



Natural Disorder Discussion Guide

Director: Christian Sønderby Jepsen
Year: 2015
Time: 98 min

You might know this director from:
Blood Ties (2013)
The Will (2012)

FILM SUMMARY

Jacob Nossell has always been different. As a Korean boy raised in an adoptive family in Denmark, he stood out. Diagnosed with cerebral palsy not long after his arrival on European soil, the odds of him living a “normal life” became even less likely. As he puts it, “My life is and always has been one long battle.”

Not one to accept adversity, Jacob’s mind seeks to reveal the forces at work against him. Time and again he encounters the concept of normality, landing outside its boundaries despite his actions, thoughts, or feelings. With wits firmly about him, he makes it his mission to expose the oft-used but rarely defined buzzword “normal.”

Meeting with scientists, biologists, doctors, philosophers, and creatives, Jacob puts himself on the chopping block. Undergoing MRIs, genetic testing, and a soul-searching conversation with the outside world, he faces the discomfort inherent in life, asking: who defines the averages, and what makes a life worth living?

Director Christian Jepsen follows Jacob all the while, documenting his journey to compile a four-act play at the Royal Danish Theater, complete with technological innovations and five-star theatrics. Jepsen is there when Jacob is informed that his kind—the abnormal disabled type—will most likely be deselected before birth in a relatively short time. He witnesses Jacob’s fear, anger, heartache, and hunger. And when Jacob walks in front of a city bus while rushing to rehearsal, Jepsen quickly meets him at the hospital, aching for the answer at his side.

In *NATURAL DISORDER*, Jacob hunts for profoundly personal answers in an overtly public manner. As he discovers the inherently impossible nature of defining life’s motivations and reveals the imbalance between justice and reality, he leaves us with this. “No matter how fucked up you are, life is still worth living.”

FILM THEMES

Jacob is not content to spend his life as a side-lined disabled man. He instead charges head-on into the issues, collecting data and creating a boundary-bending work of art out of his findings.

NORMAL VS. ABNORMAL

Jacob has never lived a life without disability. Diagnosed with CP as an infant, he has always struggled with physical limitations, walking and talking differently from the majority. His mind, that invisible entity, however, is fully-functioning, enabling him to address society in an intellectually bold capacity. "There's an imbalance between who you are and the body you've been dealt," he explains. This dichotomy frustrates him to a point of action, and he sets out to learn where the standards are set and if the definition of normal can be expanded to include humans in the many ways we come, disabilities, exceptions, differences, and all.

A LIFE WORTH LIVING?

In a letter to his unborn child, Jacob states, "If you want a life without too many obstacles, I wouldn't advise you to be like Daddy." Having battled against the ordinary his entire life, Jacob begins to wonder if he should be living at all. By using logic as a means to an end, to try to reach a point where the answers are clear and a standard is set, he cracks open the façade society presents us with. Subconsciously we accept a general concept of normal, and anyone falling outside of this definition is widely seen as substandard. Perfection can only be achieved if the right pieces are in place, if you walk a certain walk and talk a certain talk. According to this unspoken definition, the disabled live questionably unworthy lives.

DESELECTION

Besides longing to locate the answer to the dilemma of whether his life is worth living, Jacob wants to become a father, to perpetuate life and be granted the opportunity to continue. This brazenly opposes the people telling him that through scientific advancements, humanity is working towards eradicating the disabled. By intervening in human evolution, we are making it possible to pick and choose between what makes a life worth living and not, placing ourselves in a process previously beyond our control. Would the world be better without disability? As Jacob puts it, "You'll be missing out on someone like me, someone difficult to handle, forcing you to be tolerant." By choosing to deselect certain people, we arguably erase the magic inherent in the unpredictable.

TOO FAR?

Struck down by a city bus, Jacob's already weakened immune system is further challenged. The stress mounts over completing his play in time, and he finds himself in the operating room having his colon removed. In a way, Jacob works so hard to not only overcome but to outdo the world's perceptions of his abnormality that he attempts to become superhuman. Fighting the normal fight with his non-average physicality, his body lags behind his intellect's demands to continue the quest for meaning. The human psyche longs for belonging and acceptance, and Jacob's journey shows us how far the spirit is willing to go to become one with the rest.

"Parts of the population will not exist in 100 years simply because we deselect them."

Thomas Mailund

"What's actually wrong with me? Why is it that I can't be normal?"

Jacob Nossell

"(Jacob) You've overstepped the boundary we've set, the picture we've drawn of a reasonable and morally good world."

Anders Fogh Jensen

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What were your initial impressions of the film? What ideas does the film's title, *NATURAL DISORDER*, conjure up? Is it a suitable title?
2. Define "normal" in a single sentence. How were you taught the concept of normal? Is normality a universal concept that can be applied to one and all?
3. Discuss your thoughts on deselection, as it is mentioned in the film. Would you "deselect" a child before birth if you found out it had a disability or defect? Why or why not?
4. What informs your identity? How do your abilities, and inabilities, feed into your concept of yourself and others?
5. In what ways does the fact that Jacob was adopted play into his life story? If he hadn't been adopted and was raised within a community of Korean children with CP, do you think he would be asking the same questions?
6. Did you think that director Jepsen overstepped the line when he insisted on filming Jacob right up until the end? In what ways was the process of documenting Jacob's playwriting research and creation process helpful, and in what ways was it harmful?
7. Discuss the relationship between Jacob and his double, Kristoffer Fabricius, cast for the play. Should a more physically approximate person have been cast? In which ways did Kristoffer's appearance (as compared to Jacob) spark notions of normal vs. abnormal?
8. Do you have any personal experience of disability? How often do you interact with people with disabilities? Discuss any prejudices or preconceptions you have of disability in general, and cerebral palsy in particular.
9. Towards the end of the film, Jacob says, "I'm so afraid of becoming one of the disabled people I've fought not to be my whole life." What does he mean by this? Do you feel he is fighting beyond his "natural" capacities, trying to achieve the impossible and thereby harming himself in the process?
10. Do you feel normal? Do you feel you merit the right to live a full and complete life? If yes, what grants you this right? If not, why not?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- NATURAL DISORDER premiered on its home turf in Denmark on 7 October 2015, and met with 5-star reviews across the board. It went on to have its global premiere at IDFA in Amsterdam the following month, where it was nominated for the Audience Award.
- Jacob Yook Egeskov Nossell studied journalism and social sciences at Roskilde University in Denmark. He works as a comedian, guest speaker, and journalist. His filmic debut was in 2009's *Kim Jong-Il's Comedy Club*, a documentary where he traveled to North Korea with another comedian on the pretext of performing in a theater troupe. The film sets out to uncover North Korea's alleged policy of abusing and killing disabled individuals.
- The U.N. defines disability as a "restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being," while Merriam-Webster defines it as "the condition of being unable to do things in the normal way." Normal is derived from the Latin "normalis," meaning a right angle, and became used to denote conforming to a set of standards.
- The play Jacob staged at the Royal Danish Theater was entitled *Human Phase-Out*.
- Jacob underwent ostomy surgery, which involved cutting an opening in his abdominal wall enabling waste to pass into a small bag.
- The Royal Danish Theatre was built in 1748, first as the king's theater but later expanded to serve the public, with an original capacity of 800. The Old Stage, where Jacob performed his play, was inaugurated in 1874 and offers a capacity of 1,600. Danish author Hans Christian Andersen began his career at this very theatre.
- Cerebral palsy (CP) is the most common movement disorder in early childhood, appearing in around 2 out of every 1,000 live births. Examples of it date back to the 5th century B.C.E. The name cerebral palsy is from the German for "cerebral child-paralysis." Jacob has the most common type of CP—spastic cerebral palsy—which involves muscle tightness. There is no cure for CP, although certain types of physical therapies and medications help.
- International adoption became prevalent in South Korea at the time of the Korean War, when most of the adopted children were fathered by American soldiers. As Korean society places great importance on bloodlines and purity of race, these children were not easily accepted on home soil. Over 200,000 children have been adopted abroad since this war, although only 1% of them today are American-Asian.
- Pilou Asbaek, who provides the voiceover in Jacob's play, acts in *Game of Thrones*.
- Magnetic resonance imaging, commonly known as an MRI, images the processes of the body.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** NATURAL DISORDER with others, and challenge communal views around normality. In the words of Jacob himself, "Don't go and see the film expecting to get to know more about a Korean spastic but to know more about your own abnormality. You don't have to discuss me so much. Discuss yourselves!"
2. **Learn** more about cerebral palsy and what this disability entails. "[The Cerebral Palsy Guide](#)" offers plenty of information, while their "[Just Say Hi](#)" campaign breaks the boundaries between normal and abnormal.
3. **Understand** people as individuals, encouraging acceptance and inclusion and being mindful of the language you use. [Cerebralpalsy.org](#) offers an informative article on disability etiquette.
4. **Watch** *Kim Jong-Il's Comedy Club*, winner of the 2009 Sundance Grand Jury Prize, in which Jacob travels to North Korea to challenge the concepts of disability in a country that allegedly kills off disabled infants.

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Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.