INTRO

“I am a surgeon” - this one dramatic memeable sentence thrust the state of autistic representation into the mainstream discourse. This clip is from a show called The Good Doctor. - a medical drama about Doctor Shaun Murphy, played by Freddie Highmore, who is an autistic surgeon. The short snippet was posted online, and quickly became meme-fodder, with parodies, use of the sound going viral on tiktok, and many people questioning if this show was “good” autistic representation judging by this scene.

I decided to look into it, and ended up going on a deep dive that took me from the legacy of Nazi Doctors during the Second World War, to the worrying consequences of the savant genius myth. In this video we’ll be looking at characters from Sheldon Cooper in Big Bang Theory to Raymond in Rain Man, and shows from Love on the Spectrum to Heartbreak High, as well as autistic headcanons and theories - to breakdown the state of autistic representation today.

Bcause although there are difficulties in assessing “accurate representation” of autism, due to the wide array of experiences of autistic people, there are commonalities in this representation that are worth pulling out, especially in the ways they connect to existing stereotypes and misconceptions about autism - and in this video we’re going to begin by investigating three of them: spectacle, infantilisation and exceptionalism.

Spectacle

Let’s start with The Good Doctor.

Spectacle in autistic represenation is essentially a highlighting of difference, a focus on the “alien” nature of autism, emphasising the outward evidence rather than the internal experience or processing or thoughts and feelings - showing an audience an autistic character through an allistic lens of the people who are on the outside watching what is visible to the world at large. Like, for example, a seemingly sudden meltdown.

The potential concerns with Highmore’s character in The Good Doctor were discussed online even before the pilot had aired, with one analysis of the trailer by journalist Kaila Hale-Stern accurately predicting the debate that still rages around the show:

> “Dr. Shaun Murphy is the hero of *The Good Doctor,* and this is a good thing. I guess I just don’t want him to be a weekly spectacle—denounced and gawked at by naysayers before he saves the day.”

Whether intended or not, the performance of the i am a surgeon scene become a spectacle outside of the show - as TV journalist Michele Kirichanskaya explained in Collider:

> “Shaun experiences a meltdown, an experience defined as an “intense response to an overwhelming situation," often involving being overstimulated by one’s current environment. During this clip, Shaun, who is provoked by his ableist colleague who wants to limit Shaun’s working abilities, shouts “I am a surgeon” repeatedly while looking emotionally overwhelmed.”

Many online criticised Highmore’s portrayal itself - and users began remixing the sound, recreating the scene to mock the acting choices, and generally resharing it using every meme format popular at the time. But the question of how far this was a community of autistic people poking fun at a neurotypical actor’s attempt at faking a meltdown, or a mixed group with allistic users just finding the idea of someone having a meltdown itself a source of entertainment, is impossible to know.

Kirichanskaya expanded on this in her article, saying:

> “While the accuracy of this scene depicting an actual autistic meltdown is questionable, the response to it is indicative of a larger system of how our society sees neurodivergent people. Making fun of an autistic character having a meltdown (and not the actor’s exaggerated attempt at playing one) is making fun of the idea of neurodivergence itself [...] distress over having a meltdown in public isn’t helped when a non-neurodivergent accommodating society makes fun of these moments, only adding to the stigma surrounding neurodivergence.”

And the “questionable” accuracy is something that has been questioned since the show began – with critics quick to point out that Highmore himself seems to have drawn on a relationship with Autism Speaks for his performance - even doing a PSA for them. Autism Speaks is a controversial organization, with a reputation for speaking *for* autistic people - focusing on parents of autistic children as a target audience - and supporting

Applied Behavioral Analysis as a way of “treating” autism. They were originally set up to find a "cure" for autism, which they conceptualised as a "disease" – they removed the goal of finding a cure from their mission statement in 2016. There are a bunch of articles and collections of the many specific incidents with Autism Speaks that you can check out if you so wish, many collated by autistic people who have personal testimonials of the damage things like ABA can inflict.

But, the information is out there and readily available with a simple google search, so many argue that working with such an organisation at such an involved level suggests a lack of preparation for the role on the part of the writers and actor himself.

After the “I am a surgeon” scene went viral, other moments from the show began to pop up online. In one, he repeatedly accuses a Muslim woman of being a terrorist. In another, he continues to misgender a trans patient. The latter is particularly bizarre for a couple of reasons - his misgendering seems to be because of his logical autistic brain, but surely as a brilliant genius doctor he would know about the breadth of sex and gender diversity. But also, from the point of view of how this portrays autism to a wider audience. Because, for the sake of giving Shaun another episode “arc” about bedside manner and learning about people’s differences - it misses engaging with a bunch of studies and data on the higher rates of queer identity and gender dysphoria in autistic people. Like, you have a trans patient, an autistic doctor, and an understudied field linking them together - this has all the making of some really interesting discussions and pathos - but no.

And the thing is, the show seems to link behaviours like islamophobia or transphobia to his autism, as if it’s an unavoidable side effect of it. Like, it’s his natural state, that he has to learn to grow out of with guidance from the neurotypicals around him.

Lydia Brown, senior adviser at Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network, called out this element of the show directly, as reported in The Washington Post:

> “The Good Doctor” reinforces false stereotypes that autistic people can’t form meaningful relationships, understand boundaries or treat others respectfully.”

It feels like this is the kind of conclusion you might come to from engaging with stereotypical attitudes and portrayals - or outside observation without talking to someone who is autistic. Because respect, consideration, and politeness are often malleable and socially constructed - and assigning negative intentions to autistic people simply because you observe a behaviour you don’t think is “respectful” enough is all too common. Observation of bluntness, without an understanding of where it comes from,

can then be extrapolated by a screenwriter into extreme forms of “rudeness” including bigoted beliefs, because of the false connection between the two.

A genre where spectacle is part of the appeal is reality TV, and autistic dating show Love on the Spectrum is no exception. These shows thrive on a high concept premise - that is being a concept you can describe in one or two sentences. Love Island is “a group of singles try to find love in a stunning tropical villa - but anyone who isn’t paired off at voting time is kicked out.” The traitors is “participants undertake group challenges to earn money for a final prize pot - but amongst them are traitors who have the power to “kill” their fellow contestants”.

Love on the spectrum is a concept that relies on autism as its very premise - “a reality show following the dating lives of members of the public - but they are autistic”. The “but” here holds a lot of potential weight - the idea that the fact these people have autism is a big enough twist to be a concept in and of itself. The question for many then becomes, is this a genuine documentary about an underrepresented group of often infantilised adults being shown as fully capable of relationships if they want them, or is it played as a gawkable gimmick emphasising how different these people are to “normal” people on these types of shows?

The answer to that question seems to be in the eye of the beholder.

Journalist Alison Foreman *described it as:*

> *“*an affecting show that paints telling portraits of human connection that are so lovely, so moving, and so wholly satisfying, it's hard to imagine reality dating being done any other way"”

This clearly demonstrates the positive attributes she sees in the show, but also betrays the fact the show is fundamentally different from other dating shows. Foreman perceives this as a good thing, with a wholesome nature being desirable in this space of reality TV - but it’s clearly not in line with the typical “hot singles” element of many dating shows, which actively emphasises the desirability of the subjects in question. Whether this was a case of the show producers not seeing autistic subjects as inherently hot and desirable, or if they are fundamentally against the typical dating show format for anyone, is unclear. The production company “Northern Pictures” doesn’t focus on dating shows at all - their output has been a mix of environmental projects, social investigations on things like consent, mental health units, and sexism in the arts, and programming about disability and neurodivergence - including “Employable Me” which:

> “follows people with Neuro diverse conditions such as Autism, OCD and Tourette Syndrome as they search for meaningful employment.

However, there has also been criticisms of the show, which point out this element of spectacle - which itself can combine with other aspects of stereotypical autistic representation, including infantilisation.

Disability policies and culture reporter Sara Luterman wrote in 2020 about the original series:

> "The show is also riddled with bad advice and is frequently infantilizing. There are more interviews with parents than with the people the show is ostensibly about. The musical cues would be more appropriate for a documentary about clumsy baby giraffes than for a reality series about adult humans."

There are discussions about sex on the show that are euphamistically broached by the producers behind the camera - asking grown adults, who are moving in together and share a bed, if they have “consummated” their relationship. The idea that this would be a surprising thing, considering they are about to live together and share a bed, seems to be tied to an assumption based on their autism itself.

The advice Luterman refers to is a key part of the show, where relationship therapist Jodi Rodgers, who specialises in coached disabled and neurodiverse clients, offers her insights. In one episode she walks a young man Kelvin through a date scenario - correcting him when he doesn’t immediately introduce himself, but also criticising him for following that up with his interests. He knows to pull out a chair for her, but does it too soon for Rodger’s liking. When they repeat it again, he introduces himself just by name, no interests, and forgets to pull out the chair.

The lessons seem to be in many ways imposing objectively nonsensical norms of dating onto his natural inclination of connecting with the girl he’s on a date with. Her version of dating advice here seems to amount to mimicking neurotypical dating norms, which have been adopted by society because that is “the way things are”, rather than because they would necessarily be the most natural or successful way to have a date - where to goal after all is to engage with someone, get to know them, and have fun.

The spectacle here is the enforced repetition of the practice scenario. Instead of pulling out her chair herself when he forgets, like most people would even if they expected a

man to do that for them, she just stands there awkwardly, emphasising to the audience his supposed failures at such a “simple” task.

Journalist Sarah Kurchak wrote a nuanced piece for Time about the show, that asks questions about the editing, score, and cinematography of this show - and whether the same choices would have been made for non-autistic subjects. The inclusion of “quirky” likes and dislikes as part of the intro, for example, would feel out of place on many mainstream dating shows. The plinky cutesy musical accompaniment gives a very specific impression of the people on screen, and it isn’t necessarily that they are capable adults ready for a romantic relationship.She also describes her hesitance around the lack of diversity on the show, missing an opportunity to give representation from people across multiple autistic experiences and identities.

However, she also pointed out that:

> “It’s not like reality unscripted programming about non-autistic love is a bastion of accuracy and perfectly fair depictions. Even the more earnest and straightforward ones aren’t perfect. There is always the risk of misrepresentation and misinterpretation. Perhaps accepting that autistic reality show stars will be subject to the same hazards as non-autistic ones—and respecting the autonomy of those who choose to participate—is its own awkward step toward equality.”

In a subsequent piece on Medium, she talked about the response to her article. Her initial piece had been written with the intention of discussing all supposed “sides” of the discourse around the show, but while many saw this complexity for what it was, she had grown concerned about how:

> “People who enjoyed the show were treating my story as some sort of get out of being problematic free card. If this one autistic person liked it, they seemed to reason, then they were free to enjoy this reality show without any further soul searching or feeling any need to listen to more than one autistic perspective on it.”

This, to me, is a key part of any discussion around representation – as I talked about earlier in this video, there can be a tendency for people to want a black and white answer to questions of “good” and “bad” representation. I did a whole video essay about the false dichotomy of that binary last year in fact. Any representation in this video will have those who love and hate it – including amongst autistic viewers – but representation does have power, especially when we are talking about marginalised communities and those who have not had the opportunity to tell their own stories.

It means that representation can often be informed - whether consciously or not - but stereotypes in prior representation made by non-autistic people. And then those stereotypes will be absorbed by new audiences in a cycle. And although some may relate to these portrayals, when they take up the majority of representation, it leaves the diversity, nuance, and contradictions in that community on the cutting room floor.

One women Kaelynn, who was rejected from the new series of Love on the Spectrum, for example, recently made a tiktok about her experience. From her point of view, they took her out of the running because she did not fit the specific boxes they wanted to put their subjects in. Her issues with communication would not be visible on screen in a way that could be emphasises as a spectacle - and she was interested in dating allistic men after a number of experiences with autistic men pushing her boundaries and treating her badly, by blaming it on their autism and not taking accountability. A show like Love on the Spectrum, with its cutesy wholesome image, feels like one that would absolutely not want to deal with conversations about autistic people having the capacity for abuse or mistreatment of others. She was told they just weren't filming in her area, so it wouldn't work out, but she later found out that had been a lie when some of the production team from the previous season invited her out for drinks.

We can see this element of spectacle in autistic-coded characters too. Take Sheldon from The Big Bang Theory – who is a walking list of coded attributes - from his quirky and obsessive behaviours, to his genius level scientific knowledge. The show writers have denied he is autistic, and in the show itself he mentions that his mother "had him tested" but it didn't end in a diagnosis. For many, this is seen as a sort of attempt at a "get out of jail free card" - that if they say he isn't autistic, they don't need to be held to any kind of representation standards.

Indeed, the actor who played Sheldon himself has admitted:

> "Very early on I was asked by a reporter whether Sheldon had Asperger's. I wasn't sure what that meant. I asked the writers and they said no. He has Asberger traits. But their saying that took away a social responsibility."

The intention for some kind of neurodiversity is clear for many - whether they intended for him to be autistic in all but name, or if they just saw these traits as a clear and classic "nerd" archetype they could tap into, is questionable. The actress who played Sheldon's eventual love interest in the show, said in an interview in 2015:

> “All of our characters are in theory on the neuropsychiatric spectrum, I would say, Sheldon often gets talked about in terms of Asperger’s or OCD [...] I think what’s interesting and kind of sweet and what should not be lost on people is we don’t pathologise our characters. We don’t talk about medicating them or even really changing them. And I think that’s what’s interesting for those of us who are unconventional people or who know and love people who are on any sort of spectrum, we often find ways to work around that. It doesn’t always need to be solved and medicated and labelled.”

The idea that labeling is an inherently bad thing, is itself a strange way of looking at it - suggesting a kind of wholesome show where oddballs and misfits find love and friendship - but that people should find a kind of representation there without actually getting explicit rep. That they can connect with these characters quirky weirdness, but that’s sort of on them. It also allows the show to use many of Sheldon’s attributes and behaviours as jokes in and of themselves, while denying they are laughing at autistic traits. When the audience waits for a classic Sheldon Cooper joke - they are waiting to laugh at his misunderstanding of a social situation, or his frustration with someone messing with his routine, or his exasperation with those that don’t have his savant-like skills.

Back up… what exactly is autism?

So, how can we have a character like Sheldon Cooper, that people aren’t “sure” if they are autistic? Surely characters are autistic or they aren’t?

At this point I feel like it’s time to ask the question: what specifically *is* autism? Not just because it’s good for us all to be on the same page, but because the answer isn’t exactly simple. The characters we’ve seen so far have been wildly different - even within the same arena of spectacle - and that is indicative of the vast and varied experience of autism. I collaborated with my friend, and v talented autistic writer, Nicky Watkinson to break it down for this video - as soon as I mentioned thinking about writing about this, she was like “okay but can I work on it with you” so the deep dive research in this section is credit and thanks to her.

Okay, so, both the word Autism and the condition it refers to have a complex history - and that context may well shed some light on the reasons *behind* these themes, myths, and issues we see in autistic representation - and that we’ll be covering in the video.

First things first: autism is a neurological condition, which affects how the brain processes information. But, immediately, this is where we run into difficulties: although it's evident that autism *exists*, no-one quite knows where. Autistic people and scientific researchers alike agree that it is a distinct and observable condition, but as soon as we try to define it precisely, it becomes complicated. The National Autistic Society describes it as:

> "a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world."

Which may be true, but is also vague as all hell. This is, in part, because autism isn't located in any one area of the body or brain: it's a neurological condition, it seems to have genetic factors, there have been studies that show potential differences in some autistic brain structures - but none that show some universal or testable bodily or brain "characteristic" that is shared by all autistic people.

There are some common experiences, and certain areas like executive function, sensory processing, and social and communication skills, where autistic people are likely to experience some level of differences from neurotypical or allistic people. Issues with executive function can affect your ability to organise and complete tasks - from every day activities to new experiences. This might look like great difficulty with seemingly "simple" tasks like cleaning your room - in the way it affects your working memory, flexibility, time management, attention span, and more. Sensory processing differences might manifest as being over or under sensitive to sensory stimulus and could lead to mental or physical withdrawal, overwhelm, or meltdowns.

Ultimately, there's no one single thing that all autistic people experience or feel in common. As the saying goes, if you've met one autistic person, you've met one autistic person.

Autistim affects many of the systems in the human body, including the neurological, metabolic, gastrointestinal, and mitochondrial systems – but there's no one neuron or gene that's responsible for it, and – crucially for this video – there isn't just one presentation of autism. It manifests in extraordinarily different ways from person to person, and it's common to find two autistic people with diametrically opposite needs, internal experiences, and outward presentations, despite them having in essence the same condition.

There are multiple reddit threads about all the characters I talk about in this video, where the original poster will call out the show for seemingly being ableist or inaccurate,

and half the comments will agree, but the other half will talk about how much they relate to a character. There is a lot of subjectivity and individuality here.

Autism is what's called a spectrum condition, which means that there is a wide variety in the type and intensity of symptoms experienced by different autistic people – it does *not* mean that autism is a line, from "not autistic" to "very autistic", although this idea is frustratingly common. These days, it's often conceptualized – by autistic people and autistic-affirming researchers and psychiatrists – as a circle, as in these examples by Matt Lowry and Anouk at autism_sketches.

This idea of there being a vast array of individual experiences is also true of other conditions, of course, and especially neurological and mental health conditions where diagnosis relies on being able to understand someone's internal experience: often, these diagnoses demand that either a professional is able to observe certain behaviours which correspond to symptoms, or that the person with the condition is able to identify and articulate what feels wrong. But autistic people often have specific challenges identifying and articulating their internal experiences, and differentiating their experiences from those of other people around them – meaning they may be less likely to be *able* to identify that something feels wrong in the first place, or to communicate it and seek support.

Autism has existed long before this, but the condition was first *identified* by two different scientists at almost the same time: Leo Kanner in 1943, and Hans Asperger, in 1944. Named after Asperger and the specific presentations he often observed, Asperger syndrome became an official diagnosis in 1992, distinct from autism – and was then folded back into the diagnosis of "autism spectrum disorder" in the 2010s. Until recently, people still used the term Asperger Syndrome – whether formally or informally – to refer to a specific autism presentation, which usually involves high intelligence and lower support needs. But in 2018, a medical historian published a paper claiming that Asperger had collaborated with the Nazi regime to institutionalise and euthanise children who he deemed "unworthy to live," and many people now feel uncomfortable continuing to use the term.

Because of this storied history, there are major differences in the frameworks, research methods, and even the diagnostic procedures used by different researchers and doctors. And the limits of the diagnostic process means that many people who likely are autistic are excluded from accessing a diagnosis, because their presentation is less typical.

And this creates a feedback loop: people who aren't able to be diagnosed because their profile doesn't match the allegedly typical presentation of autism are excluded from research, and the research then fails to expand to accommodate these rarer presentations.

Not to mention that autistic people and science have a pretty rough history. Historically, scientists researching autism have been focused on eliminating autism, by "curing" autistic people and preventing future autistic people from being born. Because of the perception of autistic people as incompetent and infantilised, scientific research has been dominated by caregivers and doctors, and led by neurotypical feelings about autistic people – distrust, pity, even disgust. Another feedback loop: it has been widely observer in studies in the Uk, for example, there is distrust of these researchers from autistic people, who then don't participate in research, so the research being conducted fails to take their needs into consideration and privileges neurotypical perspectives.

Which leads perfectly into the next aspect of autistic representation…

Infantilisation - Canonical Rep

Infantilsation is an unfortunately common treatment for many neurodivergent and disabled people - including those who are autistic.

This attitude, and often outright treatment, often comes from the underestimation of autistic people – the assumption that their processing of the world, their being non-verbal, their diagnosis itself makes them automatically incapable. I think this is in part because of the narrow view of what "proper adult behaviour" looks like - especially in Western culture - that is linked to a state of independence and the ability to fit seamlessly into a capitalist workplace and structure - with normative unassuming behaviours and communication which fits the assumed cultural norm.

It is also exacerbated by the traditional image of an autistic person as a child, as shown in research such as the 2011 work from Jennifer L. Stevenson, Bev Harp, and Morton Ann Gernsbacher, who found the media representation of autism was overwhelmingly that of children, across everything from books and films to the websites of autism charities and support organisations, and news articles. They concluded that this was a cyclical relationship - where the lack of representation meant a hesitance for allistic gatekeepers to allow autistic adults to self-advocate, or join conversations about their community - especially in the era of the time being about "autism awareness" and the public perception of it as a new phenomenon.

This can bleed into the idea that autistic adults are child-like, naive, and non-sexual - full of innocent wonder. It assumes a lack of understanding and comprehension. It might involve being spoken down or condescended to.

Infantilisation might look like an autistic person being seen as controllable. In the worst cases it can lead to imposing a lack of agency over that person's life and body.

When we talk about the media - whether fictional portrayals or reality and documentary content, infantilisation looks like the tools of representation being used to emphasise these supposed qualities. This might be the editing, the music, the scripting, the formatting, the camera angles, and more. This paternalistic lens through which a filmmaker will show an audience an autistic character might historically been from a place of utter ignorance, but in recent years we see this idea that an allistic, or non-autistic person, who decides to shine a light on autistic life is doing so as a morally good act, almost. That their decision to highlight this poor underrepresented group is a gift, and that showing them as sweet and innocent and pure is positive representation that should be appreciated.

If we look at maybe the most notorious example of canonical autistic representation in film from the past few years, we can't not talk about Sia's movie Music.

I think a lot of things about this movie - the fact it pulled in stars like Kate Hudson and Maddy Ziegler, and came on the back of the singer-songerwriters most successful commercial years as an artist - probably boosted the confidence of Sia and her team that this would be a popular and well received film.

The film essentially follows Hudson's character Zu, as she gains custody of her non-verbal autistic half-sister Music after she quits drug dealing and becomes sober. It's a musical drama with a bunch of other plots including a well-meaning neighbour, manslaughter, and Zu maybe getting ready to dump Music at an adoption centre.

Even before the film was released, there were criticisms of the casting of Zielger in the titular role. Once the movie was out, the reviews were equally as scathing, with the movie currently at 7% on Rotten Tomatoes. Many autistic critics have pointed out the aspects of infantilisation that the movie manages to impart on their titular character, even though she is herself a child - which feels like quite a feat. Writer Clem Bastow pointed out in her analysis of the movie:

> "Music is gifted an AAC device to aid her communication, but it seems to only have two phrases installed: "I'm happy" and "I'm sad". (For context, popular AAC

> app ProLoQuo2Go has a default setting of 4,750 unique words.) Music manages to both underestimate autistic people and infantilise them."

The backlash to the film was exacerbated by the response from Sia herself, who railed against the criticism, tweeting:

> "I cast thirteen neuroatypical people, three trans folk, and not as fucking prostitutes or drug addicts but as doctors, nurses and singers. Fucking sad nobody's even seen the dang movie. My heart has always been in the right place."

She also talked about her conception of the character of Music:

- "I've never referred to Music as disabled. Special abilities is what I've always said, and casting someone at her level of functioning was cruel, not kind, so I made the executive decision that we would do our best to lovingly represent the community."

This response itself received criticism from people in the community, who questioned the "special abilities" framing of autism - and pointed out that the intention of having your heart in the right place doesn't necessarily make up for potential damage your actions might cause.

The idea of autism being a magical superpower may have started as a well-meaning attempt to change people's perceptions of autism as something that made you fundamentally lacking - but for many it is just as dehumanising, painting autistic people with this one-dimensional inspiration-porn brush.

Interestingly, Sia herself has since been diagnosed as autistic. However, this new understanding of herself doesn't take away from the criticisms of the movie or the way it was handled - especially as the character of Music doesn't seem to share Sia's experiences. The autistic community is not a monolith, and hand-waving any concerns with representation because an autistic person is involved is a little too reductive - especially when it comes to someone portraying a character whose autism affects their ability to communicate.

Infantilisation - Coding

There is also an element of infantilisation in a number of autistic-coded characters - both by their writers, but also the audiences who react to them.

When I mentioned I was making this video, one autistic friend of mine immediately sent me a voice note asking if I was going to talk about the fandom reaction to Entrapta from She-Ra and the Princesses of Power.

The She-Ra reboot in question is an animated show about a bunch of young adult characters navigating life in a magical fantasy world - including the lead character and her personal antagonist being raised as child soldiers. Entrapta is one of the aforementioned Princesses of Power - specializing in technology that she develops herself. She is highly intelligent, with a bright and bubbly personality, and hyperactive tendencies. While not specifically mentioned in the series itself, the showrunner has confirmed that she was written as an autistic character.

In their voicenote, my friend explained that there are chunks of the fandom who object to people “shipping” Entrapta with anyone in fanfic or fanart - arguing that she is “basically a child”.

This show has romance in its plot - it’s not devoid of this as a concept at all - this isn’t a criticism leveled at the other characters due to the nature of the show itself or their actual ages. This seems to fully be focused on the idea that this character is too naive and child-like to be able to consent to a relationship. Entrapta, I feel I need to specify at this point, is canonically 30 years old in the show.

Moss from the IT Crowd is another character who was clearly written as autistic-coded at the very least. You just have to type his name into YouTube and you’ll find dozens of “Moss from the IT Crowd being very autistic for 5 minutes 37 seconds” type compilation videos.

The sitcom is about two anti-social geeks who run an IT department, and the woman who ends up being sent down to supervise them. The show aired in the mid-2000s and the characterisation of Moss was, I think, meant to play into one version of the nerd-archetype - the autistic-coded character who is too into uncool things, doesn’t understand social situations, and uses a “nerdy” voice and intonation. When Moss misunderstands someone during a conversation - like when a woman tries flirting with him by complimenting his glasses, and he replies seriously “They’re not for sale” - we see how these social misunderstandings are part of what is supposed to make the character funny - the audience is encouraged to laugh at his confusion.

The IT Crowd's other two main characters Jen and Roy frequently have dating mishaps and storylines - but Moss doesn't get the same treatment. In fact, his incompatibility with sex is played on as the series one final joke - where we see Jen wake up in bed after a work party, panicking about having potentially slept with Roy - but instead Moss emerges from the bathroom in a skimpy pink robe, whipping off his glasses, and proclaiming "Good Morning". Jen proceeds to scream as the credits roll. This is never mentioned again on the show.

I think there is a combination of tropes going on here that compound into the de-sexing of autistic-coded adults in much of fiction - the idea of the virgin nerd, the uncool autistic, the unattractive geek - the attitude that caring passionately about things is weird or "too much", that it's unattractive to be outside of the "norm" in some way - all combines to associate autistic-coded characters with a kind of default asexuality for many writers. That you start with the idea of an uncool nerd, and attach autistic-coding to emphasise this idea - or that you consider an autistic-coded character, and what follows is an assumption that relationships just aren't part of their story.

Exceptionalism - Canonical Rep

This leads neatly into the third and final pattern in autistic canon and coded representation - the myth of savant exceptionalism. The existence of savant syndrome is rare in reality, but over played in on screen representation. These characters will be autistic - or coded that way, but with some superhuman ability or element of genius added on in a specific area, contrasting with their apparent "deficits" in other areas.

If we look at this from a skeptical lens, then there is this potential idea that someone with autism can justify their worth by excelling in one specific area to a superhuman level. That it sends the message that autistic people's particular brand of inspiration porn is that they overcome their deficits with this novel and alien talent - that might be useful to the world around them.

We've seen elements of this already in the example of The Good Doctor - that Shaun is allowed to work in the hospital as an autistic surgeon only because of his savant-like abilities. That his autism alone would disqualify him, but the added level of genius is what gives people pause.

Probably the most well known of these partrayals is the 1988 film Rain Man, which stars Dustin Hoffman as an autistic savant called Raymond, who has been living for years in an institution before his brother finds out about his existence. Raymond has incredible memory recall, and can perform complex mathematical feats in an instant with ease. He also has discomfort with eye contact, an extreme sensitivity to touch, verbal and physical stims, and a specific list of routine rituals that need to be in place.

The film was based on “megasavant” Kim Peek, as well as screenwriter Barry Morrow’s friend Bill Sackter - while alive Kim was believed to be autistic, but it is now suggested he had FG Syndrome instead. Similarly, Sackter was not thought to be autistic either. The original script didn’t include the word autism at all – according to the book NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism by Steve Silberman, the decision to make Raymond autistic came from two psychologisits, one with an autistic son, who read over the script. Hoffman subsequently met with a number of autistic people, both in formal settings, and more informal ones, like going bowling together.

The film is generally regarded as a key stepping stone in autistic representation, with many people’s association with autism itself calling up memories of watching this very movie. It was one of the first films to center around an autistic protagonist, and arguably set the scene for the image of the exceptional savant autistic character across decades of cinema that followed.

Perhaps it is unfair to judge a movie on its unintended legacy – but I do think it’s worth considering the way language from the film like “high functioning” is considered outdated by many today. Yet, the preservation of this movie as a classic means many will continue to watch it and, without new and diverse representation available alongside it, see the portrayal as the be and end all of what autism is. Raymond, at the end of the film, is judged not capable of living independently - and returns to the institution. The idea that this is the highest level of autonomy an autistic person can hope to achieve, as “high functioning” as Raymond is labeled to be, has surely had an impact on the lives of autistic people in subsequent years. Either doubting their own autism, or preventing those around them like parents or teachers from connecting autism with their behavior, processing, and communication style.

A friend of mine, Ellen, who is herself a disability advocate, went viral for a video on a train where another autistic passenger asks if she is autistic - Ellen asks “wait, how did you know I’m autistic?” before pausing and concluding “the ways i am and the things that i do” - the other passenger tells her, with knowing humour, “you were playing stardew valley when I got on”. It was a fun interaction between two people on a train, under a minute long, but the comments she received were truly wild. So many people

attacking her for the gall of claiming to be autistic, before a “Real” autistic person wouldn’t be capable of travelling by herself.

When writers base autistic characters on people they might have met once or twice, or who are public figures, or honestly even people who they consider friends - there is always a danger of a surface level interpretation. Especially when we take into account masking, which might indeed be in place with even people they consider to be close friends. The writer has not seen who that person is when they are alone, they may never have thought about the burnout consequences of that period of intense one on one interaction, or the consequences of sensory overload which manifested after they left a gathering early.

The autistic savant got another piece of representation recently in Korean TV show Extraordinary Attorney Woo, about an autistic lawyer newly hired at a big law firm, who also has a photographic memory. The show is a clear example of how canonical autistic representation, including those that engage with common themes like savant exceptionalism that have been critiqued, does not necessarily lead to a universal feeling from autistic viewers as to whether a portrayal is “good rep” or not.

Polygon writer Geoffrey Bunting interviewed an autistic attorney, Haley Moss, who said

Other interviewees pointed out the stimming in the show, using headphones to combat potentially overwhelming sensory stimuli, the negative reactions from colleagues to accommodtions, engaging in echolalia, being in a romantic relationship with someone who isn’t autistic, and more as examples of aspects that made them feel represented.

There is also the wider case, similar to that in Rain Man, for the show being positive just by existing as a piece of accessible representation in a place and time when autism is overlooked. Reportedly, in South Korea only 22% of autistic people are employed, and those that do earn an average of just $800 per month. These elements of workplace discrimination are reflected by the various ways people underestimate and mistrust her and her abilities in the show.

Bunting’s article also points out reports from Korean news sources and creators who describe the impact of this representation.

> “Korean schoolchildren are reportedly insulting each other by asking, “Are you Woo Young-woo?” Autistic content creators field comments expressing disappointment they’re not like Young-woo, while receiving abuse for their criticisms of the series.”

This expectation of all autistic people sharing Woo’s characterisation and personality is obviously ridiculous - but the idea that they would be expected to also have savant abilities is even more so. Woo is a so-called “prodigious savant” - with her degree of savant genius being exceptionally rare - many sources quoting the stat that only 75 people in the world would be considered at this level - although I couldn’t find the original source of this claim.

But the combination of the show's success, and previous focus on exceptional autistic savant characters, no doubt had an affect on the reception from an audience who might consider this to be the autistic norm.

Interestingly, one interview with the creators of the show seems to demonstrate a level of understanding of the potential pitfalls of this singular representation. The interview has been translated online - series director Yoo **In-shik’s** said:

> “I sympathize with and feel regret for the relative deprivation that autistic people feel, the sense that they must have some kind of special talent to have value or to be worthy of being the main character.”

Writer Moon **Ji-won’s** answer went even deeper into the response to the show, when asked about audiences with “developmental disabilities” themselves:

> “To be honest, if I was autistic, or if my family or acquaintances were autistic, I would have been uncomfortable watching the drama *Woo Young-woo*. I can't easily call it 'fun'; I'd probably be conflicted about whether to watch it or not, and no matter how much the drama is full of goodwill and good intentions, I can imagine the complicated feelings.”

To hear a writer say they expect their show to be uncomfortable watching for an audience of people the show intends to represent feels icky I guess. If it was an autistic writer saying the same thing about a show they have written, that autistic audiences might not want to watch, you could understand it to be more about the experience of watching ableism or the like play out on screen. If a piece is meant to confront non-autistic people with the realities of sensory overload or meltdowns or discrimination - that might well not be pleasant viewing for an autistic audience. But the fact it’s being

said by a writer writing *about* a community in a show that isn't mean to gritty and hard-hitting, feels strange.

He went on to say in the same interview:

> "I didn't try to avoid the difficulties caused by autism. I tried to show them as much as I could. I worried a lot about the concentration and degree of these hardships, because I was afraid of showing them in a way that would hurt autistic people. I wanted people to support and root for the character Woo Young-woo not because she is pitiful and they feel sorry for her, but because she is lovable, courageous, and cool."

Exceptionalism - Coding

We also see this savant exceptionalism in autistic-coded characters – perhaps most notably Sherlock Holmes. Many have theorised about the famed fictional detective over the years, including those who suggest the original character written by Doyle may well be autistic. But perhaps the most infamous portray today is BBC's Sherlock, played by Benedict Cumberbatch.

Sherlock has a near supernatural level of observational and deductive skills - helped by a near perfect memory. It is a spectacle within the show, as we see his mind's eye animated across the screen, connecting the dots of various seemingly unrelated clues to jump to correct but outlandish conclusions to even the trickiest cases. The writers outside of the show have never called him autistic, but within the show characters have joked about it, as if it's an obvious observation.

Ironically, it seems likely Cumberbatch didn't deliberately play Sherlock as autistic, because his own conception and research into autism is documented for another role. He played the Creature in Frankenstein on stage, and has spoken about using autistic children as inspiration for the role, telling Graham Norton:

> "It's basically being a man child, it's being a man infant. And then, psychologically, Danny and Nick Dear, who's adapted the Mary Shelley novel, into a brilliant 2 ½ hour play version of it, they both have autistic sons. So we went to two extraordinary schools and met some high spectrum autistic kids. And it was very, very humbling and amazing and very upsetting, but very, very extraordinary as well, and inspiring [...] It's really really extraordinary and very

> upsetting. And it was important for them to realize that the Creature in their story was not their… the monster of old… the monster of the gothic horror stories. He's very much an innocent. He's very much someone [...] who is so different, not only because of his appearance, but because of these behavioral tics, which are very autistic, um, both in his understanding of the world, psychologically and emotionally, but also physically as well, how that manifests later in his body. And so that was the major part of the preparation."

Cumberbatch subsequently said, of people calling Sherlock autistic:

> "I'm very wary of that, because I've met people with those conditions. It's a real struggle all the time. Then these people pop up in my work and they're sort of brilliant, and they on some levels almost offer false hope for the people who are going through the reality of it."

It feels like a real life example of the hesitation so many people have with infantilising or savant portrayals of autism - that people will read into these a universal autistic experience, and not be able to engage with the scope of individual experiences. An actor, who is himself engaged with the kind of research that many would praise as "doing the work", has ended up in a very specific and narrow-minded conclusion about what autism even is.

If that's the case, how can we expect the average casual TV and movie watcher to understand these complexities? Especially if so many of the narrow portrayals are themselves made by non-autistic people?

Autistic Headcanons

At this point I think it's time to talk about headcanons - a genuinely vital piece of the representation puzzle.

Autistic headcanons are characters that autistic viewers see as autistic, even though that aren't confirmed to be in the show or movie itself. This is often because the viewer sees elements of themselves in that character, or people they know. These are sometimes just the personal belief that a character is autistic, but might also include additional ideas about how that character's autism plays out in their life beyond what we see on screen.

I have a strong belief that true representation is rep that is clear, undeniable, and explicitly evidenced to its target demographic. So, for example, claiming a character is gay in a kid's show only works if children understand the way you reference that in the

show itself. It doesn't count if you code a character as gay so the parents so give each other smirks as they watch their their kids.

Similarly, I think that clear, undeniable, and explicitly evidenced representation for autism is the only way you can judge it in the sphere of conversations about representation more widely. It demands intentional and impactful representation that doesn't rely on stereotypes and coding. However, I do think that the importance of headcanons within community discussions is often overlooked. If one of the goals of representation is to make people feel seen, then characters who feel so connected to an autistic viewer's own experiences that they want to claim them as their own, feel significant.

I don't think they can be used to give credit to writers for pioneering rep. In fact, the fact the creators of these characters weren't *trying* to write an autistic character, meant they might have accidentally written a more accurately autistic character than one that relied on tired tropes and stereotypes. But you cannot deny the importance of these characters to the individuals who see themselves within them.

There are so many amazing examples, but I wanted to mention some of the most talked about here. A recent example might be Wednesday Addams from the Netflix show Wednesday. In an article for Glamour, writer Eleanor Noyce wrote about the elements of her character that resonated with so many autistic viewers.

> "In the Netflix spin-off, she has a dislike of physical touch, struggles to interpret emotions and social cues, has minimal facial expression, rarely blinks, and appears blunt or monotone to her peers."

In the article "They're Comfortable With Us Until They're Not: Autistic-Coded Characters," Sara C., a neurodiversity advocate, expanded on these wider observations:

> "She shows sensory sensitivities (aversion to color, touch, etc). She abhors physical contact, even going so far as to say "we don't hug" in the first episode. When presented with a room full of color from her roommate, a popular werewolf by the name of Enid, Wednesday rips off all of the wallpaper and colorful nick-nacks on her side of the room. When Enid asks why Wednesday did this, she simply replies "I break out in hives and then the flesh peels off my bones." [...] Wednesday also has obsessive interests, a strong sense of social justice, and tenacity that many autistics commonly have. It's easy to see why autistics

gravitate and identify with Wednesday when viewing her through an autistic lens.”

And it isn’t just the specifics of behaviour or sensitivities or voice that can spark a headcanon, there is also something key for many about others characters reactions to them. The experience of being shunned, or looked down on, or even outright bullied for expressing yourself or remaining unmasked is reflected in many of these characters. Characters, who aren’t reacted to in a negative way, might serve as an appealing source of joy, optimism, and escape - but those who do suffer for their potentially autistic traits might feel especially significant, with a kinship across multiple levels of experience.

Eddie Munson, a new character introduced in the latest season of Stranger Things, is loudly and proudly uncool. He dresses how he wants, is obsessed with Dungeons and Dragons, is tormented by the popular jock crowd who dubbed him “Eddie the Freak” - a balancing act of a character existing in a world that looks down on him, but who puts his middle finger up at it anyway. Some viewers have connected elements of the actors physical performance with stimming, or seen themselves in his obsessive interest in his hobbies. Interestingly, Eddie is also a character who is often headcanoned to be queer, and these often combine together in fanfiction to explore his friendship with canonical lesbian, and oft autistic-headcanoned character, Robyn.

One example that felt so obvious as I watched the show was Wylan Van Eck in Shadow and Bone. He stims, he info-dumps about his special interests, he seems to struggle with eye contact, he has sensory issues and overwhelm - a bunch of things that viewers have picked up on to evidence autistic headcanons for him. Plus his boyfriend canonically has ADHD - and the autistic/ADHD power couple dynamic is honestly so real.

I could go on and on, but we’d run out of time - so here are some more quick fire examples:

- Every single one of the Belcher Family in Bob’s Burgers
- Jack from Check, Please
- Frankie Stein and Draculaura from Monster High
- Katniss Everdeen
- Aziraphale and Murial from Good Omens
- Newt Scamader
- Gregory in Abbott Elementary
- The whole family in Mitchells vs the Machines

- Elle Woods
- Lilo from Lilo and Stitch
- And so many more

One of the most frustrating elements of coming across headcanons, or hearing about them from friends, is how they perfectly demonstrate the ease with which autistic characters could be included in quite literally any show or movie. With Stranger Things, for example, autistic fans have essentially given examples of ways multiple autistic characters, with specific and differing experiences of autism, would work in a single show that isn't just "about" their autism - and it isn't autism that makes them suitable for a sci-fi show. They aren't the unfeeling alien or the screaming monster - they are two of the teen heroes.

What has been missing?

If we look at the gaps in autism representation, I think the first thing we see is a deficit in representation across all media, and that is diverse characters and stories. Black autistic characters, queer and trans autistic characters, those whose autism doesn't look like how it is "supposed to", those who are flawed and messy in ways that aren't listed as part of a DSM diagnostic criteria list.

There are elements of autistic experiences that are by definition hard to get across in on screen media. The traditional adage of "show don't tell" works for outward information and emotions that can be seen on people's faces or with that actions. But when you are looking at characters who deal with internal and sensory processing in a different way, you are faced with a decision. Do you stick with the "show don't tell" and create an external behaviour to demonstrate this, or give room for autistic characters to express their internal feelings so as not to be misinterpreted. Without an added understanding of stimming, might it become to non-autistic audiences just a "funny thing autistic people do"?

As someone with Pure-O OCD, I see a similar thing with portrayals of my condition on screen. It is, I think, the reason why contamination OCD is the most commonly used. Cleaning over and over is a visual expression of the internal processes. But the over reliance on this means most people have no idea the level of internal turmoil that leads to the external behaviour of cleaning in the first place.

We are currently experiencing with the tabloids are proclaiming to be some kind of autism epidemic - either because of vaccines or tiktok.

There is the vaguest of truth there - I mean vaccines have nothing to do with it, but more people *are* being diagnosed, seeking diagnosis, and self-diagnosing. This is likely due to a confluence of factors, including both an increase in information and online community building and experience sharing - but also how much more difficult it's becoming to exist under late capitalism without accommodations – neurodivergent people who would have got by without a diagnosis in previous decades are now finding themselves so overworked and overstimulated that their symptoms are much harder to manage.

Many people also argue that a key factor when it comes to late diagnosis in autism, is the diagnostic criteria themselves, which are skewed towards the demographic that Kanner and Asperger most often treated: middle class white boys. The diagnosis and the diagnostic criteria were developed around these children, their experiences, and the observations of their caregivers and doctors – resulting in a diagnostic process which still to this day doesn't account for varying presentations in children of colour or children assigned female at birth – or, for that matter, adults. The diagnostic criteria still focuses heavily on childhood symptoms, and adults seeking diagnosis today have to evidence the presence of symptoms in childhood. This means that autistic people who go undiagnosed into adulthood often miss the window for diagnosis - especially if they have to rely on potentially biased, misinformed, or faulty memories from family members who knew them in childhood, but didn't necessarily have an understanding of their internal experiences.

These gaps in the diagnostic criteria have consequences, one of which is masking. An experience that is often lacking from autistic representation, but is increasingly being discussed as a key component of many autistic people's experience.

Masking is a concept in sociology and psychology, referring to the ways in which we camouflage our individual personality and natural behaviour in order to conform in society – it's something most people do to an extent, but it's particularly often observed in minority groups, as a way of assimilating to the dominant culture. Frantz Fanon, for example, defined masking in 1957 in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, describing how Black Americans mimic the behaviour of white people.

When masking an autistic person might suppress stimming in public, or copy other people's mannerisms in order to "pass" as neurotypical. Often, these behaviours are undertaken semi-consciously; the autistic person might be scolded by caregivers or teachers, or bullied by their peers, and internalise the message that these behaviours need to be suppressed. But this creates a feedback loop: the autistic person struggles

more and more, alienated from themself and their instinctive coping mechanisms, but often unable to describe how they feel, or what they need. And to others, they don't seem to be struggling.

Recently, some researchers have proposed including masking in the diagnostic criteria, even going so far as to suggest that it is a symptom of a "female autism phenotype" – a "female-specific manifestation" of autism which is different to the existing male-focused diagnosis.

But, crucially, these camouflaging behaviours aren't an inherent *part* of autism; like other forms of masking, they're a consequence of societal conditioning, of systemic racism and sexism, and of restrictive and stereotypical representations of autism in popular culture. They are, in fact, a trauma response to a society which privileges the voices of white men and ignores the suffering of women, trans and intersex people, and people of colour.

We think autism only looks one way – so we miss all the other ways it can look.

But there are, of course, writers and actors who aren't relying on flawed research and second hand tropes to create their autistic characters. Writers who are autistic themselves…

Representation by Autistic Writers and Actors

In recent years we've seen increasing examples of autistic writers and actors getting to tell autistic stories on screen.

The first show I want to talk about in this section is Everything's Gonna Be Okay from Australian comic writer and actor Josh Thomas. The premise of the show is that his character, Nicholas, learns that his father is about to die - and that he has been tasked with the responsibility of looking after his two younger half-sisters Matilda and Genevive. Matilda, a seventeen year old working on her dream of getting into Juilliard to study music, is autistic - and played by autistic actor Kayla Cromer.
The show dodges a number of potential pitfalls of representation by having multiple autistic characters with a variety of personalities, goals, and interests. Through the series Matilda explores her sexuality, her desires, and ends up in a non-conventional romantic relationship with another girl Drea - who is an asexual lesbian. Matilda and Drea agree that Matilda can explore sexual hook ups with guys they meet on dating apps - in a communicative poly relationship.

Far from the stereotypical idea of autistic people being infantilised, unable to complexly communicate, this whole storyline is an exploration of the ways that thinking outside of social convention can lead to ultimate happiness that makes its own rules.

Writer Thomas said in an interview with Awards Daily:

> "I am very aware that we don't have a lot of Autistic representation on TV. Only having one Autistic character would feel weird. We have three Autistic characters in our show and there are only two or three other shows with Autistic characters and they aren't even played by Autistic people! So suddenly we have half of all Autistic characters on TV. I want to make sure that they are all different. It was a solid point we wanted to make. That was the first time I had ever done that in a conscious way. Usually, I just set out to tell the story that I want to tell."

The most interesting thing about this show for me, however, is that in producing the first season, Josh Thomas came to the realisation that he too was autistic, as well as having ADHD which he'd already been diagnosed with. It was a real life example of the ways authentic representation can have an impact - although much closer to home than many would expect.

Between seasons he was able to get a diagnosis, and Nicholas goes through his own journey with figuring out his autism in the second season of the show - as a character who drew a lot from Thomas' own personality and perception of the world. The storyline gives us an example of multiple neurodivergent people in the same family, of someone with both ADHD and autistic, which is resonably common, of autistic people with very different experiences and presentations - as well as another queer autistic character on screen.

Even with an autistic man at the helm, however, they also bought in "autism consultants" - including Lillian Carrier who plays Drea in the show, and gave input at all stages of the script, from initial story ideas to final script reads. But also consulting with the props team on ways to ensure there were no sensory issues for the different performers with objects they needed to interact with. Plus ensuring there are options for requested items - so she could choose the best pair of headphones for her character, for example, which would also make her most comfortable.

That easy accommodation, baked into the structure of production, feels vital to all ways of working on shows or movies which are truly interested in authentic autistic representation. But they are also something I think should be vital to all productions in

general - to start on the basis of making the environment as accessible and comfortable as possible for everyone.

Another recent example of autistic rep by an autistic actor is Chloe Hayden playing Quinni in Heartbreak High, an Australian teen drama.

The show had similar methods to ensure Quinni felt as real as possible - including both an external consultant, but also writers who were always ready to make changes based on Hayden's feedback from the start.

> "I knew that it was special because when I got the casting brief for Quinni, she was very boldly depicted as a neurodivergent person. And I've never seen that before. It's [usually] like, this person is "quirky" or this person is "XY". We never actually see "this person is definitively neurodivergent"."

This explicit rep was clearly a key part in Hayden trusting the team to tell Quinni's story as part of their wide ensemble of characters. Quinni's storylines include a new relationship with fellow classmate Sasha - and the subsequent breakup - as well as her friendship with Darren, and special interest in book series Angeline of the Underworld. Critics have praised the ways her autism is balanced with her personality and circumstances - no ignoring it, nor making it the only thing that is unique about her. We see the way the nature of her high school environment affects the way she thinks about herself, including her autism, and her decision to talk about it with other people or not.

After an argument with Sasha, Quinni experiences a period of non-verbal shutdown, that her friend Darren immediately understands and defends. This trusting closeness is played out across the show, with both of them helping each other in different ways as a loving equal friendship that defies many of the "autistic anti-social emotionless loner" images of earlier stereotypical portrayals.

In one interview with Time Out magazine, journalist Chantel le Cross asked Hayden:

> **How did you play a role in making sure that Quinni wasn't some kind of caricature of what an Autistic person might look like based on misconceptions?**

> I think when they hired me, they knew I wouldn't let that happen. I only discovered after getting the role and finishing the series that they actually scouted me on TikTok, and I don't hold back on there. I am very loud and very vocal, particularly about the entertainment industry and about media, so I think they knew from the get-go this wasn't going to be a 'yes man' sort of deal for them, but they never want to try to make it that way either. So many divergent voices have gone into Quinni to ensure she wasn't this manic pixie dream girl, or this false stereotype of Autism that we've had far too much of.

The final example I wanted to mention is the British kids' TV show A Kind of Spark - based on the book by autistic writer Elle McNicoll. The story follows an 11 year old autistic girl, Addie, who starts a campaign for a memorial for the victims of the witch trials in her hometown in Scotland. There is a clear parallel made between the misunderstood witches of the past, who seemed to act "strangely" and "unnatrually" and were punished for it - and the experience of an autistic person. She learns about the witch trials at school, and becomes dedicated to finding a way to have the victims remembered, to the idea that she and they are alike, and that she can be a voice to speak for them.

The series was staffed by neurodivergent creatives - from crew to writers to actors and consultants too. In an interview with the Guardian, writer McNicoll, who also wrote the series, explained:

> "I said to the BBC, it has to be autistic-led. There's this expression: 'Diversity is being invited to be party, inclusivity is being asked to dance'. But what if we threw the party? What if it was our party?" [...] It's not a story about being diagnosed with autism or people 'suffering' with autism, which I'm very against, it's a story about a girl who is on a mission [...] Being autistic is an all-encompassing thing; it filters into every aspect of your life – as is true with Addie. But the story is about this legacy."

In the show, Addie has two older sisters, one who is autistic too, and one who isn't. All three sisters, however, are played by autistic actresses. They have spoken about the difficulties on set of acting out emotionally and physically draining moments, like

sensory overwhelm - but also the experience of having to mask as a character who is neurotypical - but all seem to agree that the atmosphere and provisions on set were directly aimed to account for this.

Again, this is the kind of thing that feels should be happening on sets of any kind - a genuine empathy and understanding of people's needs - regardless of who they are.

Why Write Autistic Characters?

Okay, so, at this point in the scripting process, when Nicky and I were talking about what we were going to cover here, I wondered if there would be anything interesting in finding out why so many non-autistic writers had included these characters. What was the reasoning there? Especially if they were portrayals that ended up being mired in stereotypes or that fed into misinformation - or with behind the scenes research which demonstrated the writers only thought to enageg with autistic people *after* deciding to write about them.

Nicky went away to have a look into this, and it was a mess. She kept digging and digging, and eventually when I asked how it was going she explained she just couldn't get it to come together into a complete section, because it didn't feel complete. It felt lacking, empty, a list of quotes and citations from various interviews, but it didn't feel like enough. This was clearly frustrating, so we moved on, and left the notes to come back to later.

But thinking about it, that feeling of incompleteness is surely a symptom of the problem itself. Of course there won't be a logical and understandable list of reasons for the appeal of writing autistic characters if allistic screenwriters don't themselves really know about autism as a complex and individualised spectrum. And because if they then decide to try to engage with and understand autistic people during the writing process, they would surely be hesitant to reveal their initital motivation was an ignorant kind of fascination.

I think we can hazard a guess at reasons that lie deep down for some of these writers - they have seen the autistic savant character so many times they just assume that's a fair game archetype, they want to write a kind of inspiration porn story for those poor

autisitics, they see it as a useful narrative device, they think it will Rain Man them into a “lofty” “worthy” seeming story.

There is an overarching element here that Nicky summarised as “simple laziness”. It’s *easy* to just go along with it – these tropes are so encoded in popular imagination that there’s a kind of shorthand to autism representation. This single mother needs to be more sympathetic, so we’ll give her an autistic kid – because we all know that autistic children are difficult and violent, a nightmare for their parents. (Of course, what this stereotype doesn’t often acknowledge is how difficult it is to *be* autistic, to be presented as a burden to those around them.)

Nicky pointed out the way even with side characters steretpyical autsitic-coded behaviours and personality traits are used as a shorthand for an unpopular and unpleasant outsider. They are layered with a heavyhand and rarely given any nuance, sympathy, or redeeming qualities. Michael from recent movie Saltburn was an example that came to mind for both of us- they needed a character to contrast to the cool and popular crowd, and made him unpredictable, aggressive, cold, yet also inappropriately attached to main characters Oliver, forcing his friendship on him where it’s not wanted; and, of course, he’s a savant-like genius. All fragments of coding that pass on through the popular view of “what autism is”.

Again and again, autism and autistic people are a narrative device – to engender empathy for a neurotypical character, or the subject of patronising sympathy themselves, or a source of inspiration porn. We end up geting a mishmash of a bunch of typical reasonings from a single source in interviews with Atypical creator Robia Rashid. We found a number of writers who mentioned having autistic people “close to them”, often children in their family, for example, and Rashid was one of those people:

> “I do have personal experience with it, yeah. I don’t want to talk about it too much because I want to protect their privacy, but yes, I do. Sam’s story and this person’s story are very different, but it really helped with me being drawn to this topic and keeping an eye on the family members of people on the spectrum, and how they’re affected.”

She has also talked about the idea of autism being a hook to differentiate the coming of age story in her show:

> “You’ve seen the story of somebody looking for independence and looking for love before, but not from that specific point of view. I really was drawn to that. I was a little annoyed because it sounded really hard! I had to do a lot of research.”

And, of course, the idea of using autism as shorthand for someone abnormal, to spread a message of acceptance.

> “For me, the show is about what it means to be normal and how nobody’s normal, and that is why the show is relatable. It’s about everyone and their struggle to be understood and find love and feel like they’re not alone.”

When writers say something like “We wanted to teach the world about autism”, I think it then opens them up to potential critique when it turns out they didn’t hire autistic writers or actors. It’s fair to question, I would say, why are you the one to do this teaching? So, I can totally understand many writers and creators simply not saying anything about the whys.

The Impact

So – does all this matter? Well, I’d say yes, I made an unecessarily long video about this after all.

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, more and better representation of autistic people in media and popular culture allows autistic people to understand themselves better. This might be because they can relate to a character’s experiences and find similar solutions to challenges that character faces, or it might be bigger than that – it might be the reason they realise they’re autistic at all.

Autistic people often find it particularly challenging to identify their own feelings and internal experiences, due to high rates of alexithymia among autistic people. For this reason, accurate representation and access to external reference points can be super important in helping autistic people to recognise and give voice to their experiences – many late-diagnosed autistic people describe thinking that their experiences were common until their diagnosis, and knowing that something was wrong but not knowing what. Accurate, explicit representation provides a route out of this confusion and loneliness, towards self-knowledge, diagnosis, and support.

Representation also helps autistic people in the same way that all representation helps the people being represented: to feel seen, heard, and less alone. This may be particularly important for autistic people, whose experiences of socialisation and communication are complex. As Chloe Hayden says,

> "You can't be what you can't see. Growing up, never seeing myself represented, I grew up thinking I wasn't supposed to be here. [...] Young people can look at Quinni and go, "OK, if she exists as wholly and beautifully and unapologetically as she does, then I can too."

And it's not just about awareness and understanding, although those are vital. Simply being exposed to portrayals of autistic people in media makes allistic people feel more positively towards autistic people – this is thanks to a psychological phenomenon called the "mere-exposure effect". Put simply, people begin to like something purely because of repeated exposure to it, and this has been shown to apply to allistic peoples' perception of autistic people, too.

And finally, increased calls for representation also have a positive side effect on the production landscape for autistic creatives – and in general, as increasing neurodiversity increases the strength and capacity of a team. As more attention is paid to getting neurodiversity and autism right onscreen, and the importance of lived experiences in creating these representations, there are more opportunities for autistic writers, actors, directors, and so on to have careers in media in which they are able to identify themselves as autistic and draw on their experiences and skills, without having to hide their identities to be accepted.

You might notice that I caveated several of these points by saying that media representation needs to be *accurate* – because as soon as it's not accurate, these positive effects go awry. Similarly, representations of autism in popular culture need to be explicitly named as such for these impacts to occur; otherwise, people continue to relate to and like autistic-coded ~quirky characters whom they assume to be neurotypical, while stigmatising and rejecting the actual autistic people in their life who behave the same way, because of their unchallenged prejudices and stereotypes.

As with all representation, if we acknowledge the power positive, complex, nuanced characters can have, we also need to appreciate that the opposite may also be true. That representation that is simplistic, inaccurate, and even damaging can be just as impactful - particularly if it plays on existing assumptions and stereotypes. It's a vicious cycle – allistic writers influenced by their assumptions and internal biases continue the legacy of these characters, which then affects allistic audiences and writers alike view of autistic people.

These misconceptions are not just something that might fester in the mind of audiences, shaping how they conceive of autistic people - but can also affect how they treat them. It isn't hard to imagine how a narrow view of autistic people could lead to instances of mistreatment, disbelief, infantilisation - not to mention undue pressures and expectations placed on autistic people themselves around what an autistic person "should" be like.

A lack of diversity within mainstream autistic representation, where white middle-class straight men seem to be the norm, is frustrating for the typical reasons a lack of diverse representation might be - the way it fails to represent the world as it is. But the idea of "you can't be what you can't see" takes on a more impactful meaning when applied to autistic characters - where those outside of this narrow view of autism might be prevented from accessing resources, understanding, or even diagnosis.

We also have the focus on these exceptional savant figures, giving this one special skill that justifies these characters being allowed to partake in society. Accommodations are grudgingly granted on account of their gift – not seen as something everyone should be given in the classroom and workplace. Acceptance is earned, and support deserved, by what skills you can give that "make up for" your autism.

We see this in a lot of disability and neurodivergent-based campaigns - getting people into work, not necessarily as a path to independence, but so they can contribute to the economy.

For example, as a show of the dystopian world we live in, we have the example oif programmes which specifically "target" autistic employees. Aa journalist David Kushner explained in an article in Esquire:

> "Leaders in the Israeli army developed a program to recruit autistic people for technical and detail-oriented roles. Soon, organizations such as software company SAP, tech company Hewlett Packard, consulting firm Ernst & Young, and many others developed programs of their own."

Autistic adults around the world experience high rates of unemployment and underemployment – with a range of studies and reviews citing employment figures as low as 18% in the UK. A report by The Institute of Leadership & Management found that half of the respondents, made up of over 1000 managers in the UK, would:

“be uncomfortable employing or line managing someone who is neurodivergent.”

It would be a mistake, I think, to encourage the view of either superhuman savant powers being the positive trade off, or relying on forcing autistic people to mask and push through overload and burn out to “act” as similarly to their allistic colleagues as possible.

Rather, an understanding of individual skills, a comprehensive and inclusive accommodation programme, and access to equal pay, benefits, and non-discriminatory support is needed. Representation that fails to engage with the everyday experiences of actually autistic people - whether in work, relationships, communities, and free-time passions - risks creating symbolic archetypes that can be used to withhold resources and information for those that don’t fit this narrow “definition” of what it is to be autistic at all.