

The Sea Inside/ Mar adentro (2004). A different view six years after the Academy Award

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Summary

Several aspects of the Academy Award winning film *The Sea Inside*, by Alejandro Amenábar, are analyzed in this paper six years after it was awarded an Oscar. It is a widely known fact that this film tells the real story of a quadriplegic, Ramón Sampedro, emphasizing the vicissitudes the protagonist withstood before managing to put an end to his life. An analysis of the characters in the film is made; both popular and cinematographic reviews of it are discussed, and the image it conveys of disability is analyzed. Always respecting the protagonist's personal choice, and conscious of the fact that the main topic is not disability but euthanasia, we offer a critical view of the approach to quadriplegia, and ultimately to spinal cord injury, offered in the film, since we believe that it indirectly highlights negative aspects, to the detriment of a positive approach to the experience of living with such a disability. In short, this film conveys an image that is opposed to what this team struggles to defend: namely, that disability, including spinal cord injury, is compatible with happiness.

Keywords: Cinema, *The Sea Inside*, Disability, Quadriplegia, Spinal cord injury.

Technical details

Title: *The Sea Inside*.

Original title: *Mar adentro*.

Country: Spain.

Year: 2004.

Director: Alejandro Amenábar.

Music: Alejandro Amenábar.

Photography: Javier Aguirresarobe.

Film editor: Alejandro Amenábar.

Screenwriter: Alejandro Amenábar and Mateo Gil, based on a real event.

Cast: Javier Bardem (Ramón Sampedro), Belén Rueda (Julia), Lola Dueñas (Rosa), Mabel Rivera (Manuela), Celso Bugallo (José Sampedro), Clara Segura (Gené), Joan Dalmau (Joaquín), Alberto Jiménez (Germán), Tamar Novas (Javi), Francesc Garrido (Marc), José María Pou

(Father Francisco), Alberto Amarilla (Brother Andrés), Andrea Occhipinti (Santiago), Federico Pérez Rey (Driver), Nicolás Fernández Luna (Cristian), Raúl Lavisier (Samuel), Xosé Manuel Olveira 'Pico' (Judge 1), César Cambeiro (Judge 2), Xosé Manuel Esperante (Journalist 1), Yolanda Muiños (Journalist 2), Adolfo Obregón (Executive), José Luis Rodríguez (TV presenter), Julio Jordán (Publisher), Juan Manuel Vidal (Ramón's friend).

Color: Color.

Runtime: 125 minutes.

Genre: Biography, Drama.

Production Companies: Sogepaq, Sociedad General de Cine (SOGECINE) S.A, Himenóptero, Union Générale Cinématographique (UGC), Eyescreen S.r.l., Televisión Española (TVE),

Canal+, Televisión de Galicia (TVG) S.A., Filmanova (as Filmnova Invest), Eurimages and the Ministry of Culture.

Synopsis: The film is based on the real story of Ramón Sampedro, a sailor who is left quadriplegic because of an accident he had when he is young and has remained bedridden for around 30 years, wishing to die with dignity. His world is reduced to his room where he has contact with Julia, his lawyer (who suffers from CADASIL), and with Rosa, a neighbour who tries to convince him of how interesting life might be. Ramón's strong personality radically changes the principles of both of these women.

Awards:

Oscar (2005) for Best Foreign Language Film. Goya Award (2005) for best Film, Best Director (Alejandro Amenábar), Best Actor (Javier Bardem), Best Actress (Lola Dueñas), Best Supporting Actor (Celso Bugallo), Best Supporting Actress (Mabel Rivera), Best New Actor (Tamar Novas), Best New Actress (Belén Rueda), Best Screenplay - Original (Alejandro Amenábar and Mateo Gil), Best Original Score (Alejandro Amenábar), Best Production Supervision (Emiliano Otegui), Best Cinematography (Javier Aguirresarobe), Best Make-up and Hairstyles (Jo Allen, Ana Ruiz Puigcerber, Mara Collazo and Manolo García) and Best Sound (Ricardo Steinberg, Alfonso Raposo, Juan Ferro and María Steinberg), ...

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0369702>

http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mar_adentro

Ramón Sampedro (Javier Bardem) is a Galician sailor who is left quadriplegic as a result of an accident that takes place when he dives into the sea from a rock. Owing to his disability, he has been bedridden for 28 years. From the very moment he finds out that he is never going to be able to walk again, his only aim is to find some loophole in the law that might allow someone to help him to die without being convicted for it. During this struggle, he meets two women who are to change his life: Julia, the lawyer who wants to support his cause publicly, and Rosa, a neighbour from the village, who, upon learning his story, will try to persuade him that life is worth living. Ramón's strong personality will win these two women's hearts, leading them to reflect on the principles that their lives are governed by, since Ramón himself admits that *"the person who really loves me will be precisely the one who will help me to die"*. Euthanasia, dignified death, living without dignity, the right to die, freedom of choice, etc., are the terms with which the main topic of the film *The Sea Inside* could be defined. However, a love story that is more delicate than the dis-

cussion on euthanasia, which is the film's main topic¹, develops throughout the film.

The characters

The Spanish film by Alejandro Amenábar tells the true story of Ramón Sampedro (1943-1998)², a 19-year-old young man (Figure 1) who worked as a ship's mechanic, allowing him to travel and see the world while at the same time enjoying the sea; his most precious treasure. However, at 25, a miscalculated dive from the rocks along the coast of his native Galicia results in a cervical injury after which he is only able to move his head. This changes Ramón Sampedro's life radically, together with his own conception of it. He refuses to use a wheelchair, seeing it as a symbol of his limited freedom. Because of this, Ramón is left with no autonomy at all, depending on others for all his needs: first on his mother, and later on his sister-in-law [Manuela (Mabel Rivera)], who nobly takes charge of Ramón's personal care, becoming emotionally involved and even saying *"I love him like a son"*.



Figure 1: Ramón Sampedro (Javier Bardem) before the accident.

The different characters that appear in the film represent a human universe of attitudes when faced by the onset of an unexpected disability, with their different reactions, feelings, behaviours and processes of adaptation, while at the same time weaving a natural support network to cope with daily life. Besides Manuela, the main carer, Ramón also lives with his brother José (Celso Bugallo), who gives up his life as a sailor to be near him physically, even though he makes it clear that he is completely opposed to his brother's intention of bringing about his own death, expressed in phrases such as *"while I'm alive, nobody is going to get killed here. In this house nobody's going to get killed"*. In his role as nephew, Javi (Tamar Novas), Manuela and José's son, is always willing to spend time with Ramón and offer him his youthful enthusiasm and energy. Another important character in Ramón's life is Joaquín's father (Joan Dalmau, who seems

to be reserved about what he says since his son's resolve to die is mistaken and painful for him; he expresses this in the film when he says: *"there is only one thing worse than losing a son; that he actually wants to die"*.

Apart from the people who live with Ramón, there are other important characters involved in his story. One of them is Gené (Clara Segura), whose role is to defend the pro-euthanasia association and is the person who puts him in touch with Julia (Belén Rueda) (Figure 2), the lawyer who will defend Ramón Sampedro's freedom of choice. Julia, who also suffers from a neurodegenerative disease, visits Ramón accompanied by Marc (Francesc Garrido), another lawyer who it to help in the defence of his cause. Finally, there is Rosa (Lola Dueñas) (Figure 3), a neighbour from the village who, after watching Ramón publicly declaring his determination to die on television, seeks to befriend him in order to convince him that life really is worth living. During the course of this, she falls in love with him and ends up fighting for what Ramón is most passionate about. Another character is the priest, Father Francisco (José María Pou), who is also quadriplegic and engages Ramón Sampedro in a debate on the possibilities involved in living in a wheelchair, setting forth arguments such as *"life is not only moving one's arms or running from one place to another or kicking a ball: what a load of bollocks!, Life is really something else; it's much more"* clearly reflecting, in the scenes where he appears, on the architectural barriers that exist where Ramón lives.



Figure 2: Julia (Belén Rueda), Ramón's lawyer.

Criticism

1.- Popular criticism

Of the performance. Among the **"positive"** pieces of criticism are Javier Bardem's and Lola Dueñas' outstanding performances, both of them Goya Awards for Best Actor and Best Actress respectively. The supporting characters are also brilliant. The Galician accent could be



Figure 3: Rosa (Lola Dueñas), Ramón's neighbour.

considered **"negative"** in the sense that it is sometimes very hard to understand.

Of the characters. Among the **"positive"** aspects perceived by the viewer, the following are worth mentioning:

The strength with which Rosa confronts life, together with her eagerness to convince Ramón that the best option is to continue living. In this respect she comments: *"Can't someone fall in love with a quadriplegic, or what?, Do you find it that strange [...], love does not answer to reason"*.

The way in which José stops working to be able to be close to his younger brother to deal with his situation. Throughout the story, he will reproach Ramón for it: *"And what about me? Am I not a slave too? How do you think I felt when I had to leave the sea to come here, to get some kind of money out of this crappy piece of land, to be with you: only with you; me and my wife and son? All of us your slaves!"*.

The willingness of Manuela, Ramón's sister-in-law, who looks after him unconditionally and without any help. She even states that her opinion does not matter *"you see, what I would prefer doesn't matter, Ramón wants to die; it's all clear to me"*.

Ramón Sampedro's cheerful attitude when he says *"when one can't escape and constantly depends on others, one learns to laugh while crying"*.

The fact that Ramón Sampedro makes it clear that he is only speaking of himself, not of the whole group of people with quadriplegia. Statements such as *"life like this is not worth it. So, all right, and I understand that other quadriplegics might take offence when I say that life like this is not worth it, but I am not judging anyone, am I ?, Who am I to judge those who want to live, that's why I ask not to be judged and that the*

person who can provide me with the necessary help to die should not be judged either", "the question was whether I was willing to love in this state [...] but who?, who is talking of quadriplegics. I'm talking of myself, of Ramón Sampedro".

On the other hand, viewers might consider certain attitudes as "negative":

Thus, Ramón Sampedro is stubborn, selfish, manipulating, self-centred and a blackmailer, "and don't judge me, Rosa, don't judge me, not in my own house".

His stubbornness against attachment to life is obsessive, and his desire to die becomes pathological. In one scene he tells Julia that for him the future "...is death, the same as for you, or don't you think of death? Surely I'm not the only one to think of death", to which she replies: "Of course I think of it, only I try not to make it my only thought".

His rejection of resources that might improve the quality of life of people with quadriplegia (technical means, suitable environmental means, etc.). He refuses to use the wheelchair because "to accept the wheelchair would be like accepting scraps of what my freedom used to be".

The judges are portrayed as lacking humanity, with gloomy features and solid arguments that refuse to see his point of view: "if you want to change the proceedings, then change the law".

Gené and Marc, defenders of the pro-euthanasia association, also become standard-bearers of life, explaining their ideals as the defence of all: "we support freedom: that of those who wish to live and that of those who wish to die".

Ramón's pessimistic position might be thought of as a negative influence for people with physical disabilities, because of phrases such as: "you are sitting there less than 2 metres away. What are 2 metres? An insignificant distance for any human being. Well, for me those 2 metres that I need to reach you, to touch you even, are an impossible journey, a chimaera, a dream. That's why I want to die". This position contrasts with what his brother says: "ideas are free, but I believe that what he asks for is not right. I want the best for him; everybody in the household wants the best for him. So, why should he want to die? No one could possibly manage to understand it; it isn't rational, as he says".

Ramón talks with cold detachment of lives that should not be lived, he explains: "the sea gave me life and then took it away... I should have died then", or in

another scene at the end of the film before drinking the glass of water with cyanide he says: "forced to put up with this pitiful situation for 28 years, 4 months and a few days".

Of the film. Some of its features are clearly "positive": the cinematography is not good but exceptional; the music is perfectly adapted to the plot; the narrative resources conform to the intended end, and the supporting characters are adequately used to support the main topic.

Despite its fame and the large number of awards it won, there are several aspects that could be mentioned as "negative". Although the film is considered a documentary -and therefore objective and with images taken from reality- it is no more than an apology of euthanasia and suicide as a means to "resolve" the problems related to disability.

The result is a sensationalist film focused only on its marketability. In spite of this, it does not succeed in completely reaching the viewer, possibly due to the mediocrity of its stylistic resources and its dull and superficial plot: it does not go into why Ramón becomes so obsessed with death. In addition, it presents a "non-risky" politically correct discourse. Thus, when talking about his situation Ramón Sampedro says: "it depends on those who are pulling the strings".

The director's point of view is made clear, since comments against euthanasia are easy to manipulate and counteract. In his dialogue with Ramón Sampedro, the priest says: "a freedom that eliminates life is no freedom", to which Ramón quickly replies: "a life that eliminates freedom is no life either".

The concept of happiness portrayed is materialist and individualist. The film establishes a parallelism between quadriplegia and euthanasia. The development of the film's plot is one-way, focused on the negative experience of the onset of quadriplegia in such a way that it shows a process of adaptation that necessarily results in a desire for the voluntary ending of one's life. There are no counterarguments provided by complementary stories of other people who live cheerfully despite being quadriplegic; testimonies that, by providing a broader view of the issue, would enrich the development of the line of thought defended by the scriptwriters and the director in the plot.

The film establishes a campaign of manipulation that takes advantage of a person with a spinal cord injury to open a discussion on euthanasia for political purposes, since it uses a dignified death that could have been discreet.

The main topic is focused on discussions that do not concern Ramón Sampedro's real problem, such those about anti-Catholic approaches, with reproaches against the Church such as when Ramón says: *"why does the Church defend this position of fear of death with such passion? Because it knows it would lose a great number of its customers if people lose their fear of what lies in the great beyond"*; or his recrimination to the priest: *"the institution you represent and accept to date is nothing but the death penalty"*; or Marc's words at the trial when he says: *"in a secular State that acknowledges the right to private property and whose Constitution also includes the right not to suffer or undergo torture or degrading treatment, we may deduce that whoever considers his/her condition degrading, such as Ramón Sampedro, should have the right to take charge of his/her own life. Indeed, no one who attempts suicide and survives is subsequently prosecuted, but, when the help of another person is needed to die with dignity, the State interferes with people's dignity and tells them that the life they have does not belong to them; that they can't simply dispose of it as they please. This, your Lordship, can only be done based upon metaphysical, that is to say, religious, beliefs in a State that, I repeat, is declared as secular"*. This is opposed to Catholic approaches such as those of Ramón's father: *"this is a terrible pity; it is something that only someone who suffers from it can... well, as long as it is God's will, he will have to go on living"*.

Some words of criticism from viewers:

- *"Christopher Reeves has been and will be the clearest example of self-improvement and heroism"*³.

- *"Part of the film is occupied by uncomplicated scenes of closeness between Bardem and Belén Rueda, in the purest style of romantic comedies"*¹.

- *"Watching this film makes me feel grateful for being able to walk and do other things"*⁴.

- *"How many thousands of quadriplegics have managed to overcome their difficulties and have had a happy life? There are much more important things to which euthanasia might be applied"*⁵.

2.- Cinematographic criticism

Of the performance. It is mainly **"positive"**. Javier Bardem plays the role of a quadriplegic in a very convincing and masterly way, in such a way that this role has led him to being considered one of the best Spanish actors of the times. At his side, Mabel Rivera's performance is no less spectacular. The performance of the both protagonist and the supporting actors is synergic and imbues the

issue addressed with a certain sobriety. At times, the Galician accent becomes too broad, making it difficult to understand the dialogues. This is the most important **"negative"** piece of criticism in this field.

Of the film. Among the **"positive"** criticisms, the appropriate use of cinematographic resources is outstanding. Humour is used without seeming **"funny"**. Thus, Ramón Sampedro teases people by saying things like: *"well then I will get up and make coffee"*, *"sorry for not shaking hands with you"*, *"I'm very lively"*, *"I sometimes smoke to see if it kills me but it doesn't"*, or *"I wouldn't like to fall backwards and break my neck"*. The film plays with the feeling of pity, but owing to the protagonist's bitterness stemming from his desire to die, and not because of his condition as a person with a disability. It uses effective music but with manipulative purposes. It uses Ramón Sampedro's dreams as a narrative resource that distances the film from reality.

The film's position of not taking risks, its evasive approach, and its lack of personality and character should be pointed out as **"negative"** criticisms. It does not deal with the true issues about life and death in depth. It establishes a moving, but not very thought-provoking, atmosphere, following the typical format of American films, where the director seeks emotional involvement of viewers. The commercial purpose is unquestionable. The cast, which is excellent, is what saves the film. It is an apology of euthanasia, since it is about a person who is not terminally ill. The reasons for the nature and opinion of each of the characters are not clear, while the truth is that the personality of each of them is rooted in their past. The concept of love involves certain sacrifices; however, Ramón is not willing to make any sacrifices, even if these are for his own benefit.

To sum up, there is little to object to. The prizes awarded support its cinematographic qualities. It is a successful piece of cinematographic art, with an excellent screenplay and a praiseworthy performance.

Gustavo Bueno Sánchez describes the director, Alejandro Amenabar, as a *«marvellous opportunist»*, because of his **"nose"** for detecting plots that inspire social discussion. *«It happened in "The Sea Inside", about the euthanasia Ramón Sampedro managed to orchestrate»*⁶.

Spinal cord injury through *The Sea Inside*

Apart from the personal aspects, which Ramón Sampedro himself stresses on several occasions, both in his writings^{7,8} and in the film itself⁹, the aim of this section is to attempt to focus on the image of disability conveyed in *The Sea Inside*.

In spite of Ramón's attempt to make it clear that he is not representing anybody in particular; that in his struggle he neither judges others nor speaks in the name of others ("*I'm talking about myself*"), to start with we see the image of spinal cord injury to be extremely biased and specific to the case dealt with. The risk for the general public lies in their being led into thinking, generalizing, that everybody with a spinal cord injury, or at least a high spinal cord injury, are condemned to a life such as Ramón's and to having no more options than resignation or evasion through imagination.

The film starts from a series of facts that can indeed be generalized to all those suffering from an unexpected spinal cord injury. It shows a high cervical spinal cord injury leading to quadriplegia as the consequence of an ill-fated dive. This type of accident and its subsequent injury are one of the most frequent causes of unexpected spinal chord injuries related to sports.

The inherent tragedy of an accident such as this involves a radical change in the lives of both the sufferer and his/her immediate background, in this case of Ramón and his family. It involves the need for help, environmental adaptation, and technical support. The most outstanding differences among patients with spinal cord injuries are observed at this stage, since the resulting limitations depend on the level at which the injury takes place. The most dramatic consequences, quadriplegia, result from high cervical injuries.

In this sense, the film reflects the consequences (both physical and psychological) and the complete dependency of a quadriplegic; complete dependency, in its "purest sense", in the patient's refusal to use any technical support.

Stressing Ramón's personal aspects, which cannot be extended to others, are his repeated rejections of the wheelchair, his confinement in a non-accessible environment, etc. Possible explanations for such a situation might be found, for instance, in the time when the injury took place, since in 1968 neither welfare resources nor environmental support were at the level they are today. However, this explanation might not be appropriate, since there are many people whose unexpected spinal cord injuries took place around that time or even before, and who have chosen paths of adaptation that have led them to high degrees of independence, autonomy, and quality of life.

This refusal is, or at least might seem, paradoxical, since Ramón is neither a person who lacks social abilities or skills and nor is he immersed in a depression that might prevent him from establishing social relationships or that might inevitably lead him to isolation. His case

would rather be the opposite; he manages to establish an extensive, caring and more than considerable network of friends.

As has been said among the associations of people with spinal cord injury, to be the focus of the media, to appear on television or in the newspapers, in order to have a film made about you, you must be prepared to commit suicide. On the other hand, if you work and are a productive person, if you pay taxes, if you have children, and if you are integrated both socially and employment-wise, then you do not attract anybody's attention.

We believe, and have stated so more than once, that "*spinal chord injuries are compatible with happiness*". In Ramón's case, it seems that both his personal choice and his physical surroundings, his family not included, did not favour such compatibility. However, thousands of others choose their own happiness and thus contribute to the happiness of those around them. The process of adaptation involved in such a serious and limiting unexpected disability as quadriplegia clearly requires huge amounts of personal effort towards adaptation, as well as efforts from family, society and from that person's surroundings. It is also equally clear that



Spanish poster

not everyone has the same capacity for adaptation. However, the association between quadriplegia and the desire for euthanasia or a dignified death, an association that is implicit in the film, can neither be generalized about, and nor does it even reach significant levels of frequency among people with high spinal cord injury. This association, unjustified and applicable only to certain cases, is what is unfair, unjustifiable, and uncalled-for, stirring the anger of the large group of people with spinal cord injury who, instead of attitudes of defeat, resignation, submission, and giving in, choose attitudes of confrontation, adaptation, self-improvement and rehabilitation, thus fighting for a life of independence and quality. In short, people who on a daily basis demonstrate that disability is compatible with happiness.

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