

JOSEPH VALENTE  
SUNY University at Buffalo

## THERE'S A GIRL INSIDE

The Disney-Pixar animated blockbuster, *Inside Out*,<sup>1</sup> winner of the Oscar for Best Animated Feature, does not claim and should not be construed to represent or dramatize the condition of autism. We are nowhere given to understand that the subject of its vivid psychological allegory, Riley Anderson, is an autistic or an aspie of any description. To the contrary, the official companion to the film, *Inside Out: The Essential Guide*, makes a point of designating Riley a “regular” eleven year old girl.<sup>2</sup> But as Michael Bérubé observes in his forthcoming *The Secret Life of Stories*, “Disability and ideas about disability can be and have been put to use in fictional narratives in ways that go beyond any specific rendering of any disabled character or characters...narrative deployments of disability do not confine themselves to representation.”<sup>3</sup> *Inside Out* provides a look at how a highly popular vehicle of mainstream culture comprises such a narrative deployment. Despite, and in part because, the “spectrum” has no official place in the movie, the specter of autism inhabits it from start to finish, and to deeply contradictory political effect, at first neurodiverse and finally neuro-ablist.

In the wake of the movie’s record opening weekend, the internet fairly buzzed with the express appreciation of parents who felt that their autistic children not only delighted in the cinematic fantasy of personified emotional dynamism, but learned from the frolicsome adventures of Joy, Sadness, Anger, Disgust and Fear, the vital importance of accessing, abiding, and ventilating one’s affective states, however woeful or oppressive they might be. But this lesson— doubtless a key to the film’s pragmatic agenda—never actually addresses autistic children or autistic sensibilities as such, insisting rather on the normality of its mind world. Why then do these caregivers remain convinced that *Inside Out* speaks to their autistic youngsters in a singularly intimate and instructive manner? While one should never entirely discount a parent’s capacity for projective identification, the basis for this particular belief seems ultimately rooted in the film’s own rhetorical ambiguity. The account of Riley’s response to sudden, unsettling tribulation, not to say trauma, employs a language and a narrative logic resonant of a broadly but recognizably autistic nosology. In this regard, the film serves to illustrate how in the wake of the recent proliferation or so-called epidemic of autism diagnoses, the assumed boundaries distinguishing a neurotypical and a neurodifferent response to juvenile crisis have begun to blur and fracture.

The dis/ability double-register of *Inside Out* begins with that very phrase, inside out. The title vaguely betokens the externalization of a hidden psychic interiority, and the first words of dialogue, spoken by Joy to the audience, amplifies and

---

<sup>1</sup> *Inside Out*. Dir. Pete Docter. Perf. Amy Poehler, Phyllis Smith, Bill Hader, Lewis Black, Mindy Kaling. Disney-Pixar, 2015. DVD.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Bynghall, *Disney-Pixar Inside Out: The Essential Guide* (NY: DK Publishing, 2015), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Bérubé, *The Secret Life of Stories* (NY: NYU Press, 2016), 2.

confirms the signal: "Did you ever look at somebody and wonder what is going on inside their head?" Now of course any sort of person, "regular" or otherwise, can arouse such inquisitiveness. But to judge from the recent annals of popular and cognitive psychology, none have aroused this species of curiosity quite as urgently or persistently as autistic children. The radical introversion imputed to some on the spectrum, the perception that they are locked within themselves (a sense implicit in the term autism), have combined with associated problems in social cognition and communication to frame autism and autistics as the ultimate "enigma." Playing upon this cryptic image of self-enclosure, many an autistic autobiography entices its prospective reader, as Ian Hacking observes, with a rare look inside the autistic mind. Aficionados of this literature might recognize in my title an allusion to Judy and Sean Barron's *There's a Boy in Here*, which in concert with *Why I Jump, Nobody Nowhere, Through the Eyes of Aliens*, and others, have helped to make turning the autistic mind inside out a staple, even the *raison d'être* of the genre.

Now Joy does immediately assure the audience of her own thoroughgoing knowledge of Riley's ebullient personality, as she narrates, over a montage of sunny childhood memories, the function of those other emotional personae crowded into the control room of Riley's brain. But the opening credits have scarcely finished rolling when Riley begins to undergo the prepubescent crisis that will send her into a state of rigid withdrawal, evocative of certain autistic stereotypes, from which she will not emerge until the film's conclusion. To be sure, Riley's meltdown does not approximate a classic autistic regression, occurring as it does at a much later stage of development. Still, the factors occasioning Riley's meltdown are certainly of a type with some of the signature autistic triggers. It is received wisdom that autistics have great difficulty dealing with transitions, and Riley is initially thrown by a personal transition writ extremely large, her family's move from the Great Plains of Minnesota to the urban confines of San Francisco. It is also widely understood that some autistics find insupportable any disruption in schedule, routine or expectation, and Riley's decisive breakdown results from a series of such disruptions: repeated delays in the arrival of her gear; a smaller grimmer grungier house than she could have anticipated; the tainting of her favorite food, pizza, with her lifelong *bête-noire*, broccoli; and, in a nice Bettelheimian touch, the unwonted lack of attention from her now professionally ambitious father.

The film's suggested parallelism between the external catalysts of neurotypical and autistic crisis extends immediately to the internal symptoms as well.<sup>4</sup> As the narrator Joy elucidates, Riley's makeup can be partitioned into several "islands of personality." At the outset of her ordeal, Riley's "core memories," those constructive of her identity, are darkened, and as a result her islands of personality shut down. The three essential islands, those that name forms of life (as opposed to pastimes), are Goofball, Friendship and Family, and their malfunction just happens to correspond with the three chief problem areas

---

<sup>4</sup> This parallelism, to be elaborated through the remainder of the essay, bears a strong functional resemblance to the narrative prosthesis as theorized by disability scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder. See *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan Press, 2000), 6-10.

delineated in Lorna Wing's widely accepted "spectrum" of autistic markers: imitative and imaginative play (Goofball), social interaction and peer relationship (Friendship), communication and emotional intimacy (Family). Having been unsettled by what may be read as the characteristic autistic challenges of transition, routine, predictability and control, Riley comes to display likewise stereotypically autistic behaviors in response: estrangement, uncommunicativeness, stolidity.

To this point, the autistic field of reference in *Inside Out* forms a subtext that resists splitting off from the main story and, as such, resists any easy bifurcation of neurotypicality and its autistic other. That is to say, neurodifference does not emerge as difference from some normative standard, but rather operates across the psychological board, as it were, in defiance of any such standard and in no particular relation to some dominant or idealized "Same." The trip wires, the experience and the symptoms of preteen crisis all bear dual associations that imply what critics like Browning and Odell have called a neurodiverse spectrum, a single common gradient of functioning, along which neurotypical and autistic subjects alike are disposed, albeit differently, and so remain in some fundamental cognitive and emotional kinship with one another.

But as it proceeds to consolidate this alignment, the film goes one step, one fatal step, further. As Joy and Sorrow scour Riley's mind in an attempt to rehabilitate those core memories for future happiness, Riley herself bristles at a dinnertime interrogation by her parents and subsequently, in an emphatic turn, refuses to engage her father in the customary family game of imitating one another impersonating a monkey. Her unwillingness causes or manifests a wholesale collapse of Goofball Island, which goes from being stalled to *defunct*, before disappearing into the depths. In horror, Sorrow exclaims, "We've lost Goofball Island. That means we could lose Friendship, and Hockey and Honesty and Family." She thereby gives voice, at a subtextual level, to a leading theory of autistic etiology: that the inability to take part in imitation and imaginative play lays the primary ground for later, more conspicuous problems in sociability, communication and emotional expressiveness.

Arms full of the imperiled core memories, Joy confesses to uncertainty, for the first time, in her competence to fix the landscape of Riley's "inside" self so that she and Sadness might return to the control room of Riley's mind. No sooner said, than Friendship Island likewise goes defunct and collapses into the deep, a calamity, caused or manifested by Riley's abrupt termination, over Skype, of her closest, most enduring peer relationship, and her ensuing assent to social isolation at her new school. Joy's confession on this occasion is especially telling in that it signals a deterioration in Riley's plight, from behavioral dysfunction to an outright loss of faculty. The trouble with Riley's core memories has passed into an intimation of "core deficits," a term of art whereby the medical model of autism treats the condition not as a varied constellation within the broader continuum of human intellection, but as a more or less stereotyped neurocognitive deficiency. In its extremity, Riley's crisis thus turns decisively away from a subtextual identification with autism as an alternative sensibility to a simulation of autism as a lesser, wanting, or defective mentality. It modulates from being in fellowship with autistic difference, as the neurodiversity

movement affirms it, to being a masquerade of the autistic syndrome, as the medical community pathologizes it. Thus, in an interesting twist, attesting to the film's "ablist unconscious," the particular extension of the parallels between the "regular" text and the neurodiverse subtext actually erodes the kinship originally established between them.

At this crossroads of the narrative, there arises from the same ablist unconscious a haphazard series of stock autistic symptoms disseminated largely by and within the disciplines of cognitive and neuro-psychology, currently the home base for the medical model. Joy and Sadness recruit Riley's infantile imaginary friend, Bing Bong, an emblem of psychic regression and nostalgia, to guide them back to the control room of her mind. He takes them on a shortcut through the room of abstract thought, a faculty for which autistics are supposed to have a narrow, restrictive affinity, as evidenced in the scientific literature by Simon Baron-Cohen's Systematizing Thesis and in the popular mind by the identification of aspies with computer geeks. While traversing this room, the trio is first afflicted with "non-objective fragmentation" and "deconstruction," an experience of the body and world in pieces. This phenomenological state plainly recalls the symptom known as "weak central coherence," a difficulty bringing parts or details together in gestalts, commonly attributed to autistics by cognitive experts such as Uta Frith and Francesca Happé. The trio next suffers two-dimensionality, a "lack [of] depth," consistent with the expert view, reiterated by science historian Ian Hacking, that autistics have "thin" personalities. Finally, the group becomes "non-figurative," an emblematic pun on the cognitive-psych stereotype of these thin autistics as reductively literal minded, without aptitude for metaphor.

Ultimately, Joy and Sadness find their path home obstructed by the imminent collapse of Riley's last remaining "island of personality," Family, a climactic rupture caused or manifested by Riley's decision to quit her new home and by her dissociated manner of enacting her departure. Riley moves to leave her family and return to Minnesota without any threats, any warnings, any complaints, without a word to anyone, entirely closed in upon herself, acting along lines in keeping with the root meaning of autism. Indeed, Riley now deliberately eschews all communication with her parents, repeatedly declining their frantic phone calls as she trudges to the bus station. Depicted in alternating frames, her mother's escalating panic throws into sharp relief Riley's strange sudden imperviousness to the pain and distress of those with whom she has until recently been so freakishly close. Her conduct suggests that the personality deficit symbolized by the crumbling of Family Island is one of primary fellow-feeling or empathy: a deficit ranking among the most prominent and most pernicious stereotypes of autism propagated by the psychological sciences. As Riley takes her seat on the bus, the word from Anger in the control booth summarizes her stereotypically autistic profile, "We can't make Riley feel anything."

The peripeteia of *Inside Out* arrives all but simultaneously with its denouement, an enjambment that helps to conceal or distract from some crucial narrative sleight of hand. The film overtly stakes its bathetic resolution, Riley's spontaneous, under-motivated decision to exit the bus and return to her family,

on the transfer of psychic agency from the pollyannish Joy (who nonetheless approves this ending) to the lugubrious Sadness. This conclusive plot twist signifies the need to accept and integrate sorrow within the rich fabric of life. But underpinning this transfer of agency and the moral it animates is a structural reversal in the *lines* of agency informing the adventure to this point. The disintegration and introversion of Riley's personality, figured in the implosion of the islands and exhibited in her detachment and self-sequestration, is what balks the efforts of Joy and Sadness to repair the damage and restore her to happiness. At the level of the physical action itself, the multiple ruptures in Riley's mental landscape are what bar these Emoticons' passage back to the control room. All of this is to say that the *fate* of Joy and Sadness merely expresses the *state* of Riley, which constrains their movements and sets limits upon their efficacy. Suddenly however, right before the end, Joy and Sadness somehow acquire the power to exceed these bounds, to transcend, that is, the very psychic context that animates them. The efforts of Joy and Sadness not only overcome Riley's acute anomie, but contrive to initiate her recovery. In symbolic terms, their mission not only succeeds despite the destruction and disappearance of its conditions of possibility, those self-defining islands of personality, but also succeeds—magically and without explanation—in reconstructing, enlarging and enhancing them.

This climactic narrative device bears profound implications for the autistic subtext of *Inside Out*, revealing as it does the full, ablist significance of the midcourse "correction" from the kinship spectrum of neurodiversity to the medical paradigm of neuro-disability. Having posed the main, insuperable obstacle to Joy and Sadness' quest to return home and restore Riley's well-being, the decimated islands of personality and the core deficits they leave behind prove utterly, surprisingly irrelevant to the ultimate recuperation of our heroine. By the same token, the autistic counterpoint insinuated throughout Riley's ordeal becomes likewise irrelevant, has no corresponding role or impact in the representation of Riley's psychic renewal. The lost islands or deficits that are vital, if stereotypical, markers of autistic identity turn out to be but passing impediments in Riley's case. Instead of a juvenile crisis showing forth some lived continuity of the neurotypical and autistic estates, as the film promises early on, the specter of autism is reduced in the end to a mere figure, a metaphor, for the disturbance a neurotypical might suffer during such a crisis. Under the duress of massive change, disappointment or disorientation, when managing one's emotions is most urgent and most difficult, a "regular" child might shut down, lose access to those emotions altogether and, the film's metaphor suggests, might be understood to 'go autistic' as people are often said to 'go crazy'.

This metaphorical deployment of autism, however, does more than reassert the opposition of regular and different, typically and atypically developed, that the film initially seemed to override. It casts an autistic type or profile as a version of neurotypicality, a failed version, neurotypicality at its least functional, neurotypicality mired in anomie and at the point of breakdown, neurotypicality before and *only before* it comes back to itself.

Strangely, the perception among those internet parents that *Inside Out* speaks directly to their autistic youngsters consists with, rather than contradicts, this

metaphorical dynamic. After all, the narrative ruse of simply eliding the autistic elements or symptoms that Riley displays as the condition of her reclaiming her emotional integrity might allow the impression, by the logic of fantasy, that the return to emotional integrity itself has the effect of dissolving those autistically inflected elements or symptoms. The film allows, in short, for a kind of self-help fantasy of autistic *bildung*, where the challenges faced by youngsters on the spectrum are amenable to the same approaches, the same responses, as the everyday growing pains of their “regular” peers. In so many senses—narrative, symbolic and pragmatic—*Inside Out* raises the specter of autism only to lay it to rest.

JOSEPH VALENTE is UB Distinguished Professor of English and Disability Studies at SUNY, University at Buffalo. He is the author of *James Joyce and the Problem of Justice: Negotiating Sexual and Colonial Difference* (1995), *Dracula's Crypt: Bram Stoker, Irishness and the Question of Blood* (2002), and most recently *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922* (2011). He is also the editor of *Quare Joyce* (1998), *Disciplinarity at the Fin de Siecle* (with Amanda Anderson, 2002), *Urban Ireland* (2010), and *Yeats and Afterwords* (with Marjorie Howes, 2014). His current project is entitled *Subject to Exception: Complexity, Moral Authority and the Emergence of Autistic Literature*.

©Joseph Valente

Valente, Joseph. “There’s a Girl Inside,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 15 no. 2 (Spring 2016): 116-121.