

Watershed February 2008 Podcast

Welcome to February's podcast. This is Mark Cosgrove head of Watershed's cultural programme bringing you thoughts and reflections on what is happening in the cinema.

You have probably already heard of 'The Diving Bell and the Butterfly', either in its original form as an extraordinary publishing phenomenon a few years ago or now as an equally extraordinary film directed by artist turned filmmaker Julian Schnabel. After winning an award at the Cannes Film festival last year it is now regularly and quite rightly being nominated for best film in this current awards season.

It was and still is an extraordinary book, containing the memoirs of Jean Dominique Bauby, the flamboyant charming and charismatic editor of French Elle magazine who suffered a stroke from which he went into a coma. When he surfaced from the stroke his brain was intact but he had no movement in his body bar the flick of one eyelid – a medical condition appropriately called locked-in syndrome. A terrible fate that is unthinkable if not unimaginable. Yet out of this horrific paradox Bauby managed to communicate through a specially constructed alphabet and remarkably told his story which was published in 1997. The title 'The Diving Bell and the Butterfly' eloquently conjures up the paradox – a body which is leaden and restrictive, the imagination which is nimble and exuberant. Through the book Bauby expresses the resilience of the imagination, the ability of the creative process to transcend the constrictions of the physical. A truly remarkable achievement and a book that should be read as a tonic of inspiration.

When I heard that it was being made into a film I hesitated at the prospect. How was such a definitively literary experience of entering a paralysed man's imagination going to be transferred onto the screen. Julian Schnabel's film does exactly that, Schnabel brings his painterly artistic eyes to cinematically unlock Jean Dominique Bauby's vision. I saw the film at its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival and was amazed at how Schnabel had cinematically rendered Bauby's vision. It alternately gives you the impression of the diving bell and the butterfly seeing Bauby trapped in his body in the hospital whilst flashing back and forward through his imagination. Some of the film reminded me of the audacious visuals of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger and in particular 'A Matter of Life and Death', during the scene where David Niven finally goes for the operation and we see a point of view shot, just before he is being administered anaesthetic, of an enormous eyelid closing in on the screen and for a second you see what Niven sees. Schnabel echoes such visual intensity and indeed exuberance in the joy of getting into someone's head as it were.

Schnabel's career is itself extraordinary. He was one of the highflying artists in the States in the 1980s. His work was part of that explosion in the market where

the financial world realised art was a serious investment and if you were an artist at the right place at the right time you could make some serious money. The value of the art was in its price not necessarily in its aesthetic. I'm not a fan of Schnabel's signature painting of the time – large canvasses covered with broken crockery. The art critic Robert Hughes wrote a damning piece on Schnabel for The New Republic in 1987 published in Hughes' collected art criticism 'nothing if not critical', I quote:-

'Schnabel's entry (to the art world hall of fame) was propelled by a megalomaniac, painfully sincere belief in his own present genius and future historical importance.'

And so wittily, acerbically witheringly and entertainingly Hughes goes on for a right old demolition job on artist Schnabel.

I am by nature sceptical about artists when they start making films. (I also remain bemused why some filmmakers are not called artist but that is for another time.) I feel they – the artists – think to themselves: 'I am an artist, I make art, I will make a film which by the nature of me being an artist will then itself be art.' This is not necessarily the case – see Tracey Emin's 'Top Spot (2004)' as a case in point. However, see also the case of Salvador Dali who tantalisingly circled the film world and whose paintings display a dreamlike cinematic quality. He along with Luis Buñuel made two iconic surreal films 'Un Chien Andalou' and 'L'age D'or.'. Dali also famously provided the dream sequence for Hitchcock's 'Spellbound'. But most surprisingly – or not when you think about it – Dali was invited by Walt Disney himself to develop an animation project. One can only wonder at what that partnership might have produced, clearly Disney saw the animation potential and cinematic scale in Dali's paintings

Schnabel is certainly proving the exception to the rule. His first film 'Basquiat (1996)' a portrait of his friend and contemporary graffiti artist was a strong first film. Then 'Before Night Falls (2000)' a portrait of repressed sexuality in Cuba starring Javier Bardem and Johnny Depp was an atmospheric film which demonstrated that Schnabel could not only control a narrative over two hours but could also imbue it with cinematic flourishes. With 'The Diving Bell and the Butterfly' he has created his most accomplished film bringing to bear his artistic visual sensibility to quite brilliantly realise the metaphor of Jean Dominique Bauby's diving bell and butterfly

'The Diving Bell and the Butterfly' opens at Watershed on Friday 8th February.

'Un Chien Andalou' is currently touring in the Independent Cinema Office's 'Essentials – Masterpieces of Cinema' programme following a sold out weekend at the Tate Modern. www.independentcinemaoffice.org.uk/essentials

As a footnote I wonder what art critic Robert Hughes makes of Schnabel the filmmaker.

Following on the art theme. For all those who when standing face to face with modern art feel that 'a kid could paint that' there is a somewhat cautionary documentary with that very title which follows the case of a 4 year old who was catapulted in the media spotlight after a local gallery showed her work and started selling them for thousands of dollars. Her paintings did indeed display a precocious talent but what the documentary filmmaker stumbles into is the revelation that she may well not have been the only author of the work. The film is less about what constitutes art the aesthetic object and more about the money, manipulation and modern obsession with media and fame. 'My Kid Could Paint That' opens at Watershed on Friday 1 February.

This month we introduce two services for blind and deaf cinemagoers to enhance their experience of some of the films we are screening.

First is audio description, which is a descriptive track attached to the film and relayed via infrared to a headset of the blind or partially sighted person. This gives added description of what is happening on the screen. To use this, the blind or partially sighted person needs to collect a headset at Box-Office.

For deaf or hard of hearing cinemagoers we are offering descriptive subtitling. This is subtitles which are projected onto the screen giving dialogue if it is an English language film and description of additional sounds and music. If it is a foreign language film the subtitles just give description of additional sounds and music.

You need to check with Box Office on availability of both services or in the brochure or website. Box office number is 0117 927100 or visit **www.watershed.co.uk/accessibleprogramme**

In closing this month's podcast I want to point you to 'There Will Be Blood' which has at its heart a quite outstanding performance from Daniel Day Lewis. His ability to occupy – or become – the character is one of Cinema's great joys. In 'Gangs of New York' whilst the bits without Day Lewis didn't quite live up to expectation, here the whole film is exceptional and Day Lewis's performance is mesmerising. I'd like to think he has based it on John Huston's demonic character in Roman Polanski's classic 'Chinatown' – one of the handful of truly terrifying characters in cinema history. The sheer pleasure in watching Day Lewis's physical, subtle, nuanced acting is inestimable. Of course I couldn't help think that Heath Ledger had it within his gift to deliver performances of such intensity and quality – indeed he already had in 'Brokeback Mountain' and, for my money, in 'Candy' – what great inspiring performances we were to look forward to as he worked his way into the pantheon of great actors. What a damn tragedy. And may he rest in peace 'There Will be Blood' opens on Friday 15th February.