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Mass Media in Society

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Autism, Actually

A Look At Representations Of Autism In Pop Culture

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Intro To Mass Communications- COMM 1307 S01

This essay examines how Autistic people are frequently represented and what roles Autistic people typically play in conventional American pop culture, with such depictions in film and TV typically not being as thoughtful or true-to-life as they could be. Keywords here include Autism, Representation, Pop Culture, Asperger's Syndrome, Film and Television.

It does not take long to discover that patterns exist in the depictions of anyone that is considered out of the norm in American pop culture, that norm being white cis-gendered heterosexual males. Typically, anyone that does not fit those strict parameters is relegated to supporting roles in the form of sidekicks/friends/relatives to individuals that fit all those strict criteria, if they even get to exist at all. While some pieces of American pop culture buck this convention, for the most part, the expected practice for lead characters is to not go against the grain of what is considered normal. Anyone who does not fit into that rigid barometer is, at best, going to be seen only passingly in the background. Individuals who fail to fit into that barometer are people on the Autism spectrum. Autism, according to Neisworth and Wolfe, is “[a] developmental disorder characterized by marked difficulty in communication and social relations and...atypical behaviors...” (20) and people with such a disorder have frequently not been treated respectfully by pop culture. In the past and present, many depictions of Autistic characters in pop culture have been sorely lacking in depth and thought while also coming off as derivative of each other since they all seem to depict a very narrow idea of what it means to be Autistic.

One notable depiction of Autistic characters in pop culture is that, typically, leading characters in films/books/TV shows and the like are not going to be anywhere on the Autistic spectrum. This seems like a most odd phenomenon given the growing number of Autistic individuals residing in America. According to the Data & Statistic page in the Autism section of the Center For Disease Control And Prevention website, in 2012 “[about] 1 in 68 children have been diagnosed with Autism spectrum disorder”. That figure from 2004 is a surprisingly high number that is considerably up from the figure seen just a decade earlier in 1994 that showed that 1 in 150 children born in that year would be diagnosed with Autism. Despite the rapid increase in

the awareness of the Autism population in America, positive or thoughtful depictions of people on the Autism spectrum in American pop culture are few and far in between, with Autistic characters being even more scarce before *Rain Man* brought such individuals into the pop culture limelight in 1988, for better or for worse.

While characters who were implied to be Autistic certainly existed before *Rain Man* in 1988, there's no denying that this particular piece of American pop culture was the most high-profile example of an Autistic character in American cinema up to that point. Raymond, Dustin Hoffman's character in that movie, is an Autistic individual with difficulty socially interacting with other people. He has a strict adherence to schedules and routine, while he also possesses a hidden intellectual prowess. Due to the large-scale financial and awards success that film found, the world of Autism was suddenly prominent in a way that was not even conceivable before. However, instead of using the new ubiquity of Autism brought on by *Rain Man* to explore other storytelling terrain involving individuals living with Autism, instead a deluge of motion pictures and television programs came around simply imitating the structure and style of *Rain Man*. So many pop culture depictions of Autism closely imitated Raymond that Travis Thompson mentions in his book *Making Sense Of Autism* that the level of variety in how much or how little Autism affects people in real life "...puzzles people with limited experience with children and youth with Autism and who may expect every individual...to resemble Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*." (25)

The massive level of influence Raymond had on people's perceptions of Autism becomes quite clear from that story, which explains why other productions with Autistic characters were looking to mimic numerous facets of that popular movie's portrayal of Autism. Which specific elements from *Rain Man* were being imitated? The primary one was that the Autistic individual

was rarely, if ever, the lead character in these stories. Instead, those on the Autism spectrum were typically sidekicks to the lead character who had no such neurodevelopmental disorder, leaving the Autistic individuals in these stories as not human beings but being much more akin to simply props used to teach the protagonist some kind of lesson. Also, like Raymond, Autistic individuals would have had an extreme case of struggling with social cues and were withdrawn from the rest of the world, never taking any interest whatsoever in elements like romance or personal goals. While plenty of Autistic individuals just like that exist in the real world, the ubiquity of *Rain Man* meant that Raymond was viewed as the default standard of Autistic representation in American pop culture. This meant a very narrow definition of what being an Autistic human being emerged in pop culture. The book *Essentials Of Autism Spectrum Disorders Evaluation and Assessment* even explicitly notes how "[it] is the norm, rather than the exception that profiles of skills [among Autistic people] will be extremely varied..." (Sailnier & Vantola, 33). In the world of science, it is common knowledge that the personalities of Autistic people vary from person to person. In American pop culture though, that variety is virtually nonexistent, with many representations of Autism simply being caricatures of Raymond from *Rain Man* and his characteristics.

The ripple effects of Raymond still courses through pop culture today, including through a fictional figure who may have usurped Raymond's place as the go-to figure for Autism in pop culture, Sheldon Copper, one of the stars of *The Big Bang Theory*. He is like a walking-talking collection of all of the worst traits of typical portrayals of Autism in pop culture. This includes a persistently odd penchant of many of these works. Despite using character traits clearly associated with Autism, the writers of many properties (including, *The Big Bang Theory*) featuring Autistic characters refuse to label a character as Autistic. This way, they do not have to

adhere to all of the actual behavior characteristics of people on the Autistic spectrum. The writers on this show use Sheldon's personality traits usually associated with Autism as a way to drum up forced conflict in plotlines and also use said character traits as the butt of numerous jokes.

Mean-spirited gags at the expense of Sheldon's shortcomings pepper various episodes while the character itself is a hodgepodge of lazy reworkings of various traits that have been strongly associated with the Autistic community for years. The whole program is once again an example of how Autistic characters are simply being used as props or sources for lazy humor instead of being treated as real life characters. That's particularly shameful for *The Big Bang Theory* since many past American sitcoms have shed humanity on types of characters previously only treated as stock stereotypes, as seen in programs like *Modern Family* or *Black-ish*. There's certainly an opportunity accomplish something more meaningful, or at least more thoughtfully humorous, in these particular narrative confines. But like many pieces of American pop culture dealing with Autism, *The Big Bang Theory* settles for just doing a knock-off of Raymond in *Rain Man* all while depicting a narrow and crude depiction of Autism to tens of millions of viewers across the globe.

Recent signs in the world of American pop culture indicate some progress is being made in terms of depictions of people on the Autistic spectrum that offer some hope for those who have long wished for more thoughtful pop culture representations of such individuals. Real life individual Michael Burry, a hedge fund manager who has Asperger's Syndrome, is depicted in recent Best Picture nominee *The Big Short* by Christian Bale. The film's depiction of Burry is starkly contrasting to previous default cinematic depictions of individuals on the Autistic spectrum; Michael Burry may struggle socially and think differently from those around him, but he is very much conscious of his unique psyche and has his own life outside of Autism that

includes a wife and child. In addition, Michael Burry is the lead character of the proceedings. He is not around to make a non-Autistic character better, but exists to fulfill his own needs and desires. After decades of depictions of Autism that all felt so one-note and derivative of each other, *The Big Short*'s depiction of Michael Burry provides a clear guideline for how to handle unique and more realistic portrayals of Autistic individuals.

Similarly, last year's Oscar-nominated documentary *Life, Animated* offers up a thoughtful take on real-life individual Owen Suskind, an Autistic 23 year-old whose love for animated Disney films allows him to connect and communicate with the world around him. In a book penned by Owen Suskind's father, *Life, Animated*, Ron Suskind, notes how his son "...Owen is different, not diminished...Owen, and so many folks like him, are just like the rest of us, only more so and less so" (339). It is a thoughtful concept that reaffirms the humanity in Autistic individuals, an element that many pop culture representations of Autism forget to include. The documentary *Life, Animated* presents that humanity in a visual form with a thoughtful manner that captures the day-to-day life struggles and joys for Owen while interviews with both Owen and his parents lend further insight into the daily lives of Autistic individuals.

To see a documentary chronicling the life of an Autistic person in such an introspective way is to see some hope that maybe the future of pop culture will feature films like *Life, Animated* and *The Big Short* that positively depict Autistic individuals who are far too often relegated to being mere stereotypes or laughingstocks. That provides a hopeful sign for the future in regards to how Autistic people get represented in pop culture, that there may indeed be hope for better representation of Autistic individuals beyond the likes of Sheldon Cooper. After all, people with Autism are human beings, with lives to live, dreams to achieve and rich stories yet to be told.

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