



BFI EXPANDED

Playing with Reality

+ panel discussion

Co-curated by ANAGRAM and Mind in Camden

With support from BFI Expanded

This evening is a companion event to the UK premiere of *Goliath: Playing with Reality*, a powerful virtual reality documentary made with Jon, a gamer who is diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and spends many years in a psychiatric institution. Jon discovers online gaming as a way to overcome his isolation and as the online character *Goliath*, he finds friendship in a fantasy universe.

His world is at once the experience of numbing medication, the possibility of connection within the game, and the torment of voices.

The piece uses the mechanics of virtual reality to explore the experience of inside and outside realities.

Whether we are telling these stories from an inside or an outside perspective, and why the difference between them matter, is what inspires this programme, Cinema has a long history of misrepresenting those with mental health conditions. An oft-used trope of violence and danger contributes to harmful stereotypes. Studies have shown that one in four so-called 'mentally-ill' characters in films kill someone, and half of them inflict harm on another person. These acts of violence are also more graphic and disturbing than the ones perpetrated by other characters. While these 'mentally-ill' characters are usually relegated to plot devices and background roles, if they are given a speaking part they become ten times more likely to act violently than other speaking characters. It seems hardly coincidental then, that the public's association of mental illness with violence has doubled since 1950. From this prejudice many troubling norms arise - from the belief that a person going through difficulties can be denied individual agency in favour of state care to the isolation that comes from fear and mistrust.

In this context, stories that allow people to portray their experiences in their own words and in their own way, with an emphasis on the sensorial, visceral and experiential, do more than merely offer another perspective. They are part of a movement to go beyond language and labels, challenging the categories that entrench the systems which have been built up around them.

The films that will be included are listed below. In keeping with the efforts to bring the voices of the creators themselves into the room each director has offered a statement for the work.

Inside

Dir. Dolly Sen (UK, 2021), 7 minutes

Inside is the 2nd film in a trilogy I want to make on the experience of psychosis. The first film *Outside* is about the subjective sensory experience of psychosis. The second film *Inside* is looking at the relationship between voices and voice hearer. I've heard voices since I was 14. Life only got easier when I realised I needed to develop a better relationship with them. At first, I tried to run from them. Then I grasped that my voices are the sanest part of

me. The madness is not understanding their pain, which is really my dissociated pain. I also added another layer to the story by adding racism as trauma in the film. None of the actors has experienced psychosis, but they have brought humanity to it. This film is basically about finding your own voice in a wilderness of voices.

Being Jesus

Dir. Mind Wick, (UK, 2019), 12 minutes

Being Jesus is a short documentary depicting the greatest story ever told. Our hero, Luke, candidly recounts his descent into becoming an uninvited messiah. Discovering God's spaceship, reincarnation at an Oasis concert, and a revolution outside a hospital. This short documentary film was made with the intention of telling Luke's story as authentically as possible. To challenge how popular culture holds these stories in the shape of what is most convenient to hear. The term 'Psychosis' carries pantheons of baggage with it, and rarely will you hear someone talk about it so openly as Luke. He exemplifies laughter being a great medicine. This then provokes so many thoughts on how conversations around Mental Health are framed often outside of the way we would talk to each other in real life. The film asks a lot of questions around the formulae of recovery narratives. Serving to remind it's often not an 'A-to-B' journey or a trip from sad to happy.

Interloper

Dir Saskia Olde Wolbers, (The Netherlands, 2003), 6 minutes

Interloper is a fictional story based on the syndrome Pseudoligica Phantastica, where invented experiences are presented as reality. The off-camera narrative is told from the doctor's divided point of view; as a phantom lover and placebo surgeon. He wakes up from a nine-month coma, has a near-death experience and floats above his deluded self through the basement bowels of a hospital. He briefly realises that he has become fiction as he sees his character carry out unqualified medical operations. *Interloper* visuals look like computer-generated imagery but her liquid visuals are entirely analogue, shot underwater, in real-time in miniature sets dipped in paint. This film won Olde Wolbers the prestigious Baloise Prize, Art Basel in 2003 and the Becks Futures Prize, London in 2004. The electronic soundtrack is by Jem Finer.

Crooked Beauty

Dir Ken Paul Rosenthal, (US, 2010), 30 minutes

In Winter 2005, I read an article by Jacks McNamara called, *Anatomy of Flight*. With the Greek myth of Icarus as her guiding metaphor, Jacks' mission to 'navigate the space between brilliance and madness' suggested that one's life could be more integrated and meaningful if managed with compassion and care rather than medicated into submission. Jacks describes how *the world seemed to hit me so much harder and fill me so much fuller than anyone else I knew. Slanted sunlight could make me dizzy with its beauty and witnessing unkindness filled me with physical pain*. Similarly, my own experience of the world had always been one of visual osmosis; light clung to me like liquid to a dry sponge. As a child, I would frequently stare down the sun, holding my gaze until the sensation was unbearable. Whether holding my hand to hot irons, teetering on the precipice of great heights, or poking at my flesh with my Xacto blades, I felt invited to reach for places that were clearly unsafe. Was there something wrong with me, or was I in need of models and mentorship that could help me make the transition from having my sensitivities overwhelm me, to having them offer information I could use?

Rather than demonise and pathologise mental distress, she proposed a 'dangerous gift' model that suggested one's darker inclinations and experiences might also allow us access to more transcendent possibilities with the proper skills, mentorship, and community. I recognised parallels between the disease model of treating 'mental disorders' and the industry model of mainstream filmmaking, both of which elevate power and profit over insight and integration. I imagined a film that approached mental health issues from unique thematic and visual perspectives—one that would restore authenticity to experiences that are marginalised and stigmatised in Western culture.

ADVISORY NOTE

During the panel discussion an archive montage lasting approx 3 minutes will be shown. Please be aware that there are some scenes that viewers may find disturbing. There will be a warning before this is shown to allow anyone who may want to leave the auditorium.

Archive is used from the following films.

Psycho, Dir. Alfred Hitchcock (US, 1960)

The Joker, Dir. Todd Phillips (US, 2019)

The Snake Pit, Dir. Anatole Litvak (US, 1948)

The Visit, Dir. M. Night Shyamalan (US, 2015)

Panelists

Chair: May Abdalla, Co-director *Goliath Playing With Reality* ANAGRAM

Fiona Malpass, *Mind in Camden*

Olatunde Spence, Art Psychotherapist and Black Minds Matter UK Network

References:

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Phelan, J.C., Link, B.G., Stueve, A., Pescosolido, B.A. (2000). Public conceptions of mental illness in 1950 and 1996: What is mental illness and is it to be feared? *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 41 (2), 188-207

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Goliath: Playing with Reality (Dir: Barry Gene Murphy, May Abdalla, UK/France 2021) is at the BFI from 9th - 16th May. Bookings can be made online or in person at the box office.

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