dovetails with the "future bodies" arguments advanced by Davis and Sobchack suggests that new forms of disability representation, grounded in philosophical and phenomenological understandings of the body as the site of awareness and engagement with the world, have begun to challenge social constructionist theories founded on the problematic assumption that one's identity is the product of the imagination's engagement with socio-cultural constructions of gender, race, able-bodiedness, etc. According to the "future bodies" argument, this assumption proves questionable because it denies the material body's role in our conceptualization of language and experience. New forms of "dismodern" representation seem to inspire an empathy fostered not by social constructionist notions of "otherness" but by a phenomenological understanding of the ways our bodies inform our cognitive responses to the world. Schnabel's filmic adaptation of Jean-Dominique Bauby's memoir of disability exemplifies such a "dismodern" representation—a fractured depiction of dependence arising out of our experience of literal imprisonment within Bauby's filmic body.

While the filmmakers do consciously endeavor to provide viewers the opportunity not only to identify with but to *inhabit* a perspective shaped by disability, the film does not provide an

uncorrupted account of living with a disability.[3] Schnabel certainly expressed other intentions for his presentation, not least of which was his desire to use the film to work through personal fears of death brought about by his father's illness.[4] Sarah Heidt notes that "the idea of his own love of Jean-Dominique Bauby's story, and of his conception of Jean-Do, crops up repeatedly in Schnabel's discussions of the film, suggesting the degree to which his own creative work was animated by a desire 'to be in concert with the way Jean-Dominique Bauby was actually recounting this place where he was reporting back from.'" Heidt suggests that Schnabel purposefully used a disabled body as the means to work through his fears of losing his own body. As a filmmaker choosing for his subject the uniquely composed memoir of a once able-bodied man, Schnabel likely hoped his efforts would help members of his audience work through similar fears.

Furthermore, Heidt argues that Schnabel found justification for taking creative liberties with facts and people in Bauby's life story through "Bauby's imaginative transcendence of physical restraints" (9). That the film is billed as an exploration of similar themes of transcendence complicates use of the film as a critique of able-bodied norms. Paul K. Longmore's "Screening Stereotypes" offers a useful framework for assessing the extent to which the transcendent thematic pins *Diving Bell* to other problematic filmic representations of disability. Longmore describes an historical arc of disability representation in which disabled characters figure in early and middle 1900s films as "monsters," villains to be dispatched. These representations were complicated during the 1970s and 80s when disability was embodied within "the severely physically disabled character who seeks suicide as a release from the living death of catastrophic disablement"; the disability was confined to the individual, and the viewer was freed from any guilt or responsibility that

[3] Sarah Heidt characterizes the film as a hybridization of original source material and dramatic interpretation. She argues that screenwriter Ronald Harwood, Schnabel, and cinematographer Janusz Kaminski took great pains to dramatize the experience of reading Bauby's memoir, and as a result, they achieve a weirdly visceral realization of the situation of Bauby's disability. While Bauby's memoir tends toward nostalgia, the film lingers in the present, emphasizing the physical dimension of Bauby's bodily "confinement" via the tensions generated in scenes showing the arduous processes through which Bauby's doctors rehabilitate and help him communicate.

[4] See the *Charlie Rose* interview of Schnabel produced near the film's release.

accompanied the dispatching of earlier "monster" representations (136). Writing in 1985, on the cusp of the "second wave" of disability studies, Longmore saw that the historical representational progression was characterized by "paternalistic prejudice." While representations of the "maladjusted disabled person" embroiled in the "drama of adjustment" acknowledged the humanity disabled persons were denied in earlier forms of representation, Longmore notes that even these representations were problematic because they "put the responsibility for any problems squarely and almost exclusively on the disabled individual" (138).[5]

Schnabel's professed motive for wanting to work with rather than adhere faithfully to the material of Bauby's memoir might place the film into this one of Longmore's theories. This complicates my attempt to read *Diving Bell* as a document uncorrupted by normative able-bodiedness. However, Heidt allows for another view when she asserts that "Schnabel sought to create Jean-Do on screen in such a way that audiences might see not only into Bauby's inner life but even *beyond* his experience, finding in that experience some sort of universal and universalizing truth" (19). In describing Schnabel's need to immerse his audiences in an experience of pain that transcends Bauby's body, Heidt implies that only through a deep immersion in the character's consciousness can the filmmaker achieve sincere empathy with the subject. So, while Schnabel may have intended to situate his viewers not within a physical body but within a host of deeply felt personal fears—of death, spiritual and physical confinement, and losing the ability to connect with loved ones—his film skirts such ethically fraught representational patterns by positioning the audience immediately within the subject position of its disabled character, thus making Bauby's

[5] According to Longmore, this "drama of adjustment" rises from a highly normalizing, thus troubling, narrative in which able-bodied characters provide the crucial "slap to the face" that wakes the disabled character up to the supposed "fact" that "disability is a problem of psychological self-acceptance, of emotional adjustment" (137). Longmore's critique hinges on the aforementioned "fact" that the disabled character's impairment is no great match for a positive outlook and some "gumption," to quote from an episode of *Little House on the Prairie* which Longmore cites in his essay. Far from a "fact," Longmore argues that "gumption" is part of a normalizing discourse that carries the reductive implication that "if [disabled characters] are socially isolated, it is not because the disability has cut them off from the community or because society has rejected them. Refusing to accept themselves with their handicaps, they have chosen isolation" (138).

disability the means through which viewers experience the film. In other words, the film engages its audience by grounding its exploration of themes of confinement and liberation in embodied rhetoric. Thus, as a representation of disability, thus, the film exemplifies how we might begin to understand disability as a phenomenology instead of an outmoded, reductive identity politics argument.

An exploration of such themes could easily slip into one of the modes of representation Longmore criticizes for reducing both disabled characters and the plots that provide their shape to simple tropes—the monster, the villain, the invalid, and so forth. Had the filmmakers allowed Bauby to linger too long in flashbacks, in which Bauby's actor, Mathieu Amalric, is able-bodied and reveling in his own life, the whole of the film might be classified as another able-bodied lens through which disability is seen as non-normative. The emotional resonance of these scenes corresponds to ways of feeling which Longmore suggests we've been pre-conditioned to understand as experiences of the other, and which derive their power from an able-bodied point of view. It would have been just as conventional for Celine, the mother of Bauby's children, to have forgiven him for leaving her for another woman.[6] But Bauby continually references his physical condition, and the film goes to great lengths to dramatize Bauby's disability as his new point of view, or subject position, from which he views and responds as a disabled body to the world of his able-bodied past.

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[6] One could nonetheless criticize the film's mind-over-matter rhetoric for debasing the body as unnecessary to an individual's ability to self-define. Nowhere is the film's potentially problematic enactment of the body as both motivation and point of confinement more present than in those sections which evoke Siebers's critique of the psychological power of performativity. Elsewhere in "Disability Studies and the Future of Identity Politics," Siebers criticizes Judith Butler's argument that performativity allows an individual to reclaim identity within a discourse surrounding gender, sexuality, etc., on the grounds that her configuration presents a mind-over-matter dualism in which "the body . . . is an able body whose condition relies on its psychological powers, and therefore the solution to pain or disability is also psychological" (76-7). I note in Bauby's reminiscences an element of performativity in the sense that Bauby can claim to have once been able-bodied, and by virtue of his ability to recall these memories and experiences of able-bodiedness he is able to be judged as healthy by his imaginative ability to "surmount pain, illness, and disability" (Siebers 77). Furthermore, it is only by virtue of a constantly realized pain that Bauby is reminded of his body; in both the memoir and in the film, Bauby is made to wonder whether it is his condition that has allowed him to realize "his true nature." Though he never clarifies what he believes his true nature to be, it is clear that he believes his disability provides him with a point of reference by which he's better able to appreciate what he still has in his disabled life. Bauby also cites the ascetic's maxim that one can be purified through pain, thereby strengthening the implication that the body is only the means by which one translates "effects into benefits" (77).

In one of Bauby's first imaginative leaps, we're exposed to a visual of a glacier calving, a montage of photographs of the character as a young man, several aerial shots of rivers and beachscapes, and one of Bauby's group skiing trip. We're allowed to linger only momentarily in these exotic expanses; within seconds, the film cuts away from the images to an external shot of Bauby in wheelchair, appraising his reflection in an elevator's polished chrome ceiling.[7] The shifting of perspective in this scene heightens the tension of embodiment, forcing viewers to assess the ways in which our own bodies, crippled or otherwise, inform our self-image. We're time and again returned to the original subject position, ripped from Bauby's imaginative flights of fancy in favor of a more indirect exploration of the tensions arising from characters confronted with the situation of disability. Because of this tension, the disability shapes how we experience the film and Bauby's life narrative. Disability is hardly otherized, hardly the source of revulsion or pity; it is instead the very bodily nature of our experience of the world presented in this film.

To contextualize my analysis of the film's complex representation of disability, I mean to distinguish the situation of disability from the obstacle of disability. According to the analyses of Mitchell and Snyder referenced earlier, in traditional narratives obstacles are set before characters so that by overcoming them, characters can earn a sense of belonging. *Diving Bell* exemplifies traditional narrative arcs only in the sense that it ends with the main character's death. And while the film presents disability as an obstacle keeping Bauby physically bound to bed and wheelchair and mentally bound within the confines of his disabled body, the obstacle is not something to be overcome but something to *become*, to *inhabit*.

Bauby's disability might better be understood through these terms because it represents a state of being forced upon an individual who must decide to inhabit that body to continue living. Bauby's reminiscences juxtapose to his disabled present, which serves as the grounding force and

[7] The description here refers to the chapter "Progress," one of the most sharply edited scenes in the film.

the basis for the audience's connection to that experience. The audience enters the filmic experiences as a disabled character and leaves the film disable-embodied within Bauby's dying body, through this unique subject position, we're discouraged from the subject position from which the disabled body is "otherized" and from a plot in which we're engaged in rooting for the normalization of that otherized body. In fact, we're very much encouraged to image the limitations of all bodies as "temporarily able-bodied" and from this point of view we're asked to consider the very nature of what makes us human. Able-bodiedness is cast as the other in this film; the position of privilege is cast as the object of the viewer's scrutiny.[8]

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[8] The film's depiction of Bauby's learning to communicate through eye-blinks, and the voice-over interior monologues in which the character of Bauby responds to the frustrations and joys associated with this process, echoes Nancy Mairs's account of having discovered her own writing voice while negotiating both the general shame of owning a body and the more specific shame of living with multiple sclerosis. In the voice-over, Bauby wonders whether his "accident" was the force necessary to bring him to terms with his true nature. He realizes his artistic vision as a locked-in patient; he had intended to write a stylish update of Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* in which the main character was a "modern woman," but he realizes in the memoir and the film the transitory nature of such a project; after his stroke, he muses that he has more in common now with the crippled figure of Noirtier de Villeforte.

There is a distinction to be drawn here, however, between the film and the memoir. The degree to which disability memoirists accept the terms of disability seems to hinge on whether the writer discovers an adequate outlet for his or her pain. For Mairs, discovering that readers shared some of the physical pains she explores in her essays brings a kind of satisfaction and validation. The ability to communicate with non-deaf individuals, especially those closest to her, enables Emmanuelle Laborit, author of *The Cry of the Gull*, to identify with her alter-ego, this person others referred to as "Emmanuelle," to whom Emmanuelle herself couldn't attach the personal pronoun. "An initial opening had been made in my prison wall," Laborit writes, characterizing her deafness as a metaphorical space of confinement she could leave only after learning to communicate. And while Bauby's memoir relies on a similar metaphorical emancipation, Schnabel's adaptation frustrates any attempt to read the film the same way; instead of establishing a metaphoric containment of the mind within the body, the subject of disability in *Diving Bell* is defined by Bauby's physical disability, or the situation which brings Bauby closest to his caretakers and friends. To put it succinctly, it is Bauby's negotiation of, not his eventual emancipation from, disability that comprises the transformative force of the film. The body is not longed for as though it has been lost, but rediscovered, creating a reality for Bauby that is both new and frightening but also very *real*.

What unites both memoir and film is a question of what constitutes the real, and whether its discovery can both confirm and complicate one's interactions. Laborit does take strength for the way her own perceptions of the world—from her appraisal of music as colorful and as the universal language that we experience *bodily* to her negotiations between images and experiences—allowed her a unique understanding of the habits and customs of those closest to her. Bauby himself appraises similar moments in his own experience. The filmmakers capture this sensibility directly through their use of camera angles and setting shots, all of which favor the literal, the filmic reality of tactile scene rather than the constructs of metaphorical language. So, just as Laborit's experience empowers her to speak to "normal" people, the filmmakers suggest a similar conceit; Bauby, having lived his entire life without the kind of appreciation for vision, communication, and connection afforded him by his disability, is told by Pierre Roussin—who, by virtue of a coincidence in which Bauby gave up his seat for him on a plane to Beirut that was hijacked by terrorists, had been solitarily incarcerated—to hold on to "what makes him human."

This bout of encouragement, delivered in the film by a character who receives only cursory attention in the memoir, clearly positions not only Bauby but the viewer in a position to consider just what it means to be "human." Bauby's character offers the viewer a lead, saying that holding onto the human is the easy part. The process through which Bauby discovers his voice leads him to discover a sense of the value in living disabled, and thus comprises the film's propulsive tension. Furthermore, the process serves to demonstrate the ways in which Bauby continues to live on in an altered though no less relevant way through connection, communication, and a sense of responsibility that is best articulated by Mairs, who finds her voice as a bodily thing; the state of her body and her disease has given her the confidence to speak what is truest to her heart.

Schnabel's interpretation exposes an ambivalence to the body and a fear of the body's limitations common to the experiences of both able-bodied and disabled individuals. Thus, his film version of Bauby's autobiography may overcome the book's representative shortcomings by repositioning the viewer not before a text but within a visual arena that to some flawed degree allows for a connection of the tactile with consciousness. The viewer experiencing this point of connection, which phenomenologist Vivian Sobchack deems the "cinesthetic subject," comes to reside within a space in which "the film experience […] mobilizes, confuses, reflectively differentiates, yet experientially unites lived bodies and language" ("What My Fingers Knew" 84).

Through this insistently opaque procedural connection between viewer and subject, the film problematizes both traditional tropes of disability representation, offering a representational trope that has its foundations within a phenomenological understanding of film's relationship to the physical body. Through the film's "jarring visual shifts" between a first-person point of view that highlights the experience of being locked within Bauby's consciousness and a more distant exterior view of Bauby's body, the viewer is made quite bodily aware of the distinction between what Megan Craig, citing the work of Cora Diamond, calls facts and presences. The former signifies information, while the latter deals more directly with "realities that resist comprehension [but which] affect us personally" (152). Our presence within the film is heightened by Schnabel's' scenic exploration of the physical worked processes of both caring for Bauby's body and communicating with him. Such close, expansive scenes work to heighten our own sense of our bodies as sensory and sensible, and to thereby enact a breakdown of the stigma placed on the disabled body.

Sobchack admits that the filmic medium is but a confluence of visual images that cannot replicate the real lived experience portrayed on the screen ("What My Fingers Knew" 72). Yet, Sobchack wonders how it is that she first recognized via her sensory knowledge of her own fingers that the opening shot of the film *The Piano* is bands of light seen through fingers held over one's

eyes. Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack argues that the body is at once a sensory and a sensible being, and both forms of knowledge—sense and intelligence—work together to generate meaning. Thus, she concludes that "even if the intentional objects of my experience at the movies are not wholly realized by me and are grasped in a sensual distribution that would be differently structured were I outside the theater, I nonetheless do have a *real* sensual experience that is not reducible either to the satisfaction of merely two of my senses or to sensual analogies and metaphors constructed only 'after the fact' through cognitive operations of conscious thought" ("What My Fingers Knew" 76).

Advocating a phenomenology of the experience of visual media that draws on other sensory knowledge but is not metaphorically created by or bound to prior experiences, Sobchack argues the "lived body senses itself in the film experience." This implies the language we use to articulate that experience is not metaphorically constructed but is the product of a very direct connection to that film experience ("What My Fingers Knew" 79-80). Schnabel's film is so engaging because it exploits the audience's phenomenological connection to Bauby's experience, insisting that its audience identify with the position of the disabled character without requiring the "cognitive operations of conscious thought" to assimilate and construct the experience reflectively. This pre-reflective empathy with the film's subject is crucial, because Sobchack implies the essential weakness of social constructionism's inability to account for the bodily experience, let alone the bodily experience of disability. Sobchack's work in the realm of cinematic phenomenology suggests that this directorial choice of point of view heightens our bodily identification with the disabled without the interference of the intellect; because we're forced into such close visual and experiential proximity to the disabled that experience—so far as we're able to access it—that our perceptions of disability are conditioned away from pity and shifted inextricably to the realm of identification.

Whether the film's writing and/or direction was intentionally subversive, execution of the first-person subjective point of view subverts tropes of disability representation that confine the disabled figure to the role of "other" by forcing the viewer's identification with normate subject positions. David Denby has praised the way the film draws strength from feelings of despair and pity but keeps such feelings etched on the faces of Bauby's caretakers and guests as they speak to him. These normative emotional energies are otherized; even as the film opens to allow the viewer a more objective view of Bauby's body, the subjective experience of disability is maintained and reinforced by repeated returns to the first-person position.

Denby includes in his analysis the extent to which Schnabel draws a different kind of energy from non-narrative scenes surrounding the process by which Henriette and others care for Bauby's disabled body:

> Schnabel neither avoids nor softens the hospital-room procedures, yet slowly the movie opens up. The camera shifts away from Bauby's limited gaze and moves to a third-person point of view that takes in everything, including Amalric's face, with its hanging lip and wandering left eye. The sight of that face—as grotesque as an image from a horror movie yet expunged of titillation—is a shock, but we quickly get used to it, and the picture moves steadily ahead on two tracks: we see the stages of Bauby's treatment, including the tortuous but productive way he learns to write; and the tumult and ecstasy of his inner life. (Denby, para. 3)

Denby's assertion that viewers "quickly" become accustomed to Bauby's visage suggests the degree of identification Schnabel's filmed choreography creates between the viewer and Bauby's bodily states. Denby then goes on to describe the way "stillness and frenzy oscillate in almost musical rhythm" as Bauby's flashbacks to his life as an able-bodied man and/or the various collage set-pieces that represent impressions of that past life are interrupted by jarring shots of Bauby's

disabled body or, more potently, of the metaphorical shots of Bauby confined to the "diving bell" submerged in an opaque blue sea. Denby insists that the viewer "deserves" the "ravishing beauty" of these frenzied interludes as part of the film's thematic movement toward a redemptive conclusion that seems to sound very closely to the climax of Longmore's drama of adjustment. Rather than reinforcing the redemptive power of the imagination to triumph over bodily confinements, the film draws upon this tension of identification with and objectification of disability as a means of resisting both confinement and total freedom.

Indeed, Schnabel's insistence on the thematic of near-death transcendence depends upon a deeply felt experience of the body, and to overcome this body would be to undermine the validity of this or any experience. The film maintains this tension between freedom and confinement to the film's final scene, in which the viewer has been returned to the first-person point of view to be shown the first edition of Bauby's published memoir. By reestablishing this point of view, the bodily experience of disability is reinforced as the subject position and not the object of pity, which once again is clearly etched and confined to the faces of his friends surrounding Bauby in his final hours. The film never succumbs to the conclusion that Bauby's life is not worth living; Schnabel achieves the avoidance of the stereotypical representation in which death is better than enduring disabled embodiment by embedding this unique experience of disability not only within Bauby's body but within the viewer's frame of vision and experience.

From an identity politics perspective, among the greatest virtues of Schnabel's adaptation are the liberties Harwood and Schnabel take to flesh out many of Bauby's relationships with his caregivers, painting "psychological portraits" (to borrow Denby's metaphor) of these men and women Bauby describes as disinterested parties who merely administer care to his disabled body. In the film, these caregivers and friends are transformed into life-sustaining, lively bodies. The characters of the speech therapist, Henriette, and Bauby's physical therapist, Marie, provide crucial

sexual and moral energy to the film and invigorate, challenge, and complicate our understanding of Bauby's character as merely a man reminiscing on his lost able-bodied life. His translator is also "fleshed out" into a woman Bauby's character in the film comes to love. One could cite this blooming relationship as another example of Hollywood's reductive conventionalism, but it does much to undermine the trope of disabled characters as asexual entities. While Bauby references his own inability to enact his sexuality, his "animal" instincts are hardly eradicated from the film's plot. Whereas the text on which the film is based is very much the final product of a communicative process from which many of the smears have been smoothed, the film revels in the very tactile, organic, and bodily experiences of the process through which the characters cocreate the text of the memoir and, more deeply, of Bauby's disability.

By choosing to dramatize this process as the means through which he could explore themes of confinement and freedom, Schnabel avoided much of the criticism laid down by disability scholars who found fault in Bauby's unwillingness to appraise his disability as a source of identity to which others could relate. G. Thomas Couser has argued that Bauby seems to treat his disability as the motivation for his writing rather than the subject, and such treatment places a barrier between his experience and those experiences of others with disabilities. Couser critiques Bauby's disability as merely the motivation for his memoir, arguing that Bauby's use of the "rhetoric of nostalgia" demonstrates his unwillingness to situate his experience of "locked-in" syndrome in a larger communal experience of disability. In other words, rather than look his fellows in the eye and strive to add to the conversation in which disability serves as common ground, Couser argues that Bauby would rather reminisce on his able-bodied past.

While there is some evidence of a similar conceit in the film, the visual medium affords the viewer a richer opportunity to gauge the extent to which Bauby's disability walls him off from everyone, disabled and able-bodied alike. The setting of the hospital and its other inhabitants are

given a more physical reality in the film and are periodically the objects of Bauby's gaze, a gaze which is developed as a kind of speech and represents Bauby's essential connection with others. Again, the film succeeds in particularizing and embodying disability in productive ways; one might even argue that Couser fails to recognize the phenomenological nature of Bauby's rhetoric. The text, confined as it is print, is partially at fault. The filmmakers rectify this shortcoming—unintentionally, it can be argued—by going to great lengths to dramatize the painful processes of care and the "tortuous but productive way [Bauby] learns to write" (from Denby, above).

One such scene dramatizes particularly well how carefully the filmmakers frame, instead of the sympathetic aspects of Bauby's confinement, the frustration and patience required of both Bauby and his therapist to work out the kinks in the modified alphabet.

"I want death," Bauby says near this scene's beginning. It is difficult to tell whether he is being overly dramatic in his communique, but the effect of his remark drives an angry Henriette from the room – though not before telling Bauby there are many people to whom he matters a great deal, including Henriette herself.

The filmmakers might have cut the scene here, encouraging the audience to sympathize with the disabled figure of Bauby, who would have been rendered by such a cut as the otherized subject of a reductive feeling.

Instead, the film avoids the tendency to slip into what we might call another example of Longmore's drama of adjustment: Henriette returns to the room; having calmed herself down, she calls for renewed patience from the both of them; at which point, the process of speech, even of work—the process by which Bauby brings himself out into the world, into connection with Henriette—takes center stage. The scene lasts a full three minutes, much of which time is devoted to Henriette's reiterative runs through the specialized alphabet she's developed to enable Bauby to blink letters and words more quickly and easily.

Additionally, constant cutting between first- and third-person points of view heightens tensions between being inside the disabled body and outside it. This tension works not to separate but to reinforce the viewer's identification with the disabled character's subject position, a point from which empathy emerges via extreme bodily identification with the on-screen subject—we're shown the extent of the efforts of Bauby's therapists to work Bauby's fingers, arms, and legs; to lift him bodily out of his bed and into the wheelchair or submerge and wash him in a bath; to dress him and walk him around the hospital corridors.

Time and again, we return to the scene of Bauby's blinking out his carefully thought-out messages to friends and others. The tension in these moments reinforces the stasis of being locked in, reinforcing our own sense of immobility. This is not a negative sensation, but one the film helps us better understand as a way of being, a *bodily* state, one that does not demand our sympathy but rather our identification. We look out at the world of the film from this static point of view. We are let into the film from this position. We are encouraged to empathize with it, sitting in our seats as audience members. It becomes something particular to our own way of being—something very much a part of our experience of the world—and not some other way of being, some phenomenon of an existence apart from our own.

I don't mean to argue that *Diving Bell* fully confounds a trope-based reading of disability. The film acknowledges the validity of the body while still very emphatically endorsing a reading of the film that is grounded in identity politics. In another scene midway through the film, two deliverymen enter Bauby's room and inquire of Bauby whether he was the one ordered the speaker-phone they're carrying. The scene is fraught with the tension that serves so well as the film's dramatic vehicle; Bauby cannot move any part of his body save for his left eyelid, and these two deliverymen haven't been prepared to communicate with him. They proceed to joke about this vegetable of a man

they've stumbled across, and the camera pans back and forth between the men and Jean-Do, whose left eye we watch blink once, then again, and then rapidly.

The tension boils to the threat of sexual violence:

"What is that?" one asks. "Is it a man or a woman?"

"A man, I think," the other says, suggesting the implausibility that a disabled man has a sexual identity.

Even more troubling than the two men laughing with impunity is the possibility the audience won't be let in on the joke. We are its butt if we have any part in it; because we're situated within Bauby's body in terms of camera positioning, the joke loses it edge, and we are made to feel varied implications of threat within the men's exchange. The subject positioning eradicates any likelihood that we might feel the effects of Bauby's isolation as feelings other than, or beyond or foreign to, our own.

When Henriette enters the room a moment later, she tells the man who asks whether Bauby can speak to ask Bauby himself.

"Don't act as if he's not there," she says.

To which the man, pointing from his spot in the doorway, replies, "What use is the phone if he can't speak?"

The other deliveryman, having deposited the phone on the bedside table, says, "Maybe he's a heavy breather!"

As both men laugh again, Henriette once more leaps to defend Bauby. "Think you're funny?" she fumes. As they shut the door behind them, she shakes her head, looking at Bauby (the camera has since resituated us, the audience, back within Bauby's body, allowing us to view the scene's final moment from Bauby's subject position), she says, "Some nerve."

What's most interesting—what Henriette isn't privy to, though we, the audience, are—is that Bauby has joined the men in laughing at the joke they've made of the disabled, bed-ridden man.

"You have no sense of humor, Henriette," Bauby thinks.

This scene is crucial to any disabilities-studies reading of the film—both those readings I've termed "reductive" or "trope-based" and those that rely on phenomenology and bodily awareness—because it links the tone of Bauby's written text and Schnabel's directorial vision.

Moreover, the scene demonstrates the link between body and voice which Nancy Mairs discusses at the end of "Carnal Acts." I'm doubtful whether either party—the deliverymen or Henriette—is right in their views toward Bauby; certain contexts render inappropriate any actions to either joke about or defend him. But the tension that the deliverymen reinforce through their dismissal of Henriette's insistence on Bauby's personhood enables Bauby's own kind of laughter, and his laughter provides us a new context, in which the view of hilarity and the view of sympathy collapse into a third view: a critical view.

Many disabilities scholars suggest that any conversation about disability, academic or otherwise, fails unless the participants appreciate the value of becoming uncomfortable. This assumes that one's right to laugh depends on the context, and that defensiveness often robs the disabled person of the right to own their experiences. In the fifth chapter of *Crip Theory*, Robert McRuer argues that any defense implicitly validates the normalizing impulses distinguishing the disabled as "other." Therefore, the best mode of engagement with troublesome representations of disability is via the "crip eye," characterized as "mark[ing] a critically disabled capacity for recognizing and withstanding the vicissitudes of compulsory able-bodiedness" (McRuer 197). Rather than vilify the normate, McRuer suggests we acknowledge normativity as a theoretical construct, a process to be resisted. Such acknowledgment could potentially enable us to laugh *with* Bauby during this scene.

While I've aimed to leave room for such debate about the ethical successes and/or failings of the film's representation of disability, I hope moreover to have provided grounds to trouble critiques of films like *Diving Bell* that focus solely on the extent to which the narrative diminishes the social dimensions of characters with disabilities. In place of, or perhaps in conjunction with such considerations, new readings grounded in film's phenomenology—the very real sense in which film requires us to engage bodily with its subjects independent of narrative—might allow critics to appraise the degree to which a film encourages viewers to reckon more directly with their own bodily sense of the filmic subject of disability.

Sobchack's theories of embodiment in the cinematic experiment may prove incredibly useful in focusing such critiques of disability representation in film, especially those in which the film is an adaptation of a memoir of disability, as is the case with *Diving Bell*. Such critiques might proceed from Sobchack's argument that the distinction between fiction and documentary isn't a representational but an ethical distinction

> that calls forth not only a response but also a responsibility… engag[ing] our awareness not only of existential consequences *of* representation but also of our own ethical implication *in* representation. It remands us reflexively to ourselves as embodied, culturally knowledgeable, and socially invested viewers. ("The Charge of the Real" 284)

Of particular importance here is the idea that our embodied ability to empathize with, or find ourselves implicated within, the representations we see requires us to reckon with our own understandings and misunderstandings of the body as a reflexive organism. The memoir, bound as it is to a page, lacks this physical dimension. And while the text of the film depends on the autobiographical nature of its source material—the real substance of Bauby's life, his struggle with locked-in syndrome, and his personal account of that struggle—I contend that this condition of a

confluence of visual and textual sources is precisely what charges us with the ethical responsibility of having "experienced" locked-in syndrome through the first-person lens.

Furthermore, whereas Couser has critiqued Bauby's memoir for utilizing a rhetoric of nostalgia, in which the author-as-subject favors his own experiences to the exclusion of others with disabilities, I believe that by situating the viewing audience within the character of Bauby himself, the film downplays this reductive nostalgia while heightening the physical dimensions of Bauby's disability, so that the audience becomes engaged in a more dynamic and continual process of sensory recognition and shared pain that has very little to do with a reductive sense of longing. This view corresponds to Sobchack's phenomenological arguments concerning the filmic experience as a bodily experience. Additionally, Richard M. Zaner's argument for an existential connection between self and other provides further grounds for future-bodies readings of *Diving Bell*. To establish a theoretical context, Zaner borrows from the work of philosopher Max Scheler, who writes that "others are experienced directly and immediately" by the self, or viewer, or "I," and these experiences are *a priori* to any sensory experience of that other person (qtd. in Zaner, 197). Consequently, while one may require the expression of laughter to see a person as happy, one does not need to see any such expressive gesture to know that person's mind is working in relation to another's.

This viewpoint, Zaner argues, is fundamentally obscured by the degree to which our perceptions of others are socially and culturally mediated. Simi Linton and Lennard Davis add that social constructions of disability have so vilified disabled people as "other" that Scheler's argument has become obscured. Schnabel's film succeeds phenomenologically by establishing a subject position within the disabled figure's body to remind each of us of the "elemental relatedness each of us experience to the other person" (Zaner 196). This "elemental relatedness" encourages us to challenge the normative view that disabled bodies provide sub-standard or negative life experiences.

Our experience as viewers of *Diving Bell* is created, engendered, and mediated by the disabled body; our view of the world is the view of the disabled body. We can empathize with Bauby; we can share his experience as though it connected intimately with our own bodily experience of the world. Sympathy—and any sense of distance or otherizing that stem from this source of emotion—emanates from the outside, from the others who move about freely, come as go as they please, and provide or withhold vital care—Henriette, Bauby's wife, his doctors.

This is no doubt a difficult position to attend to because it rests on the assumption that not only are individuals capable of reflexive identification with the subjects of their gazes, but also that they're capable of identifying immediately with these subjects. Identification is not synonymous with setting eyes on a subject; identification arises from conscious reflection on both bodily reactions and the sources causing one's feelings and moods. Just as one must cultivate the ability to read texts in ways that reveal submerged patterns of normative oppression, one must learn to think through the skin. Such are the norms that govern our self-perceptions and what we can and will do with the substance of our emotional and physical responses to the felt world.

So, while Sobchack suggests that individuals are "conscious" of their bodily response to other bodily stimuli, there is not a clear correlation between the two forms of consciousness. But it seems more and more likely that films like *Diving Bell* will insist that we *become* conscious of such connections. Therefore, such films that reinforce our connection to others' and to our own bodies educate by reinforcing the decentering shift in point of view that such an appraisal of the felt requires. When we're decentered, the conflict we see enacted between Bauby and the physical realities that shape and define—and redefine—his disabled bodily existence becomes, potentially, a shift in our very existence, reframing without demolishing or belittling.

I do not wish to argue that we should dismiss out-of-hand social constructionist readings of this film and its source material. While *Diving Bell*'s writers and director subverted reductive tropes of

disability representation—even those found in the material they adapted from Bauby's memoir—those interested in conducting identity politics readings have grounds to criticize Schnabel for his use of what Causer terms a "rhetoric of escape" to celebrate the interior leaps Bauby makes toward his lost able-bodiedness. However, while the liberties Schnabel has taken in adapting the particulars of Bauby's life to the screen may have marred the film's realistic representation of the experience of disability, a phenomenological understanding of Sobchack's ethical "charge of the real" arising from even the most tenuous connection to the realities of disabled experience invokes our own sense of bodily awareness. As a phenomenological representation, the film may support and help to extend a new kind of "dismodern" representational critique grounded on Davis's assertion that the body cannot be denied access to any further discussion of the ethics of disability representation.

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