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The Camera Blinks

DAVID SALLE ON *THE DIVING BELL AND THE BUTTERFLY*

Julian Schnabel, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, 2007, still from a color film in 35 mm, 112 minutes.
 Jean-Dominique Bauby (Mathieu Amalric) and Empress Eugénie (Emma de Caunes).

EVEN BEFORE *CITIZEN KANE* (1941), Orson Welles was already experimenting with using film techniques to heighten audience awareness of the special relationship between the teller and the tale that is fundamental to movies. In a little-known precursor to that film titled *Too Much Johnson* (1938), Welles made inventive use of a handheld camera to expose the phenomenological conundrum at the heart of moviemaking: How do you make an audience aware of the artificiality of cinematic reality and still keep them emotionally connected to the story? In the great leap that was *Citizen Kane*, Welles explored using the camera and its naturally unstable point of view to heighten awareness of a character's psychological state; to create an inner life on-screen that was as fluid and mobile as it could be in literature. Welles and cinematographer Gregg Toland freed the camera from a fixed point of view in favor of shots that convey a sense of the world of thought and feeling. This was done not just by photographing a scene from a character's point of view but by making the camera into a kind of subjective player in its own right, motivated at times by inchoate feelings or pure sensation. Welles's innovations, however, were not taken up by Hollywood filmmakers of the 1940s. In a recent *New Yorker* article, Claudia Roth Pierpont writes that even directors who worked with Toland, such as William Wyler, Howard Hawks, and George Cukor, were not interested in expanding on the subjective emotional terrain that Welles opened up.

Yet starting in the '50s, personal or auteur filmmakers from John Cassavetes to Martin Scorsese to Paul Thomas Anderson have made use of the full palette of camera possibilities that Welles suggested. On a parallel track, a rich tradition of avant-garde films has treated movies as pure personal poetry, more or less detached from conventional narrative. Underground film, as it was known, was arty by definition and seemed to have little relationship to its commercial counterpart, though, of course, since the '60s some Hollywood directors have adopted its techniques (John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* [1969] comes to mind). But it has taken many decades and an American painter working in France to finally make good on the promise of Welles's experiments in creating a subjective cinematic world in a movie for commercial release. In his latest film, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, Julian Schnabel successfully fuses an aesthetic descended from Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage, on the one hand, and Mikhail Kalatozov and Andrei Tarkovsky, on the other, with a satisfying narrative story. Structured as a series of encounters between the mute protagonist and his sympathetic and beautiful female interpreters, the film charts a man's progress through the last stage of his life with great emotional intensity, and it does so in part by hurling itself into a liberated and subjective kind of moviemaking.

Strange as it may seem now, in the art world of the mid- to late '70s the words *subjectivity* and even *sensibility* had the taint of romanticism and were definitely uncool. An artwork was meant to resemble a verifiable proposition; an artist was a kind of philosophical worker, visual arts division, who took pains to leave very few fingerprints. Throughout the '70s it was heresy for an artist to insist on the primacy of his or her subjectivity. One risked being called "arbitrary," and who wants to be called that? When Julian, along with other artists of a similar age, emerged at the end of the decade, the collective attitude amounted to one big Bronx cheer for the pieties and anemias of a generation drifting out to sea on a leaky raft of "conceptual" precepts. In 1978, he took a hammer to a box of china to make a ground for his painting, and, believe me, that blow made a big echo, at least all along West Broadway. Those early plate paintings operated outside the permissions of the day. They represented nerve and freedom and a willingness to stake everything on an *in-the-moment* decision. These works and the Kabuki backdrop paintings that followed were unanchored to anything except Julian's sensibility—and that constituted an act of rebellion. They were also *about* something. In their subject matter, as well as in their styling, they presented images of suffering and redemption; they celebrated holy fools and were as much about human frailty as they were about artistic success. They contained a vein of raw vulnerability, even tenderness, which at the time could be overshadowed by

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their bravado and scale.

Adapting the memoir of Jean-Dominique Bauby, the forty-three-year-old editor of French *Elle* who in 1995 suffered a massive stroke and became the paralyzed victim of “locked-in” syndrome, allowed and, in fact, required Julian to bring all of his talents as an in-the-moment artist to bear on the creation of a cinematic equivalent for a myriad of sense impressions and for consciousness as it forms and observes itself being constituted. On the simplest level, once Jean-Do’s right eye is sewn shut (in an already famous scene that allows us to imagine the panic induced upon seeing a needle and thread pass through one’s own eyelid), the one-to-one correspondence between the monocular vision of the camera and that of Jean-Do is made logically and dramatically appropriate. But the consciousness of the film—which is synonymous with and also larger than that of the protagonist, played by Mathieu Amalric—expands to include all of us and eventually achieves that rare thing: a cinematic metaphor for all of our human relationships, and for the delicacy, poignancy, and immediacy of consciousness itself.

In films about damaged people there is always a scene in which the director tries to connect us to the protagonist’s struggle to regain a lost capability—an attempt to walk again, relearn speech, and so on. These scenes, these movies, almost never work. Apart from *The Miracle Worker* (1962), Julian’s is the only one that actually made me feel I was experiencing the hero’s struggle. Jean-Do’s vibrant speech therapist, Henriette, played with great humility by Marie-Josée Croze, devises a way for him to “speak” by blinking at the correct letter as she recites the alphabet with the letters arranged in order of the frequency of their use. Julian’s patient camera allows us to participate in real time as, one letter after the next, Jean-Do and Henriette construct the words and phrases that reconnect him to society and, eventually, compose his book. As his caregivers and Céline, the mother of his children but not the love of his life, master the system of “talking” with him, we instinctively race ahead to link up letters to spell the next word. It’s a strange dialogue: Jean-Do’s “voice” emerges from his interlocutors. This transference is so absorbing, so suspenseful to watch, that I forgot I don’t speak French.



Julian Schnabel, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, 2007, still from a color film in 35 mm, 112 minutes. Céline (Emmanuelle Seigner).

As these language sessions progress, our experience of a person constructing his world with the most evanescent but resilient tools becomes exhilarating. And the film matches this exhilaration with its extravagantly buoyant camerawork and freely associative editing. The sense of meaning snatched from the enveloping void (the diving bell) is pervasive; this is the film’s art consciousness. Making the moment-by-moment, one-letter-at-a-time fleeting nature of life coexistent with the stubborn force of erotic love at odds with the familial bond is the film’s real achievement. We get so used to the idea that what we’re seeing is what Jean-Do is seeing that when, twenty minutes into the film, we have our first view of the “outside” of Jean-Do, we still remain somehow within his perceptual chain of command. Everything is his inside—even his outside.

Jean-Do is a kind of style arbiter, and the film charts the heartbreaking nature of a true aesthete’s relationship to beauty. The whole external world becomes suffused with a poeticizing perceptual sweetness that is expressed through the dispersal of light on film. This is the kind of “I’m glad to be alive so I can have this moment of poignant beauty” immediacy, connected to a narrative of tragic inevitability, that is akin to what I think Julian has always been going for in his paintings. When I replay the film in my head, the image that keeps floating back is that of Emmanuelle Seigner, who plays Céline, as she gazes straight into the camera, which is synonymous with Jean-Do’s eye. Seigner’s blond bangs cascade down, half-covering her immensely sad eyes; she is strongly side-lit so that the highlights in her hair are overexposed, giving her a faint halo. The way her image is constructed, by slathering light on her blond head as if she were being painted, is exemplary of Julian’s style as a filmmaker. Photography, moving or still, reconstitutes the visual world by making a record of light; it is said of the great cinematographers that they paint with light.

Painting constitutes by reconstituting bits of material. In Julian’s plate paintings, the broken shards of china are the carriers of the marks that reconstitute the sitters’ likenesses. At their best, these works are neither decorative nor purely “scenic” but have the freshness of something coming into being as we observe it, a quality that speaks to the phenomenology of the seeing eye and of the self finding form. Similarly, in *The Diving Bell’s* cinematography, Julian reconstitutes Jean-Do’s visual field not just through the direct correspondence between the shot and the character’s monocular gaze but by using the material of cinema as freely and spontaneously as he did his smashed plates. Commercial cinema is a recalcitrant medium. While a camera is capable of recording the minute shifts of light on a wafting curtain, which is to say immediacy, a movie set is a terribly difficult environment in which to locate these sensations, making Julian’s achievement all the more remarkable.





Julian Schnabel, *Lolita*, 1980, oil, plates, and Bondo on wood, 96 x 84".

As with other painters of his generation, Julian's aesthetic has always been about the freest and most surprising juxtaposition of images and an ability to see images and pure form as part of the same continuum. What set his work apart was his use of a fragmented, physically demanding surface, which gave his version of free association a kind of flickering, tentative quality that insists on the materiality of the painting. In this new film, we can feel the same aesthetic impulses at work. It flickers too. The gorgeous light that passes through the window and makes Jean-Do's curtains glow is the artist's material. Subjective experience and narrative come together in his movie's astringent and luscious gaze.

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