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Lost In Adaptation

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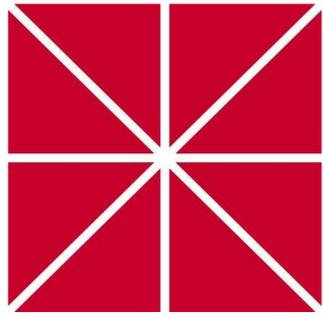
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Lost in Adaptation: Representing Women on the Spectrum in Film & TV

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Jacques Derrida

Abstract

philosophical societies that send us here as their representatives- can no longer, in this case, allow itself [the philosophical idea] to be enclosed in a single idiom, at the risk of floating, neutral and disembodied, remote from every body of language (Derrida 1994: 14)

Introduction

In *Sending: on representation* (1994), Jacques Derrida questions the function of representation that we can use to offer a challenge to the experience and structure of representation as a practice in visual culture and for contemporary spectatorship. When the function of representation is being questioned, rather than its subject, the practice of representation is seen to expose a “system of thought” that is often ‘enclosed in a single idiom’. The Autism spectrum (particularly individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome) is predominantly portrayed via a narrow mediated lens, intended to work as a representative of the Autistic Spectrum as a whole. Television programs and films, such as: *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present), *Sherlock* (2010-present), *Parenthood* (2007-2014), *Adam* (2009), *Rain Man* (1988), show only the most extremist and stereotypical portrayal of the characteristics found within an individual with Asperger’s. All of these films and television programs feature men or boys on the spectrum. As a woman with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS), I often feel boxed into the stereotypical representation of Asperger’s that the offers, as I am expected to act a certain way. When my AS diagnosis is revealed I tend to be perceived differently. Perhaps this lack of representation of girls and women with Asperger’s in film and television media is directly correlated to the amount of women being misdiagnosed with another learning or mental disorder.

Topics



Asexual Robots



Few & Far Between



Broadening The Scope

Brief Terms

Term: Asperger’s Syndrome (AS)

An individual with Asperger’s Syndrome has “a developmental disorder related to autism and characterized by higher than average intellectual ability coupled with impaired social skills and restrictive, repetitive patterns of interest and activities” (Oxford English Dictionary). The diagnosis for the disorder formed in 1944 under the pediatrician and psychiatrist Hans Asperger in Vienna, Austria, but what is considered average intelligence? Does this definition play a role in the single idiom understanding of AS? The classification of ‘disorder’ was withdrawn from the DSM in 2013, but the consequence of its association has persisted within visual culture. The current question that faces future study, is how to readdress the connotations of Asperger’s Syndrome of being a disorder, as these have been largely predetermined by television and film. More recently, such examples as *The Bridge* (Swedish/Danish 2011-present), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (U.S. 2009), *Autism in Pink* (2014) and *How to Dance in Ohio* (2015) have begun to introduce a different set of connotations for Asperger’s that identify it more as being a specifically male and different way of thinking and processing information. These examples of specifically categorized female portrayals of AS challenge the prescriptive ‘single idiom’ bound to acts of representation to which Derrida refers.

Term: Idiom

In a literal sense AS is not its own idiom, or language, but because of the disconnect between individuals with and without AS, there is significant miscommunication (as well as communication breakdown) when individuals with AS try to be understood by their neurotypical peers. In *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self Experience*, British psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas asserts the belief that “each of us at birth is equipped with a unique idiom of psychic organization that constitutes the core of our self” (Bollas 1992: 51). Using this concept, I pose the following question: if each individual has their own idiom or language than why are individuals with AS expected to model a singular idiom in the mode of their neurotypical peers? Perhaps in order to gain insight into the various idioms of individuals with AS we can use Bollas idea of looking at the objects and behaviors of another in order to enhance our acceptance of different idioms, “it allows us to consider forms of existence selected by human life, sculpted through choice and use of objects, but unencumbered by the imposing physical presence of the subject who seems to be self defining in and through his own presence” (Bollas 1992: 55-56). Unfortunately this approach appears to be one sided, as individuals with AS need to observe and mimic the behaviors of neurotypical peers as a means of survival.

Terms: Neurodiversity, Neurotypicals and Masking

The term neurodiversity looks at a “range of differences in individual brain function and behavioral traits, regarded as part of normal variation in the human population (used especially in the context of autistic spectrum disorders)” (Oxford English Dictionary). AS is on the Autistic Spectrum, meaning that all individuals display symptoms, characteristics, and behaviors differently. The Autism Self Advocacy Network has expanded upon this idea:

Neurodiversity is a natural form of diversity, found in every human society. It is similar in many ways to other forms of diversity, such as ethnic, racial, cultural, sexual, or gender diversity. Like these other forms of diversity, neurodiversity can enrich a society or community that embraces it; however, it is frequently met with prejudice and hostility by people who believe that there’s just one “right” way for others to be, to think, or to act.

(Autism Self Advocacy Network 2006)

On the other hand, neurotypicals are individuals without an Autism spectrum disorder. This is not to say that neurotypicals cannot empathize with individuals with AS, but it instead asserts that neurotypicals can never know what it is like to be an individual on the spectrum. In an attempt to blend into neurotypical society, Aspies mask their autistic characteristics. ‘Masking’ in a broad sense refers to “a manner or expression that hides one’s true character or feelings; a pretense,” (OED) and individuals with AS mimic the behavior of neurotypicals in order to comply with social normativity. This paper will look at the negative effects of masking and the ways in which film and televisual media have presented or failed to present the masking effect in individuals with AS.

Term: Avoidance

Since the process of masking is psychically exhausting, as it requires a great deal of energy to hide my natural responses and mimic or adapt to the peers of a social environment, I often enter a period of avoidance in order to regain enough energy to engage socially at a later time. In terms of AS this avoidance is “action of keeping away from or not doing something” (OED) in order to avoid situations that may cause an over-stimulation, leading to a meltdown. When a AS meltdown occurs it takes a significantly longer period of avoidance in order to process what has happened and recover before engage in these types of settings.

Term: AS Transgression

Transgression applies to the action and the limit (Foucault 1977: 33). In terms of AS, individuals with it can sometimes go against the ‘code of conduct’ in a neurotypical society. The lack of empathy, eye contact, social skills, and motor skills that can be found in some individuals with AS go against, transgress, accepted behavioral patterns, but if an individual with AS conforms to neurotypical behavior, is that not also a transgression? Neurotypicals can express themselves in a variety of ways without their actions being viewed as transgressive, but since AS tends to be understood as a single idiom when AS presents itself differently it is automatically viewed as transgressive behavior. Since a woman’s behavior is scrutinized more so than her male peers, even for neurotypicals, it is more difficult to find a balance between behaving as oneself without coming under condemnation of her neurotypical peers for her supposed transgression. “Transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable,” but it’s a constantly repeating pattern for individuals AS, as their behavior is limited to a singular portrayal (Foucault 1977: 34)