

## **Cinema and Mental Isolation: Representations of Autism and Mental Health in the Short Film *Corduroy* (Hugh O'Connor, 2009)**

David Mackey, *University College Cork*

Cinema has a unique way of interacting with the audience on a multi-sense plain. It is able to develop a shared consciousness between the cinematic world and the spectator, one realised in the camera's becoming a physical presence in the diegetic space in ways that invite interrogations of the spectator's sense of self. The body of the spectator experiences a visceral elevation of emotions and sensations, that invite her to identify with screen representations, or to experience as sense of detachment, isolation, and alienation from them. The subjective (located or point of view) depictions of mental health within the cinematic medium is an extreme form of this evocative engagement. From the perspective of the film spectator, the encounter can fluctuate between a sense of loneliness and a communally shared experience of isolation from the physical environment. The imagined space between camera and body can become distorted as each shares with the other the mental activity of encounter. Some have even suggested that through the cinematic medium a "new human being is formed" (Holl 2017, 161) by virtue of a newly emerging "being present together". Mental health is a theme increasingly addressed in cinematic narratives, and it one of evident critical importance. Its depictions and characterisations on film inevitably aim to offer an experience that is shared by the collective consciousness of the film audience. In a basic way, as film struggles to represent cognitive anomalies, it reaches back to its historical foundations, and some of the first endeavours it sought: it attempts to display for audiences pure ontological experiences, and in reaching towards its phenomenological capacities, we might recall how at best it is a "strange mechanism parodying man's spirit" (Baudry 1975, 348).

In the Irish short film *Corduroy*, specific capacities of the medium are mobilised to present a world shaped by the mind of an autistic woman. Most directly, these allow director Hugh O'Connor to share the character's experiences with his spectators, by using aural and visual techniques that only the cinema can provide. The idea of collective experience in the film is further developed by establishing a "common memory" (Margalit 2009, 51) between the audience and the protagonist, Jesse. Within this shared isolation from the outside world, the audience and Jesse are united and

emerged in the diegetic space of *Corduroy*. The film strives to neutralise its own processes of mediation, and while we see what Jesse sees and encounter her experiences as she lives through them, the film foregrounds the inevitability of its own limitations – of framing, of polyvocal sensuousness, of two dimensionality – rather than concealing them with a more traditional seamless. Thus, it leans into the limits of the medium instead of disregarding or denying them and so represents an ontological and cognitive position to us more aligned to that of Jesse's. O'Connor sets up an interesting and innovative relationship between the audience and Jesse that helps to display (at times almost impressionistically) a perspective of mental health. The means by which our understanding of various attributes of the illness are conveyed is not concealed, and the "disruption" generates a feeling of separation, distance, and (ideally, even) loneliness for the viewer. Our encounter with this world becomes a complete encounter with a distinct aesthetic, cinematic domain.

In a basic way, the film's point of view alignments work to ensure the establishment of a coherent subjective engagement and, simultaneously, objective disengagement. As we follow Jesse through her uninterrupted perspective, we are denied access to the points of view of her helper and others surrounding characters. Formally we are given access to Jesse's interpretation of events in scenes when the blurring of characters and the backgrounds during a conversation within the autism centre. This enhances the division between how Jesse interprets the places and people around her and the identities and perspectives of those sharing her space. The audience is forced to confront an alienating and disorientating environment, in which regular cinematic cues, codes, and conventional modes of representation are suspended or disrupted. The "real world intrudes in such a setting" for both Jesse and the audience as it attempts to eliminate their shared understanding of this world from their minds (Dixon 2016,505).

The film takes a further interesting turn when Jesse is submerged in the sea. During this scene, Jesse's world becomes tranquil and severed from normative sensual stimuli. The film responds by suspending its soundtrack and rejecting recognisable framing. This moment of Jesse's existence is at odds with how the ocean may be seen by those outside of her purview: as an active energetic threat to our physical reality. In the world of the film *Corduroy*, which is entirely Jesse's world, it is transcendent. The autistic world of Jesse as she lingers in the seas and her existence within the surface has become a "secondary world" (Clayton 2022, 216).

The spatial design of *Corduroy* confronts and interacts with the viewer by allowing her to experience another level of consciousness and an alternative mental state. This exploration facilitates an alternative understanding of not only the physical impact of mental illness on those who suffer but also on how our world can be seen as at times alienating and distorted from our own perceptions of reality for those who experience autism. From its earliest moments, cinema had developed a relationship with the phenomenological and physical structures of the mind that

mirrored its perception of the world at large as “our imagination is projected on the screen” (Holl, 2016). *Corduroy* reaches back to the fundamental mechanical capacities of the technical apparatus and has used these faculties to represent alternative cognitive dispositions.

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## AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

David John Mackey is a second year PhD student in the Department of *Film & Screen Media* at University College Cork. His thesis explores the relationship between time-memory and film through the works of Henri Bergson and other French philosophers such as Jean Baudrillard and Jean Louis Baudry. He has completed both a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in English. His work has been published in *Estudios Irlandeses*.

 [davidpio532@gmail.com](mailto:davidpio532@gmail.com)