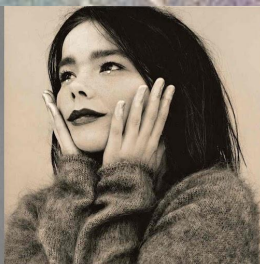
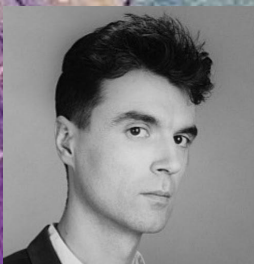




Autism
in the
Media:
The
Good,
the Bad,
the
Coded,
and the
Canon



PowerPoint
and
research
by Connor
Runnings

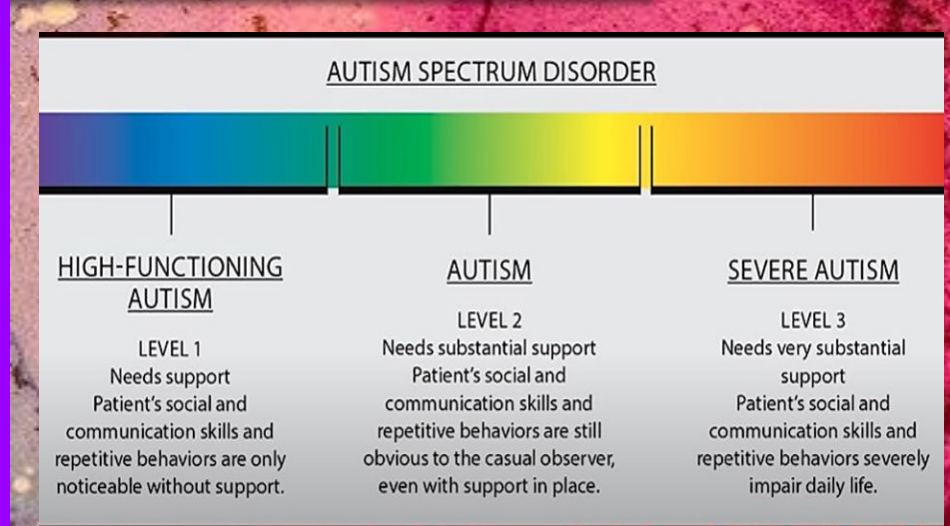


Early History of Autism

- The first case of autism was diagnosed in 1911 by Eugin Bleuler, who characterized it as a symptom of schizophrenia.
- Autism was better defined as a "social and emotional disorder" by Lee O'Connor in 1943.
- Hans Asperger (right) further characterized the social aspect of the disability in 1944, and coined the now-defunct definition of Asperger's Syndrome. *(Fun fact: he's a Nazi!)*



- Autism treatments from the 50s to the 80s consisted mostly of aversive punishments.
- In the 70s, Temple Grandin (left) and Guy Berard broke ground with their research and techniques.
- In the 80s, autism was added to the DSM (right).



Early Representations, Rain Man, and Inspiration Porn

- While there were a handful of portrayals of autism in the 80s, *Rain Man* (1988) was the film that brought autism into the public consciousness.
- Two types of autism portrayals became prevalent afterwards: "overpowered savant" and "pitiable burden." The latter usually becomes tragedy porn or inspiration porn.
- Examples of inspiration porn: *Forrest Gump*, *Miracle Run*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *Dear John*, *The Story of Luke*, *Music* (2021)
- Overpowered Savants: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, BBC's *Sherlock*, *The Predator* (2018)
- The very first instance of an autistic actor playing an autistic character is Lizzie Clark in BBC's *Dustbin Baby* (2008)
- My take: inspiration porn is so widespread because it's Capitalism's attempt to prove the system works for everyone when it doesn't.



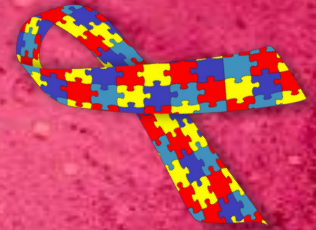
Cure Propaganda and Autism Speaks (TW: ABLEISM)

- Pathology Paradigm: viewing autism biologically rather than psychologically
- The cure movement has been around as long as the diagnosis has (Remember Hans Asperger's history of eugenics!)
- *Molly* (1999) was a film that had a cure narrative
- 90s dramas with an "autistic-kid-destroys-their-parents'-marriage" plot: *Backstreet Dreams*, *Family Pictures*, *David's Mother*, *Cries From the Heart* (yes, this was an actual subgenre)
- In 2002, Marvel's Reed Richards became canonically autistic (bottom)

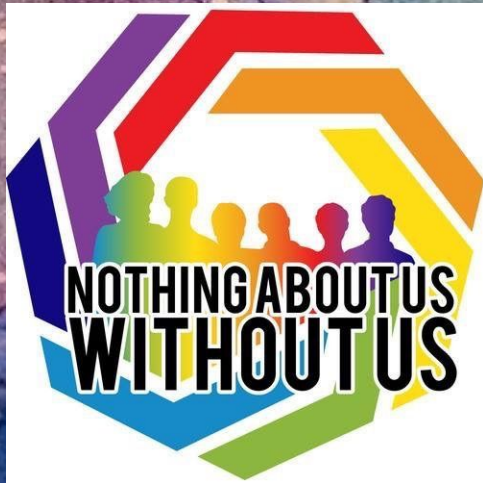
Autism Speaks has been the cure movement's largest proponent:

- Founded in 2005 by Bob Wright
- Established an anti-autism stance right away with PSAs and initiatives such as *I Am Autism*, *Autism Every Day*, and *Light it Up Blue*
- The puzzle piece is their symbol, framing us as a mystery
- Condemned by 60 disability justice groups
- Dropped the word "cure" from their mission in 2016
- Has a strong influence over autism-related content in Hollywood and is backed by many high-profile celebrities
- Certain sponsored works: *Atypical*, *As We See It*, *Music* (2021)

"I am autism. (...) I work faster than pediatric AIDS, cancer, and diabetes combined. And if you're happily married, I will make sure that your marriage fails. (...) I will plot to rob you of your children and your dreams. (...) And the truth is, I am still winning, and you are scared. And you should be." ~I Am Autism



The Neurodiversity Movement and ASAN



- Key ideas: education, accessibility, training, normalization, and inclusion of autistic people in conversations about autism
- The Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) was founded in 2006 by Ari Ne'eman (as a teenager!)
- Related organizations: Autism Network International, Autism National Committee, and the Autistic Women and Non-Binary Network
- Symbols: rainbow figure-8, sunflower lanyard
- *Mary and Max* (2009) features an autistic protagonist that openly condemns the idea of a cure for autism
- Notable names: Temple Grandin, Ari Ne'eman, Julia Bascom, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

Normalization: A Double-Edged Sword

Positive Normalization:

- Normalizing autistic access needs in public (accessibility aids, support animals)
- Normalizing autistic communication styles, especially in romantic relationships
- In social troubleshooting, treating autistic people with the same level of accountability/patience that you would have with anyone else
- Portraying canonically autistic characters without needing to make a "statement" about autism
- Multiple autistic/ND characters in stories; diversity over tokenism

Negative Normalization:

- Normalizing abuse or resentment against autistic people, especially from family members (AS's anti-autism PSAs, *Atypical*, *Music*)
- Normalizing social marginalization or ridicule against autistic people (social media "cringe culture")
- "Autistic" being used as a pejorative or a slur
- Using "Rain Man" or "Sheldon Cooper" as insults against autistic people
- Even just using the r-slur at all

Autistic person: *has non violent meltdown*

NTs who just watched sias 'music': " No worries! We know what to do!"



Who put this together, are you autistic?



Overt Rep in TV

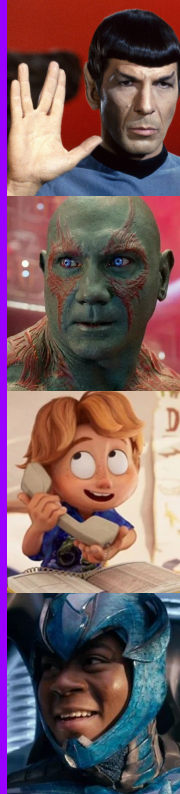
- Most of the widely known explicit autism rep tends to come from TV in shows like *Community*, *Everything's Gonna Be Okay*, *The Good Doctor*, *Atypical*, and *As We See It*.
- It is also important to mention that the latter three shows contain stereotypical portrayals endorsed by AS.
- The format of TV allows for more nuanced portrayals over a longer period of time.
- The autistic space race of *The Big Bang Theory* and *Community*; TBBT won in terms of ratings and awards recognition, but *Community* maintained a stronger longevity in its cult following.
- Sheldon Cooper was never actually confirmed or denied to be autistic.
- Elon Musk claimed to be the first autistic host on *Saturday Night Live* in 2021 (Even though it was actually founding member Dan Aykroyd)
- *Everything's Gonna Be Okay* (2020-2021) only ran for two seasons but quietly made waves in explicit autism portrayals on TV, and in autistic involvement in these stories.



Coded vs. Canon Rep

Coded:

- Often done when it's not an autism-related story and they don't want it to detract from the main themes
- In aliens, robots, and generally otherworldly characters (Spock from *Star Trek*, Drax from *Guardians Of The Galaxy*)
- Neurodivergent bait: giving a character autistic traits while avoiding taking an active stance on autistic issues in society
- Coding usually works best when taking a covertly ND-positive stance (*Mitchells vs. Machines*, *Steven Universe*, *Poor Things*)



Canon:

- Often done to make a statement or fulfill a creative agenda
- Historically used for tragedy points or inspiration points
- The second you say "autism" in something, AS will try to get involved and curate the portrayal to fit their narrative
- Even certain canon portrayals like Abed had to avoid using the word itself so they don't incur too much unwanted attention
- Usually at its best when it's normalized in a given work without much intent beyond that (*Community*, *Power Rangers 2017*)

Autistic Screenwriters, Auteurs, and Actors

- Comedian and screenwriter Dan Aykroyd (*SNL*, *Ghostbusters*, *The Blues Brothers*) was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome in the 80s, becoming one of the first major celebrities to publicly have autism or Asperger's (top left).
- Director David F. Sandberg (*Shazam*, *Lights Out*) has been public about his autism diagnosis (top right).
- Both Dan Harmon (bottom left) and Josh Thomas (bottom right) created autistic characters for their sitcoms *Community* and *Everything's Gonna Be Okay*, respectively. Writing for these characters eventually led both Harmon and Thomas to realize that they're autistic themselves, taking self-diagnosis tests online to confirm it.
- Thomas even wrote his self-diagnosis journey into his character's arc on *EGBO*!
- Other autistic actors/comedians: Vincent D'Onofrio (left), Sir Anthony Hopkins, Daryl Hannah, Paddy Considine, Kayla Cromer, Chloe Hayden, Tig Notaro, Jimmy Carr



Case Study: *Community* and the Shared Language of Pop Culture

- Dan Harmon initially conceived *Community* as a semi-autobiographical retelling of his own experience at Glendale Community College through Jeff (bottom right)
- Abed Nadir, the autistic character, was based on someone from Harmon's friend group at Glendale who was also named Abed
- Abed is an aspiring filmmaker, and communicates heavily in pop culture references to compensate for his social cluelessness
- This shared language is a key building block of the show, tackling both autism representation in the media and the teaching power of stories
- He often films when he needs something to do ("It's relaxing to me; it's like knitting.")
- The show's focus shifted from Jeff to Abed, who became Harmon's new self-insert character and the path to Harmon getting an autism diagnosis

"Everyone else is growing and changing all the time, and that's not really my jam. I'm more of a fast-blinking, stoic, removed, uncomfortably self-aware type. Like Data or Johnny 5 or Mork or HAL or K.I.T.T. or K9 or Woodstock and/or Snoopy. Of course Spock probably goes without saying..."
~Abed Nadir



Case Study: Where Things Were in 2021

High Point: Josh Thomas's sitcom *Everything's Gonna Be Okay*

- Premise: After his father dies, hedonistic twentysomething Nicholas is thrust into a caretaker position for his two teenage half sisters
- Autistic actress Kayla Cromer was cast as Nicholas's autistic half-sister, Matilda, and she was given the final say in how the character was portrayed in relation to her autism
- More autistic characters began to pop up, such as Matilda's love interest, Drea, who is asexual and has a service dog
- Between Nicholas, Matilda, and Drea, the show was also able to address the overlap between autism and the LGBTQIA+ community

Low Point: Sia's film *Music*

- Premise: Wayward addict Zu becomes guardian of her nonverbal autistic sister, Music, after her previous caretaker commits suicide
- NT actress Maddie Ziegler was cast as Music, and her concerns about the problematic portrayal were ultimately ignored by Sia
- Music's characterization was shockingly ableist, and she came off like an insulting caricature of disabled existence
- Zu commits several cardinal NT caretaker sins, such as physical restraint during meltdowns and open homicidal ideation towards Music
- Sia stonewalled autistic concerns on Twitter, but later admitted to being autistic herself (Holy Internalized Ableism!)



Speaking From Their Own Experience

"I'm an astronaut on the ocean floor" ~Owl City,
Bird With a Broken Wing

- Autistic musicians: David Byrne, Bjork, Courtney Love, Susan Boyle, Owl City, Dan Bull, The AutistiX
- While the latter two examples have songs directly about autism, the others convey the autistic experience simply by conveying their experience (Ex. *Psycho Killer*, *Human Behaviour*)
- Greta Thunberg and David Byrne both address the "autism as a superpower" narrative; empowering for the individual, invalidating as a generalization
- Comedians such as Hannah Gadsby and Fern Brady have spoken candidly about their experiences as later-diagnosed autistic women, using their platform to shape collective knowledge for the better



Social Media's Influence



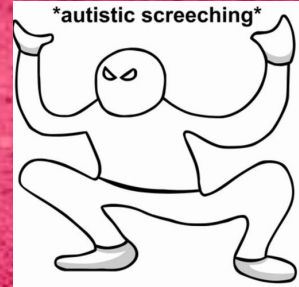
@Neurodivergent_lou

The Good:

- Autistic creators now have a platform to use their own voice (Neurodivergent Lou on Instagram, Stephanie Bethany on YouTube)
- Since social media blurs the lines between the personal and the institutional, there's a lot more awareness of the cure backlash
- The neurodiversity movement is a household name and has more followers than it ever had before
- The many wonders of the online autistic community <3

The Bad:

- There's as much misinformation out there as there is information (Vaccines/autism, etc.)
- Autistic meltdowns getting made into memes and posted on YouTube
- Ableist memes in general
- "Cringe culture" and cyberbullying (Chris Chan, AirsoftFatty)
- Autistic Twitter and its dumpster fire of rage which creates further divisions
- Identity politics and reactionary discourse



Case Study: *Rick and Morty*

- Rick and Morty (2015-present) is a sci-fi animated sitcom created by Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland [REDACTED].
- Rick is fundamentally an antihero, which means that certain fans idolize him for the wrong reasons.
- He also used the r-slur multiple times in the early seasons, with Morty calling him out for it each time.
- Around the third season, there was a surge of negativity online surrounding the show with fans acting entitled and hostile.
- During this period, autistic people were often an easy target online for both the fans and the people criticizing the fans.
- Dan Harmon hated this phenomenon, so he revealed Rick to be autistic in the Season 3 finale, setting it up like an ableist joke.



Loop, Sesame Street, and Nonverbal Communication



- Julia is an autistic muppet who made her *Sesame Street* debut in 2017
- Developed with consultation from Julia Bascom of ASAN



- She became a pivotal character in societal understanding of autistic non-speakers
- In 2020, Pixar released the short *Loop* on Disney+.
- Both Julia and *Loop*'s protagonist Renee use AAC devices to communicate, and both pieces are fundamentally about teaching how to communicate with nonverbal autistic kids
- ASAN endorsed both portrayals instantly

Intentional Coding vs. Fan Projection

- Neurotypical interpretations are often based on stereotypes (Sheldon, Forrest Gump, etc.)
- Autistic interpretations are often based on the feeling of "they're just like me fr" (Drax, L from *Death Note*, Edward Scissorhands, Mr. Robot, etc.)
- There's often subjectivity as to whenever something could be read as conscious autistic coding or not
- Reading into the artist's intent is problematic
- The problem with accepting relentless projection over canon portrayals: if everything is autism rep, nothing is autism rep.
- All neurodiversities and mental illnesses are just different combinations of traits we exhibit, so it's really easy to assume something is something else because a few traits line up with each other

That being said, the next few slides are about my personal autistic readings of films, and how each of them helped me understand different categories of autistic traits I connect with.



If I had a nickel for every time
turned out to be a robot I'd have two nickels.
a reliable autistic coded character from my favorite show at the time
Which isn't a lot but it's weird that it happened twice.

Personal Highlight #1: *Punch-Drunk Love*, Emotional Disregulation, and Autistic Trauma

"I don't know if there is anything wrong with me, because I don't know how other people are." ~Barry Egan

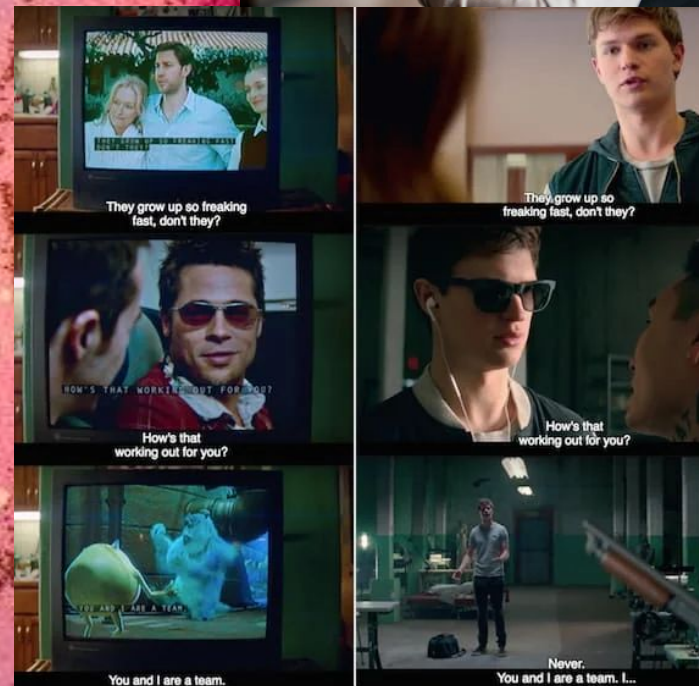
- In Paul Thomas Anderson's *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), Adam Sandler plays Barry Egan, an anxious, autistic-coded small business owner who faces ableist bullying from his sisters and financial abuse from scammers
- Barry has no coping strategies for his trauma, which means he has violent meltdowns
- The film conveys his sensory experience through the mise en scene; it starts out as overwhelming and abrasive, but becomes dreamy when he falls in love
- When he enters the film's central relationship, his newfound love empowers him to stand up to his bullies
- The film is as much a self-love story as a love story
- PTA took inspiration from *Rain Man* in a positive way, even borrowing Raymond's echolalic phrase "I don't know" for Barry



Personal Highlight #2: *Baby Driver*, Echolalia, Routines, and Accommodations

"Wait. I gotta start the song again." ~Baby

- In Edgar Wright's *Baby Driver* (2017) Baby is a getaway driver for a group of bank robbers, who listens to music as a concentration tool (and to drown out his tinnitus)
- He is The Ultimate Autistic Action Hero
- Communicates primarily through echolalia (right), using his own words sparingly
- Loves repetition and routines
- Is capable of doing his job perfectly when he has music, but has a hard time self-regulating without it
- Connects with people through music like Abed connects with people through movies
- In the end, his strength of character is what ultimately redeems him



Personal Highlight #3: *Amelie*, Autistic Socialization, and Autistic Love Languages

"She can't relate to other people. She was always a lonely child." ~Amelie Poulain (mocking how people talk about her)

- Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (2002) follows timid waitress Amélie Poulain, played by Audrey Tautou.
- Amelie grew up homeschooled, having been medically gaslit by her emotionally unavailable parents.
- Now in her 20s, Amélie has very little social agency; she has a rich inner life, but outside connection is a luxury.
- She becomes a guardian angel figure for her Paris neighborhood as a form of exposure therapy.
- The film is shot in an immersive, maximalist style to properly convey the vibrancy of her worlds.
- Her inner dialogue is shown in the TV she watches.
- As she develops confidence, she falls for fellow social outcast Nino, but remains too shy to talk to him directly. Instead, they embark on a wild goose chase of secret messaging to each other until Amelie is finally forced to be brave and face him in real life.



Personal Highlights #4 and #5: *The Mitchells vs. the Machines*, *Percy Jackson*, and Neurodivergent Strengths

"We're here because we don't *THINK* like normal people. (...) *The Mitchells* have always been weird, and that's what makes us great." ~Rick Mitchell

- Mike Rianda's *The Mitchells vs. the Machines* (2020) is a post-covid animated family sci-fi epic about communication and personal strengths
- The family is extremely ND coded, and they all have special interests and spiky skills profiles
- When the AI invasion happens, their unpredictable ND differences keep them from being captured, and ultimately helps them save humanity



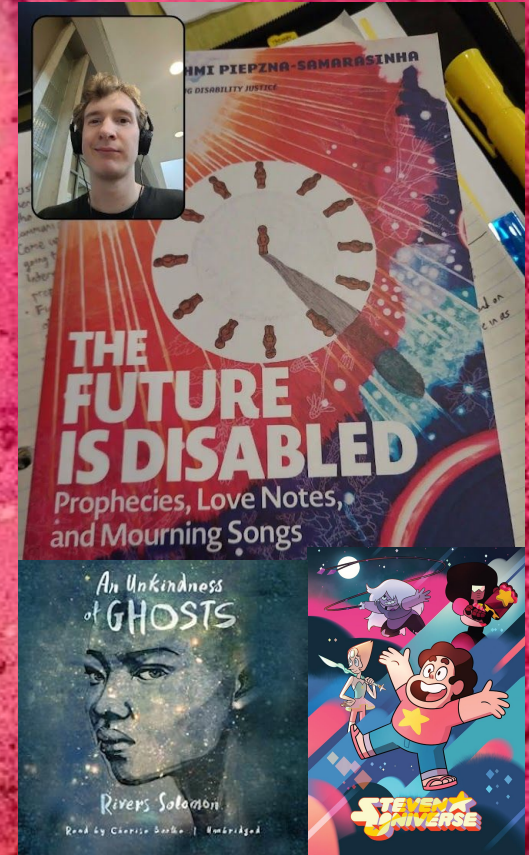
"Demigods process reality differently than humans do." ~Luke Castellan



- Rick Riordan wrote the novels for his ND son, giving the characters ADHD and dyslexia as a way to reframe them as strengths
- While nobody is **EXPLICITLY** autistic so far, Annabeth feels autistic-coded in the show because of her flat affect, repetitive speech, hyperfocus, and pragmatism
- The central theme of ND kids learning how to fight back against a world that threatens to destroy them makes it one of the most iconic ND works of all time

The Future is Disabled, sci-fi, and "Crip Futurism"

- In Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's book *The Future is Disabled*, she puts forth the idea of "Crip Futurism" and the importance of disabled wisdom to humanity's survival
- Crip Futurism: as the world becomes increasingly disabled by the war, pandemics, and the climate crisis, disabled people will help the rest of the world persevere with their pre-existing disabled survival techniques (How to use an air filter, masks, etc.)
- "We have to fight to have a future, always, in a world trying to kill us"
- Autistic coding and disability representation has been present in sci-fi since its inception, since that's a big faction of its target audience
- Autistic people (and disabled people in general) gravitate towards sci-fi because it pushes the limits of what's possible
- *An Unkindness of Ghosts*' social commentary through an ND-centered sci-fi lens
- *Steven Universe* teaches important life skills (for ND people and in general) through the sci-fi medium, such as stress/trauma management and self-soothing



The Barriers to Perfect Representation

- When AS partnered with *Sesame Street*, they instituted a "100 Day Kit" which contained troubling and alienating messages about handling autism in relationships with loved ones. ASAN (who had initially endorsed the show) made a "us or them" ultimatum about AS, and PBS went with the more publicly and financially backed option.
- In my experience trying to make ND-centered theatre, limits within administration and high communication demands kept productions from being truly accessible. We were given too big of a workload on too short of a time frame, which set us up to suffer under the very disorder we were meant to be celebrating.
- The biggest lesson I learned was this: internalized capitalism leads directly to internalized ableism.
- Unless there's a significant procedural/staff overhaul, AS's continued existence and influence is always going to be a barrier in the public perception of autism.

ASAN Has Ended Partnership With Sesame Street

August 5, 2019



The Autistic Self Advocacy Network condemns Sesame Street's decision to further stigma against autistic children and adults in their new Public Service Announcements.

THE MORE YOU UNDERSTAND HER WORLD, THE MORE POSSIBILITIES YOU SEE.

Find out more at ScreenForAutism.org

THE AUTISM SPEAKS

SESAME WORKSHOP

Where Do We Go From Here?

- Massive strides have been made since the first public portrayals of autism, but there's still a long way to go.
- Since the spectrum is so wide, the diversity in portrayals needs to be even wider. This means more representation of autism in women, BIPOC, the LGBTQIA+ community, and people with other visible and invisible disabilities.
- More conversation needs to happen about how autism intersects with belonging to other marginalized groups, and how the experience of one group identity informs the experience of other group identities within a person.
- Whether you're ND or NT, *listen to your autistic friends and loved ones when talking about portrayals and representation.*



References :

- Every film mentioned in this Presentation:
<https://letterboxd.com/dinoshroom/list/films-ive-included-in-my-autism-in-the-media/>
- TV Mentioned: *Bones*, *BBC's Sherlock*, *Community*, *Everything's Gonna Be Okay*, *The Good Doctor*, *Atypical*, *As We See It*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Saturday Night Live*, *Steven Universe*, *Rick and Morty*, *Sesame Street*, *Death Note*, *Mr. Robot*, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*
- Books Quoted: *Strong Female Character*, *The Future is Disabled*, *An Unkindness of Ghosts*
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHdtOpzKlNw&list=PLpUnJb-BNsetBtaGcMlget5GFrqUzYiu0&index=2&t=1877s> Autism in Media - Movies With Mark
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- https://www.aitinstitute.org/dr_guy_berard.htm Guy Berard and AIT
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- <https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/> ASAN's homepage
- <https://19thnews.org/2022/04/julia-bascom-asan-autism-advocacy/> Julia Bascom and Ari Ne'eman
- <https://youtu.be/8KtKm08jSZU?si=jVnVWJs2zw7zzuFa> Atypical & Autism in Media | We Don't Talk About Disability Issues
- https://autism-advocacy.fandom.com/wiki/Dan_Aykroyd (Dan Aykroyd being autistic)
- <https://themighty.com/topic/disability/vincent-donofrio-queens-theatre-disability-hollywood/> Vincent D'Onofrio's Q&A about disability inclusion/accessibility
- <https://time.com/5942094/sia-music-disability-representation/> The Sins of Sia's *Music* (2021)
- <https://www.cbr.com/steven-universe-neurodivernt-crystal-gems/> Rebecca Sugar's take on *Steven Universe's* characters being ND
- <https://autisticadvocacy.org/2019/08/asan-has-ended-partnership-with-sesame-street/> The ASAN/Sesame Street Fallout
- <https://www.mcgilldaily.com/2021/04/watching-abed-nadir-watching-myself/> How Watching Abed Nadir Made Me Feel Seen
- Other pictures from Google Images, Reddit, and my personal camera roll