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Andy - A Documentary Short Film

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An abstract of

a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences

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Abstract

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A short documentary about a preteen with autism, *Andy* seeks to combat stereotypes and misinformation surrounding the developmental disability by creating a comprehensive and empathetic portrait. The film works in tandem with Andy in order to create the most accurate depiction of how he interacts with the world around him. By carefully documenting both the ordinary occurrences of his everyday life and showcasing his interests and talents, this film works to demonstrate how Andy is not wholly defined by his autism, and is just as human as any other child.

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I. Intro

I met my cousin Andy in early 2010, just a few months after he was born. In the years that followed, Andy and I saw each other a lot at family events, as well as shared vacations. During this time, I developed something of a close relationship with him, as despite our eight year age gap, we were usually the two youngest at any family function and would be left to entertain ourselves. When I moved to Atlanta for college, my relationship with Andy and the rest of his family only deepened. Since we now lived so close together, they would invite me over for dinner and other events, and even helped me move into my first apartment. Simultaneously, I began to study both psychology and film, and through these studies, encountered misconceptions and misrepresentations of autism that clearly did not match up with what I was often experiencing with Andy. As I began to be passionate about nonfiction storytelling in my junior year of college, I grappled with the idea of creating a piece to more accurately represent Andy and other children like him. After progressing even further in my studies of psychology and in my practice of documentary filmmaking, I realized that I was in a unique position to be able to tell this story and contribute to the field of nonfiction media on autism. This thesis is the culmination of the dissonance I have felt between the representations of childhood autism in film and media and what I observed with my cousin. In the following sections, I will explore why there is a need for my film, as well as my filmmaking process and how I molded it to specifically meet the need for better representation of childhood autism and serve as a counter to the much of the popular misrepresentations of it.

II. Literature Review

When beginning to study documentary media on childhood autism, it becomes immediately obvious how few proper representations exist. Thus, it is important to examine where the widespread ideas about autism are coming from: primarily psychological research, as well as other forms of popular media. To begin, Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD is defined by the CDC as simply, "a developmental disability caused by differences in the brain." This definition, despite feeling somewhat nebulous and vague, does a decent job of conveying the disorder. Unlike many other disorders, ASD is classified as a spectrum, meaning that there is no one experience or set of symptoms. As such, it has been a struggle to create any common definition of the disorder that would accurately represent it, leading to struggles in diagnosis and support. This problem has continued into popular media, as the representation of ASD, especially in film, has been widely criticized for the spread of harmful stereotypes as well as forcing the complexities of ASD into a few concrete categories. This review seeks to broadly explore the current landscape of ASD representation both in psychology and film. Specifically, the criticisms brought against these representations, and what steps must be taken in order to create a proper representation of ASD.

Addressing Autism

When first entering into the discourse on the representation of autism, the first issue many face is the question of how to refer to those with ASD, as "autistic" or as a "person with autism." In popular media, the latter has been widely declared as the preferable of the two, as it uses "person first language", a system of speaking that works to put the referred individual before their disability. Person first language has been widely adopted and in 2006 the People First Respectful Language Modernization Act was passed to require its usage in many public forums. While this was done with the utmost respect for all people with any kind of disability in mind, for many of those with ASD it represents a disconnect between how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by the neurotypical public. Since its introduction, many activists have spoken against person first language with the founder of Autism Network International, Jim Sinclair writing in 1999, “I am not a ‘person with autism.’ I am an autistic person… Saying "person with autism" suggests that the autism can be separated from the person. But this is not the case.” He continues to argue that “saying ‘person with autism’ suggests that autism is something bad, so bad it isn’t even consistent with being a person…” (Sinclair). Sinclair and other autistic activists have further argued that autism should not be presented as a disability external to a person, but rather as a core element of their identity in a similar vein to race and sexual/gender identity (Thibault, 57). This is an early example of how normalized it can be to treat autism as something to get away from, an idea that many autistic people have spoken out against. For this reason, many autistic individuals prefer “autistic”, which is what this paper will be using going forward.

Diagnosing Autism

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the first struggles that arises from autism being a spectrum is struggles with diagnosis. The main tool used by psychological professionals to diagnose a child with autism is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders also known as the DSM-5. This book provides a series of criteria that the American Psychological Association has deemed to constitute childhood autism. If a child meets enough of these criteria then they are diagnosed. While this system has helped families get a diagnosis for their child, this more rigid system has been criticized for what autistic author and researcher Temple Grandin calls “label-locked thinking”. In her 2013 book, *The Autistic Brain*, she writes, “ This type of thinking can do a lot of damage. For some people, a label can become the thing that defines them" (Grandin, 105). She describes how defining autism as one single and negative disorder, can not only cause autistic people to lose focus on their strengths in favor of apathy at their diagnosis, but also causes external changes in perception as well. Peers and superiors can devalue someone when they have the autistic label, regardless of their achievements. However, perhaps most harmful is the changes in diagnosis that can occur, where autistic individuals often have other symptoms and ailments they have simply attributed to autism instead of being provided with a proper diagnosis (Grandin, 106-107). Furthermore, in his 2015 book *Uniquely Human,* Barry Prizant argues that the current state of diagnosis uses a "circular logic," where children are diagnosed as autistic because they display certain behaviors, while these behaviors are simply explained away as symptoms of autism. Prizant points out that this method of diagnosis provides no information on what the child experiences and leads to ineffective therapy (Prizant, 17). However, despite the problems that labels can cause, practicing "label avoidance" by avoiding diagnosis can have catastrophic consequences as well. As Devon Price outlines in his 2022 book *Unmasking Autism*, when autistic children are never diagnosed, this can lead to years of uncertainty and pain. He writes, "[undiagnosed autistic children] work hard, demand little, and play by society's rules closely as possible. They grow into an adult who is even more self-effacing, and even less capable of voicing how they feel. Then after decades of forcing themselves into a restrictive neurotypical box, they have some kind of breakdown" (Price, 17-18). He introduces the term "masking", which refers to the methods by which autistic individuals attempt to cover up their behaviors that could be considered "abnormal" and/or autistic. Price breaks down the process of masking, the first element of which is faking social interactions and cues, such as faking a smile at all times no matter what emotion is truly being felt or faking eye contact by staring at someone's forehead, even though this is entirely unnatural to people with autism. Price notes that masks often involve attempting to dull one's passions or knowledge on a subject in order to not expose their levels of interest that are perceived as unnatural or to not seem arrogant (Price, 97-108). Furthermore, Price states that maintaining this mask can have catastrophic effects on an autistic individual. Without access to their natural support structure, they are bombarded with stress, anxiety, and other negative psychological effects which can often result in destructive coping mechanisms like chronic people pleasing, drug habits, and even joining cults (Price, 111-112).

Given the potentially disastrous results that can arise from forgoing a diagnosis, clearly a diagnosis is at least a first step towards being able to thrive with autism. However, the concerns towards labels are still valid, and raise the issue of how autism is both received and worked with. While the process of diagnosis can focus too heavily on the negative aspects of autism, many of the negative aspects associated with it come from the reception to/treatment of autism. This shows the importance of how those around an autistic person, especially parents and other close relatives/friends respond to their autism.

Treatment vs. Acceptance

When discussing the reception of autism, parents occupy a large portion of this conversation. They are often interacting with their child and their autism more than anyone else. It should be acknowledged that especially before any diagnosis is reached for their child, having an autistic child has the potential to place serious stress and strain on both parents and other immediate family members. In England, a ten year longitudinal study of families with an autistic child conducted from 1992 to 2002, found that parents reported significant distress before their child was diagnosed. This was because they did not have access to any resources to help them adjust to their child’s different needs. This distress was often relieved greatly with access to specialized childcare programs; though many parents expressed worry for how they would fare once their child was no longer eligible for these programs as autism programs for adults are extremely rare and inaccessible (Gray, 215-216). While these and other struggles faced by parents of autistic children are real and should not be ignored, studies like this one as well as other mediums reveal that parents of autistic children often have an unsurprisingly self-centered outlook on their children that has been widely spoken against by autism activists. In this study, the parents largely expressed a desire for either a program that would take their adult child away to care for them, or for some kind of “cure” for autism that would have their child “live a ‘near normal life’” (Gray, 219-220).

It must be acknowledged that not all parents share this sentiment. As covered in *Uniquely Human,* there are many parents who have become increasingly frustrated that this same outlook is held by the professionals that they look to in order to help their child. He writes, “[some researchers’] goal is to be in total control, they’re often insensitive to sensory issues and other autism related challenges, and they impose their own goals' ' (Prizant, 138). Whether it’s coming from parents and relatives, or medical professionals, this sentiment that work needs to be done to find a “cure” for autism and bring autistic individuals to something resembling neurotypical has been widely panned by autistic individuals and allies. Lei Wiley-Mydske, an autistic writer, who wrote in a 2014 article for the Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network states, “A really simple solution, I think, is to spend less on “research” and administrative costs and invest that money back into communities that need it most… I don’t need to be cured. I need acceptance” (Wiley-Mydske).

This begins to get at the struggle between the desires of those around an autistic person for autism to be a treatable disorder that can have its effects lessened, and the aforementioned views of many in the autistic community where autism is inseparable to them and should be accepted instead of suppressed. Prizant echoes this in *Uniquely Human* by reiterating the ineffectiveness of suppressing autism. He instead strongly recommends listening to the person with autism and working to understand what causes their behaviors that may seem odd to a neurotypical individual (Prizant, 17). He lays out what he has observed as the best ways to manage and live with autism. He heavily encourages an empathetic approach that seeks to understand exactly why a behavior is occurring and how to both lessen the stimuli/stressor causing it and nurturing the behavior into an effective tool to overcome the pressures of those stimuli/stressors. For those around autistic individuals, especially parents, he heavily recommends not attempting to stem their behaviors and to give space and respect to them instead. He provides a call to action for parents to provide opportunities to both express their personal interests which are often used as both an outlet for unused social energy as well as a calming technique, and engage in regular social situations and communities to "energize the spirit." Prizant argues heavily in this section for being empathetic and attempting to lessen stressors for the person with autism, while also trying not to treat them like anything other than a normal human. With that they can increase their self-determination and self-esteem which will help them develop to thrive and achieve later in life.

Communication

When using this more accepting and empathetic approach to working with autism, it is very important to find some way of openly communicating. There is somewhat of a stigma that most autistic people struggle with communication, and while this is sometimes true, it is not for a lack of trying and has more to do with the methods of communication not being as friendly to autistic people. This can be seen in the fact that about 80% of autistic adults use some form of social media, and well over half of them report using it to successfully make friends and communicate with family (Mazurek, 1711). Prizant argues that simply by being willing to be open with autistic people and having a willingness to learn will go a very long way in facilitating this communication. He then outlines six things that help neurotypical people understand autistic people: empathy, viewing "autistic behavior" as a type of human behavior, sensitivity, sharing a sense of control with each other, humor, trust, and flexibility (Prizant, 139-141).

As good as empathy can be, sometimes, especially in children, autism can prevent meaningful communication with words, making the process nearly impossible for those who are not trained professionals. However, all hope is not lost, as there have been a number of interesting research directions into alternative forms of communication. One of the more interesting ones in relation to this project is dance and movement therapy, which is covered in Fran Levy's anthology, *Dance and Other Expressive Art Therapies.* In it, Dr. Tina Erfer writes that autistic children usually struggle to define and relate to the world around them, resulting in poor communication (Levy, 193). Dance and movement allows the children to relate physically with the world around them, and with practice, feel more in control of their own body. Erfer states that this results in improved communication skills, which allows the children to be more active in school and other activities. On top of this, dance and other movement therapies helped the children to focus and soothe themselves, which is often a struggle for children who suffer from overstimulation (Levy, 208). This research, while not always widely applicable, begins to touch on the existence of effective nontraditional therapies for ASD. The existence of such therapies stresses the importance of acceptance towards the soothing measures.

Redefining Autism

Up to this point, this review has been covering background information on how autism is defined and treated in society, as well as how autistic people and their allies have fought for its acceptance. Throughout this discussion focuses on redefining autism from a debilitating disease that renders anyone affected as unable to participate in society, to a spectrum of frameworks that shape how autistic people interact with the world around them. Autistic activists have been critical of campaigns that define autism as something that can be separated from them (Thibault, 77), and instead have advocated for a new definition for autism as an integrated and personal framework for thinking and seeing the world that is deeply connected to each autistic person. There have been many different methods to reach the latter definition, a few of which will be explored here. In the article, “Autism as Rhetoric”, Paul Heilker and Melanie Yergeau argue that, “we might do best to unlearn everything we think we have learned about autistics, who, as a group, are about as amorphous and diverse as neurotypicals” (Heilker and Yergeau, 496). They continue on to argue that autism is less of a disorder and more of a rhetoric used by autistic individuals to accurately express how they perceive the world, writing that, “Conceiving of autism as a rhetoric, as a way of being in the world through language, allows us to construe what we have historically seen as language deficits as, instead, language differences. Students on the autism spectrum, like all students, have their own culturally and individually distinctive topoi, tropes, dialects, and so on, and their rhetorics thus constitute both cultural and individual representations of their selfhood” (Heilker and Yergeau, 495-496). Prizant argues for this as well, stating that when examined, “autistic behaviors” are ultimately not too dissimilar from neurotypical ones (Prizant, 9). A simple example he gives is that many autistic children are criticized for and discouraged from their reactions to outside stimuli, such as recoiling to touch or covering their ears/panicking at audio stimuli, even if they are seemingly quiet. Prizant points out that autism often increases the sensitivity to these stimuli, and that even neurotypicals will recoil to a firm touch/hit and will cover their ears at a noise we deem too loud. With this new frame of reference, "autistic behaviors" can start to be broken down to their root causes and to Prizant, show typical human responses to the different sensory/mental experience of autistic individuals. Finally, Grandin provides a neurological basis for this definition, she discusses neuroimaging studies done on autistic brains, which found significant differences between the corpus callosum and graymatter topology in autistic brains and neurotypical brains. These differences in the brain's connective tissues may begin to provide researchers with the ability to predict autism in children (Grandin, 36-38). These brain differences are all in the connective tissues, suggesting that autism is largely a change in how information travels around the brain, instead of a deficit in thinking as some have claimed. Throughout these models, it becomes clear that with up to date research, autism is less of a disability in the traditional sense, and more of a restructuring of the brain. Given this new definition, it is becoming increasingly necessary to create representations of autism that follow this definition in order to create the more accepting environment needed by autistic communities around the world.

Representation in Documentary Media

While this thesis is more focused on documentary media, it is important to first discuss the more widespread cultural impact of fictional representations of autism due to the lack of documentary media focusing on childhood autism. When analyzing both fictional and non-fictional representations, a severe lack of proper depictions can be found, however both genres suffer from different failures. In fiction films and TV shows, representations of autism tend to separate autistic characters into their struggles and their skills that serve other characters in the media.They often are, “hyper positive to the point of being unrealistic,” and contain, “a lot of sugar coating of autistic symptoms and displays of normativity that do not often exist in people with real-life diagnoses" (Prochnow, 147). The high prevalence of similar depictions in shows such as *The Good Doctor* (Highmore, 2017) and films such as *Rain Man* (Levinson, 1988) where the autistic character is a “savant” with almost superhuman qualities, minimizes the real struggles faced by average autistic children and adults and can lead to the harmful masking behaviors discussed earlier. The minimization of neurodivergence in these characters can also paint the idea of an almost “ideal” autistic, who has the analytical capacity that some autistic people gain with few of the non-neurotypical behaviors. This can be harmful to autistic people as it can further the idea that they can and should act neurotypical to fit into the societal standard instead of what comes naturally and comfortably to them. For autistic people, these depictions can also seemingly define them as only worth their “good” traits. Price writes,” This is how all of us were trained to view the disability: a horrible condition that renders you freakish and helpless, your life only as valuable as your savant-like skills are to other people" (Price, 19). While these fictional depictions are far wider spreading and are important to address for their impact on the perception of autism, this thesis is more focused on documentary, where representations are less culturally pervasive, but are seen more as a pure reflection of the truth.

As researcher Alexandria Prochnow points out, “Unlike [in] mainstream movies and TV shows, there is no way to accuse documentaries of showing behaviors that are ‘unrealistic’ or ‘unreal,’ which makes them the most accurate representations there can be” (Prochnow, 145). The issues of documentary arise from their framing of autism. While no one can deny that what is being shown really happened, the question is, from whose eyes is the story being told. Are these real events being contextualized in a realistic manner? It is also imperative that when a film takes an authoritative stance on autism, that it does not claim to be showing the audience all that autism is and is instead simply adding to the anthology of representations of autism. As Prochnow writes, "It is impossible for one piece of media to include portrayals of every single manifestation of ASD, however it is not impossible to endevor to show many different types of characters as possible, especially in a realistic manner" (Prochnow, 137). Documentaries that focus on older autistic persons have had a lot more success creating good representations. Films like *Autism in Love* (Fuller, 2015), have been able to work directly with autistic adults, giving them their own platform to speak on their lives and the issues they face. *Autism in Love* follows four different people in different places on the spectrum, creating a miniature anthology that demonstrates the wide range ASD has. Unfortunately, these documentaries often do not have much of a wide release. They see success at festivals and occasionally get placements on streaming services, but their widespread impact is still somewhat limited.

Some of the most popular pieces of documentary media are those on autistic children, and unfortunately, these are often considered bad representations by autistic activists. In 2011, PBS aired *Autism Now*, a documentary that they promoted as being, "designed to provide viewers with an authoritative, balanced look at the latest scientific research and medical thinking about the disorder" (Thibault, 69). This series unfortunately fell flat with autistic audiences, who heavily criticized it for, "[emphasizing] the medicalized child/caregiver perspective by situating its production as authoritative and balanced while excluding the "eyes" of autistic adults and rendering them invisible throughout the cultural broadcast terrain it mediates" (Thibault, 69). While *Autism Now* fails to properly include the voices of people with ASD in its discussion of autism and thus works to further some stereotypes about autistic children, it did attempt to show the spectrum of autism and how it can affect people differently, something that not all films have done.

Perhaps the two most well known pieces of documentary come from the charity Autism Speaks, one of the most predominant, and criticized charities that focuses on autism. Their widespread influence allowed the films, *I am Autism* (Cuarón, 2009), a short directed by Oscar winner Alfonso Cuarón that warns the audience of the “dangers" of autism through a personified account of the disorder, and *Sounding the Alarm: Battling the Autism Epidemic* (John Block, 2014), a longer documentary that focuses on the struggles of parents raising autistic children, and the efforts to “cure” autism. *I am Autism* has come under heavy scrutiny for perpetuating the idea that autistic children should be “cured” for the benefit of those around them, as well as generally being offensive, with quotes like “If you are happily married, I will make sure that your marriage fails… I will bankrupt you for my own self-gain… I will rob you of your children and your dreams… you are scared, and you should be… I am autism” (Thibault, 76-77). *Sounding the Alarm* has come under fire from activists like Lei Wiley-Mydske for the, “filming of Autistic children and young adults in crisis. Shown at their most vulnerable and since all of the parents claimed they were unable to communicate, certainly without their permission” (Wiley-Mydske). She continues to say that the film focuses too much on the “cost” to the parents and the idea that these families have been robbed of the child they wanted. On how a better representation could be made she states, “I just don’t think that talking about us as if we are half people unless we are cured is doing much other than making it worse for us. I know the answer is not to ask our parents instead of us” (Wiley-Mydske).

When creating or analyzing the creation of documentary media on autistic children, it is imperative to consider the role the child’s parents play in influencing the representation of their child. While all parents have some form of authority over their children and are often turned to for information about their children, this effect is especially pronounced for parents of autistic children and their kids often cannot communicate in a manner easy for others to understand and are sometimes completely non-verbal. While this cannot be held against the children, this necessity to get much if not all the information about an autistic from the parent instead of the child can result in a skewed representation that can tend to focus on the parents instead of staying focused on the child. As discussed earlier, raising an autistic child is not without difficulties, especially before diagnosis and when access to programs is limited, and this should not be invalidated, there is nothing wrong with showing the voice of the parents. However, in a similar manner to the longitudinal study, documentaries featuring autistic children often hyperfocus on the parents and their struggles to create a sensationalized account of what parenting an autistic child is like, an issue on full display in the films from Autism Speaks. To create better representations of autistic children there must be an effort to include autistic voices.

Conclusion

Through analysis of autism through both a psychological lens and a media lens, a need to destigmatize autism and foster a more accepting environment becomes crystal clear. As discussed in the following personal statement, this thesis attempts to add to the body of work attempting to do this by creating a platform for one autistic preteen, Andy, to show his life and his passions as they are. Simultaneously moving away from the sugarcoated nature of fictional depictions by not shying away from the struggles, but also moving away from the stigmatizing depictions of autistic children by allowing Andy to show his successes and speak for himself. It is also important for this thesis to acknowledge that it is not a definitive account of autism, but rather exists as one example of someone with autism being able to work past their struggles and thrive in their own way. There is an identifiable lack of representation of children with autism, and this thesis exists to fill some of that gap and begin to shift perceptions away from the helplessness and otherness often associated with autism and start to foster the sense of empathy and similarity advocated for by the scholars and activists featured in this review.

III. Personal Statement

The idea to do a piece on Andy first began during my third year at Emory when I was taking an introduction to documentary filmmaking class. While I was brainstorming a topic for my final project in that class, my aunt suggested I do a piece on either Andy or his sister Julie. The idea of exploring Andy's life with autism was immediately intriguing, but I wasn't really sure how exactly to approach it at the time, so I decided to save the idea for this thesis and do a bit more preparation to do this topic justice. As I began to do research on this idea to put together my thesis, the two Autism Speaks films were some of the most accessible pieces of media I could find. Having seen their frankly horrific representations of autism, I immediately became very passionate about making a film that served as a counter to the harmful representations found in them. At this point, I brought up the idea of doing my thesis film on Andy to his parents, and from the beginning they had no objections to the idea. As the time to start the project got closer, I met with Andy and his family again, laying out what filming would entail. Once again they liked the message of the project and provided me with a few ideas of events I could film Andy at. Andy himself was willing to be part of the project, but somewhat apprehensive of the filming process, something I will discuss in future sections.

My thesis originally started with the idea of following Andy through the process of preparing for one of his tap dance recitals, documenting both the physical journey of learning the moves for the dance, and the social aspects of being part of a dance troop. In this phase of planning, I had intended to almost solely focus on this one aspect of his life, using the more concrete timeline that the storyline provided as a framework for the film to follow. I was hoping that through capturing him dancing I could capture his personality and interactions with others through his participation with dance, and would only touch on other elements of his life in the downtime and through interviews with his family and others around him. However, this plan had to be scrapped rather quickly as Andy decided to quit dancing the summer before I began filming for this project. At first, the notion of having to refocus the entire documentary was somewhat daunting, but I began to realize that this was an opportunity to make a much better film. Ultimately, this film is about Andy, and structuring the entire film around an activity that he wasn't passionate about could have been disastrous, so I was happy to move on. Nonetheless, as the school year began, I began to be overwhelmed with stress about what I was going to focus on, who I would still need to interview, and how I was going to be able to mold this into a cohesive narrative that could be powerful enough to undermine prior misrepresentations.

Once I began filming, some of these worries began to diminish. However, filming with Andy did have some unique challenges that I had not faced before. The main issue simply came from the fact that I had not worked with a child, or an autistic person on any project before. This meant that I had to change my approach to filmmaking in order to accommodate Andy, and while this was difficult at times, Andy's comfort was paramount to my filming process and was conducive to him being more natural to the camera, and ultimately, the audience. The most immediate and important change I had to make to my approach was that I had to be much more patient with Andy than I was used to being with other people with whom I had worked. When I first started filming, he would often want to be alone in his room after being on camera. It was very important to me to not pressure him into anything uncomfortable to keep the film authentic to Andy as well as to not put any distress on him. As previously discussed, many of the prior depictions of autistic children have come under fire for filming children in distress and often paid no mind to the consent of the child, and so it was paramount to attempt to get away from this as much as possible. However, being unable to film with him for occasionally long periods of time when I had planned to was somewhat frustrating especially at first. I soon began to find a few solutions to begin to solve this problem, and still prioritize Andy's comfort. First, I would set up the camera, begin to let it run, and sit slightly away from it so that it was not as apparent that I was focusing the camera directly on him. This was doubly effective as Andy was more comfortable with this even when he knew the camera was rolling, and not having the camera directly between us allowed for him to interact with me as a cousin instead of a filmmaker which led to many more little personal moments on camera. Secondly, I would just film footage of the space around Andy after working with him for a bit, which gave him a needed break and let me still be efficient. Eventually being patient with Andy paid off as he did warm up to being on camera, even asking me to turn it on at times. While this process was difficult for me, I think that sticking to being patient and never pushing Andy to film resulted in much more meaningful and impactful moments being caught on camera.

Alongside this, I had a similar experience with using a lavalier microphone on Andy. He had a bit of experience wearing them from a few school plays, however he was not used to having one hidden on him. Oddly enough, the best way I found to get Andy to be happy to put the microphone on was through humor. Alongside him and his parents, I would make jokes about him being like a police informant or spy which he liked. Additionally, he quickly figured out that he could whisper things to me from long distances away, which he would use to make his own jokes. While this could be annoying at times, I think that letting him do this both strengthened our connection throughout filming, and allowed him to have positive experiences with the microphone, which meant that when he would start whatever activity we would be filming, he would quickly forget about it. Having a microphone on him at all times was invaluable, as it allowed the footage to be so much more personal, and on top of that, helped with the first problem I mentioned, as it allowed the footage to still feel close to him while the camera was at a distance with which he was comfortable.

As November began, and I had already acquired a decent amount of footage, I started editing to begin to shape the film early on and guide the rest of my filming. During this early editing process, it became clear that some changes to my original plan needed to be made. One of the first big deviations I made from my original plan was to move away from talking head interviews, and cut out the interviews I had shot with Andy's parents entirely. Initially, I had envisioned a film consisting of two main elements, observational sections of Andy, and talking head interviews with Andy, his parents, a director at the Emory Autism Center, and potentially some other big figures in his life like his scout leader. In hindsight, this plan was largely based on a fear that I would not be able to get good observational material, and so flaws began to present themselves almost immediately. First, it became clear that this would simply be too many interviews for a project of this length. Then the director of the autism center stopped responding to my attempts at communication and so I had to consider him as having dropped out of the project. This was ultimately a blessing in disguise as this made the decision to focus exclusively on the family much easier.

Close to the start of my filming process, I filmed a lengthy interview with Andy's parents that covered topics such as Andy's early childhood, what his parents had done to accommodate his autism, and the impact they felt having an autistic child had on them. This interview went well, and provided a lot of context to Andy’s current situation, as well as a touching depiction of two parents who truly loved and did the best for their child, despite the difficulties he had. I began to cut this interview with observational moments with Andy, and the film began to have the consistent rhythm of hearing the parents’ context, then hearing Andy talk about whatever activity he was doing over the observational video, and finally letting the diegetic audio of the event play. Unfortunately, these cuts never seemed to work, and the longer they got, the more they seemed to drag. The talking head interviews were egregiously breaking the flow of the film, and so, after revisiting what I wanted the film to ultimately accomplish, I decided to cut out the interviews and focus entirely on Andy’s own voice. As addressed in the background section of this paper, one of the main issues found with much of the prior work depicting childhood autism was that it focused heavily on the parents point of view. While I had intentionally focused my interview on dispelling some of the negative stigma around having an autistic child, and talked about the ways Andy’s parents nurtured him instead of trying to “cure” him, it was still an example of this issue, and after receiving feedback from my peers and advisors, it became clear that it would be far more effective and more true to the intentions I have with this film to let Andy be the sole narrator of his story, even if that meant leaving out some contextual details.

For Andy’s interviews, I knew that he would not be very enthusiastic about sitting down and completing a full sit down, talking head interview, so I began to ask him questions and do smaller interviews in the middle of observational filming. This was immediately very effective as the less formal nature of these interviews were much more comfortable for Andy and he had no problem talking to me/the camera about whatever he was doing at that time. Having these on-location interviews also gave me a lot of freedom while editing to either use the interview audio as a voiceover or with the corresponding clips. The latter of the two was especially effective, as through the use of the lavalier, the interviews feel a lot closer to him and feel more like he is simply talking freely. I did eventually do a sit down interview with Andy, as well as a follow-up re-recording session, and these were about as difficult as I had anticipated. Andy was far more distracted and was more interested in yelling into the microphone than actually answering questions, but we persevered and got a few good sound bites that were very helpful to the piece, and gave insight into how he perceives himself.

By cutting out much of the explicitly stated context surrounding Andy, I began to feel that the film was becoming more of a personal encounter with Andy, rather than a purely informational piece about him. This was immediately stronger than my previous approach, and I began to completely devote myself and the film to being purely observational. By removing the more explicit elements of the film that told the audience exactly who Andy was and what he was doing, the film now allowed the audience to “meet” Andy and make their own observations about him as the film progressed. Furthermore, to increase the importance of Andy’s voice, I did not want the film to feel like it was specifically curated to highlight portions of his life and hide others in order to make a point, and was rather a reflection of what I saw from Andy so that the audience could form their own conclusions after seeing him flourish despite some struggles. This idea was somewhat nebulous and hard, if not impossible, to execute, but in order to get close, I began to pick out clips to edit into the film by what I explicitly remembered from filming, and prioritized these clips slightly above what I found by rigorously scrubbing through my footage. This led to some of my favorite clips, such as Andy pulling on the vines after being told not to. In reality, these events occurred a while apart from each other, but in my head I remembered it as being right after eachother and I felt like representing my own personal interactions and memories with Andy in film was the best compromise. I could not possibly remove my own voice from the film, but by removing the elements of the film that directly told the audience about Andy from other peoples voices and leaning into the personal nature of my, and thus the camera's, interactions with Andy, the audience could experience something close to "meeting" Andy and begin to learn about him in a more personal way.

While my old approach was largely inspired by the work I had done previously, short form informational content like that you would find on social media, this new approach took a lot of influence from longer form observational documentaries. Films like *Midnight Family* (Lorentzian, 2019) introduced me to the idea of telling a story through solely observational footage and on the fly interviews, an approach I attempted to replicate on a smaller scale with this film. Furthermore, I took inspiration from ethnographic films like the *Turkana Trilogy* (MacDougall, 1980) for their commitment to long takes and letting scenes unfold in a natural and uncut way. While this could not be done to the same extent in my film due to its shorter length, shots like Andy talking about saving up for a computer while raking leaves used this approach to allow the audience to see how Andy interacts with the world around him in an unfiltered way. Finally, I took influence from prior films on autism such as *Life Animated* (Williams, 2017) and the film mentioned in my lit review, *Autism in Love* (Fuller, 2015) for their commitment to letting the autistic participants of the film speak and express themselves in an unfiltered way as much as possible. Techniques like including "outtake" moments from interviews, and not always chopping up interview audio for speed/clarity were instrumental in allowing Andy to speak to the audience in his own way and accurately portraying him in the film. All of these films gave me a good sense of direction for my new fully observational approach, and by combining their best elements together, I had a new fleshed out plan for the remainder of the filmmaking process.

This new approach ultimately culminated in the film's lack of any direct dialogue around Andy's autism. During filming, Andy never once said anything about his autism or described himself as autistic in any way. His parents would talk about his autism, as did other figures around him, but this was never a part of his identity that he ever made mention of. Because of this, I began to treat it like any other characteristic the viewers might be able to pick up on without any extra attention drawn to it. It became very important for me to convey that autism is not necessarily the defining characteristic of Andy. I decided to not have autism be anywhere in the title, and scrapped the idea of an opening insert revealing his autism as to not prime the audience to interpret the film in any specific way. By not explicitly calling attention to Andy's autism, I wanted the film to invite the audience to discover this about him gradually, and maybe have doubts throughout the film. In the same way that the audience can learn about his entrepreneurial mindset through listening to him talk about his lawn care business, or his goofy sense of humor through his interactions with the camera, they can also begin to pick up on his autism. None of these things are explicitly stated and can be discovered organically by the audience, leading to there not being any more attention brought to one over the other, a rarity in depictions of autistic children.

This was initially where I planned on leaving this, with the film never making a mention of autism even once, however when I began to run the project by people who were not familiar with it, there were some who did not pick up on the fact that he was autistic at all. Initially I struggled with this, wondering if I needed to change the edit to make it slightly more obvious in some way, but after a while I actually became very happy with this outcome. This film's goal is to serve as a counter to the existing popular depictions of autistic children, and someone being able to watch the whole film and not realize Andy is autistic when I made no effort to hide this fact was actually an amazing opportunity to make a powerful statement. In order to make this statement more effective and self-sufficient within the film alone, I decided to add a quasi-reveal after the film cuts to black. However, I still did not want to directly call Andy autistic, as this felt like I would be undoing some of the work I had done to avoid statements like this earlier in the film. I instead decided to quote from Dr. Barry Prizant, who was heavily referenced in the prior lit review. I also felt like using a quote allowed me to use it as something like a retroactive thesis statement for the film, that along with the reveal of Andy's autism would force the audience to recontextualize what they had just watched, and thus be forced to confront their own preconceptions about childhood autism. Secondly, when a viewer had already figured out that Andy was autistic, a quote would be more effective as it is more than a simple restating of what they had already known.

To me, this film represents not only Andy, but also a full year of my change and growth as a filmmaker. When I started this project, I was too focused on explicitly forming an argument against the existing examples of documentaries on childhood autism, and was not creating anything that allowed the audience to connect with Andy in any meaningful way. However, by spending so much time with Andy and this project, I began to develop a lot more patience and and nuance surrounding non-fiction filmmaking, and became more open to letting the audience encounter Andy in a personal way as I have throughout my life to lead them to my conclusion that Andy is just as human as everyone else. By letting the audience see through my eyes, and experience Andy as a goofy personality, a local entrepreneur, a lover of music, and so on I want this film to portray autism as something that does not fully define him, but is nonetheless a part of his life. This film is in no way a definitive representation of ASD, it is not even a definitive representation of Andy, but rather exists simply as a platform for Andy to be himself. Through this platform I hope that the audience is able to deepen their understanding of childhood autism as simply another characteristic that contributes to Andy’s overall personality and therefore be in a position to be more empathetic towards their fellow humans.

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