

# ***AN ANALYSIS OF AUTISM THROUGH MEDIA REPRESENTATION***

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## **EDITOR'S NOTE:**

The *Next Generation* series is designed to give student voices an opportunity to contribute to the ongoing conversation within the field of General Semantics and in the pages of *ETC*. High-school students, college undergraduates, and students in graduate programs are encouraged to submit their work.

**M**edia representation practically never accurately portrays social groups as they actually are in reality. These social groups can be specific to certain races, ethnicities, genders, sexualities, occupations, or even medical issues; although some groups are easier and simpler to represent more truthfully, many prove difficult to depict without worrying about political correctness and overall accuracy. Autism, although technically a psychiatric diagnosis, forms a community of diverse people with a myriad of distinct lives and characteristics. Autistic people are a unique social group; there are some who are diagnosed that lead nearly typical lives with few challenges and others who are severely impacted and experience vast challenges. With so many different types of autism diagnoses and huge numbers of people living with autism, it would be impossible to perfectly depict each aspect of autism through television and film characters. Although not every autism characteristic or every autistic person's story can be shown through media representation, it is media's responsibility to at least attempt to make their portrayals as accurate as possible. Television and film are limited in what

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they choose to illustrate and highlight about autism in their programs; it is not their fault that autism has such a wide range of characteristics and types that can be difficult to fully cover, but they still exhibit too few aspects of autism to be considered representative. In contemporary media, there are four different categories of autistic characters presented: the magical/savant, the “different”/quirky individual, the character with undiagnosed/unlabeled behaviors, and the autistic person whose portrayal is more realistic or even based on a real-life person.

### **Autism Criteria and Characteristics**

Before media representation of autism can be analyzed, it is important to understand what exactly autism is. Autism was discovered by Leo Kanner in 1943; it is now labeled “as a spectrum disorder, meaning that there is a continuum” of severity, as well as a “syndrome, meaning that it encompasses a wide variety of traits” (Strate 2006, p. 112). According to the University of Washington’s Web site, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is broken down in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th Edition (DSM-5) into four criteria. The first criterion is “persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across contexts, not accounted for by general developmental delays, and manifest by 3 of 3 symptoms” (Carpenter 2013, p. 1). The first symptom is “deficits in social-emotional reciprocity; ranging from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back and forth conversation through reduced sharing of interests, emotions, and affect and response to total lack of initiation in social interactions” (Carpenter 2013, p. 1). Examples of this first symptom include not sharing, literally or figuratively, not “show[ing] pleasure in social interactions, failure to offer comfort to others, indifference/aversion to physical contact and affection” (Carpenter 2013, p. 2). The second symptom is “deficits in nonverbal behaviors used for social interaction,” which can include impairments with eye contact and/or understanding socially correct body postures—such as looking at the speaker—as well as abnormal volume and patterns of speech and/or “impairment in the use of facial expressions” (Carpenter 2013, p. 2). The third symptom that the autistic person must exhibit for the first criterion of diagnosis is “deficits in developing and maintaining relationships, appropriate to developmental level (beyond those with caregivers)” (Carpenter 2013, p. 2). This can include “inability to take another’s perspective,” difficulty “notic[ing] another person’s lack of interest,” difficulty engaging in “imaginative play,” difficulty making friends, and/or lack of interest in others (Carpenter 2013, pp. 2,3). These first three symptoms and first criterion are shared by all people with an ASD diagnosis.

The disorder is foremost characterized by the social deficits exhibited by the person and the difficulties they have because of these. These issues alone, though, are not enough to warrant an ASD diagnosis, unless accompanied by three other criteria.

The second criterion in the DSM-5 is “restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities as manifested by at least 2 of 4 symptoms” (Carpenter 2013, p. 3). The first symptom is “stereotyped or repetitive speech, motor movements, or use of objects” (Carpenter 2013, p. 3). Examples of these include mixing up “you” and “I” or using third person when referring to oneself, “repetitive hand movements” such as clapping or putting one’s hands over one’s ears, repetitively opening and closing doors, or turning lights on and off (Carpenter 2013, pp. 3,4). The second symptom is “excessive adherence to routines, ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior, or excessive resistance to change” (Carpenter 2013, p. 4). This symptom’s characteristics are mostly self-explanatory, except for “ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior,” which can include compulsive behavior or repetitive questioning about a particular topic (Carpenter 2013, p. 4). The third symptom is “highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus” (Carpenter 2013, p. 4). This can mean having a narrow range of interests and/or unusual fears, such as being “afraid of people wearing earrings,” or “having to carry around or hold specific or unusual objects” (Carpenter 2013, p. 5). The fourth possible symptom is “hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of environment” (Carpenter 2013, p. 5). Examples of this symptom can include “high tolerance for pain,” “attraction/aversion to texture,” distress due to certain sounds, and/or “licking or sniffing objects” (Carpenter 2013, p. 5). As mentioned, for the second criteria, only two of four symptoms are necessary for an autism diagnosis. These symptoms, however, are often assumed to be characteristic of all autistic people; some people do exhibit all four symptoms, but the stereotype of every autistic person engaging in all of these behaviors needs to be debunked.

The third criterion of ASD is that “symptoms must be present in early childhood (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities)” (Carpenter 2013, p. 5). In the DSM-5, early childhood means “approximately age 8 and younger,” though this can be flexible (Carpenter 2013, p. 5). As the criterion states, to be diagnosed with ASD, an individual must exhibit symptoms from the first two criteria as young children, even if these symptoms do not impair their social interactions until a later age. Related is the fourth and final criterion, which is that “symptoms together limit and impair everyday functioning” (Carpenter 2013, p. 5). These limits/impairments

are rated on a three level severity scale. Level 1 is “requiring support,” meaning that, “without supports in place,” the autistic person’s “deficits in social communication cause noticeable impairments” (Carpenter 2013, p. 6). Level 2 is “requiring substantial support,” whose characteristics include “marked deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication skills” with “social impairments apparent even with supports in place” (Carpenter 2013, p. 6). Level 3 is “requiring very substantial support” due to “severe deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication skills [which] cause severe impairments in functioning” (Carpenter 2013, p. 6). It is problematic that this system does not seem to have concretely fixed boundaries between levels, but it is important to at least try and definitively differentiate between levels of severity of autism, as it is a spectrum with many different diagnoses within one umbrella diagnosis.

### **Autism in Media**

As the DSM-5 criteria shows, ASD can manifest in countless ways, through distinct characteristics and behaviors; however, media tends to consolidate autistic characters into just four specific and mostly unrealistic categories, as aforementioned—magical/savant, “different”/quirky, undiagnosed/unlabeled, and realistic portrayals. The magical/savant category can be seen in the Fox television show *Touch* (2012) and Barry Levinson’s film *Rain Man* (1988). The “different”/quirky character is highlighted in Peter Naess’ *Mozart and the Whale* (2005). The undiagnosed person with unlabeled, autistic characteristics is depicted in Menno Meyes’ *Martian Child* (2007). Finally, more realistic representations are shown in Max Mayer’s *Adam* (2009) and Mick Jackson’s HBO biopic *Temple Grandin* (2010). These films all have one major characteristic in common: they each represent their autistic characters as super/high-functioning and verbal, which simply is not the norm in the autism community. In fact, in 2006, only 20% of autistic people were reported to be at a “relatively typical level of intelligence,” or “referred to as high functioning”; this statistic does not include people with Asperger Syndrome, but, even so, the number of high-functioning autistic people is much lower than could be assumed based on media representation (Strate 2006, p. 112). Mainstream films and television fail to illustrate that autism is a spectrum disorder; they show little range in characters’ behaviors, mannerisms, and intellectual levels. Contemporary documentaries, such as Henry Corra’s *George* (2000) and Taylor Cross and Keri Bowers’ *Normal People Scare Me*, better represent the realities of autism, as they are filming real-life people, but they are not without bias or, at least, limitations. It is impossible for one piece of media to include portrayals of

every single manifestation of ASD; however, it is not impossible to endeavor to show as many different types of characters as possible, especially in a realistic manner.

### *Magical/Savant*

The first of the unrealistic/unlikely portrayal categories is the magical/savant. The magical character is presented as almost other-worldly, as many autistic characters often are. This type of character has supernatural abilities, due to his/her diagnosis, that elevate the autistic person from having a disorder that affects them negatively, to having a disorder that actually makes them special and more interesting than the average person. This characteristic is similar to the savant, meaning a person with less-than-average intelligence levels that somehow has certain abilities beyond what is normal for even a typical, average-intelligent person. Although being a savant is a real, possible aspect of having autism, it is not the norm.

Although the autistic character in *Touch* certainly displays savant characteristics, he also has an element of the magical. The pilot episode begins with a monologue spoken over a montage of numbers being written, the galaxy, assorted people around the world, and, finally, a little boy writing in a notebook. Though it is clear by the voice that the person speaking is a young boy, when we see him, he is sitting silently. He informs the audience about his life through the voiceover—"I was born 4,161 days ago on October 26, 2000. I've been alive for 11 years, 4 months, 21 days, and 14 hours, and in all that time, I've never said a single word" (Lawrence, *Touch*). Right away, the viewers know that this child, Jake, is nonverbal but has enough intellectual capabilities to have an inner voice with sophisticated language and knowledge. In the following scene, the audience is introduced to Jake's father, Martin, an airport worker. He collects a box of old phones from lost and found, because Jake likes to take them apart, but one of them rings. Martin answers and speaks to a man who says he desperately needs this phone back; Martin wants to help but gets distracted when his own phone rings and loses the phone on the conveyor belt. This storyline will come back to demonstrate Jake's magical abilities. Martin is informed over the phone by Jake's school that he has managed to escape the school for the third time in 3 weeks to climb up a cell tower, which he has done at exactly 3:18 p.m. each time—this number occurs frequently throughout the episode. When Martin arrives at the cell tower, there are fire trucks and police already there; he insists that they cannot touch Jake. Throughout the episode, Jake exhibits the first criterion of ASD in the DSM-5: deficits in social-emotional

reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, and in developing and maintaining relationships. More specifically, Jake has an extreme aversion to physical contact, does not make eye contact even with his father, and shows no interest in other people. When a woman from Child and Family Services comes to evaluate Martin's household and mentions Jake's autism diagnosis, Martin states that he's "never bought that label anyway," though the symptoms are obviously apparent (*Touch*). He believes that Jake is seeking human connection through his numbers, and that this behavior somehow overrules his diagnosis. The stereotype of all autistic people having an inability for human connection is prevalent in this program, though it cannot be discounted that ASD does make it arduous to form relationships with other people. During the pilot, the storylines of Jake and his father, a former firefighter, a mourning father in Tokyo, a teenager in Baghdad, and an aspiring singer in Dublin are all shown to be intertwined through Jake's knowledge of numbers and technology. While doing research on "mutism and technology," Martin finds a Web site for the Teller Institute, of course located at a 318 address. Martin goes to the address and meets a man there who tells him that Jake is not only enormously talented in math—a savant skill for an autistic child—but he is also extraordinarily connected to nature and the universe, as demonstrated by his mathematical abilities. According to this man, Jake can see things that others cannot. Martin is intrigued by this idea and believes this man is correct. He starts following the nonverbal orders that Jake has lain out for him, and, in the process, a group of schoolchildren are saved from a burning bus number 318. Martin is certain that Jake has abilities beyond what is normal for an average child and beyond what is normal for any human being. *Touch* should be credited for depicting one of the more severe representations of ASD in media; however, its autistic character not only demonstrates savant skills, which are highly uncommon, but also goes so far as to have magical abilities, due to his autism and unique perspective on life.

One of the most famous and well-known autistic characters is Dustin Hoffman's Raymond in *Rain Man*. Although Raymond is the film's titular character, his brother Charlie, played by Tom Cruise, is the protagonist. The plot follows Charlie as he finds out about his estranged father's death and tries to discover who is receiving the bulk of his father's estate. When Charlie discerns that his father's money is being controlled by the director of an institute for adults with special needs, he also learns that he has an older brother with severe autism—a resident of the institute—that he did not know about. Charlie takes Raymond to a doctor to be evaluated. The conversation that ensues between the doctor and Charlie is unnecessarily

derogatory on Charlie's part and, in retrospect, partially politically incorrect on the part of the doctor, though it was appropriate in 1988. Charlie questions the doctor, "So is he crazy? Is he retarded?" and the doctor replies that Raymond is an "idiot savant" or "autistic savant" (Levinson, *Rain Man*). The doctor explains that Raymond is "actually high-functioning," but that his autism causes him to have "a problem communicating and learning" (*Rain Man*). Like many autistic people, Raymond avoids eye contact, dislikes change, and engages in repetitive behavior—all symptoms listed in the DSM-5. He also takes things very literally; for example, in one scene, Raymond is halfway across the street when the "Don't Walk" sign comes on and he stops walking in the middle of a crosswalk. Although Raymond has severe social and cognitive impairments, he exhibits savant characteristics of having a photographic memory and being extremely good with numbers. Throughout the film, Charlie uses Raymond for his unique abilities, most notably in a Las Vegas casino to count cards, and wants to gain custody of him for the sake of being able to control his father's money. At the end, though Charlie does not win custody of his brother, he does try to explain to the courts that he does have a real connection with Raymond and truly cares for him; they try to tell him that Raymond is "not capable of having a relationship" (*Rain Man*). As in *Touch*, difficulty forming relationships is a real symptom of ASD for many people, but there is also the possibility of human connection. It is apparent that Raymond displays numerous characteristics of autism and certainly fits the criteria for ASD, still today, but the added savant abilities just are not realistic or an accurate portrayal of autism overall.

### *"Different"/Quirky*

The second character type within media representation of autism is the "different"/quirky person. Although these characters are labeled as autistic, they are made out to be abnormal in behavior due to choice or personality, rather than due to their medical diagnosis. This type of character displays symptoms of ASD but is not necessarily excluded from society because of them, as many autistic people are in reality. They fit in better with neurotypical people, because they embrace their "different" traits and behaviors as inherent parts of themselves, instead of considering them symptoms of a disorder. This is not to say that autistic people, in general, do not accept their so-called differences as natural parts of their personalities and temperaments, but there is something unique about the quirky character that sets them apart from a plain, realistic portrayal of a person with ASD.

Both protagonists, Isabelle and Donald, in *Mozart and the Whale* have Asperger Syndrome, a high-functioning form of ASD with vast social impairments, but no cognitive impairments. The two meet at a support group for people with autism, formed and run by Donald, and soon fall in love. According to text given a few minutes into the movie, *Mozart and the Whale* is a “fictional story inspired by true events,” though the details of said true events are unknown. In the film’s opening, the viewer learns that Donald is a taxi driver, though he explains to the passengers that he has only been working for the cab company “for about 7 days, 9 hours, and 37 minutes”; it is relevant to note that his passengers not only are not paying attention to him, but also do not speak English (Naess, *Mozart and the Whale*). Donald also informs his passengers that he is a visual thinker and pictures the other taxi drivers’ movements in the city as he listens to their locations over the radio. During this explanation, he gets distracted and rear ends a parked car. He walks away from the scene with his pet bird on his shoulder and leaves his assorted food wrappers in the cab; he has his quirky characteristics, but Isabelle really highlights hers. Donald exhibits numerous symptoms of autism, including inability to maintain eye contact, engaging in some repetitive movements, and aversion to change, but most notably, he does not notice other people’s lack of interest in what he is saying, especially when he is listing numerical facts. Isabelle, on the other hand, seems more like a generally eccentric person—she even refers to herself as “weird,” though she dislikes the label “strange” (*Mozart and the Whale*). During the first meeting that Isabelle attends for Donald’s group, Isabelle informs the other women there that she always interprets what people say literally, and she is also extremely open about her troubled past, whereas most neurotypical people would not be. At one point during the first meeting, Isabelle gets angry and calls the other women “ding-y”; Donald responds by saying, “some of us are higher-functioning than others, but that’s no reason to call anyone ding-y” (*Mozart and the Whale*). This comment speaks not only to Isabelle but also to the audience. It is common for neurotypical people to make derogatory or ignorant statements about things they do not understand, and Donald’s character makes it clear that this behavior is not appropriate or acceptable for anyone. Although there is tension between these two protagonists at first, they shortly develop a relationship with each other that turns romantic. They discuss their similarities that come from both having Asperger’s, such as taking things literally, not understanding social cues in conversation, and having unusual interests. Donald expresses other typical Asperger’s symptoms, but Isabelle does not.

She does not have any impairment with eye contact or with expressing her emotions. Her only real issues, according to herself, are not knowing what to say, having an aversion to the sound of metal clanking together, and taking everything literally. In terms of her atypical behaviors, Isabelle just generally likes to do/wear/be weird things; in one scene, she rides around the city on her bike, wearing a rabbit on her chest in a baby backpack, as well as sunglasses and a beanie hat in the likeness of a frog's head. She has affection for all sorts of pets, including her rabbit, birds, and reptiles. She makes funny comments and laughs rather enthusiastically in public. Even if she were neurotypical, Isabelle would not be considered to display so-called normal behaviors; she is a loud, obnoxious, free-spirit type, outside of her diagnosis. *Mozart and the Whale* excels in showing a wide range of characteristics in its autistic protagonists. Isabelle is a quirky character, as well as a bit of a savant—she can paint and compose music at the same time, using one hand for each. Donald is more of a realistic portrayal of Asperger's syndrome; however, their romantic interest in each other, as well as their relationship, is uncommon for people with Asperger's or any ASD diagnosis. Though this film could not be considered to be an overall realistic representation of autism, it should be commended for at least not pigeonholing its characters into one, stereotypical persona.

### *Undiagnosed/Unlabeled*

Although there are autistic characters portrayed in mainstream media, there are also characters who display symptoms of autism without having a diagnosis or label. Just as it sounds, undiagnosed/unlabeled characters exhibit behaviors that fit the criteria from the DSM-5 for ASD. However, unlike their diagnosed counterparts, their autistic behaviors either go completely unmentioned or can be highlighted, just not labeled.

In *Martian Child*, John Cusack's character, David, is a writer and widower who is considering adopting a child. David is contacted by a woman named Sophie, who runs a group home, to see if he would be interested in a child named Dennis. Dennis turns out to be a unique child; the first time the viewer sees him, he is sitting in the front yard, inside a cardboard box with only the slit to look out of. While David is waiting in the car in front of the group home, a little girl comes up to talk to him and explains that Dennis spends all of his time in the cardboard box, that he does not have any friends, and that "he's a weirdo" (Meyes, *Martian Child*). Right away, the audience knows that Dennis is not accepted by the other children and that he displays abnormal behaviors. David is hesitant at

first to have a home trial with any child at all, much less one that has special behaviors and perhaps special needs from a parent. His sister tries to deter him from the home trial, stating that a child spending all day in a cardboard box is a “red flag,” but David decides to give it a try anyway (*Martian Child*). Dennis, though he is a friendly and sweet child, has difficulty bonding with people and interacting in socially expected ways. The adoption board describes him as follows: “uncommunicative, tendency to steal things, inability to form personal attachments or distinguish between right and wrong, and he thinks ... he thinks he’s from outer space” (*Martian Child*). This last statement is akin to how Temple Grandin, an autistic innovator and accomplished speaker, describes herself, “‘Much of the time’ she said, ‘I feel like an anthropologist on Mars’” (Strate 2006, p. 119, quoted from Sack, p. 259). Clearly, it is noticeable that Dennis’s behavior is not typical, and, though his behaviors fit some of the criteria for ASD, he is not labeled as even possibly being autistic. In addition to his social impairments, Dennis also displays the autistic symptoms of having an “attachment to unusual inanimate object” and “interests that are abnormal in intensity”; he insists on wearing a “weight belt” at all times to not fly away from Earth’s gravity, and he is obsessed with Mars and outer space, as well as taking photographs (Carpenter 2013, p. 5). He also engages in repetitive behavior, for example, insisting on only eating Lucky Charms cereal. He does not have an aversion to physical contact, though it is difficult for him to understand in what social contexts this is necessary or appropriate. He has a difficulty understanding emotions of others, but he does try to comfort others—not comforting others would be a symptom of ASD (Carpenter 2013, p. 2). Although it is fairly easy for Dennis to form an emotional bond with David, he has difficulty making friends at school and does not really show any interest in the other children. All of these symptoms seem to match up with the criteria outlined in the DSM-5. He has “deficits in social communication and social interactions,” engages in “restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities,” these symptoms have been displayed at an early age, and they do impair his everyday functioning, though at a low level of severity (Carpenter 2013, pp. 2–6). Certainly, in reality, a child like Dennis would be diagnosed somewhere on the autism spectrum, but, in the media representation, he is almost more of a quirky character, if anything, though he clearly exhibits numerous symptoms of autism.

### *Realistic*

The final category of autistic characters in media representation is realistic portrayal. These depictions most closely match the criteria laid out for ASD

in the DSM-5. The characters are neither over-the-top in their behaviors nor subdued in the display of their symptoms. They are also not portrayed in an overtly positive or negative light. The manifestations of their symptoms are not unrealistic; they align with known autism symptoms, but they do not add extra characteristics to make the personas more unique or atypical than is normal. Although there are certainly too few realistic representations of autism in media, at least there are some more accurate portrayals to be seen by the neurotypical and autistic viewers.

*Adam* follows the life of an adult male with Asperger syndrome, coping with his life after the death of his father who was also his housemate. At the beginning of the film, the audience sees Adam crosscut between two different settings that go back and forth within one scene; he stands in the cemetery at his father's funeral, with a blank expression on his face, and does chores at home. In his apartment, the contents of his freezer are shown—multiple boxes of the same couple of foods. He sits alone at his kitchen table, eating and using his computer. At work, a coworker quite obviously flirts with him, but he does not notice. Back at home, Adam goes down to the laundry room where he meets and has an awkward encounter with a beautiful woman, his new neighbor Beth. He is wearing nothing but pants and a suit jacket, which she comments on to try and make small talk about needing to do laundry, but he seems distressed and quickly leaves the room without saying goodbye. Another day, Adam is sitting on the porch steps of his apartment building, when Beth comes by with a cart full of groceries. Beth says hello to Adam, and, without greeting her back, he begins to talk about the research he found online about Saturn. She seems interested, though a bit perplexed, even more so when he does not offer to help her with carrying her grocery cart up the stairs. It is clear from these interactions that Adam has a difficult time interacting with others and understanding social cues. He seemed to be close with his father, but now he is mostly alone. As Beth attempts to form a friendship with Adam, more awkward conversations ensue. After a particularly uncomfortable exchange, Adam explains to Beth that he has Asperger's and that he often does not "know what people are thinking," due to his mind-blindness; he tells her that his "brain works differently from NTs ... neurotypicals" (Mayer, *Adam*). He is not shy to tell people his diagnosis; for him, it makes sense to explain why he acts differently, sometimes, rather than be embarrassed by his behavior and clueless about the behaviors of others. Adam and Beth soon become romantically involved. He does make some eye contact with her, though he often looks away when speaking to people, but he does not engage in typical romantic behaviors, because he does not always

understand social interactions. These social deficits, though, do not exclude him from being able to form social connections; they just make it more difficult to create “normal” bonds. Beth has a hard time coping with Adam’s abnormalities, though she does care for him and acknowledge that he is just as capable of being loving and kind as any neurotypical person is, and they do not stay together in the end. *Adam* is a realistic portrayal of an adult with Asperger’s, because it does not shy away from the symptoms of ASD, nor does it make the character into a magical being with superhuman skills. It only depicts Asperger’s symptoms as they are in reality. Although the romantic relationship may not be typical for people with Asperger syndrome, the challenges that would come with forming a romantic or any type of close bond with another person are shown in a realistic way.

The last mainstream film analyzed was *Temple Grandin*, a biopic about the woman who invented the “hug box,” or the squeeze box, as she refers to it in the film, and revolutionized the treatment of cattle in slaughterhouses. The movie mostly documents Temple’s life as a young adult, but shows scenes of her childhood in various flashbacks. From the beginning, the audience is informed that Temple sees in pictures, visually thinking about what is said to her and sometimes literally interpreting certain comments. For example, in one scene, her high school teacher is talking to her about possible college majors and mentions “animal husbandry,” which just refers to taking care of animals, but Temple visualizes a cow in a veil marrying a man; she knows that this is humorous and incorrect, but she cannot help but picture it initially. Temple, who was diagnosed as autistic at 4 years old, displays typical symptoms of ASD. She has difficulty interpreting social cues and practicing social norms; she has to be reminded to greet people and introduce herself, though she does so when appropriate, and often talks more loudly than is socially acceptable. She is a very independent person; the only friend shown in the film is her college roommate. She does have fairly close relationships with her mother, aunt, and high school science teacher, but it is normal for autistic people to form bonds with their caregivers. She gets agitated easily and engages in repetitive behaviors, such as spinning, but also eating only a few types of food. Temple understands and embraces her autism. She is extremely intelligent, high functioning, and well educated in social manners. As an adult, she becomes comfortable with public speaking and teaches people about the realities of autism, not just the stereotypes. As aforementioned, she invents the “hug box” based on a contraption she sees on her aunt’s farm that is used to calm down cattle. She builds it herself to use as a means to calm herself down; the device

applies surface pressure to her, the way that a human hug would be used to calm a neurotypical person. Though she has an aversion to human physical contact, she explains that she still needs “the sensation of being hugged,” as it really does change her demeanor (Jackson, *Temple Grandin*). *Temple Grandin* is a unique case of a realistic depiction that just happens to be of a high-functioning, super intelligent, autistic person; Temple is not a savant nor is she portrayed as one. She is not just a quirky person, and she is certainly not undiagnosed. This HBO film realistically shows the struggles and achievements of a real-life autistic person, though it certainly cannot be generalized as representing all people with ASD.

### Documentaries

Because documentaries, by definition, film real people in real situations, they obviously provide much more realistic depictions of autism than mainstream media representations. They capture more of the day-to-day realities of autism and do not have to create storylines to fit fictional characters. Documentaries do, undoubtedly, still have biases in their portrayals of autism, or at least limitations. Unlike mainstream films and television shows, there is no way to accuse documentaries of showing behaviors that are “unrealistic” or “unreal,” which makes them the most accurate representations that there can be.

*Normal People Scare Me*, a 10-minute short film directed by a teenage autistic boy named Taylor Cross and his mother Keri Bowers, consists of interviews of autistic people and some relatives. The short opens with various footage of Taylor and is captioned “Taylor, the journey to normal, 2004” (Cross and Bowers, *Normal People Scare Me*). A male voiceover states that “autism is a developmental disability that effects communication and social interaction” (*Normal People Scare Me*). A series of brief interviews are shown, some interspersed throughout, with autistic children and young adults. They are asked about the difficulties they face because of their diagnosis and just generally how they feel about having autism. Throughout the film, a wide range of abilities and ages are shown within a relatively short period; one of the interviewees is college-educated, many are in school, many appear to be “typical” children, and one young adult male is nonverbal but his father helps him communicate through gestures and hand signals. Some interviewees say they like being autistic, some do not. Some admit to the challenges and hardships of living with autism but some say they like to focus on their abilities and the good things. Some of them say that *everyone* is different in some way, so why should they be

considered the “abnormal” ones. The final question, though, asked by Taylor is, “do normal people scare you?” to which most interviewees responded yes. Taylor’s stepfather is featured in the ending scene of the film saying, “I don’t like the word normal, because what’s normal? I think it’s a connotation that we all live with, and I think for people that are quote-unquote normal, it’s ridiculous. It’s a ridiculous term.” Cross interviewed about a dozen people for his short film, which is more diversity than is shown in any mainstream representation. Not only did he capture their behaviors and mannerisms, but he also allowed the interviewees to voice their own opinions about their own diagnoses—this is not typical for all media portrayals. Although the audience did not get to see a single person’s life in-depth, it is valuable to learn about the lives of all sorts of autistic people, even if only for a couple of minutes each.

*George*, a film originally commissioned by HBO, is an original documentary directed by an autistic boy’s father, though footage shot through George’s viewpoint is also shown throughout. George is a 12-year-old boy whose interests include filmmaking, planes, and aviation; he especially knows a lot about the latter two subjects. He attends a special school with class size of three to five students, though it is not strictly for children with autism. One student describes the school as being for children with “special learning problems . . . special learning abilities” (Corra, *George*). George often gets stuck on words and sentences. He sometimes gets frustrated and throws small tantrums, but his “abnormal” behavior is not too severe. George is high-functioning, though his social impairments are apparent to the viewer. For children of George’s age though, his differences are less noticeable. When a female classmate is asked what the difference is between her and George, she responds, “I’m a girl and he’s a boy . . . he’s got short hair, and I’ve got even short-long hair” (*George*). She knows that she and George are different, but not in the ways that the audience perhaps expected her to say. A male classmate answers similarly to the same question. Though George certainly displays symptoms of autism, he also maintains several interpersonal relationships with his family members and friends; he cares about people and can understand certain social cues. He is also verbal, very smart, and talented. In the clips of home videos from George’s young childhood, his symptoms seemed more severe, whereas in the present George’s most noticeable symptoms are his tendency to get stuck on certain words or subjects and his inability to understand certain emotions or empathy. Corra and his son illustrate the day-to-day life of George, his activities, preferences, behaviors, and mannerisms. It is a very in-depth depiction of one autistic person’s life; however, at some point in the film, George’s father

gets a call from HBO explaining that they are dropping production because “they don’t think he’s autistic enough” (*George*). It is a jarring statement from what is supposed to be a progressive channel, but it shows the ignorance of the general public when it comes to facts about autism. Clearly, not all autistic people have superhuman abilities, extremely high intelligence, or eccentric personalities and behaviors, but HBO and other companies think that these are the types of characters that audiences want to see. It is distressing that to be one’s self is sometimes not enough for society; eventually, though, HBO decided to air the program while Corra held the rights. In one of the final scenes, George is asked if he knows what autism is and he replies no. Autism is defined to him as “when your brain, the way you learn, and the way you process things in the world is a little bit different from most other kids”; after he hears this definition, George replies that, yes, he thinks he is autistic (*George*). It is interesting that George realizes that he is different from other children and even knows he is being filmed because of it, but he does not understand his own diagnosis—this is common, though certainly not universal, in the autism community.

### Observations and Conclusions

At the start of this research, it was hypothesized that there would be more negative than positive portrayals of autism in media; this hypothesis was proved incorrect. Instead, it was found that, if anything, most representations in mainstream media are hyperpositive to the point that they are unrealistic. There were no representations of characters with severe autism nor were there any depictions of extreme hardships and struggles. Throughout all of the mainstream media—*Touch*, *Rain Man*, *Mozart and the Whale*, *Martian Child*, *Adam*, and *Temple Grandin*—there was a lot of sugarcoating of autistic symptoms and displays of normativity that do not often exist in people with real-life diagnoses. Other issues include limited childhood autism represented in film and the fact that there were zero nonwhite people represented. One problem that would be hard to fix is that there are no autistic actors playing characters with autism; obviously, acting is not a career choice conducive to most symptoms of autism, but at the same time it can be inappropriate to have actors play roles that they have not experienced themselves. Representations by these non-autistic actors can become questionable at best and derogatory at worst. It seems that mainstream media have a fear of being politically incorrect and that is why only hyperpositive representations exist for the most part. This fear is not necessarily a bad thing because it can be best to stay within boundaries that feel comfortable, rather than overstepping and insulting a group of people or even one individual. However, at this

point, media is too scared of making a wrong move in portraying autistic characters; it is better to have an unintentional negative representation than to have no representation at all and be ignored as a social group.

Although the magical/savant, “different”/quirky, and undiagnosed/unlabeled characters are interesting to see, it is time for mainstream media to start showing far more realistic depictions of autism, as well as a much wider range of ASD characteristics. Portraying autism does not have to be something that is feared nor do accurate representations have to be spoiled by sugarcoating. As Frith (1989) states

Some of the perceived abnormalities of autistic social behavior can be seen not so much as impairments, but as unusually positive qualities. These qualities can be captured by terms such as innocence, honesty, and guilelessness. Autistic people are not adept at deceiving others nor at impressing others. They are not manipulative or gossipy ... they are not envious and can give to others gladly.... Autistic people may not empathize in the common sense of the word, but neither do they gloat over other people's misfortune. Indeed they can be profoundly upset by the suffering they see, and they can show righteous indignation. (Strate 2006, p. 120, quoted from Frith 1989, p. 110)

Undoubtedly, having an autistic diagnosis can come with many struggles and hardships, along with social and sometimes cognitive impairments, but it can also come with unique abilities and perspectives. In any case, the symptoms of autism are not any less important to represent in media, nor do the lives and experiences of autistic people matter any less than those of neurotypical people.

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