

The Co-Production of Autism in the film *Wretches & Jabberers*

Wretches & Jabberers. Dir. Gerardine Wurzburg. State of the Art, Inc., 2010. DVD.

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A bell-like sound introduces us to the credits that begin the film, *Wretches & Jabberers*—a film by Academy Award nominated director, Gerardine Wurzburg—about two communication-impaired¹ autistic men, Larry Bissonnette and Tracy Thresher. They travel to Sri Lanka, Japan, and Finland to meet other autistic adults who cannot speak but type to express themselves. The film takes place with students in various educational programs, autism conferences, with a US Senator, and focuses on moments where the film subjects communicate *with each other* about autistic self-advocacy.

As the bell fades, the screen goes black, and then we read: “Until the 1980s most children and young adults with autism were excluded from normal schooling. Some were placed in mental institutions.” The letters dissolve with a long pause. Larry Bissonnette’s voice breaks the silence.

“Eeeeeeee,” he chimes with a smile, and then we hear laughter. Next, we see Larry gently nudging his friend Tracy Thresher across the stomach as if to urge him to also smile before the camera, or perhaps as a gesture of camaraderie. In the next frame, more text appears on the screen: “Like many children with autism Tracy Thresher and Larry Bissonnette grew up unable to speak... They faced a future of isolation in adult disability centres. When Tracy was 23 and Larry was 34 their lives changed when they learned to communicate by typing.” The implication is that freedom can be found the ability to type, or to come to language.²

The film begins with an assemblage of music, sounds, and voices—the film subjects when they are able to read their own text, the text-to-speech device, the voices of their assistants helping to read the typed text. Considering that for many, typing can take significant time, this presentation technique can be seen as an effective way to capture the extensive travels and conversations of the autistic subjects for a typical viewing audience.³ The manner in which the

¹ Autistic individuals who have communication impairments are also often referred to as being non-verbal or as “having” non-verbal autism. This author recognizes the confusion with labels. Some individuals may be mute, others may have a limited verbal ability, sometimes referred to as “inconsistent speech.” Many Autistics may name this “non-speaking autism.” Note as well that I use the term “autistics” or “autistic people,” rather than people with autism. I use this term taking cues from autistic people who are involved in activism and reclaim their identity as part of the autism rights movement. However, it is important to note that the manner of reference interchanges and is different for all individuals.

² There is not enough space in this review to discuss the issues we may take up with this view.

³ While I don’t have the space to discuss the notions of speed and presentation for efficiency in contrast with the disabled body that may not produce quickly, I am alluding to the way presentations are made as a language audiences can understand. This can be a topic for further critique.

film is stitched together also illustrates the way in which communication and interaction is enabled among the autistic subjects and their assistants. Yet, it presupposes one thing that most films about autism do not: autistic competence. Most films about autism or autistic people never show autistic people speaking for themselves or as experts of their own experience. Typically, a medical professional will interpret autism for a viewing audience. In contrast, *Wretches & Jabberers* focuses on the subjects' "voices" with interview questions and dialogue and is enabled with support. While assistants are not interviewed in this film, their presence is seen in support of autistic voice and movement to people, places, and typing.

The title, created by the film's subjects during a typed conversation at an outdoor restaurant in Finland, is meant to indicate that autistic people are the supposed "wretches" and those who talk easily (or too much) are the "jabberers." Henna, Annti, Tracy, and Larry reclaim their autistic status that has been historically imprinted; that autistic subjects are among the *wretched* because of their inability to speak and their "odd" or "difficult" behaviour. As Antti says later at an autism conference, however, "not having the ability to speak doesn't make our heads empty". This interaction at the restaurant is fun and endearing; the typists are conversing with each other over lunch and we hear the music lyrics, "change is gonna come."

To establish a brief synopsis of the characterization of autism, be it through a medical model, media representation, or the public imagination, autism is construed as a mysterious and isolating condition; the person so labeled is represented as "condemned" to being "locked inside" their own body. Much of the way autism is characterized comes from the non-autistic community. That autism is differentiated as an isolation deriving from within the autistic person (i.e. "prison") is challenged when we witness interaction, camaraderie, and the main subjects' very movement across oceans and continents in order to be with other non-speaking self-advocates.

A variety of lenses⁴ including autistic rights literature, feminist theories of the body, and phenomenological interpretations help us to understand the different embodiments and experience that challenge dominant medical hegemonies of autism as a disease or pathology. As suggested, the medical model still predominates our understanding of autism. Thomas Couser remarks, for example, that all bodies are defined within the same standards (which are normative) and that with all parallel binaries, "[T]he privileged position depends on its definitions of the marginalized position; notions of health and illness; normality and disability, we might say are 'co-dependent'" (Couser, 2009, p. 9). *Wretches & Jabberers* suggests that autistic identity and self-referencing are also produced through co-relationship. The film provides material to mine in order to study dominant positions and discourses in the production of autistic identity and relationship. We may discuss these positions as the film's subjects explain a history of isolation and institutionalization—including modern forms arranged in disability centres and group homes. Where we see Antti's day program of towel-folding, Wurzburg's voice

⁴ We can also view the film through other film review lenses including Stuart Hall's viewing as a "negotiated position that acknowledges the dominant position or ideology while negotiating the understanding which would both challenge and accept the dominant codes and provide contradictory interpretations" (Hall, 1992). To this, Mitchell and Snyder state that disability is an interaction between many positions including author, text, culture, and audience and they question a monolithic representation of disability culture (Mitchell and Snyder, 2006).

in the background asks him whether the program staff are aware he can type. “I think they are afraid,” he replies. This begs the question of why support for communication is withheld in such programs and why Antti must go there. Now that we become aware that the non-speaking autistic person can communicate, what is our collective responsibility to ensure the right to communicate?

As a group, the subjects mean to prove themselves to mostly doubting “jabberers.” This is apparent when Naoki Higashida, best-selling author of *The Reason I Jump* (2007) asks his fellow autistic friends Larry and Tracy, “I want to ask you what we need to do so that we can survive for future?” This very question alludes to the precariousness of life for those who do not communicate verbally. This ambiguous life situation is of particular relevance to Tracy, which arises in his meeting with Vermont State Senator Phil Scott to address the issue of budget cuts for disability services; Tracy lives in a precarious situation of having to move from shelter to shelter each night and as he states, he has “no permanent place to hang my hat”. In the scene where Tracy explains his living situation to a Senator, midway through typing he becomes visibly upset when the Senator mentions forthcoming budget cuts just after claiming that Tracy’s work as an advocate is essential. Tracy makes noises, begins to waggle his arm. Harvey, his assistant, offers a walk before he might come back and talk to the Senator again. “No no!” Tracy yells. We watch Tracy struggle to calibrate his body that is reflective of his intense emotion, a trait that many autistic people cannot hide. He begins to try and regain control of his arm, and we watch him try to organize his body. His arm flaps some more until he is able to guide it himself to the keyboard and begins typing before Harvey goes in to support him. This method of support is tactile (that is the support of Tracy’s forearm) as much as it is emotional; it suggests a relationship of trust and another body required to gain the momentum Tracy needs to continue typing his thoughts. As Tracy and the Senator shake hands and say goodbye, we are left to wonder how much longer Tracy will have to live like this.

Later Naoki states, using a metaphor to describe human diversity: “I know each leaf has a value and meaning to the life of itself, so our mission is to prove it.” This theme of proof as purpose is the thread of the film and sustains the movements and intention of the autistic subjects to “prove their intelligence.”

Larry answers Naoki’s question: “Mobilizing letters, expressing patterns of thoughts, like proud autistics we are.” This mission to prove intelligence and to *mobilize* letters is hardly trivial, and is little understood. Learning to type can take years of practice as movement differences (Biklen, 2005; Donnellan & Leary, 2012) are known to challenge not only the production of speech in the communication-disabled person, but also affect the movements to find words (word-retrieval), organize sentences, and manifest thoughts in the system of language. These movement patterns are also expressed by an effusive body—in hand-flapping, “stimming,”⁵ repetitive movements which therapy attempts to eliminate in order to render the autistic person *appear* normal. Autistic individuals continue to be segregated and isolated due to their “behaviours” even after we learn how these movements are required in order to “process” people and environments (and negotiate one’s body within these interactions). We watch as Larry has difficulty coping with too much stimulation at a Sri Lankan Buddhist temple where he must also

⁵ Otherwise known as “self-stimulatory behaviour.”

take off his shoes, to which he responds later that he has “low barefoot tolerance”. For such behaviours, Larry was placed in an institution:

I was 8 years old when I was placed in the institution. I had no idea what I'd done wrong. Placed in chains of conformity. After 15 years I was released. Ten years later I began to communicate by typing. I am 52 now. Lesson in autism is not abnormality of brain as much as abnormality of experience.

The concept of normality (Lawson, 2008) may lead us to believe that Larry's comment has to do with his own abnormality of experience as his own problem to overcome—a very individual model of disability—which is problematic in that we expect autistic people to overcome their autism and the way they need to adapt in any given environment. But Larry might mean instead that the abnormality of experience may reside in the way *others* have identified his mind as the maladaptive site of his behaviour—and the abnormal experience of having been *institutionalized* for it. One has to consider then, just how far audiences may reconsider how they view autism through language—or as other autistic authors call the *language prejudice* (Abram, 1997; Prince, 2010); that language—a one-way neuro-normative street, if you will—can be a disabling barrier to expressing autistic experience, and to being. The autistic body, as we understand it in language, can be viewed as culturally co-produced, which can be considered alongside a history of maltreatment and pathologization imprinted upon and deep within the memory of the autistic person, and the way they have learned to be in the world. It is apparent that the culture of normality has materialized into oppressive living situations for Tracy and Larry who are working for change.

Tracy mentions that one purpose of their tour is “to move people's knowledge of disability to a positive place”. We bear witness to many interactions and desires for human connection. Yet, after a conference in Japan, Tracy says, “can you believe that two green mountain men made it to sushi land? Is eating sushi the highlight for us?” The statement invokes a concern that all that effort is not enough, and that the film tour may be the highlight of their lives, perhaps a final hard-won opportunity after coming to language. For Larry, “Nothing I did convinced people I had an inner life until I started typing. Knowing my intelligence was a matter of self-learning through CNN and powerful impulses towards growth and the beast disappearing”. Tracy says, “My life has been an interesting journey starting as a boy with no means of expression who acted out to reach out to my world with little success. Now I travel the world educating people about autism and movement differences and intelligence”. Despite the proof, however, Tracy still does not have a permanent place to live and Naoki, who has written ten books, is not included in a mainstream school in Japan and remains home-schooled. Henna maintains a paper-shredding job at an autism centre; Chammi remains isolated in Sri Lankan society; and Antti spends mundane days in an adult day program putting together visual schedules and folding towels. If nothing changes as a result of all this effort, this is in a sense *beastly*, unjust and an act of erasure (Stiker, 2009).

After long travels to typing and to meeting thousands of people on their many tours also outside of those seen in the film, autistic subjects have worked arduously to be able to move their bodies to organize and enact typing in a language that we call “universal.” The film should be viewed by teachers and university professors, within classrooms where critical questions tackle

why supported communication is withheld and why autistic people are not fully included in society. Larry, Tracy, Henna, Chammi, Naoki, and Antti are few among many who ask us to move our view of “disability to a positive place” (to quote Tracy) so that all lives may be included and valued. “Let’s say I haven’t changed,” Larry say, “plentifully autistic in my behaviour but getting more motivated to understand autism is the world...you would not venture out reporting this thirty years ago”. We have to question the justice in a world that asks autistic people to “keep up” in normative ways and then continues to exclude them. We must ask whether we support the autistic citizen only if they achieve normative communication through technological devices and what we might risk in the shaping of autistic identity or, in the vein of Abram (1997), language delimits experience. It seems that enabling participation is still at risk of being co-opted by normalized standards rather than empowering choice and human difference. Whether within or outside of language, we are really all in this together.

Tracy: “I think this has been the trip of a lifetime, Larry. I’m so happy we did it together.”

Larry: “Larry loops twice on that loving fellowship feeling.”

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