

MEDIA REVIEW: Autism Chic – A New Path to Exclusion?

As someone whose life is not personally touched by autism, I have been wondering what to make of its growing prominence in mainstream media. Suddenly, cultural commentators are bringing autistic renderings into our view. We seem surrounded.

Recently, I came across a short *Vanity Fair* article (Scovell, 2009) about a set of public service announcements (PSAs) available at www.Rethinkingautism.com. Described as a tongue-in-cheek look at medically unsupported autism “fixes,” the PSAs are a thinly veiled attempt to re-write the messages promoted by celebrity cum mother activist Jenny McCarthy.

Curious, I checked out the PSAs. At 22 seconds each, they must convey their message quickly and powerfully; and they do so, mostly through sexually charged imagery. Leeann Tweedon, a minimally attired model, is featured in a number of provocative settings and poses—reclining on a sofa, lounging on a bed, frolicking on the beach. Hearing the sultry tones of “mood music” through my computer accompanying the puzzling images, I initially wondered if I’d accidentally stumbled upon a pop-up instead of the intended site. But then, fleetingly, the words “Self-advocacy” and “Neurodiversity” flash on the screen. After re-playing the PSA several times, I was finally able to read the whole message—a mere 15 words long.

The PSA spots are the inspiration of the mother of an autistic son. Ostensibly her goal is to “change the conversation (about autism) one video at a time.” The Rethinking Autism website defines many of the words and concepts introduced through the PSAs—embedding links to other websites or news articles where visitors can learn more about, for example, inclusive classrooms, the risks of chelation or the indignities of aversives and restraints. The PSAs don’t try to avoid criticism, instead wade into several heated debates among families of autistic children: vaccinations, special diets, the role of self-advocacy. It’s not surprising then that the PSAs have come under some criticism on other blogs—although most of these question the decision to use sex to communicate any message about autism. Indeed, while the PSAs may be satirizing Jenny McCarthy’s anti-vaccine efforts, they, perhaps like McCarthy herself, use eroticism and sex-appeal to sell autism to a broader audience. And while the combination may seem troubling, for her own part, Jenny McCarthy transformed her celebrity—derived from her work in the entertainment industry—into activism, and has been profiled in the talk show circuit including *Oprah*, *Larry King Live* and *City-Line*. She may be controversial, but she’s keeping autism in the public eye.

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Keywords

Asperger syndrome,
public service
announcements,
films,
magazine articles,
mainstream media,
alternative therapies

Several weeks later, I can remember those PSAs. And I'm struck by how several major autism blogs and social networking sites "kept the conversation going" through their derision of the videos. It's noteworthy that self-advocates have been largely silent about the endeavour.

More recently, books and culture columnist Brian Bethune (2009), addressed the rise of autism in popular culture in *Maclean's*, the Canadian national weekly. Although he contends traditional television portrayals of autism have been confined to the non-verbal, self-harming child, he believes a new image of autism is taking shape. Equally as narrow, the new autistic character in the media is the adult prodigy. With an "IQ north of 163," these characters are brilliant loners: proficient intellectually, but deficient socially.

Bethune's depiction of autism is somewhat disingenuous. He lists several "high-functioning" autistic characters in popular television programs (House, Bones, Boston Legal and others), but not all these characters are, in fact, ever identified as having autism in the programs, a point not clearly made in the column. Similarly, he lists a panoply of characters from recently published fiction, spending considerable time exploring Christopher Boone from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. But, even in literature, there are socially-awkward prodigies, who are popularly understood as autistic despite tenuous evidence to support such categorization. When, in an interview a week after the column's publication, Bethune makes several mistakes about Temple Grandin and the movie *Rainman*, and then elaborates very little on several autism-related questions, it's difficult not to feel as if he, too, is speculating about the place of autism in popular culture himself.

Nevertheless, the autistic character in popular culture seems to capture the zeitgeist. None of this is new, simply mainstreamed. Autism is heavily covered in "new media" outlets. *Wired Magazine* and *New Scientist* have, together, published over 750 articles addressing everything from the latest genetic research to inadequate educational funding to identity politics. (*Vanity Fair*, in contrast, had six articles). Publications like these, that appeal to an audience with a high-brow literary appetite, can provide nuanced, even conflicted

discussions of autism, inviting their audience into ongoing debates. Mainstream media offers up autistic characters and storylines to a much broader audience—albeit in a narrow manner. But if we leave autism in the "geek" science literature, do we risk reinforcing conventional constructions of autism as clinical territory, a condition only to be understood by experts?

Depictions of autism in popular culture have the potential to invite us into the world of autism. As Bethune acknowledges, some will be happy with the proliferation of characters with autism-like qualities. For them, these characters herald a new acceptance, a cultural embrace of neurological difference. Positive role models can foster a greater understanding of the potential contributions made by people with autism, possibly garnering resources to support them with the challenges they inevitably confront. The argument goes on to suggest that people with autism need to see themselves in popular culture, if they want to feel part of culture.

Bethune's subtext however, both in the article and in his subsequent CBC interview, is these pop culture portrayals may have more to do with contemporary anxieties than with any emerging acceptance of neurodiversity. Paraphrasing Susan Sontag, Bethune claims that autism is the defining illness of our time, like AIDS before it, reflecting our deepest fears. In one way, these characters, highly capable, fiercely solitary and assertive, seem ideally suited to our contemporary, individuated, "brain over brawn" society. Following this argument, characters with autism serve as a vehicle through which we can work out our anxieties about a rapidly changing knowledge-based, technologically-intensive world. Perhaps it is okay that we're not keeping up with tides of information washing over us through the internet, television or our cell phones. The only ones who can keep up are so clearly deviant, after all. We feel better about our inability to proficiently speak several languages or perform complex mathematical calculations in our heads; we can console ourselves with the knowledge that we, the neurotypical, are normal.

A risk is that we're participating in a new autism entertainment industry. We have the pleasure of being spectators, not only as "quirky"

characters achieve tremendous intellectual heights, but also as they flout social norms that restrict all of us. We also watch as they experience the everyday insults and indignities of missing social cues, alienating others around them and generally undermining conventional social interactions.

Evidence that characters with autism fulfill a social purpose appears in recent reviews of the film *Adam* (2009). Adam is a young New York toymaker who happens to have Asperger syndrome. As the movie trailer describes, two strangers meet as neighbours, and one them, Adam, is stranger than the other. Although this romance comedy received a favourable review in the *New York Times*, it has been otherwise panned by critics. What's interesting about the film is not simply that Adam fits the new mold of the super-intelligent, mildly endearing, autistic protagonist, but that the critics' barbs are surprisingly pointed at the movie's failure to live up to its promise as an "affliction flick." Critics, charmed by Adam's portrayal of neurological differences, are frustrated by the lack of dramatic tension stemming from the main character's label. As one author suggests, there is a good film to be made about this disease, but this one isn't it. In one shocking turn of phrase, Asperger syndrome is described as dooming Adam to be a "social, professional and sexual retard" (Carraway, 2009). Other reviewers have been much better versed in autism and refrained from such disparaging comments, but they are unanimous in their desire to see something more made of Adam's Aspergers. Clearly, Adam's neurological differences have neither allowed his fellow characters, nor his audience, to grow. Apparently, if no one profits (or suffers) from disability, then what point is there portraying it in a movie?

Autism is made visible to the larger public in specific ways. The proliferation of portrayals of high-functioning autism creates a standard by which all autistic people may be measured. Although the image of the brilliant reclusive is not pejorative, it is narrow and constrictive. As Bethune pointed out, images of autism are dichotomously categorized as either "the screaming child in the corner" or the super-intelligent professional; there is no middle ground. As tends to occur with binaries, we inadvertently begin to organize people into "good and bad autistics." Off camera however, there are many occupants of the terrain between these two locations. The vast array of neurological differences that make up the autism spectrum are easily lost, raising questions about who, exactly, is seeing themselves in the media. For those whose qualities are not so readily interpreted as "gifts," the new media image of autism may, paradoxically, pave the way for further exclusion.

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