AUTISTICALLY SPEAKING: ADDRESSING AN AUDIENCE

WITH AUTISM

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San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts
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by
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by

Anthony Chun-Kit Pang
DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad, for their enduring love. To God, for His eternal Love.
ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT

Autistically Speaking: Addressing an Audience with Autism
by
Anthony Chun-Kit Pang
Master of Arts in Television, Film, and New Media Production
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To an individual with autism, a face is often just an ordinary object, but an ordinary object is often far from ordinary. Every ordinary object has the potential to take on extraordinary meaning, while every face has the potential to lose all its meaning. In this sense, watching a film, with all its faces, its subtext, its symbolic meaning, requires re-thinking of that film experience for the individual with autism. This thesis project report and the short, experimental film it references are framed within that re-thinking. The film is designed specifically with an autistic audience in mind. The project film attempts to reconstruct the film experience as a means to entertain and to engage this unique audience.

Distinct from narrative and documentary films in which autism the condition is the subject, the film Autistically Speaking, no. 1 is designed as a sensory-driven experience for an audience with autism, employing a non-narrative construction of images and sounds in an attempt to elicit responses that are unique to that particular audience. It is a project that draws on the work of avant-garde and underground experimental films, as well as the early work of the Lumière Brothers and Georges Méliès. Although the project is informed by both early and experimental film, the idea of tailoring a film experience for an autistic way of thinking and perceiving is a concept without much direct precedent. As such, both the film and this paper draw additionally from neurology, psychology, and indirect observation to help construct an effective film experience. It is the hope of the author that this novel and distinct premise for film construction hopefully sets a precedent as a model for future work toward developing the “autistic film.”

Finally, autism is a developmental disorder that can have devastating consequences, affecting millions of individuals and the communities they live in. In addition, the complexity and peculiarity of the condition can be both a source of alienation and frustration from those on the outside looking in. As a result, Autistically Speaking allows the general audience a glimpse into the experience and perception of the world of individuals with autism, both by its design and how this new audience responds to the film. Out of this glimpse will hopefully come a deeper understanding of not just the condition but also the world that defines the individual with autism.

The DVD of the film is available for viewing at the Media Center of Love Library.
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CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

INTRODUCTION

In his book, *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell describes an experiment using an eye-tracking device to observe how an individual with autism “makes sense of the world” (215) by having him watch the 1966 film *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The individual with autism’s interest in, and engagement with the film, the researcher observed, was unusual and very different from what is expected from a mass, non-autistic audience. Visual cues, varying facial expressions, emotions, and objects within the frame evoked very different or no reactions from the individual with autism. From this, it might be concluded an individual with autism experiences film differently than the general audience. This observation is very intriguing and begs the question: If an individual with autism experiences a film differently than the general audience, what does a film intended for an autistic audience look like? How do individuals with autism perceive the world and its objects if it isn’t the same as the general audience? If one audience resides in a world and an experience wholly distinct from another audience, then how a film is constructed and experienced must be reconsidered as the audience changes. It was from this central question and consideration that this project found its goal, entering into in the world of autism and an experience that is far removed from the ordinary. This paper investigates how a film for this unique audience might be constructed.
when the experience from which it is constructed is entirely not one’s own and also how a
film is to be considered when it is an experience intended for another.

**STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

From shorts (Erica Jean’s *Through the Eyes of Autism*) to feature length, from
documentaries and biopics (*Horseboy, Temple Grandin*) to mainstream fictional films (*Rain
Man, Adam, Mozart and the Whale*), and even on television (*House, Flash Forward, The
West Wing*), autism as subject and character has received considerable exposure and it has
generated considerable public interest. However, most, if not all, of the media available today
has simple talked about autism. It is generated for consumption by a mass, non-autistic
audience. Very few, if any, attempts have been made not only to explore the perception of
those with autism, but also to turn those results into a film intended to be seen by an audience
with autism.

Simply put, many individuals with autism don’t see or read movies or television the
same way non-autistic individuals do. Across the spectrum, what engages the attention of
those with autism can differ vastly from those of a typically-developed audience. In the
aforementioned study, when Nick (George Segal) asked George (Richard Burton) about a
particular painting on a wall, and pointed to it, the individual with autism couldn’t decide
which of three paintings on the wall to focus on even though the framing and focus made it
clear to which painting Nick was referring to. Meanwhile, the conversation already moved on
and the individual with autism was still trying to decide between the paintings. In another
example, when shown a scene of passionate embrace between two characters, the individual
with autism was focused on a light switch on a wall, whereas a typical viewer would be
focused on the activity between the characters (Gladwell 217-18). What these observations presented was a glimpse into a perception and experience that is often far removed from the general audience’s experience.

These observations of difference have opened up understanding of autism to both scientist and layman. A large volume of neurological and psychological studies and experiments in the last decade has revealed significant differences in how individuals with and without autism gather and process information. At the same time, a firsthand experience with a classroom for children with autism makes one realize that these individuals have an extraordinary way of interacting and engaging the world and its objects. These observations reveal how amazing it is to communicate and to interact in a way that unifies and enables the collective human experience. On the other hand, it also reveals how devastating the consequences are when that ability is lost or severely damaged. This ability, which has long been taken for granted, becomes fragmented as one journeys into the world of the individual with autism. Scientists and lay people alike have made inquiries into what they see, how and what they perceive, and how they then engage the world; more often, the results have led to frustration than to answers. And finally, each individual with autism tends to express the condition in varying ways and degrees of severity. Add together all these factors and the distance one must travel to understand the world of an individual with autism often seems insurmountable.

*Autistically Speaking* is an attempt to design a film for an autistic audience and, at the same time, to reveal to a non-autistic audience how some individuals with autism might perceive the world (the DVD of the film is available for viewing at the Media Center of Love Library). In doing so, the film produced also potentially fills a void in mainstream
media—the void of creative work that represents and engages that way of perceiving. As Osteen notes in “Autism and Representation,” the more challenging or complex film portrayals that try to move away from popular representations of autism tend to make spectacles out of individuals with autism and are often marginalized or not made at all (9). *Autistically Speaking* falls in line with this more challenging, complex portrayal of autism because it attempts to address and reveal autistic perception for that demographic and not the general audience. As a result, this project’s film also challenges the general audience’s acceptance of what it is “normal,” as well as its notion of film perception in general.

It isn’t entirely surprising that there have been few such attempts to engage the individual with autism and to explore his/her perception through film. How does one create “meaning” in film for individuals with autism, who are often non-verbal and can’t articulate what he or she sees? For those who don’t share that same experience of perception, it is a daunting task. It is one that requires that many questions be answered before anything can be created. Observations have to be made to understand what excites or engages an individual with autism in his or her natural environment, whether in the classroom, with other students, or at home, at the same time taking note of how such engagement expresses itself in those individuals. Because it is difficult to access the mind of individuals with autism, such observations are vital to understanding the world as they see it. These observations have been made extensively over the decades and have extended into research areas of psychology, neurology, sociology, and education; but how this might contribute to film language or filmic experience has not yet been explored.

This problem of exploring perception, however, lends itself ideally to the film medium. Film’s inherent plastic properties, its capacity to manipulate space, time, and objects
have been the drawing power for filmmakers in every era and movement of filmmaking. Films and the artists who make them have long been involved with alternative perception, film construction, and film experiences. This is most apparent in the genre of experimental films. Spencer Shaw speaks to this when he writes “as an art form, film has created a new reality and, its accompanying consciousness, a new way of thinking” (27). In the same way, film also allows the creation and portrayal of new realities and of new ways of thinking. It is thus an ideal vehicle for exploring the autistic reality and the autistic way of thinking.

**STATEMENT OF THE SUBPROBLEMS**

Given the unique and unusual premise this short film, *Autistically Speaking, no. 1*, presented a number of subproblems. First and foremost, since the intended audience was mostly children with autism, I was obliged to interact with parents and caregivers. Given the rocky history in the relationship between parents/caregivers of individuals with autism and autism researchers, I would have to evince a high level of sensitivity as a self-acknowledged outsider. Consideration of the children involved was always active, as well as full and clear disclosure of the intended purpose of this project and what was being done to achieve that.

The project’s intention to construct a film language intended to engage individuals one doesn’t fully understand, obviously, required their input. However, because many individuals with autism tend to be non-verbal, it was often difficult to obtain answers to the question “what do you see?” or “what is it about this that excites you?” Hence, the inability to access their subjectivity required that it be deduced backwards from what could be observed. This required a dependency on previous scientific work as well as information gathered from indirect sources (i.e., caregivers, educators). However, because the conclusions
of scientists and other experts in the field have hardly been consistent throughout autism’s history, a project shaped by such information is bound to be vulnerable to new discoveries and information. As a result, though the film was intended for individuals with autism, and its language itself was constructed from what is currently known about autism, there was no certainty that the film would accomplish what it intended to accomplish as the complexity and the still-poor understanding of the condition subjected it to unpredictable results. This subproblem was offset as the film additionally examined film representation of an alternate reality through an autistic perspective.

Adding to this difficulty of communication was the fact that I was attempting to represent autistic perception from the outside, as a non-autistic person. As a result, the question of one representing the other arose. An inherently plastic medium such as film leaves a filmmaker with a multitude of choices when it comes to properly representing the world of the other, and as a result, leaves open the possibility of misrepresentation. The novelty of this project’s premise and what little is understood about the condition, however, required that the representation (i.e., the film) be constructed based on both what was known to be and imagined might be. This subproblem, then, was minimized by focusing on the representation of the “normal” world of some individuals with autism, using what was known about the condition to inform the creative process.

Moreover, even if the film was capable of engaging the emotions as it intended, the previously noted communication issues created difficulties in either quantifying or qualifying emotions in more than general terms. A filmmaker showcasing his film to a typical audience for a typical test screening has a variety of methods for getting feedback. That same access to feedback was mostly unavailable from audiences of *Autistically Speaking*. We therefore
relied on direct observation of the emotional response to the film. However, emotions tend to blend together, branch off and transition from each other. From major emotions such as joy, sadness, or fear, come many derivatives, a mixture of other emotions. It may seem easy to target the major emotion of joy, but in reality the precise reaction may be a complex blend of the manifestations of those emotions associated with joy (i.e., giddiness, laughter, body movement). Individuals with autism often express emotional reactions in a manner quite different from normal individuals. A typically-developed child smiles or laughs when excited, whereas a child with autism may sway back and forth, groan, and hop, while his facial expressions remain unchanged. Further, if the typical indicators of emotional response are not readable in an individual with autism, one would be hard-pressed to know which of the general emotions was being expressed. As a result, even though the film was designed to elicit an emotional response, the form in which the emotions would manifest was unknown.

As mentioned, the complexity of the condition and the great variation in its expression presented challenges. A film covering such a wide spectrum risks going beyond its own scope, failing to measure up to such a monumental task, and becoming too broad to be useful for any future development. This was ultimately alleviated focusing on a small number of individuals with autism, keeping the variables in regards to the range of the condition to a minimum.

**GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

One of the goals of *Autistically Speaking* was to explore autistic perception of the world and its objects through an experimental reconstruction of film language that differs from the dominant model. As mentioned, the way individuals with autism perceive and
interact with objects can vary dramatically. This short experimental film attempts to reevaluate conventional film language as it was for modern audiences and reframe it to accommodate autistic perception. The film tries to reflect this unique way of seeing the world. It evaluates classical film “building blocks,” such as montage and mise-en-scène, utilizing enhanced colors, text, and audio for its construction. For the typical individual, the intention here was that through this unique vision of perception, they would see both “an aesthetic experience” and “an exemplary way of experiencing the world” (Shaw 23). This describes very poignantly both the world of autism and the goal of the film.

Another goal was to develop a short film experience intended for the individual with autism, specifically intended for his/her entertainment. This short experimental film was designed to generate an emotional (or physical) response consistent with previous observations of some individuals with autism in other environments and situations. Currently, there is a very limited selection of media produced with an autistic audience in mind. Those available are generally intended for therapy purposes. In the sense of pure entertainment and experience, the film/video medium had yet to be fully harnessed to captivate and engage an autistic audience. Autistically Speaking attempts to give to this new audience a complete entertainment experience.

The final goal of Autistically Speaking is to encourage further exploration and development of new entertainment media for individuals across the spectrum of autism. The complexity of the condition as well as the novelty of this project’s premise make it difficult to cover even a small handful of individuals. It is hoped, however, that this project’s exploration of how some individuals with autism experience “the filmed representation” allows one to “isolate the specific form of consciousness involved in the film experience”
(Shaw 23) for those individuals and eventually extrapolate the results to a larger audience. If successful, the film has the potential to be a model on which to develop toward a broader audience and also to be the first small step toward a field of media production dedicated to the autistic audience.

**DEFINITION OF TERMS**

**Autism:** Also known as autistic disorder, broadly defined as a “severe form of psychopathology evident before the age of 3 years . . . characterized by a unique constellation of severe and pervasive behavioral deficits and excesses” (Schreibman 2). The disorder is often expressed in terms of the deficits of social communication and interaction, of speech development where non-verbal individuals is common, and of impaired cognitive function and fine-motors skills. Common excesses include the obsession with order and routine, repetitive and stereotyped behaviors both in action and speech, and tendency to become overstimulated and hyperemotional. Additionally, within the scope of the project, autism was also characterized by an understanding and engagement of modern film language that differs from that of the general audience.

**Autism profile:** Refers to the characteristics that are jointly expressed in a specific individual with autism that create a profile for that individual. From high functioning to severe, from verbal to non-verbal, and levels of severity of specific behaviors, amongst others, these characteristics are grouped into an overall profile of an individual with autism. In the scope of this project, the term also encompassed the individual’s reaction to stimuli that excite or engage.
**Autism Spectrum Disorder:** The addition of the word spectrum refers to “a group of individuals displaying the characteristics of autism” (Hall 2). It alludes to the diversity of the disorder, whose variation and expression can differ significantly in each individual. Included are conditions that aren’t clinically diagnosed as autism, including Asperger’s syndrome and PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified), which refers to individuals who exhibit autistic characteristics but do not fit the diagnostic criteria (Hall 4). Within the scope of this project, the term spectrum referred to a condition that is expressed in varying degrees of severity.

**Emotional response:** In terms of this project and its goals, this term refers to any observable reaction to the film that may or may not be consistent with reactions that had been previously observed and noted for both individual and the group as a whole. These responses could be jumping, physical motion with arms and legs, non-speech vocalization like mumbling or humming, or moving closer to the screen to touch or to look closer, amongst others. They vary with each individual depending on their profile.

**Experimental Film:** For this definition, Edward Small’s provisional characteristics for the experimental film/video will be loosely employed: independence and full responsibility of artist, financial autonomy from industry financing and demands, brevity of film, affinity for technological developments, fondness for the exploration of mental imagery, avoidance of verbal language, non-narrative structures, and reflexivity of construction (17-21). Though in the scope of this project many of these characteristics exist, a few, particularly the latter three, received considerable representation. In addition, the term refers to the theoretical nature of the project as well. Lastly, though Small’s main premise is for inclusion of experimental film for major genre considerations, here, the term is primarily descriptive.
**Film language:** Refers to the construction of images that conveys an idea or a concept and constitutes the film experience. Much as the combination of words on a page gives meaning to the novel, so the images, their relationship to one another (montage), and the objects within the frame (mise-en-scène) give the film its meaning, or “language.” This definition broadens the term beyond classical narrative film language, which is but one type, of film language and extends into areas of experimental film language, of which there exists many sub-categories and varying constructions.

**General audience:** Also referred to as a typical audience or, more specifically, a typically developed individual, the term refers to anyone who hasn’t been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, including Asperger’s syndrome and PDD-NOS. Within this project, the term also referred to a typical film going audience that understands modern mainstream and experimental film language and engages appropriately to the film’s intention and design.

**Narrative Film:** The term refers to the classical continuity film with a narrative or story structure, in which there is a beginning, an end, and a logical progression between the two points. This progression is generally marked by external and internal conflicts and struggles that are played out on screen and by a resolution of those conflicts. Here, narrative film covers most media in which story is a dominant feature, including television and documentaries. This type of film construction and design stands in opposition to Experimental Film, which generally eschews of narrative or story as a primary concern.
**DELIMITATIONS**

While the project is about autism in the sense that it explores the condition to devise a film, it isn’t about autism in the reporting sense. It isn’t a documentary of information (*Horseboy*) or a fictional adaptation of a real life individual (*Rain Man*) that is intended to entertain or educate the general audience. *Autistically Speaking* is primarily concerned with an autistic audience. Furthermore, the project’s intention isn’t to replicate the autistic experience for the general audience. It is primarily concerned with an audience with autism, and the film is primarily designed for them with entertainment value in mind. Therefore, the project doesn’t merely externalize an internal daily experience, but also creates an experience to engage an autistic world. The general public’s role is to accept the terms of that presented world, enter, and attempt to connect with it.

The film isn’t intended to be a cure or a treatment for autism with respect to film language/experience. Though *Autistically Speaking* is concerned with autistic perception of film and, by extension, the world, it isn’t concerned with “correcting” or “normalizing” that perception. The project does envision serving some role in education, but only in the sense of informing the general audience about the way many individuals with autism see the world. Primarily, however, the project’s intention was to meet and engage these individuals as they are.

Though it was necessary in the process of researching the project and constructing the film to employ certain basic tools of science and to utilize available research, neither this paper nor the film was a scientific analysis of autism. It makes no claims to contributing to scientific discourse or understanding of the condition. Though a few notable autism-related studies in neurology are mentioned in relation to the primary concern, it is intended to inform
the construction of the film as a supplement and in conjunction with information drawn from observation and other texts.

Finally, the challenge of understanding how a non-autistic individual constructs an experience for a world not one’s own is much like how one creates a documentary for a culture not one’s own. In both cases, in addition to the creative and logistical issues standard to filmmaking, questions arise as to how to properly represent “the other.” These questions are of interest and investigation in the arena of disability studies, which is concerned with how one represents another and also the social constructions of categories. Though legitimate concerns, *Autistically Speaking* is concerned with designing a film based on what is known about autism and is therefore not interested in those questions that concern the field of disability studies. Hence, the acceptance of the established clinical and aforementioned definitions and distinctions is assumed here outright.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF PROJECT**

Some 1.5 million individuals in the United States alone are affected by autism, with an annual rate of increase of 10 to 17% (Schreibman 70). The meteoric rise in the numbers of affected individuals has prompted a national health emergency declaration by the U.S. Congress and the continued spending of hundreds of millions of dollars on both research and education. Autism makes no distinction of color, gender, class, or even culture, and impacts people here in the United States and abroad, where a single affected child can touch an entire community. I, myself, have had the opportunity to interact with a classroom of children with autism in a special church service for them in South Korea. The staggering numbers related to autism have attracted much attention in the mainstream media but absent were any
significant attempts to address directly the audience with autism. The impact of *Autistically Speaking*, then, is primarily on the autistic population.

For the general audience, there is much to be gained in understanding the way that many individuals with autism see the world by observing how they interact with their own film. This may contribute to some insight into their minds, and that is particularly significant for educators and caregivers, people who directly interact with individuals with autism on a day-to-day basis. *Autistically Speaking* itself is, of course, by no means an end all for understanding autistic perception, but it is hoped that it might stir up efforts to explore this unique world more fully.

For the individual with autism, it is hoped that the specially-designed film (the autistic film) would allow a complete film experience and elicit a reaction that was wholly theirs, complete with the emotions and physicality that have long attracted general audiences to the films they love. The hope is that this short film might be a small catalyst to the genesis of entertainment for an audience with autism, and that it might be a valuable stepping stone in that development.

One of the major characteristics of experimental film, according to Edward Small’s *Direct Theory*, is its interest in mental imagery like “dreams, reveries, hallucinations, hypnogogic imagery, etc.” (19), which often explores perception and understanding outside one’s own immediate consciousness. A project such as *Autistically Speaking* in similar fashion explores a perception and an understanding that is outside the general audience’s immediate consciousness. In this comparison of consciousness, however, there is a significant difference between the experimental film and this project. Experimental film often reconstructs and represents the internal, subconscious experience (closed-eye), but with this
project, the construction of an autistic experience explores consciousness on its surface. Because this film draws from what is known about the way individuals with autism interact with the world and its images, it may shed light on their conscious experience. As Shaw writes, we can isolate the specific form of consciousness involved in the film experience by describing the way the spectator or subject consciously experiences an object or the filmed representation (23). In this sense, Autistically Speaking is developed not just to make a contribution to the questions of perception and consciousness in the field of film theory but also to understand the world of an alternate consciousness.

My own interest in this project stems from Gladwell’s treatment of autism in his book Blink, and out of it I draw what I consider to be a unique challenge to understand a perception of the world that is so vastly different from my own. It strikes me at first as curious that the particular individual with autism described has such an inherent limitation in experiencing film; but upon further thought it isn’t really surprising considering that the medium doesn’t account for the way individuals with autism perceive. The questions of “What do you see?” and “How do you see it?” posed to non-autistic individuals and individuals with autism generate very different answers. In this light, the challenge of developing a model of entertainment is both fascinating and intriguing, believing that film’s power to transcend mental and emotional capacities is reminiscent of film in its infancy. At that time, a new possibility for film was being imagined, and the blank canvas to create for a new audience and a new world had a potential that, though unknown, was seemingly limitless.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND FILMS

LITERATURE ON PROJECT TOPIC

The subject of autism has garnered much international attention since its diagnosis in the 1940s and not just within the scientific community or those affected by the condition. The devastating impact of the condition can affect almost every aspect of an individual’s life, as well as the community that he or she lives in and interacts with. Autism is a subject that has attracted the attention of a wide array of fields of study, from psychology, neurology, genetics, and cognitive science, to education, sociology, and media studies. As a result, the study of autism has become very interdisciplinary and has created a large volume of research from all around the world. The following review of literature was a small sample of selected research that was most directly related to the topic at hand.

For Autistically Speaking, there are two areas of critical study that are of particular interest: Neurological studies and autism disorder studies in the field of psychology.

Neurological Studies

Recent technological advances in the last decade or so have allowed neurologists to gain new insight to the world of autism. The novel use of eye-tracking devices, which track the mechanical movement of the eye, have revealed some intriguing data about how individuals with autism receive and interact with images. Although Autistically Speaking is
not a scientific investigation into autism, neurological studies have exerted considerable influence on the project.

**VISUAL FIXATION PATTERNS DURING VIEWING OF NATURALISTIC SOCIAL SITUATIONS**

Klin et al. attempted to better simulate the everyday experience of individuals with autism by using a more natural situation to evaluate their viewing patterns. The researchers had 15 autistic adolescents and 15 normal adolescents, all males, watch five clips from the 1967 film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* while recording their visual patterns using an eye-tracking device that was worn like a baseball cap. They wanted to investigate the relative importance to the viewer of the major components in the scenes; namely, the face (eyes and mouth), body, and other objects. In addition, they also investigated whether visual patterns within a group of individuals with autism could be a predictor of social competence (social ability).

The results showed significant differences between the viewing patterns of adolescents with autism and normal adolescents, where individuals with autism focused twice as long on the mouth, body, and other objects and half as much on the eye region. The eye region had the largest gap between the two, which made it the best predictor of group membership (Klin et al. 812). The analysis also revealed that within the autistic group, only fixation time on the mouth and object were significant predictors of social competence, where more time on mouths trended toward higher competence and more time on objects trended on lower competence. This reveals a significant way of processing information in a natural social setting that is different for autistic individuals and is a “window into the ways
individuals with autism search for meaning when confronted with complex social conditions” (814).

In the context of this project, because it directly deals with a film medium, this research provided a glimpse into what many individuals with autism see when watching a film and their preferences within the images. Whereas normal individuals devoted a significant amount of time to the eyes and gathered information from them, individuals with autism gathered their information from other areas of the social environment. In addition to this, the diversity of the condition was reinforced as it was observed that information gathering from the screen differs even within the group of individuals with autism. The value of having a particular object was not just between dynamic (faces) and non-dynamic (inanimate), but also between the parts of the dynamic object (mouth versus eyes). This merits serious considerations and presents even more possibilities when it comes to the actual design of a film.

**REFLEXIVE ORIENTING IN RESPONSE TO DIFFERENT CUES**

Senju et al. conducted an experiment which investigated the difference in how children with and without autism responded to social (eye gaze) and non-social (arrow) cues. In the experiment, an image was shown to children with and without autism. The images (cue) consisted of a face with eyes gazing left or right and an arrow pointing either left or right. After the cue is shown and then taken away, a target appears either to the left or right of the screen and the children were each asked to locate as quickly as possible on which side of the screen was the target. The target appeared randomly on either side of the screen so that in the two sets of tests the target appeared first on the incorrect side of the cue 50% and then
80% of the time (i.e., an arrow or eye-gaze appears, cuing left, but the target shows up on the right). The time between the cue’s disappearance and the target’s appearance (called stimulus onset asynchrony, or SOA) varied in the experiment as well.

The results showed that children with and without autism differed in their response to the social cues. Across the board, children with autism were generally slower than their typically developed counterparts regardless of SOAs and cue type. More importantly, the authors of the experiment observed that the children with autism had responded more slowly in locating the target on the side opposite the eye gaze or arrow direction. In addition, while typically developed children showed differences in responding between cue-types, children with autism showed no significant difference in responding. In other words, eye-gaze and arrow cues are processed as equal objects, while in typically developed children a social cue such as an eye-gaze is processed as distinct from a non-social cue such as an arrow.

In the context of Autistically Speaking, the conclusions of Senju et al. shed light on how an individual with autism might interact with the various social and non-social cues while watching a film. More specifically, this research provides important insight into what a film designed for the individual with autism might need to consider. The fact that an object and a face might be processed and responded to without discretion between them forces one to consider the value of a human presence (an actor) in a film versus an object (a soccer ball). This is striking, of course, since a film for the general audience without a human presence is rare outside of the experimental and academic arenas. Whereas traditional films use an actor’s gaze in many different ways, in conjunction with or in contrast to activity happening in the frame, this research suggests that the use of that same gaze must be reconsidered for the audience with autism.
THE ROLE OF FACE FAMILIARITY

Sterling et al. had individuals with and without autism look at 30 images shown on a computer screen and used eye-tracking technology to conduct a simple experiment to observe how an individual with autism looks at faces that are familiar and unfamiliar. These images were a single highly familiar face (family or caregiver) shown 10 times, a single previously unknown new face shown 10 times, and 10 different unfamiliar, previously unknown faces shown once each. The individuals were instructed to look at the images in “any way you want” for the duration (8 seconds) the image was on the screen.

The researchers observed three significant differences between individuals with and without autism in how they looked at the images. The first observation was that individuals with autism fixated on familiar and unfamiliar faces the same amount of time while typical individuals looked longer at unfamiliar faces compared to familiar faces. The second observation was that typical individuals spent significantly more time looking at the eye and mouth regions of the face compared to individuals with autism, regardless of face category. Lastly, typically developed individuals spent significantly more time fixating on the eye region of the image than individuals with autism, while both groups spent an equal amount of time fixated on the mouth region. The researchers also concluded that repeated exposure of an unfamiliar face to an individual with autism led to patterns similar to exposure to highly familiar faces.

This study affirms some of the results of the aforementioned study by Klin et al. in observing that the individuals with autism were less focused on the eye region of the face, where more social information is typically found. This understanding affirmed the need to consider how to employ, if at all, the social cues and information in a film without the full aid
of a dynamic object such as eyes. More unique to this particular research, however, is the observation of the familiar face with the unfamiliar face. The data suggested that typically developed individuals spend more time fixated on unfamiliar faces, while individuals with autism show no discrepancy between the types of faces, and brought into question the necessity and duration of a face’s presence. A film for the general audience might show an unfamiliar face mindful of the needs of audience to familiarize itself with it, but if an individual with autism commonly places equal value regardless of familiarity, then a film designed with them in mind must reconsider how it uses its characters, dynamic or otherwise.

**Autism Disorder Studies**

There is a vast amount of available information when it comes to the subject of autism, whether it be scientific or for a general audience, and given that such a still-poorly understood condition has been prone to incorrect, incomplete, and/or conflicting information, it was imperative that this project be based on information as correct and accurate as possible. *The Science and Fiction of Autism* by Laura Schreibman was a valuable resource in clearly laying out what currently is known, understood, and even still highly debated in the field, while also giving proper context to the history of autism research from the 1940s all the way to the present.

Understanding its characteristics was crucial in translating autistic perception to film. Children and adults with autism have a variety of physical expressions of their condition, few of which appear universally. Their ability in pretend or imaginative play is often significantly compromised and when play does occur, it is often characterized as being rigid or unchanging in procedure. They may play with toy cars in only one way or draw over and over again in the
same way with very little, if any, variation (Schreibman 30-31). In many cases, play is a solitary activity, where interaction and joint play with peers is notably absent. In addition, children with autism are often characterized by repetition, order and obsessive behavior, where any change or attempt at intervention may result in tantrums and distress. Placement of furniture, objects in a particular state or condition, order of daily routines and routes of travel, the way toys or objects are used are, among amongst a multitude of other examples, subject to the peculiar preferences of children with autism (38-39). Furthermore, individuals with autism are often characterized as lacking or being peculiar in affect, unable to relate to people’s emotions and unable to relate their own emotions to others, and often lack the ability to draw on facial expressions to aid social communication. For example, a child may see a parent in distress for some reason but respond in a non-typical way (like laughing) or a child may have a sudden, unwarranted, intense emotional outburst regardless of a proper context (41). Lastly, individuals with autism are often observed to have restrictions on language abilities, where analogies, metaphors and humor are often inaccessible and words are limited to their literal meetings. Variations that make up the creative use of language, like play on words, puns, and implied and subtextual meaning are commonly missing in favor of concrete and rigid communication (36). Though the expression of each characteristic varies between individuals, their prevalence has been generally observed throughout the population.

Just as importantly, Schreibman provided a historical perspective into autism discourse since Leo Kanner first detailed the condition in 1943. In particular was the relationship between the professional community and the parents/caregivers of individuals with autism. The complexity and crippling effect of the condition, combined with the slow-pace of research, the debates over conflicting reports, and the ubiquitous misinformation and
false hope cures, had left “these populations frustrated with each other” (Schreibman 18). Over the years joint movements and efforts had led to the creation of various organizations like the Autism Society of America (22), which have aimed to improve relations that even now can be tenuous. Even though this isn’t a scientific investigation, Autistically Speaking was conscious of the sensitivities and the emotions that this subject can evoke. As a result, it is important to make clear what this film is and what it isn’t.

**LITERATURE ON PROJECT FILM THEORY/PROJECT STYLE**

The volume of literature on the experimental film is vast, considering the number of films that have been made since film’s inception. Selected here for review is Tom Gunning’s article in *Wide Angle, “The Cinema of Attraction,”* and Edward S. Small’s *Direct Theory,* which functioned, amongst other things, as a historical survey of experimental film. Both attempt to bring experimental film into the public realm and revise its potential as a major genre.

**The Cinema of Attraction**

Tom Gunning’s essay called attention to the films of pre-1906, focuses on a time in cinema history that Gunning observed “was not dominated by the narrative impulse” (64). Utilizing the work of very early filmmakers such as Georges Méliès and the Lumière Brothers as examples, he argued for cinema’s unique ability to “show something” (64), as a contrast to the telling of something that has traditionally been the form of novels and theatre. In this showing of something, the narrative construct that has come to dominate cinema takes a back seat, and cinema becomes “exhibitionist” cinema, where the story was a mere vehicle
to “stage effects” and “tricks,” as in the case of Méliès’ *Voyage Dans la Lune* (1902). Narrative, in Gunning’s survey of this era, wasn’t even necessary to attract an audience. In addition to the actuality work of the Lumière Brothers, such as *First Films* (1985), this early cinema included films exhibiting the newest technologies such as the X-ray or the phonograph (66) and trick films, often shown as part of vaudeville variety acts. In this context, the diversity of early film provided Gunning his framework with which to “[rethink] the roots of early cinema” (65). This is significant because *Autistically Speaking* draws a parallel comparison. This project’s lack of narrative concern and its intention to “show” something new to an audience with autism parallels early film’s concern for an “attraction” experience. *Autistically Speaking* is, in essence, autistic film’s “early cinema” in the sense that there is no such thing at the moment.

It was also in this spirit of cinema’s infancy and the film version of the Wild West that *Autistically Speaking* found itself. Gunning’s description of a cinema “willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator” (64) and his belief that the avant-garde film movement to come was attracted by the “freedom from the creation of a diegesis . . . its accent on direct simulation” (66) frames this project well. *Autistically Speaking* is a non-narrative film and it uses a variety of images to try to elicit a reaction from an audience with autism. Whereas narrative or even documentary film is mostly concerned with the construction of a world into which the audience has a privileged viewpoint, and experimental film (and then video) in general is concerned with the nature of film, Gunning’s early cinema and *Autistically Speaking* attempt to exhibit directly to the spectator, luring his/her attention to the images on screen.
In contrast to the pre-1906 cinema of Gunning’s survey, with the development of cinema and its history already significantly established, *Autistically Speaking* had the benefit of hindsight. In that sense, *Autistically Speaking* is an extension of cinema’s development, while the early cinema of “attraction” was its beginning, its genesis. However, the novelty and uniqueness of a project like *Autistically Speaking* draws some parallel to the uncertain path of that era of cinema, where both attempted to address directly the particular world and attention of their spectator, but neither with the benefit of a model or precedent to draw upon. From this perspective, *Autistically Speaking* might be considered experimental film in its truest sense, having a grand history of traditional arts or cinema at its disposal, yet what is created is unlike that from which it was drawn. The possibilities arising from *Autistically Speaking* and what it might imply for the autistic audience are uncertain, but as Gunning notes, “every change in film history implies a change in its address to the spectator, and each period constructs its spectator in a new way” (70). *Autistically Speaking* intended to address a new spectator in a new way. It found its confidence to do so in its relationship to the development of film’s attraction and the audience that came to see and not to be told.

**Direct Theory**

Even in light of this notion of addressing a new spectator in new way, *Autistically Speaking* doesn’t exist in a vacuum, apart from the developments of over a century of film, particularly experimental film. Edward Small’s *Direct Theory* is both an argument for experimental film as a major genre (alongside fictional and documentary films) and also a historical survey of experimental film since the 1920s. It provided *Autistically Speaking* with
some basic framework from the experimental genre as well as the specific movements within the genre.

Small lists eight broad characteristics of the experimental film: a collaborative production, lack of industry financing, brevity of production, affinity for technological innovation, prevalence of mental imagery (i.e., dreams, hallucinations, etc.), avoidance of verbal language, avoidance of traditional narrative structures, and, lastly, the attention to the artwork’s construction itself, also called reflexivity (17-21). Though these characteristics were for generic considerations, Small remarked that “it would be a rare work that included all eight characteristics,” that “no one of these eight . . . can be considered necessary or sufficient for categorization,” and that only if a number of these characteristics are evident “does a given work become a proper candidate for generic inclusion” (19). Some experimental films, indeed, have more of one characteristic than another and some may have only one or even none of them characterizing its work. Even some of these characteristics are found in major, commercial productions, like the reflexivity of some classical narrative films and the brevity of most television advertising commercials (19). However, the extent of these characteristics in experimental film, by comparison, is of a far greater degree; which, as Small notes for the reflexivity characteristic, “suggest a genuine difference in-kind” (22). As with experimental film, some of these characteristics describe Autistically Speaking much more than others.

Of the major ones, a non-narrative construction is a defining characteristic worth elaborating upon. In general, experimental films don’t have narrative as a major concern, either conceptually or structurally. If narrative is found in an experimental film, it more often is presented in a fragmented way that “tend[s] to confound the conventions of classical
continuity” (Small 21). Moreover, within experimental film, narrative, if it exists, exists to answer the “more substantial theoretical question of whether or not [it] is intrinsic to the cinema” (26) This same question was asked about autism and whether narrative is intrinsic to the autistic cinema experience. Autistically Speaking eschewed “these narrative constructions for . . . theoretical purposes” (21) to consider this question. Because of the prevalence of narrative-centered video entertainment material already being used in the classroom for individuals with autism, such as Sesame Street and Blue’s Clues, and considering the aforementioned neurological studies, the attempt at a more complete, but non-narrative, film experience was made without having to consider narrative. In light of this, Autistically Speaking can be placed within the whole of the experimental film genre.

Direct Theory dedicates the rest of the book to a survey of the history of experimental film, examining at the varying sub-genres within the genre, from European Avant-garde (EAG) and American Avant-garde (AAG) all the way to Expanded Cinema, including the transition into video and computer generated works. Particular sub-genres and their description informed and affirmed some of the creative elements and thoughts regarding Autistically Speaking.

The EAG cinema was the work of European artists who used film as “an extension of their work in painting, sculpture, and other media” (Small 24) and “largely avoided . . . narrative structures for cinematographic extensions of painting” (25). As Small notes, the four major artistic concerns of the time were Cubism, futurism, Dadaism, and surrealism, and later realism (27). Autistically Speaking relates to some of these artistic concerns more than others. For example, Dadaism’s “emphasis [on] chance versus logic or reason” (27) can be linked to the random mash of elements and images that seem very loosely connected to one
another in *Autistically Speaking*. Surrealism’s “[rejection] of pure abstraction for . . . mental imagery” (31) can be related to the exploration of how those with autism perceive the world and its objects. In a strict sense of the term surrealism, though, the conscious images of *Autistically Speaking* would more likely fall under Andre Bazin’s realist/reproductive theory, “our consensual real of outward perceptions” (33). In surrealism, dreams and mental images are represented, as in René Clair’s *Entr’acte*; but in *Autistically Speaking*, concrete “real” images are presented. *Autistically Speaking*, however, investigates autistic perception and its cinematic representation, which is assumed to be outside of a typical conscious experience (i.e., external world) and actually constitutes an “interior realm” that is, much like dreams, poorly understood, if at all. And finally, some of the characteristics of futurism are reflected as well in the film, though to a lesser extent. This could be summarized as a “veneration of the machine age that progressively surrounded twentieth-century artists and audiences” (21) and individuals with autism’s common characteristic obsession for order and patterns and for mechanical objects seem naturally suited for association. *Autistically Speaking* utilizes images that are mechanical in nature, in association with the emphasis of order and patterns of objects, and even the repetition of images.

The American Underground (AU) including the work of Stan Brakhage, has some relevance to *Autistically Speaking*. Separate from the AAG, this sub-genre’s interest in mental imagery was of particular interest. Small defines mental imagery as “perceptions without external stimuli or with the exception of such stimulus agents such as drugs, [etc.] . . .”. These images include “afterimages, hallucinations, dreams, memory images, [etc.] . . .” (51). The particular focus on the closed-eye experience was inspired by early and post-behaviorist psychology, which investigated mental images, as well as the development of
cognitive science, which is a field of study integrating many fields, from psychology to philosophy and linguistics (51). The work of Brakhage, Bruce Conner, and others reflects the influence of these fields of study, though not limited to this specific sub-genre of experimental film. In a straightforward sense, *Autistically Speaking* isn’t directly related to the work of the AU experimental films, since it doesn’t explore the same close-eyed vision or experience. *Autistically Speaking*, however, in another sense, broadens the scope of what is a closed-eye vision/experience. For many typical-developed persons, the dichotomy between autism and non-autistic bears much similarity to one inside the closed-eye experience and another who is outside that specific experience. In both cases, as much as I may attempt to understand and grasp what it is like to be autistic and what it is to have that specific closed-eye experience, my understanding is incomplete, and I am still be outside of that individual’s experience. In addition, a film like Brakhage’s *Prelude* draws the audience to the closed-eye experience and while revealing its internal construction. The film is characterized by reflexivity, which draws “[the] audience’s attention to the actual construction of the artwork” and “[making] the artwork itself its own subject” (21). *Autistically Speaking* is an entertainment film experience designed for the audience with autism but it also attempts to draw attention to how an individual with autism might experience film in terms of its very construction. For the general audience, the film’s construction becomes the subject and, by extension, it reflects how an individual with autism might perceive the larger world. Reiterating Shaw, this, indeed, might reveal the specific form of consciousness that is involved in that film experience (Shaw 23). This characterizes both the films of the projected *Autistically Speaking* series and the AU’s closed-eye exploration by presenting their respective otherworldly experiences to an audience that perceives outside that experience.
RELATED FILMS ON GENRE

There is not much precedent when it comes to films that address an audience with autism. However, as previously mentioned in the discussion of relevant literature, *Autistically Speaking* is indirectly influenced by early-cinema and experimental films. A few of the more relevant film examples are selected here for review.

*Ballet Mécanique*

Ferdinand Léger’s 1924 film is one of the best experimental films representing the EAG sub-genre, encompassing Dadaist, futurist, cubist, and surrealist aesthetics. As Small notes, *Ballet* displays a “bizarre stream of consciousness” (27), if there is indeed one, with a mash of quick images of all types, from gears and pistons, white straw hats, a woman on a swing, moving placards, a woman’s smiling and unsmiling mouth, animated mannequin legs, spinning wheels, amongst others. The film also employs distortion lenses, split screens, and rapid cuts, amongst others, reflecting experimental film’s affinity for technology. Any sense of a narrative would have to be considered a stretch and, if narrative were considered, it would admittedly be the strangest and most surreal of narratives. *Autistically Speaking* embodies some Dadaist notions in the randomness of its construction, where the images seemingly have no relation to one another. On the hand, *Autistically Speaking* doesn’t mimic the speed or the intensity of *Ballet* nor some of Léger’s more cutting-edge techniques of the time, but does embody the same pursuit of sensational, but non-narrative, experience fit for the cinema.
Retour à la Raison

Man Ray’s 1923 camera-less film follows in a similar spirit to Léger’s *Ballet*, containing Dadaist elements within the broader EAG movement. The film mimics the speed and the intensity of Léger’s film, but *Retour* doesn’t reflect the same surrealist concern, however. There is again no sense of narrative, with “any hope for an audience to find a diegesis . . . constantly frustrated by a montage of abstract images” (Small 31). In its entirety, the film is a random mash of unrelated images such as mobiles and fairground attractions. In addition, many of the images were manipulated from 35mm film stock being stretched in a darkroom with all sorts of objects such as nails or confetti strewn upon it. The resulting construction doesn’t have quite the surrealist (i.e., closed-eye or mental images) grounding of *Ballet*. Ray’s film would probably be considered more reflexive than *Ballet* simply by virtue of its switching between camera and camera-less—what Small suggests might be the beginning of what would later become modern animation (31). The relation of *Retour* to *Autistically Speaking* is similar to what was previously mentioned with *Ballet*—which are the randomness of the images and the sensation of the experience outside of narrative. In addition, like *Retour*, *Autistically Speaking* draws attention to a sense of play cinema in how the images are strewn together.

Entr’acte

Another film from the EAG era, René Clair’s 1924 film, *Entr’acte*, is one that brings together both Dadaist and surrealist aesthetics (Small 31). Clair’s film differs from *Ballet* and *Retour* in that, while both films have neither narrative concern nor central characters, *Entr’acte* evinces significant evidence of both. The narrative is not of the type we associate
with traditional features or documentaries, and shuns classical continuity for what Small calls “oneiric verisimilitude,” the parallel to a dream state. Images include a ballerina filmed at various angles then transformed into a bearded man; a canon moving without assistance; the slow motion jumping of two people; a cannon ball being fired directly at the audience; and a final sequence in which a man jumps out of his own coffin during his own funeral and “magically” makes the funeral guests “disappear.” The deliberateness of the images suggests that a loose narrative was constructed within the parameters of a dream, in which objects and events transition in and out, unrelated superimpositions appear, and bizarre relationships from image to image are formed without clear logic or reason. It has been argued, however, that the film relates more to the random and illogical impulses of Dadaism and that the surrealism, in this case, the dream narrative, is really a secondary concern. Much like Retour, Entr’acte played with (traditional) narrative-less cinema. From the superimposition of images upon another, the use of mirrors to distort and multiply images, to the play and rewind of film and the tweaking of the filming speed to create (often hilarious) slow-motion movement, the play and exploration of cinema was the greater concern for Clair. His film’s relation to Autistically Speaking, then, is similar to its relation to Ballet and Retour, which is the exploration of the medium, the desire to play with film, and the creation of a new experience.

Prelude Dog Star Man

One of the more celebrated American experimental filmmakers, Stan Brakhage, represented the American Underground in Small’s genre survey. The 1961 film itself is a 30-minute journey into a closed-eye, mental, and internal world that wasn’t really that far separated from the surrealism of Entr’acte, despite its distance in years and geography. The
use of superimpositions and distortion lenses wasn’t new, and neither was the rejection of narrative altogether. Even though they share this closed-eye, internal world characteristic, *Prelude*, and to some extent other films of the AU differs from the films of the EAG in that it is concerned with the representation of both the conscious and the unconscious. Hence, *Prelude* often seems like the eye-lid is superimposed onto its images, creating a barrier between the external and the internal, bringing us in contact with the things seen behind closed-eyes. The film contains both abstractions and concrete images, what Small calls the “abstractions that paradoxically play at the representation of stimulated optic-nerve patterns” (54). The audience is brought into an internal consciousness, where images of colored patterns and lines parallel the internal state. In addition, *Prelude* also exhibits dream, hallucinatory (man’s ghostly face), entoptic (physical “floating” closed-eye debris), and memory images. Brakhage’s film and other work, Small notes, represented “the construction of surrogates” (53), or simulations, for an internal, unintelligible, and subjective experience. This latter description is the type of experience that embodies *Autistically Speaking* because it is exactly what the autistic experience is to the normal individual: internal, subjective, and though perhaps not completely unintelligible, certainly difficult to comprehend. *Autistically Speaking* attempts to do what *Prelude* attempted to do: to bring a personal, subjective experience to an audience that only has a vague connection to that specific experience. And even though this project didn’t share the same concerns as *Prelude* did in its physical presentation, what it shared was the deeper concern of bringing the internal consciousness to the external world.
CHAPTER 3

GENERAL CREATIVE AND PRAGMATIC APPROACH

INTRODUCTION

The novel and unique premise of *Autistically Speaking* generated its own creative questions and considerations. The film fits into the category of experimental film, as outlined by Small, and yet goes beyond that designation. Given such parameters and the lack of precedent for this type of film, the core problem at hand is how to create a film world for an autistic audience. Fortunately, this question doesn’t require the invention of new techniques or methods, but rather the recasting of established forms for new purposes. As Goodman wrote, “Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is the remaking” (6). While the film retains some of the creative elements marking more traditional film worlds (i.e., strong visual color), at the same time, it minimizes focus on other elements that can’t be assumed to be part of the world of the individual with autism (i.e., narrative). Presented here are the original proposed concepts and ideas in consideration for a film addressing an audience with autism. An overview of the results is discussed in Chapter 4.
THE IMAGES

The film’s emphasis on non-narrative construction means a dependency on the images themselves to carry the film experience. The specific images that were initially considered for the film were based on broader observations about what seemed to interest some individuals with autism. These images include falling objects such as rain and sand, mouths, mechanical objects, such as a stopwatch and car door latch system, and plain objects, such as a soccer ball.

Each of these objects would be given a special treatment. The falling rain and sand have a progressive color scheme, alternating between their natural, neutral color (i.e., brown for sand) and a vibrant color palette. The mouth would consist of just a child’s mouth, whereas the eyes would be off frame. This mouth was intended as a part of a sequence alternating between smiling and a neutral expression. In addition, there would be a sequence in which lipstick is applied to the child’s lips. For the mechanical objects, a hand would operate a stopwatch or clock with a seconds counter, alternating between stop and start. There was also a planned sequence containing two images: a hand opening a car door and the car door latch mechanism. They would be cut together to form a sequence to be repeated multiple times. For plain objects, the soccer ball would be inflated and deflated multiple times. All the images were chosen with the intention of a sensory experience rather than a narrative experience. The individual with autism’s commonly observed preference for mechanical rhythms and order justifies the inclusion of mechanical and plain objects. The use of a progressive color scheme in the rain and falling objects was based on observations about a general attraction to color sensations.
Also planned were additional images drawn from peculiar observations; for example, a sequence with a swimmer in a body of water, perhaps a pool. This would include the swimmer floating on the water and also underwater, alternating between the two. I also planned a sequence of rain alternating with a face with eyes, eventually becoming a single image. This was an attempt to use a favorable image such as rain with an unfavorable image such as eyes to generate perhaps a new interest in the unfavorable image. Lastly, I planned to employ colored alphabet blocks in the title sequences at the beginning and in the end of the film. The entire alphabet will be laid out letter by letter, followed by the title of the film, also laid out in blocks. This use of the alphabet comes from the observation of a particular interest and heightened attention to words and letters.

**THE LIGHTING**

The lighting aspect of the film was to be quite simple. A number of specific images posed some challenges in their presentation, but issues of exposure were to be straightforward and uncomplicated. All the images were exposed very cleanly in order to accentuate the various colors of the objects, eliminating as much as possible shadows and artifacts that might be desirable in other more traditional films.

In addition, natural environmental lighting was to be used in a few of situations, most particularly in the sequence involving the water pool and the car door latch mechanism. The intention was to allow the images themselves to create the experience rather than the manipulation of the lights. This strategy would minimize the variables when the film would be presented to an audience and the audiences’ response would be observed.
**Camera Movement**

There was to be one instance, the water pool sequence, in which significant camera movement would be incorporated. The sequence was to include an image from above the water, angled down onto the surface and an image from underwater, looking at the swimmer and the various objects. The camera would move to track the various objects and the swimmer both on the surface and underwater, maintaining objects within the frame.

As for the rest of the images, I planned to make them static and the camera stationary. Any movement would be as a result of capturing the objects moving within the frame. Once again, the intention was to minimize the variables that contribute to the “conventional” film experience of the general audience and create a basic film experience for the autistic audience.

**Sound Design**

As much as possible, the sound in the film was to be diegetic, natural sounds of the environment and the objects. I considered additional audio in order to enhance or boost the natural sounds, but even then the sound was to match the nature of the object. For example, the image of the falling rain might not have enough captured audio from the filming of the image, so a sound library would be employed to enhance the audio. The intention here was to give the autistic audience a complete sensation experience based on the images and the sound. Hence, the film would present not just the vibrant colors of the objects but also a rich audio experience associated with each image.

No music was planned; the intention was to let the natural environmental audio buttress the images, unassisted. There was to be one instance at the beginning of the film,
when alphabet blocks are shown, in which voice-over would be employed. It would call out the letters and the film title. The purpose of this was to draw the attention of the individual from the very beginning, using both the blocks and verbal call of the letters and names.

**THE EDITING**

The editing of the film was probably the most complex of the creative aspects of the production. The lack of a narrative structure presented an unusually wide range of possibilities in the actual cutting of the film. It must be decided which images or sequence of images will be presented first and then why they should be presented in that order. There are number of thoughts regarding the editing process.

The first is that each image or sequence is intended to function on its own. Even though a montage of images generally creates meaning in their juxtaposition, that meaning in this case is not really relevant. The reason is that each image is chosen for its potential to contribute to the film’s sensation experience for the audience with autism. Their selection was based on how the audience might react to each one. No consideration was made at the time of their selection regarding their combination with one another. How the audience reacts to those images in sequence and whether they do create new meaning for the individual with autism is uncertain. That being said, I was obliged to guess at the optimal order to present the images, since each image is intended to function on its own. Whether or not the order of the images matter to an audience with autism remains to be seen. One strong consideration in determining image order was the fact that we know many individuals with autism favor orderliness. An example of order might be a predictable pattern, such as ABABABABABA, which reflects a basic cycle pattern.
My plan was either loop most of the sequences multiple times to create sense of repetition, or to play forwards and backwards to create patterns. For example, the image of the soccer ball being inflated was to be followed by the same image but in reverse. The sequence of the door handle being pulled and the door latch mechanism would repeat multiple times. As a result, each image or sequence would present order or patterns within the larger construction. The falling rain and sand images would provide the film’s bookends, with the beginning the same as the end, and hence completing the symmetry and orderliness of the film’s construction.

The length of the images and sequences themselves would determine the pace of the film. This would stand in contrast to a more traditional film in which the general sense of pacing and timing originates with the screenplay. Since the images are self-contained, there is no cutting of the images mid-action, or “cutting on action.” Each image plays out before cutting to the next image or sequence. As alluded above, symmetry was a significant part of the film’s design. The images and sequences are repeated on opposite sides of the midpoint in the timeline, creating this symmetry in the film’s construction. Once again, this emphasizes the important aspect of order. As a result, the film will potentially end up somewhere between 5-10 minutes.

**RESOLUTIONS OF SUBPROBLEMS**

In Chapter 1, a number of subproblems were presented in light of the project’s unique and unusual premise. The creative decisions just discussed offer some solutions to these issues.
A film designed for a specific audience will inevitably interact with that specific audience, and a film for an audience with autism is no different. The latter case presents a much greater challenge, given the history of misunderstanding of the autistic community by those on the outside. With that in mind, awareness of the sensitivity of the subject is essential when interacting with individuals with autism and their caregivers and/or parents. This subproblem is also alleviated by the fact that this project, both the film and project report, doesn’t constitute a scientific analysis or a scientific experiment requiring human subjects, but rather, it’s a creative endeavor that only requires an audience, albeit autistic, for its realization. The individual with autism is viewed here in the same terms as any general audience watching a film at the theatres in the sense that the final product is presented for their consumption and their review.

The complexity of the autistic condition and the uncertainty of how properly to address an audience with autism present challenges that may not be met. Creating a film that must both consider how an individual with autism sees the world and how then to deduce from that knowledge a film experience devoted to that perspective is difficult. This is partly addressed by using what is known from various fields studying autism and perception and using what has been observed to design an appropriate and gratifying experience for the individual with autism.

The emotions of individuals with autism can range widely and also shift quickly, regardless of whether others are interacting with them or not. In addition, their affect responses to sensations or experiences can be peculiar, even to typical and generic things like music or books. How to gauge success in trying to draw an emotional response from individuals with autism is both the question and the challenge. This challenge is addressed by
not necessarily trying to address a specific emotion or a set of emotions, but by just creating a sensation experience for the individual with autism. This shift allows him/her to associate in their own way whatever emotions they have with a particular scene or image. None of the images chosen are chosen with a specific emotional response in mind, such as laughter or excitement, but rather, they are chosen to draw whatever emotions the individual with autism associates with a particular image. The expectation then is a film experience for them and an enlightening experience of that experience for the general audience.

Finally, as already mentioned, autism spectrum disorder varies widely in its expression and presents challenges when designing a film for an audience with autism. A film covering too broad a section of the spectrum might end up trying to do too much, while a film addressing just one specific profile seems an inefficient use of resources. The solution comes in the inclusion of not just the profile of one individual but of a few, in addition to the key observations from the academic study of autism.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS

*Autistically Speaking* provided an exceptional and unique challenge to me as a filmmaker. Though the proposal outlined in Chapter 3 provided an imaginative, creative framework and playground, the possibilities only seemed to increase during the production process. Having little precedent to inform it, this project was left vulnerable to many variations and variables when it came to both its actual production and its final construction, even wholesale changes that were unexpected. Even with the given parameters and considerations outlined in Chapters 1 and 2, there turned out to be many possible approaches. In the end, at least as far as it concerns this thesis, those possibilities had to be refined and limited.

**PRE-PRODUCTION**

In preparation for production, the originally proposed images were carefully and repeatedly reviewed. A number of images or concepts were replaced or eliminated altogether. Most were related to logistical and cost concerns, and whether it was essential that it be part of the final film. For example, the falling sand idea was eliminated, mostly due to the complicated burden of building a separate set to facilitate the falling sand, as well as the amount of sand that would be needed and the amount of manpower required to “re-load” whatever contraption would be used to contain the sand. It was replaced with a falling packing peanuts concept instead, which still created the motion of falling objects and without
the complexity of execution. The car door latch, the stopwatch idea, and the inflating-deflating soccer ball were all ultimately cut. The car door latch for the difficulty of showing clearly its action; the stopwatch idea because we had no access to one; and the soccer ball because it seemed its execution would be unnecessarily complicated.

Fortunately, Autistically Speaking allowed interchangeability between its different images or ideas because the images were meant to function individually, mostly without regard to the whole. Unlike most classical narrative films in which images or objects have specific subtext relating to the narrative, this film didn’t have to be concerned that eliminating or changing the position of an object or element would drive it in a different narrative direction. Some images that seemed complicated yet didn’t seem essential to the film were eliminated, much in the spirit of experimental film. The falling sand, the inflating soccer ball, and the door latch all fell under this scrutiny and were replaced by other, simpler images.

As a result, though certain images were eliminated, others were added with similar or greater effect to the overall concept. For example, a pulsating light concept was added, where 22 incandescent light bulbs were strung together on a set to create an old vaudeville-style stage affect. These lights were faded up and down to create a pattern and rhythm. In addition, while shopping for props, a number of toys caught my attention and were eventually added to the shot list; for example, a colorful toy train set that traveled on an oval track and a water-soluble pill that dissolved into colorful shapes when introduced to water.

Finally, a child actress was brought in to fill the role of the child mentioned in the original proposal. Since there was no narrative and also no lines to be memorized, she was cast for her gazing ability and her ability to put on lipstick, both of which were captured
during the production stage. The casting process for both the actress and us was unusual due to the experimental nature of the film. Whereas talent auditioning for a typical narrative film would be asked to perform from a script, and since this project’s film had no narrative script, I casted based on criteria more usually reserved for modeling.

**Production**

Production of *Autistically Speaking*, like pre-production, conjured up more possibilities and variations for film images than the project’s limitations might have suggested. Having a small crew, and hence a smaller, more free-flowing production, and a studio at our disposal allowed the production to seem more play-like, more imaginative, and more experimental than a typical narrative production. It certainly had the feel of an experimental film production, for which images and concepts were being created rather than just merely photographed, much in the spirit of the filmmakers and methodologies mentioned in Edward Small’s experimental film survey.

Some new images were created while on the production set; for example, the varying use of the train set. Originally, the idea was to photograph only the train with its included track. However, long pieces of wood were used to design a makeshift straight track and the LED color-shifting lights from the rain set were used to color the straight track, creating an ominous look. The camera was set up straight down the track, where the train approached straight on, then moved down the colored-track. The intention was to use the combination of color, moving image and sound (to be added later) to create a strong sensory-heavy image. In addition, a number of images exhibiting physicality were conceived while on set. Two production team members were photographed at 60 fps on the vaudeville-styled stage first
jumping up and down, and then, with the addition of myself, hopping across the stage. In both cases, the intention was to create similar images found in René Clair’s *Entr’acte* and his funeral procession, exhibiting the physical body as a sensory-dependent image.

Some original ideas, however, weren’t photographed the way I originally proposed. Though the extreme close-up image of the child’s eyes was executed satisfactorily, the close-up image of the child’s mouth wasn’t shot quite as imagined. Ideally, the shot was to be an extreme close-up of the mouth and then the action of putting on lipstick, but the shot wasn’t close enough and the lipstick action wasn’t very smooth. The idea of the lipstick was that the ovular shape created by the action would create a looping motion that could be slowed down or reversed in combination with the extreme close-up on the eyes, thus creating a pattern and rhythm in line with the rest of the film.

The body of water concept, where we’d photograph various shots at a pool, was eliminated completely. The two days of production in studio produced a significant amount of footage and sequences for not just one cut but also multiple cuts. Since the body of water concept was planned for after the scheduled shoot in the studio, the results of the work in the studio allowed us to eliminate this shot. I ultimately determined that the sequence was not critically necessary. The concept will hopefully be revisited in the near future, if the opportunity to continue developing the *Autistically Speaking* project materializes.

**Post-Production**

Post-production was the most challenging part of the entire process of making the first *Autistically Speaking* film, henceforth designated as *Autistically Speaking, no. 1*. Two days of production in the studio produced an immense amount of footage. Moreover, each
image concept had variations in color, speed (24 frames vs. 60 frames), framing and motion. In addition to the visuals, the film also needed to feature a strong audio presence, as well, opening up yet more possibilities in creating a sensory experience. The process of editing *Autistically Speaking, no. 1* had very little to do with the conventions of standard continuity editing. Assembling a coherent film from so many different pieces of raw material such a unique audience presented seemingly overwhelming possibilities.

In order to narrow down the possibilities, specific parameters were put in place to create patterns and allow thematic elements to develop. Each shot was limited to 10-seconds, excluding the title sequence, and as much as possible, each shot had complete cycles of action, to establish a sense of looping. For example, the light bulbs were cut on complete cycles of dimming up and down, creating a complete action loop, rather than cut on the basis of the 10-second time restraint. In addition, the film as a whole has a symmetrical, mirrored structure, where the images in the first half are repeated in reverse in the second half. This also creates a loop within a loop structure, where each single shot (one loop) functions as an independent sensory experience as referenced in the original proposal. Finally, *Autistically Speaking, no. 1* is marked by an “up and down” theme. The images of rain, jumping up and down, dangling lights, and falling “snow” all reflect that decision.

The inclusion of the close-up and colored image of the girl’s eyes is one particular design decision that deserves discussion. The intention of this image was to draw attention to the eyes using color, in addition to demarcate the film’s center. Research, however, including those cited in this paper, has shown that many individuals with autism to have a strong aversion to the eyes, making the image’s inclusion in *Autistically Speaking, no. 1* somewhat problematic. This film’s intention of entertaining would seem to preclude such an image.
Admittedly, the inclusion of this image is somewhat of a gamble, since an audience with autism may very well reject it in relation to the other images. Attempting to alleviate some of the aversion, a favorable signal (color) was combined with an unfavorable signal (the eyes) to try to draw attention to the eyes. In a sense, this approach is in the vein of early cinema, which exhibited unfamiliar images and objects and drew attention to them through signals and objects already familiar. This is the case in some of the exhibitionist cinema mentioned in Tom Gunning’s article, such as Georges Méliès’s *Le Voyage Dans la Lune*, in which the image of going to the moon (unfamiliar) is combined with the image of a large cannon and a large cannonball (familiar). Whether this image’s inclusion proves valuable or not remains to be seen.

Sound and audio were a critical part of *Autistically Speaking, no. 1*, giving the film a powerful, complete experience. Supporting the visuals, rather than overwhelming the visuals, was the main idea of thinking behind the audio. Again, there were a lot of possibilities and making the process somewhat of a game of creativity. Though a good amount of the diegetic audio was captured in production, a good amount of it was replaced while editing, deviating from what was originally proposed. The main reason was either that the audio captured wasn’t quite strong and vivid enough, or it didn’t add anything particularly visual it was associated with. Rain and wind from a sound library was pumped in, as well as low-frequency ambience and room tones. In each case, the intention was to enhance the original audio. In other cases, the accompanying diegetic sound linked to what was photographed, such as the shots of the dimming light bulbs or jumping up and down, didn’t come off as very engaging. The sound mix for those photographs was intentionally detached from the visuals; for example, campfire sounds for the light bulbs and explosions for the jumping.
REEVALUATION OF GOALS

The goal and objective of the project was to explore autistic perception through film, create a film of entertainment and experience for an audience with autism, expose to the general audience this unique way of perceiving the world, and finally, develop a model from which future films can be created. These were daunting and perhaps ambitious goals, considering the lack of precedent, the plethora of possibilities, and the uncertainty of the results.

As of this writing, small screenings and a larger showcase viewing is being planned. Therefore, though Autistically Speaking, no. 1 has been completed, its exhibition to its intended audience has not yet taken place. This, of course, hampers the ability to honestly evaluate this project’s goals, particularly how an audience with autism might engage with the film. Unfortunately, the logistics of gathering an audience comprised of young individuals with autism presented challenges not anticipated in the original proposal.

That being said, from the process of producing this film some of the goals can still be evaluated. Autistic perception of world and objects was certainly explored given the major parameters placed upon the film. How does one organize a film language for that way of perceiving? Eliminating narrative structure and actors with lines and having only sensory-dependent images and sounds opened up a new set of considerations in creating a film, and reflects at the very least a presumed significant shift from the “normal” perception of a general audience. The design question was no longer about narrative logic and performance quality, but rather about patterns, rhythms, order, and motion. In this sense, Autistically Speaking, no. 1 did indeed explore autistic perception, even in the absence of its intended
audience, because its construction acknowledges this new way of perceiving both in terms what it doesn’t have and what it does show.

Secondly, a model for future films was indeed developed, considering that major parameters of filmmaking had to be modified to create something new. Eliminating narrative and performance and depending solely on visual audio that would evoke patterns and rhythms is already a significant shift from the mainstream film model. Even without an audience, *Autistically Speaking, no. 1* provided at the very least the first possible stepping stone to the next development of the autistic film. The objective of such a development has at least been partially achieved, since the question of whether or not this first stepping stone on its own engages an audience with autism was only part of the objective.

**SUMMARY OF LESSONS LEARNED**

When thinking about the lessons learned from *Autistically Speaking*, two observations come to mind. First, how much is taken for granted when it comes to communicating through the creative work of film, and on a larger level, constructing meaning. Being not autistic and therefore, not surprisingly, having a non-autistic way of perceiving, brought revealing challenges when I was forced to take the perspective of those with autism. I don’t know how many times while editing the film I found myself asking whether my decisions regarding which shots and cuts to use, or how images were juxtaposed, made sense. However, many times I caught myself not asking from the perspective of autistic perception but rather, asking from the perspective of classical film narrative construction. I realized that the former seemed wholly different, so that even though the questions asked were the same, the answers addressed different audiences. This reflects the project as a whole, of course, for the
uniqueness of the project’s premise implies a difference, or else such a project would be unworthy of pursuit.

Secondly, what an exciting and challenging playground that creating film can be. This is a reflection specifically of *Autistically Speaking* but also about the possibilities of an even broader scale of experimental films. Modern narrative film necessarily has a formulaic, structured, and predictable aspect to its construction. *Autistically Speaking*, on the one hand, and by extension, experimental film, is created each time from scratch, from a *tabula rasa*, so to speak, unbounded by the structures of narrative and continuity editing. Such films are free to create differing experiences targeting a wide-array of either real or imaginary ways of perceiving. It was certainly a different experience being in a studio with a small crew and sensing that we were creating a new film experience and exploring a territory of unknowns rather than repeating the tried and true.

**Final Conclusions**

Whether or not *Autistically Speaking, no. 1* is successful in future screenings and exhibitions, the opportunity to take the first step toward treating addressing an audience with autism is itself a reward. The film, as mentioned already, is in some sense a guess, seemingly random in the same vein of other experimental films. What has been important in the process is the acknowledgment of the question that set forth the search for the answer. There is much more to be asked and answered, whether by *Autistically Speaking* or another project yet uncreated. I am left to conclude that the potential exists for a film, whether short or feature-length, with the ability to engage and communicate to an audience with autism. This follows the line of experimental filmmakers who explored unexplored realms, ideas and concepts,
some of which have become mainstream in use. There’s little reason to believe that a similar
developmental path couldn’t be realized for the autistic film and in the future perhaps garner
generic considerations.

All that being said, the Autistically Speaking project is only a start. The understanding
of how an individual with autism perceives the world cannot be characterized with any
conclusiveness. The condition of autism isn’t fading away anytime soon as it continues to
impact families, whole communities and even whole nations in increasing numbers, and there
is still a lot of to be discovered. As such, a field of entertainment directed at this unique
demographic similarly is characterized by beginnings, not endings. With little precedent, the
sub-genre of films for autistic audiences seems at this point, limitless. If filmmakers and
general audiences allow themselves to adjust and accept a different patterns of perception,
they may very well find themselves watching an audience as active and complete participants
in a film experience they recognize as their own.
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