

# THE LEFT ATRIUM

## Film review

### Spheres of influence

#### **The sea inside (*Mar adentro*)**

Directed by Alejandro Amenábar

Sogecine, 2004, 125 min

Screenplay by Alejandro Amenábar and Mateo Gill

Starring Javier Bardem, Belén Rueda and Lola Dueñas

#### **Rory O'Shea Was Here**

Directed by Damien O'Donnell

Screenplay by Jeffrey Caine

Focus Features, 2004, 105 min

Starring Steven Robertson, James McAvoy and Ramola Garai

Although *The Sea Inside* and *Rory O'Shea Was Here* both portray seriously disabled people coping with overwhelming limitations, the issues these films raise resonate beyond quotidian struggles. *The Sea Inside* is based on the life of Ramon Sampedro, who was rendered quadriplegic in a diving accident and became a vocal advocate for the legalization of assisted suicide. Rory O'Shea is a fictional teenager born with Duchenne muscular dystrophy who refuses to let his disorder slow him down. Like other biopics (*My Left Foot*, 1989) and documentaries (*The Sue Rodriguez Story*, 1998), these well-crafted stories inspire reflection on the value of life and of a dignified death, whether we are disabled or not.

Directed by Alejandro Amenábar, *The Sea Inside* is neither documentary nor fiction but a dramatization constructed in a way faithful to Sampedro's philosophy of life. The director was inspired to write the story after he saw a documentary about Sampedro and

read his book *Letters from Hell*. Sampedro even arranged to have his own death videotaped, right down to the last agonizing cyanide-induced spasm, to prove to the authorities that others should not suffer the way he did. Amenábar held extensive interviews and obtained script approvals from Sampedro's close friends and the family members who took care of him for almost three decades.

The movie begins and ends with the theme of the metamorphic sea, giving life and claiming it back. Sampedro is in the 28th year of his fight for the right to die with dignity and is about to meet Julia, a lawyer who has agreed to plead his case. Julia is an amalgam of the sev-

has to get to know him. She is given a box of photographs that the filmmaker uses to take the audience back to when Sampedro, as a young man afflicted by wanderlust, decided to join the merchant marine. The sea and travelling were his passion. The photos reveal his larger-than-life appetite for love and adventure. Through Julia's probings, Sampedro flashes back to the moment where, mentally preoccupied, he dives off a cliff into water made shallow by a retreating undertow — a phenomenon familiar to any sailor. As he hits bottom his neck snaps; images from his life flood his consciousness. He is rescued in the nick of time but is paralyzed from the neck down. He later says, "I

## These films also challenge societal conventions about who should control critical decisions in disabled people's lives.

eral women Sampedro knew throughout his life as a quadriplegic. Later in the movie we learn that Sampedro had specified that the lawyer defending him should have a degenerative disease in order to truly understand the nature of his suffering and why he wants to choose death over life. Even bedridden he is disarmingly charming, witty and humorous, but he is also single-minded in his purpose.

To better represent Sampedro, Julia

should have died right then and there." This is the crux of the movie: for Sampedro, life is not worth living if he cannot enjoy it to the fullest, and the mental torture of unfulfilled dreams is worse than any physical handicap.

The other main female protagonist is Rosa, a character inspired by the woman who was Sampedro's constant companion and assisted in his suicide. Rosa's own life is a mess. She has two children by different fathers and works

in a dead-end job in a canning factory. She sees Sampedro making his plea on television and cannot understand why such a charming man would seek to end his life. She decides that he only needs to be loved so that he can find the courage to fight on. Sampedro quickly cuts to the chase and tells Rosa she is there to make *herself* feel better. This is the other lesson of the movie: through his suffering, Sampedro paradoxically makes everyone around him feel more alive. While everyone pleads with Sampedro, he simply asks “Don’t judge me, I don’t tell you how to live your life, don’t tell me how I should feel or what I should do.” There are echoes here of arguments made by Sue Rodriguez.

In *Rory O’Shea Was Here*, Rory and Michael are two severely impaired young men who meet at an institution for people with disabilities. Rory has Duchenne muscular dystrophy and an acid wit. Michael has severe cerebral palsy, but underneath his garbled speech lies an intelligent and sensitive soul. Rory has a caring father and has already lived a mischief-filled life. Michael as a young boy was abandoned to the institution by his rich father after his mother died. They become good companions as Rory challenges Michael about his sheltered life: “Have you ever been laid, have you ever gotten arrested?” Rory’s dream is to live independently, but he is deemed “irresponsible.” Rory convinces Michael to plead his own case for independent living. Michael is Rory’s way out. Michael wins his case but needs a so-called interpreter, to which role Rory duly appoints himself.

What is brilliant here is how the two young men complement each other; each has a gift that makes the other whole. Rory finds out who Michael’s father is (a rich magistrate) and shames him into supporting them in a specially designed apartment. Rory continues to cause mayhem, but Michael evolves beyond the hidden potential suppressed by institutional living. They hire the attractive Siobhan as their caretaker; although devoted to the boys, she reminds them that her caring is proportional to the wages she earns — a realization devastating to the smitten Michael, utterly naive in matters of love.

Rory’s talent for mischief, which includes provoking and insulting others, makes him appear self-centred, uncaring and rebellious, shattering the stereotype of the “well-mannered cripple.” But Rory’s days are numbered by his disease, the grim prognosis of which he never bothered to mention to Michael. In the short time he spends with Rory, Michael tastes excitement and adventure but also disappointment and grief that he could never encounter inside the walls of the institution. The movie ends with Michael dissolving into the crowd; an anonymous but whole person.

In *Rory O’Shea*, as in *The Sea Inside*, the issue of quality of life ani-

mates the film. Sampedro and Rory ask the audiences not to prejudice them. They also challenge societal conventions about who should control critical decisions in disabled people’s lives.

In the last scene of *The Sea Inside* Julia is in a wheelchair, alive but demented; she suffers from a degenerative disease resulting in multiple strokes. She had wanted to end her life when conscious of how the disease would ravage her mind but was persuaded to go on living by her dutiful husband.

**Normand Carrey**  
Psychiatrist  
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## Notes

### Psychiatry is hard

Psychiatry is hard. My patients aren’t getting better. Actually, I think they’re getting worse. The psychotic hears so many voices, I bet he thinks he’s at the UN. The bulimic is spending half the day in the bathroom. The manic hasn’t slept for days and is currently wailing out *Bridge Over Troubled Water* in a pressured frenzy at the nurses’ desk.

I can’t convince them of anything. Not a thing. Not that voices don’t usually come out of thin air. Not that food is neither control nor shame. Not that sitting quietly once in a while might be a good idea.

Not that there is hope.

Today I spoke with the psychotic.

“Sometimes I hear voices.”

“What do the voices say?”

“Well ... they take my stuff, sometimes.”

“How can they do that? They’re only voices.”

“They can assume human form.”

“How do they do that, assume human form?”

“How else could they take my stuff?”

Well, you can’t argue with that. It’s the worst syllogism I’ve ever heard, and it opens my eyes.

I can’t persuade these people to be healthy. Logic isn’t the drug that will cure them. A cure isn’t even what they need. What they need is help.

Help getting their stuff back from those thieving voices. Help confronting whatever monster is hiding behind the food. Help living life with the volume set a little below eleven.

Help finding some hope.

And, perhaps, help taking their meds.

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