

**Creative Works****“The Co-Op” : Director’s Statement**

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**Abstract**

Cameron Mitchell (CSM Productions) is a film director, cinematographer, and son of Disability Studies professors David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder. In this article, Cameron discusses the making of his short film “The Co-Op” and how it deals with themes of disability in film portrayal, independence, and interdependence as well as it’s autobiographical content.

*Keywords:* film, disability, filmmaking

### “The Co-Op”

“A robber’s plan goes horribly awry when he realizes that the store he has targeted is full of disabled people.”

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Link to Film: “The Co-Op”

<https://youtu.be/96HYQ-wV46g>

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It’s been a long path to the current state of affairs for Cameron and his directorial short film debut “The Co-Op.” What initially started as an entry in the 2017 Easterseals Disability Film Challenge 72-hour film festival has since gone on to feature in more than 20 film festivals all over the world including Over The Rhine, Osaka Bright, Holly Shorts, Festival Inclus Barcelona, and Slamdance 2021, to name a few. Beneath the wry wit and satire of the film, the director hopes that the festival platform can provide viewers with an entertaining and brief exposure to the vastly untapped world of real disabilities portrayed on screen: the film’s cast is made up almost entirely of disabled people.

Hollywood has long ventriloquized disability for its means throughout its history; an actual disabled person rarely is offered the roles that are meant to portray them in an already scarce market where said roles are determined by screenwriters, directors, and producers who are themselves able-bodied or don’t have real lived experience with disability. As the robber comments “you folks should seriously consider adding some stairs...it is certainly attracting

some undesirable clientele,” “The Co-Op” looks to point at and dismantle these attitudes in the cinematic universe and in the world around us.

“The Co-Op” is meant to mess with your notion of what “cinema” is and play with all the poignant examples in your mind that might pop up in the Western dialogue that has primarily excluded disability as an outlier rather than included it. I wanted to take this very familiar movie trope that we know from cinema history and flip it on its head. Why don’t we ever see any disabled people in these scenes? Is it because action films are inherently linked to the energy/entropy of an able-bodied person, perhaps? Do we not believe a disabled person could participate in a robbery as a perpetrator or bystander?

The concept for “The Co-Op” came about as a thought experiment. I wanted my first narrative film to be about disability and have a majority of the cast that was actually disabled. I cast all of the main disabled characters before their parts were even written and then brainstormed a way that they would all be in the same place at the same time. An accessible grocery store. Since many of the spaces we frequent even today hinge on inaccessible or barely pass as accessible, it was important that the scene take place in a plausible reality: we really have yet to fully integrate access in real life and on set so I think it is only fair that a situation with primarily disabled people could occur in an accessible community store such as a co-op. Finally, in writing the dialogue, I drew heavily from my history of experience with disability with my family. The scene where the robber picks my father out of the chair is a scene I have relived personally in my life thousands of times as I have literally had to pick my father up and hoist him into inaccessible trains, busses, buildings, and the like (the Parthenon is among other notable highlights belong in this list). So, primarily the experience of interdependence (a family of varying capabilities relying on each other to survive in the day to day world) as well as my own experience as a person with an invisible disability (sleep

apnea) and someone who has experienced the big d word “Diagnosis” serve as the primary background that informs this short.

Jasmine is played by my sister, Emma Mitchell who has cerebral palsy and is blind. My father, David Mitchell, plays David—in real life he is a professor of disability studies as well as an individual with Spinal Motor Atrophy, a form of muscular dystrophy. Ricky is played by my friend James Curran, who also has a type of SMA. And Barb is played by my friend Brittany Blythe, who is an amputee. I cast and wrote all of these roles with the firm belief in mind that “...people can give Oscar-winning performances of themselves if you simply do not tell them to act” (Gareth Edwards said some iteration of this in an interview in *American Cinematographer* regarding his film *Monsters*). “The Co-Op” is essentially a raw test of this idea but applied to disabled people...and the desire to watch them kick ass!

It’s time we let real authentic disabled people into that world and prove that they are capable of being in every film, from a blockbuster to an indie, in every genre and concept—not just poorly type cast roles where they play outsider villains or their bodies are used as some form of narrative prosthesis (a term coined by my folks David Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder) (See Mitchell & Snyder, 2001). “The Co-Op” is a litmus test for this in the case of the genre film. It purposefully blurs the line between dark comedy, sci-fi, horror, and drama to demonstrate how all of these genres can become so much further enriched when we enter the world of disability openly and knowingly rather than just letting it be a byproduct of the idea or the film itself.

## References

Mitchell, D. T., & Snyder, S. L. (2001). *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. University of Michigan Press.



Review: “The Co-Op”: Director’s Statement

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