

The University Of Chicago

**Respec The Spectrum:
A Speculation on Spectation
(of Autism on TV)**

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the Bachelor of Arts degree in Cinema & Media
Studies

May 2019

INTRODUCTION

In 2017, a peculiar record was set in American television. That year saw the debut of three new characters on fiction television shows who were explicitly identified as autistic. While autism has long been the subject of media attention, very few television characters have been diegetically identified as having autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and fewer still have been the central protagonist on a television show. The 2017 boom in televised autism arrived as the fusion of two different strands of the larger cultural zeitgeist: a fascination with autism and a fascination with elaborate, heavily serialized television shows.

While autistic characters had previously appeared on television (usually as subordinate, secondary characters¹), the simultaneous appearances of *The Good Doctor* and *Atypical*, shows which center on an autistic character, and the addition of Julia, an autistic Muppet, to the cast of *Sesame Street* together created a notable boost in television's attention to autism. The arrival of these shows and characters marks 2017 as a time of change in the televisual treatment of autism, a change made possible by a larger shift in television storytelling at large. As identified by television scholar Jason Mittell, this shift is a transition into a mode of storytelling he calls "narrative complexity".² Narrative complexity builds on the traditional episodic frame of television with a new and involved superstructure of continuity and seriality, allowing for television shows to address long and complex storylines which might run over the course of months or even years.³ This highly serialized (and usually serious) approach fed naturally into the rise of streaming, television on demand, and binge-watching, allowing shows to develop an

¹ Tommy Westphall of *St. Elsewhere* comes to mind, as a child who was distant and largely irrelevant to the show, but deployed to pull off a final shock twist which emphasized the alien power of his brain.

² Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York University Press, 2015. 18.

³ Mittell, 18-20.

extreme density of plot, character development, and reference.⁴ In this new environment, the treatment of serious issues through complex narrative has become a common aspect of television shows, paving the way for shows like *The Good Doctor*, *Atypical*, and even less narratively complex shows like *Sesame Street* to focus more closely on the lives and experiences of autistic people.

This is not to say television was devoid of autistic presence before 2017, but this presence was more often than not implicit, especially where it was attached to major or recurring characters. These characters are not usually relegated to the role of teaching tool, as early explicitly diagnosed characters were, but instead draw from a well of common stereotype that conflates autism, exceptional intellect, and criminality all too easily. A common role of the implicitly autistic character has been that of master detective or crimefighter. A clear and compelling analysis of this trope by autistic academic Sonya Freeman Loftis highlights the troubling messages contained within this seemingly aspirational and intellectual figure, which appears in shows like *Sherlock* (2010-2017), *Bones* (2005-2017), and *Criminal Minds* (2005-). *Criminal Minds*, for example, includes awkward young analyst Spencer Reid in its ensemble, a young man whose ambiguously autistic traits are used to simultaneously signal his brilliance at crime-solving and his eerie similarity to the monstrous criminals he catches.⁵ Likewise, a similar character on *Bones*, whose reliance on logic is absolute, is tricked into becoming a cannibalistic serial killer's apprentice through a strong argument, and then converted back to the side of the heroes just as easily.⁶ As Freeman Loftis notes, these storylines perpetuate an assumption that

⁴ Mittell, 40-41.

⁵ Freeman Loftis, Sonya. *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum*. Indiana University Press, 2015. 39-40.

⁶ Freeman Loftis, 43-47.

autistic people are dangerously outside neurotypical morality, closer to violence and criminal insanity than “normal” people.⁷ These implicitly diagnosed crimefighters are made recognizable through the use of common stereotypes in characterizing them, creating a self-affirming cycle through which autism is made visible in the public eye based on certain qualities which then become the popular foundation for determining autistic identity.

On the cultish margins of the television landscape, however, a few more thoughtful depictions of implied autism have arisen. The sitcom *Community* (2009-2015) can depict the internal pain and pressure of an implicitly autistic character as a wild imaginary world without the anxieties about correctness or realism that likely plague the writers of *The Good Doctor* or *Atypical*. More recently, the science fiction show *The Expanse* (2015-) has explored the future of autism and neurodiversity without the specificity of diagnosis, emphasizing the internal self-navigation required to live as someone outside the cognitive norm. These shows capitalize on the diversity of autistic experience to speak about the specifics of one person’s life in a close and detailed way, which enriches and elaborates stock types rather than merely reiterate them. These characters are made visible as disabled persons, not just disabilities personified.

The very question of how best to make ASD “visible” to audiences is fraught precisely because the variation in experience between autistic subjects can be tremendous. Both a person who is unable to communicate normatively or live unassisted and a person with seemingly minor social and sensory discomfort could be diagnosed as autistic and thus considered to be living with the “same” disability. While television unsurprisingly skews far in favor of depictions of less visibly divergent autism, the diversity of experience within this group is no less.⁸

⁷ Freeman Loftis, 41-42.

⁸ Though the level of stigma and discrimination directed at such people is usually less vehement than that directed towards the “obviously autistic” or those who experience another disability alongside autism.

In part, autism is so broadly defined and experienced because of the sprawling, interlocking set of traits used to define it. There are two main “symptom clusters” that guide doctors in diagnosing autism, both of which are assessed separately in terms of severity.⁹ One cluster is that of social problems: “difficulty with social reciprocity [correctly performing exchanges of information or attention] ... difficulties with nonverbal communication [trouble making eye contact or producing appropriate expressions and gestures] ... [and] difficulties in creating or maintaining relationships with others [an ‘absence of interest in others’ or a discomfort with social situations that prevents easy interaction and bonding] ...”.¹⁰ As is obvious from this description, “social difficulty” is a broad category, each of the three sub-symptoms itself containing a wide range of possible expressions that might be diagnosable.

The other symptom cluster is that of “restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior, interest, or activity”, a huge swath of behaviors covering repetitive movement and speech, “disproportionate following of routines”, “extreme resistance to change”, “extraordinarily strong fixations on objects or ... topics”, and “unusual responses to sensory input”.¹¹ This cluster too is highly variable in its expression and visibility. The responses of autistic people to sudden change or sensory overstimulation, for example, may be expressed through the loud and visible meltdown or panic attack, or a shutdown, a state less often depicted in media,¹² in which an autistic person becomes overwhelmed (emotionally, sensorially, etc.) and ceases outward function and responsiveness. These responses, though they appear unusual from the outside, are

⁹ Durand, V.M. “Diagnostic Criteria and Epidemiology,” in *Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Clinical Guide for General Practitioners*, American Psychological Association: 2014. 18.

¹⁰ Durand, 18.

¹¹ Durand, 19.

¹² Both *Community* and *Atypical* deal with shutdown scenarios, though the protagonist’s shutdown in *Atypical* is portrayed specifically as the aftermath to a chaotic and terrifying meltdown.

natural and meaningful to the autistic person, an expression of their emotional and cognitive state.

The qualities and experiences which define the autism diagnosis are often valued differently by neurotypical and autistic people. Special interests (also called deep interests and hyperfixations) are a significant and much noted aspect of autistic experience, one which neurotypical people often find ridiculous or irritating.¹³ But for autistic people, this devotion to a favorite topic is often satisfying and enriching in a way unknown and potentially unknowable to their neurotypical peers. The difficulty of communicating autistic feelings and values to neurotypical people rests on the subjective and personal nature of all the traits and behaviors that define autism.

The above section is an extremely limited and truncated discussion of ASD as defined by psychologists and scientists, but already it suggests that depicting everything of autism is a daunting task, even an impossible one, since an accurate depiction of one person's autistic experience might be utterly alien to the life of another person who is also diagnosed with the same condition, much less what a neurotypical spectator might imagine. It is certainly much easier to turn to shortcut and stereotype in bringing autism to the screen and the page, "[representing] autism not as an impairment, disability or diversity, but autism as mere spectacle".¹⁴ Television shows frequently deploy stock characters of all kinds, and developing an autistic "type" simplifies and reduces the labor of both the television creator and the viewer, allowing them to conceive of autism as a limited and set field of behaviors, one which hews exactly and consistently to the symptoms and expressions described above.

¹³ Freeman Loftis, 33.

¹⁴ McGrath, James. *Naming Adult Autism: Culture, Science, Identity*. Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017. 14.

Autistic scholar James McGrath identifies a common autistic stereotype in media which he calls “the new classic autism”, and describes this contemporary vision of the autistic person as one which “tends to invoke figures who, while finding social situations confusing (often for the amusement of a neurotypical gaze), tend to be verbose, highly intelligent, and... fulfillingly employed... [with] near-infallible expertise and sustained, high-ranking employment”.¹⁵ This stock character has become a generic figure unto himself¹⁶, typifying autistic and autistically coded characters across a wide range of television shows. These characters produce a version of autism that is neither so much impairment or disability but humorous hindrance, making the real struggles of autistic people invisible while offering them up as a source of amusement and patronizing admiration to a presumably neurotypical audience. These characters tend to be successful young white men, reinforcing the pernicious assumption that autism is only experienced by the white, male, childish, and affluent. This archetype also taps into common stock figures of television comedy and drama, misfits who are still appealing in almost every way except their irascible personality or social awkwardness, and brings together a lineage of TV archetypes and autism stereotypes into a convenient figure who can then be slotted into any number of new productions. McGrath directly cites *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), a show in which Sheldon and his fellow nerds simultaneously model autistic traits while performing a type of normative success which implicitly cancels out the potential for them to identify as disabled. This balancing act allows for a comfortable blurring of autistic stereotype and geek stereotype, conflating the two into comedy without fear of controversy.

¹⁵ McGrath, 127.

¹⁶ It nearly is always a him.

The new classic autism hinges on a performance of normative, mainstream success which counterbalances any potential impairments experienced by an autistic character. This narrative of compensation for disability with talent is also central in the other common autistic stereotype of the savant. While savant syndrome and ASD are often conflated in film and television, savant syndrome is a separate and rare condition, defined by unusual aptitude in some skill or talent (aptitude which is always, by normative standards, somehow irreconcilable with a person's cognitive or intellectual disability). In his book, *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*, Stuart Murray suggests that the core of most modern savant characters is the satisfying combination of wonder at the savant's skills and the effacement of mundane concerns about social life and care for autistic people.¹⁷ The savant combines in one character the pleasure of spectating autism and disability and the comfort of knowing that disability and impairment are "made up for" by some particular gift, whether for empathy or mathematics. More so than the figure of the new classic autism, who might be made to go through the expected stages of neurotypical life (however awkwardly), the savant is a fairly static prop, frozen with a fixed set of skills and qualities.

Murray points to the film *Rain Man* as a particularly essential example of this, since it also set the mold for almost every autistic savant character written after it. While the film is sympathetic to the autistic character, Raymond, his main purpose is to entertain the viewer with his savant skills while teaching his brother to be less a "personification of a 1980s excess", an excess which mirrors what Murray calls the "excesses of autism" which are so often effaced by savantism.¹⁸ Simply put, the neurotypical character in *Rain Man* is able to "overcome" his

¹⁷ Murray, Stuart. *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*. Liverpool University Press, 2008., 98-99.

¹⁸ Murray, 87-88.

excesses by reflecting on them through Raymond's excesses, while Raymond justifies his "difficult" qualities with his entertaining and enriching powers.¹⁹ Similar to the careful balancing of the new classic autistic person's unusual traits and normative success, the savant archetype must constantly balance their disability, which devalues them, and their talent, the source of their value in the normative context. The savant suggests that autistic people have social value only when they emphasize their most neurotypically productive qualities and "overcome or overcompensate for characteristics that may form an integral part of personal identity".²⁰

Both the savant and the new classic autism shape the autistic character into a caricature, one who is absurd in their idiosyncrasies and alien in their abilities. Both serve as a type of narrative prosthesis. Narrative prosthesis is a method of deploying disabled characters whose disabilities act as a shortcut to characterization while erasing the unique subjectivity and interiority of the disabled character as a person.²¹ This type of device allows disability to be overwritten with metaphoric meanings and narrative convenience, emptying out personhood to allow for thematic explication, as when unresponsive, autistic children are made to stand in for the failures of modern parenting or the difficulties of familial communication.²² To move beyond narrative prosthesis is to invest the disabled character with a specificity and richness that acknowledges disabilities like autism as a valid and particular element of human life, not the absence of ability or the addition of othered alterity.

¹⁹ Murray, 88.

²⁰ Freeman Loftis, 58.

²¹ Bérubé, Michael. "Disability and Narrative". *PMLA*, vol. 120, no. 2, 2005. 569-570.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. University of Michigan Press, 2008. 12-16.

Mogk, Marja. "Introduction". *Different Bodies : Essays on Disability in Film and Television*. McFarland, 2013. 1-10.

²² Think also of every time a villain is physically disfigured or dismembered the more evil they become. Anakin Skywalker completes his descent into darkness by losing his limbs and becoming reliant on life-saving support technologies. The viewer understands that his corrupted mind and "corrupted", disabled body reflect each other.

Empowering treatments of autism in media must extract themselves from the imprisoning functions of the narrative prosthesis and move in new directions. Autistic comedian Kate Fox coins the word “humitas” to describe “the practice of humour and seriousness in the same frame at the same time in a way that does not undermine the efficacy of either mode”.²³ In Fox’s practice, this mode allows her to express her identity as an autistic woman to audiences by, in one show, dressing up as a unicorn and tying the singularity of unicorns to the isolating and exhilarating aspects of being autistic.²⁴ This pressure on the generic boundaries of comedy and tragedy recreates the dissolution of norms that is implicit in neurodivergence, in seeing and experiencing the world differently from others in ways that cannot always be easily articulated. Collapsing the certain divide of hilarity and heartbreak, of abled and disabled, the most successful depictions of neurodivergence on television are characters allowed to live outside of generalized symptom clusters and sharply delineated classifications of dysfunction. Instead, these characters tell about themselves in a way that neither denies their divergence from normative experience, nor undermines the depth of their unique thought and feeling.

In this paper, I hope to explore and investigate the new worlds and lives offered to autistic people by recent television depictions of life “on the spectrum”, examined in four shows: Netflix’s *Atypical*, ABC’s *The Good Doctor*, NBC’s *Community*, and SyFy/Amazon’s *The Expanse*. In taking up four television shows as my case studies, I wish to showcase a range of genres and show structures, each of which are affected and altered by autistic presence, even when that presence is implicit rather than openly stated. Some possibilities are less radical than others, emphasizing admirable assimilation rather than uncompromising self-expression. In

²³ Fox, Kate. "Standing Up to False Binaries in Humor and Autism: A Dialogue." *Comedy and the Politics of Representation: Mocking the Weak*, edited by Helen Davies and Sarah Ilott, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 171-172.

²⁴ Fox, 181-182.

examining both meaningful successes and spectacular mediocrity, I hope to illuminate the ways in which television's specific forms and functions have placed pressure on cultural understandings of autism, and the moments when narratively complex television has imagined roles and futures for autistic people beyond straightforward stereotype.

SAM

Debuting on Netflix in 2017, the comedy-drama *Atypical* announced itself with a self-congratulatory fanfare emphasizing its status as one of the first American television shows to center on an explicitly autistic character, in this case a teenage boy named Sam Gardner. The show billed itself as a humorous, inspirational take on very familiar sitcom issues like sex and dating, family, and the trials and travails of high school. Implicitly, autism has been conscripted to serve as the “fresh ingredient” of *Atypical*, the narrative twist that will make it stand out from the many other shows with similar themes and settings. Despite the posturing of the show’s marketing as a breakthrough for autistic representation, *Atypical* is excessively bounded by the generic conventions of television comedy on the one hand and the stock narratives of autism and disability drama on the other. This embrace of convention in every aspect forecloses on any prospect of empowering representation which might lend a sense of depth or validity to Sam’s struggles. In its depiction of Sam, *Atypical* draws heavily on stereotypes without mobilizing any of television’s particular allowances to enrich its depiction of Sam’s life and interiority.

The show’s title concisely sums up its failed approach to autism representation. By calling the show *Atypical*, the show’s creators generalize Sam’s status as a nonnormative person to all the characters of the show, suggesting that Sam and his family are an atypical unit, possibly because of the presence of autism. This elides several essential qualities of autistic life, most pressing the unique and embodied specificity of autistic experience and the often isolating effects of social discomfort. By extending “atypical” to refer to all forms of abnormality, *Atypical* foregrounds a “we’re all a little disabled” narrative, which suggests both the potential for “overcoming” disability with enough effort, and that disabled people are merely needier

versions of abled people, rather than people who are intensely marginalized by mainstream society.

Generalizing the idea of atypicality also disguises the way in which the show's casting avoids challenging any harmful demographic stereotypes about autistic people. Sam is a young white straight cisgender man who is verbal and whose family is somehow comfortably well-off on the salary of an EMT and the unwavering devotion of a stay-at-home Autism Mom.²⁵ The persistence of public narratives about autism as a condition which affects affluent white children has likely had a meaningful negative impact on the lives of autistic adults, autistic women and gender-nonbinary people, and autistic people of color, all of whom go underdiagnosed and without services because they are seen as outside the sphere of people who can be autistic.²⁶ So while *Atypical* poses itself as a step forward for autism in media, it chooses not to tackle any intersectional issues which might require delicacy or sensitivity. The show avoids the perceived risk of telling a specific or multiply marginalized story about ASD, aiming for universal relatability (as processed through the white, male, affluent subject) while centering on a fundamentally diverse mode of being.

In building itself from the situation comedy mold, *Atypical* also treads a familiar path in its reliance on the simplicity and straightforwardness of the new classic autism stock character, as well as other familiar comedic archetypes.²⁷ Sam is clearly descended from a long line of

²⁵ The role of the mother in contributing to/alleviating a child's autistic qualities has been a subject of discussion since autism was first named and identified, and the pressure placed on the role of the mother in every discussion of autism is immense.

²⁶ Neighmond, Patti and Jane Greenhalgh. "'Social Camouflage' May Lead to Underdiagnosis in Girls". *NPR*, July 31, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/07/31/539123377/social-camouflage-may-lead-to-underdiagnosis-of-autism-in-girls>.

Weiss, Suzannah. "Meet the People Being Left Out of Mainstream Conversations About Autism". *Asperger/Autism Network*, n.d. <https://www.aane.org/meet-the-people-being-left-out/>

²⁷ McGrath, 127.

televised fish-out-of-water weirdos, from Mork to Sheldon, characters whose strangeness is a perpetual source of spectacular amusement for viewers. Sam mobilizes all the varied and complex traits associated with autism, and turns them into a quirk-of-the-week array, each episode seeming to pull a quality out of a hat without regard for the diversity of expression in autism, the fact that no one person expresses every trait that is associated with autism all at once. Sam is the source of the show's plot and comedy, but not its orchestrator. He, along with the rest of his family, is dragged along by his autism without agency over any of his circumstances.

Sam occupies the role of comedic steamroller, rudely inserting awkward hilarity into any situation, even as the show demands a constant melodramatic sympathy for him as a disabled and marginalized subject. Rather than wonder at why certain people are sympathetic subjects, or why the viewer is drawn to or rejects certain behaviors, the show constantly reenacts a narrative cycle in which Sam hurts someone's feelings, there is conflict, and in the end the other person is forced to apologize to Sam for not understanding how hard it is for him. Sam is proposed as the default subject of sympathy because of his disability, not through an insight into his interiority or experiences, and he seems to gain no new knowledge or perspective from his repeated missteps. *Atypical* is unable to carry off the equal blending of comedy and seriousness that produces Fox's *humitas*, instead reinforcing oppositional binaries of comedy and drama which place Sam into the role of comedic victimizer or tragic victim with no intermingling.

Early in *Atypical*'s pilot episode, Sam experiences an episode of hyperfixation, getting the word "twat" stuck in his head. There is an easy joke here as he explains in voiceover about this kind of fixation and repeats the word over and over in his head, providing the surefire humor

of incessant vulgarity.²⁸ This joke, while potentially conflating autism and other disabilities like Tourette's, does provide a bit of insight into Sam's experiences and allows him to explain a facet of his life. *Atypical* reaches for humitas in this way, but ultimately does not grasp it, showing Sam to be someone whose disability is seemingly trivial and wholly humorous.

One scene later, while Sam's sister Casey is speaking to an acquaintance on the front porch, Sam bursts out of the house and screams "twat" directly into the face of his sister's female friend. While this is certainly an example of Sam's autistic social dysfunction, it is an uncomfortable deployment, because the humor of the moment depends on deriving pleasure from the way Sam's behavior has the potential to shock and hurt another character. Sam's cruelty is unintentional in this scene, but it is also unquestioned. While Casey expresses some annoyance at his behavior, no one explains to Sam why his behavior was hurtful, and indeed no one seems to think attempting such a conversation would be worthwhile. At the same time, the show also takes a position that any anger or discomfort with Sam for his behavior would be unjust, since he can't help himself. This is a gross simplification of the complex array of choice and compulsion autistic people navigate in modulating their own behavior, and deeply infantilizing.

The cyclical shift between Sam as funny jerk and unfortunate child is emphasized in autistic critiques of the show. In their reviews of the show, autistic journalist Matthew Rosza and autistic actor Mickey Rowe both highlight the show's treatment of Sam as one which makes him appear wildly irresponsible and hurtful in an essentially static way.²⁹ As Rosza describes it,

[t]hese aren't classic signs of autism — they're violent, creepy, cruel and make the autistic character seem like a monster. When the show then shifts gears to make us feel sorry for

²⁸ *Atypical*, "Antarctica"

²⁹ Rowe, Mickey. "Netflix's '*Atypical*' Was a Major Disappointment for Autism Representation". *Teen Vogue*, August 8, 2017. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/netflix-atypical-autism-representation>

Sam, the characterization becomes more offensive. Arguing that those with neurological conditions shouldn't be held accountable for hurting others is as patronizing as it is socially irresponsible.³⁰

While autistic people are prone to social faux pas and often struggle to relate to others through normative means, the kinds of violence and cruelty displayed by Sam are drawn from a comedic tradition which means something very different reflected through an explicitly autistic subject rather than through a cartoonish Seinfeld type or even the ambiguously autistic Sheldon. By declaring its representation, *Atypical* directly attaches all Sam's behavior to the stereotypical picture of autism in the public consciousness, reinforcing the idea of uncontrollable, absurd, and irresponsible children as the default autistic subject.

As the star of the show and the focal point of the narrative, Sam casts a sort of autistic shadow on everything around him, acting as *Atypical*'s voice of autism. His voiceover narration shapes almost every episode. But this narration rarely serves to deepen Sam's storylines or provide new insight into his perspective. Rather it is used to create parallels between Sam's autistic experience, usually played for laughs, and the experiences of his friends and family, which are played for serious pathos. Though Sam is not a child, the analysis of the convention of autistic child narrators in literature done by Freeman Loftis concisely describes the role of Sam's voiceover in *Atypical*. Describing the narrators of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Freeman Loftis posits that "both characters become symbols that reflect outward—these autistic children stand in for larger cultural anxieties regarding the instability of the postmodern family and the struggle to establish emotional

³⁰ Rosza, Matthew. "Netflix's '*Atypical*' Is Offensive, but That's Not Its Real Problem". *Salon*, August 7, 2017. <https://www.salon.com/2017/08/07/netflix-atypical-review/>

connections in a postmodern world”.³¹ Sam serves this function in *Atypical*, his own interiority made opaque by his utility as a source of commentary on neurotypical action. Though he is ostensibly speaking about himself in the voiceover, and that voiceover is sometimes paired with events from his daily life, more often his self-reflection is used to heighten the emotional content of someone else’s experiences, refracting and clarifying the concerns of others, not himself. Neither season of *Atypical* ends on a moment which belongs to Sam. Both close on cliffhangers based on the romantic lives of his neurotypical family members, moments for which Sam is not even present, his storylines trivial in comparison to his family’s concerns.

As in many autism narratives, in *Atypical* Sam’s family is the central site for discourse about the lives and value of autistic people, their potential utility within a family, “and especially the central relationship between mother and child”.³² *Atypical* reiterates this notion through its fascination with Sam’s mother, Elsa. Elsa is portrayed from the first episode as a stereotypical disability super mom who has given up everything in order to properly care for Sam. Though Sam is now nearly an adult and successfully attends a mainstream school and holds down a part-time job, Elsa tend to him constantly, creating tension as Sam tries to assert his independence.

In the show’s third episode, Sam wants to buy new clothes and asks his mother to take him to the mall. Elsa is horrified by this suggestion and pedantically walks Sam through the memory of the last time they went to the mall, the overstimulation driving Sam to a public meltdown.³³ The show gives no context for this memory in time, and it is unclear how long ago this meltdown was, conflating Sam as a child or pre-teen and Sam as an eighteen year old. While

³¹ Freeman Loftis, 108.

³² Murray, 168-170.

³³ *Atypical*, “Julia Says”

Sam is allowed to directly object to his mother's characterization of him, insisting that he is "not a little kid anymore", his willingness to speak up for himself upsets his mother and his newfound independence is directly correlated to Elsa's sudden loss of purpose in life and home-wrecking affair with a bartender. Sam's childhood, teen years, and impending adulthood are all collapsed into one in this scene, patronizingly inseparable and identical, while Elsa's history of repression and changing attitudes are critically examined in many episodes.

There is nothing inherently objectionable in *Atypical's* willingness to explore the psychological effects of stress and labor on the mothers of disabled children. But in framing Elsa's breakdown as a direct result of Sam growing up, the show makes her pain his responsibility, blaming the terrifying specter of Sam's autism for hurt that he causes while releasing Sam the person from culpability. Sam is the seed of Elsa's struggle, not only in *Atypical's* present, but perpetually. Both the Gardner parents speak wistfully of the time before Sam's diagnosis, when they still had big dreams for what he would achieve, before the "horror" of learning that he is autistic. Despite the relative ease with which Sam gets by in daily life as a verbal autistic person with significant support and limited visible symptoms, his parents discuss never having had a night out together since his diagnosis.³⁴ The existence of Sam's autism is poisonous, splintering the family unit once through Elsa's affair, and at least once previously, as Sam's original diagnosis terrified his father to the point of flight from home. The Gardners are riven by Sam's essential nature, his parents driven to painful emotional lows, his sister miserably ignored, and Sam is blithely oblivious to this in much of *Atypical's* telling, standing by to provide laughs and spectacular entertainment through his performance of autism. *Atypical*

³⁴ Rowe, "Major Disappointment".

paradoxically refuses to hold Sam responsible for almost all of his onscreen actions while also demanding that he accept the responsibility for his family's dysfunction, a suturing together of disparate forms of comedy and drama, instead of a thoughtful awareness of the potential for both humor and pain in an autistic person's life.

Sam is the latest version of the new classic autism archetype, elaborated to provide superficially sympathetic representation.³⁵ While Sam experiences struggles and obstacles because of his disability, the lack of insight into its effect on him, and the subsequent ease with which this struggle can then be made humorous, renders Sam an oppressive imagining of autism. The treatment of his experiences suggests an unreflective, empty autistic subject, one whose significance is as a figure of pity and amusement for others. Sam's past and present are flat, unchanging, and absurd, and thus his future is too.

³⁵ The creators of *Atypical* did acknowledge many of the criticisms of the show's first season, and made changes to the show's second season, including the addition of more autistic characters (played by autistic actors), and somewhat expanded horizons for Sam, as he was decentralized from his family's misery and began to pursue his personal goal of attending art school. *Atypical*, as a show which is still on the air, is an unfinished text, and could theoretically produce more compelling content in the future.

SHAUN

Like Sam Gardner in *Atypical*, Doctor Shaun Murphy is an explicitly identified autistic subject whose portrayal in *The Good Doctor* draws on earlier TV and pop cultural formulations, specifically those of the autistic savant and the non-normative or disabled professional superstar (think *House*, *Bones*, *Sherlock*).³⁶ However, unlike these earlier depictions, where the savant brilliance of the character mitigates their unheroic demeanor, Shaun's savant skills and his autistic experiences are integrated into his larger role as starring hero-doctor, a classic figure of the medical drama/soap opera. While Sam is defined by a lack of all but the most superficial sense of interiority and agency, Shaun is made admirable through his heroic ability to put his autism and savant syndrome to use for society at large, elevating him in a way that is more generous than earlier depictions of autistic people, but no less bounded by normative structures. Shaun is ordained as the star through his possession of heroic qualities, some of which stem from his autism and his savant powers. He is an autistic subject who is still able to produce familiar and normative narrative value within his show.

The premise of *The Good Doctor* is nothing new to seasoned viewers of medical dramas and legal/police procedurals. The show is set in an amazingly well-decorated and well-funded hospital, and stars, for the most part, a fleet of attractive and driven surgeons and other medical professionals, an ensemble anchored by a central misfit whose special skills make him invaluable but difficult to work with at times. Shaun's savant skills, which help him visualize surgical puzzles, begin as an important part of the series, a narrative device much indebted to the likes of *Gregory House* and *Sherlock Holmes*.³⁷ Shaun's savant vision is both spectacular and a

³⁶ Freeman Loftis, 29-30.
McGrath, 127.

³⁷ Freeman Loftis, 29-30.

spectacle. The viewer watches Shaun using his skills and derives pleasure from his displays of competence and skill. At the same time, because Shaun's savant powers are represented onscreen as elaborate CGI cross-sections of the body, the viewer also shares a view with Shaun and derives the same pleasure from exercising this skill that Shaun does.³⁸ While *The Good Doctor* offers some of the familiar engagements of previous savant depictions in its use of a person with savant syndrome as a source of entertainment and fascination, the show also breaks with tradition by slowly deemphasizing Shaun's savant skills' role and relevance to the weekly mystery and integrating Shaun's savant powers into the already well-trod and thoroughly familiar process of exposition on medical procedurals. Stuart Murray emphasizes the way in which savant narratives so often render the intimate, mundane concerns of autistic people invisible behind a screen of wonder.³⁹ *The Good Doctor* sidesteps this problem by sinking Shaun's savantism into the structure of the hospital procedural until his powers become unremarkable in comparison to the interpersonal and professional drama between the characters. The challenges of navigating surgical conundrums become nothing in comparison to the challenges of getting along with his fellow residents.

In the first season finale, "More", Shaun makes a mistake in surgery which threatens a patient's life. While he uses his savant skills to figure out his failure and its solution, this minor moment barely figures into the plot, and the true resolution of the surgical plotline comes when Shaun and Dr. Melendez, the lead surgeon and Shaun's erstwhile nemesis, affirm their slowly developing friendship by sharing in responsibility for the dangerous repair surgery.⁴⁰ Shaun's savant powers provide the parameters of the operation, but his developing relationship with

³⁸ Murray, 98-99.

³⁹ Murray, 87.

⁴⁰ *The Good Doctor*, "More"

Melendez and his heroic willingness to own up to his own mistake provide the major stakes, rather than the fate of the thinly sketched “frat bro” patient.

In this way, Shaun is made to participate fully both in the procedural and emotional aspects of the show. His savant skills are powerful and useful, but they are integrated into the processes and function of *The Good Doctor* and the general form of the medical drama. Shaun’s savant powers contribute only to the diagnosis of a patient and planning of surgery. The other essential steps of the treatment process performed on *The Good Doctor* (like carrying out the surgery and communicating with the patient and family) require Shaun to not only think brilliantly but to collaborate with his peers and make critical social decisions. The placement of Shaun’s savant skill acts as a bridge rather than a wall, connecting this most spectacular and stereotypical quality of savant syndrome to the broader work Shaun does as a doctor, a departure from earlier depictions where savant skills were detached from their owners, usually only made productive or useful in concert with neurotypical guidance.⁴¹ Shaun’s journey to become a doctor is a process of learning to how to operate in the social spaces of the work, not a struggle to gain the specific tools and knowledge of medicine itself. At the same time, *The Good Doctor* draws a great deal of narrative fuel from adding obstacles of discrimination to Shaun’s path, demonstrating the violence of marginalization against Shaun’s unwavering ambitions and good intentions.

Shaun’s role as autistic protagonist is fundamentally inflected by an implicit recognition of autistic people as a marginalized group, and Shaun as someone who must battle the biases of others as well as his own personal limitations. In his analysis of Thai action film *Chocolate*,

⁴¹ Murray, 84-86.

which features an autistic protagonist, Russell Meeuf describes the way in which narrative of autism must navigate tensions between their protagonist and the normative demands placed upon the film or show by economic and generic concerns. Contemplating *Chocolate*'s only semi-intentional critique of the Thai healthcare industry, Meeuf wonder if there is a positive aspect to “melodramatic appeals that rely on often-problematic assumptions about disability as a source of pathos if they... reflect a broader cultural acceptance of the social injustices facing people with disabilities...”⁴² *The Good Doctor* often relies on Shaun's disability to apply another layer of pathos to a scene or story, but it does so by explicating the legitimate difficulties he has faced due to discrimination, acknowledging his membership in a marginalized category.

At times the show overplays its hand, thumping Shaun's marginalized status in order to deliver messages of tolerance, reducing Shaun into a device whose primary function is to provoke self-reflection in the neurotypical viewer. One episode sees Shaun treating a young transgender girl, Quinn, and handling the case poorly, as he does not understand Quinn's gender identity. A coworker reprimands Shaun and demonstrates the correct and respectful way to interact with Quinn, but it is not until Shaun, in his usual fashion, begins to ask Quinn blunt, direct questions about her life and her feelings that he starts to appreciate her experiences.⁴³ This part of the episode is very didactic, and in many ways functions as narrative prosthesis, with Shaun's autistic lack of social graces allowing him to air prejudices the viewer presumably shares, and then learn why they are wrong.

But the episode concludes in a somewhat more thoughtful fashion. Shaun sneaks into his apartment building's poolhouse to experience firsthand the aquatic metaphor Quinn used to

⁴² Meeuf, Russell. “*Chocolate*'s Ass-Kicking Autistic Savant: Disability, Globalization, and the Action Cinema”. *Different Bodies : Essays on Disability in Film and Television*. McFarland, 2013. 105.

⁴³ *The Good Doctor*, “She”

explain the feeling of being recognized as a girl.⁴⁴ Like his savant syndrome, Shaun's autism is used here to build a social bridge, not just between Shaun and a subject, but between the subject and the viewer. This presents what might be best understood as a refined narrative prosthesis. Shaun's disability provides insight and satisfaction to the viewer at the expense of his characterization, but he retains aspects of his personality which expand beyond the frame of narrativized disability, especially his ambition to become a doctor. The creators of the show recognize that an autistic person might feel a solidarity of marginalization with a transgender person, and awkwardly attempt to envision that solidarity in a way that also serves the narrative need to paint Shaun as a heroic figure and a good doctor.

This is obviously the central concern of a show called *The Good Doctor*: what makes a good doctor? The expectation among Shaun's fellow surgeons, his bosses, and likely a first-time viewer of the show is that Shaun's savant syndrome is the essential quality that makes him eligible to become a surgeon, and that his autism will provide an obstacle to overcome.⁴⁵ But *The Good Doctor* rearranges this formula. While Shaun's savant syndrome is useful, and his ability to envision medical problems with extreme exactitude saves lives, it is not the sole key to the normative professional success he seeks. *The Good Doctor* marks Shaun as an exemplary autistic subject through his savant syndrome, but it also marks him as an exemplary generic subject by highlighting his moral sense and heroic nature as proof of his worthiness to be a high-powered, TV-appropriate surgeon.

The pilot of *The Good Doctor* develops this characterization explicitly in its final two scenes. Shaun is brought before the review board which has been discussing his hiring

⁴⁴ *The Good Doctor*, "She"

⁴⁵ Freeman Loftis, 59.

throughout the episode, and asked to justify his desire to become a surgeon. Shaun, though clearly nervous about speaking in front of this large group of people, explains his tragic backstory, the early deaths of his brother and pet rabbit, and his desire to prevent the profound injustice of early death. He is, of course, immediately hired.⁴⁶ While this is very much a familiar type of inspirational TV moment⁴⁷, it is an inspirational TV moment which belongs entirely to Shaun. In giving this speech on his motivations and past, Shaun expresses himself through repetitive and unusual sentence structures, emphasizing his sensory experience, especially the smells that accompanied his formative memories. Rather than launch directly and confidently into his speech, Shaun hesitates for some time, and finally, when he does speak, performs with very stiff body language and little eye contact with his listeners. In carrying off this speech before the hospital board, Shaun occupies the heroic space normally reserved for neurotypical characters, and his autistic “excesses” color and shape his experience and performance of that role.⁴⁸ Shaun contains familiar heroic qualities (like bravery, sincerity, and resistance to unjust authority) and specifically autistic qualities in one person, a combination rarely afforded to disabled characters on television.

The final scene of the pilot episode expands on this idea. While Shaun has been formally accepted into his new workplace, his first encounter with his fellow surgeons goes poorly, as Doctor Melendez tells Shaun that he does not intend to ever allow Shaun to perform real surgical work other than suctioning blood.⁴⁹ This public humiliation, performed in front of all Shaun’s peers, is intended to intimidate him and shore up Melendez’s credibility with the other residents.

⁴⁶ *The Good Doctor*, “Pilot: Burnt Food”

⁴⁷ The speedy, 180 degree turn in the review board’s opinion of Shaun is especially impressive.

⁴⁸ Murray, 93-94.

⁴⁹ *The Good Doctor*, “Pilot: Burnt Food”

But Shaun turns the moment back on Melendez, asking him, completely without malice, if being arrogant helps Melendez be a better surgeon, and if it hurts Melendez in his interpersonal life. This question leaves Melendez and the other residents stunned. Shaun's autism empowers him to stand up to unjust authority precisely because he does not fear or understand the social consequences of his speech, and he acts in a fashion familiar to anyone who has seen a TV hero who's not afraid of speaking truth to power.⁵⁰ Again, there is a fusion between Shaun's autism, his generic role, and his ambitions, which together produce an autistic subject who can completely fulfill normative narrative expectations. ASD is thus contextualized as a part of his larger autistic experience and his overall personality, and reappropriated to serve a narrative and generic purpose and satisfy the audience in a way which is more complex than previous modes of direct narrative prosthesis, even as it remains grounded in familiar notions of the savant and the brilliant, heroic outsider.⁵¹

While the characterization of Shaun draws heavily on the stereotypical qualities of both the new classic autism and the savant, Shaun's primary role in *The Good Doctor* is not solely of these predetermined archetypes, because he has been so carefully tailored to serve as a very traditional kind of hero. Shaun's noticeable "excesses", his repetitive behaviors, non-normative speech and body language, his attachment to certain objects and routines, are not stigmatized by the structure of the show, but highlighted just as they are in *Atypical* to make the show's familiar concept feel fresh. Whereas *Atypical* is a fungal bloom of stereotypes, *The Good Doctor* is a sort of bonsai tree, all the familiar tropes of TV autism present but carefully pruned to fit the needs of the hospital drama. While Shaun expresses autistic traits which are often seen as excessive or out

⁵⁰ So, every TV hero.

⁵¹ Freeman Loftis, 58-60.

of control, the narrative handle on Shaun as a character and a device is never in jeopardy. In creating an autistic character who can perform the exceedingly normative role of dramatic hero, *The Good Doctor* crafts an arrangement in which an autistic subject is justifiably uplifted for their good qualities and achievements, but still a satisfying and useful narrative prosthetic, providing simple shortcuts to emotionally charged storytelling. In essence, *The Good Doctor* provides comforting, inspiring visions of autistic presence on television, a kind of progress of least resistance. While *The Good Doctor* exceeds the limitations of stale comedic stereotype presented in *Atypical*, it affirms the new classic autism's reliance on normative professional success as a marker of autistic value. In essence, Shaun is allowed his autistic excesses because they do not interfere with his ability to be productive in the generation of normative values, diegetically as a doctor, and generically as a heroic television protagonist.

ABED

The rambling personal journey of Abed Nadir over *Community*'s six seasons provides an excellent case study of the possibilities for complexity and development available to autistic characters who are not explicitly diagnosed. While Abed's tenure on the show began with him serving as the butt of many jokes, accused of "having Asperger's" in the very first episode, Abed's point of view develops alongside that of the show itself, eventually allowing him to grow into one of the most complex and beloved characters in the study group.⁵² Moreover, his experiences, divergent from those of his peers, become the preferred interpretive frame for *Community*'s emotional and relational action. Abed becomes a guide and even visionary in making the painful changes of life bearable, a character who is able to find humor in his own struggle without becoming the joke himself again.⁵³ Though he displays many of the qualities associated with the new classic autism, Abed is never formally diagnosed within the show (outside of bullying insinuations), and by existing outside the framework of traditional therapies and treatments for ASD, Abed is able to explore his feelings and experiences in a uniquely personal and empowering way.

Even in the sometimes crudely-written first season, *Community* extends empathy and agency to Abed, most clearly displayed in the third episode, "Introduction to Film". In this episode, Abed makes a film about his difficult childhood and fraught relationship with his parents, subjects about which he rarely displays visible emotion.⁵⁴ But Abed's film, which allows

⁵² *Community*, "Pilot".

⁵³ Abed is notably the only character I feature in this paper who was created by a diagnosed autistic person. In fact, it was the process of researching and writing for Abed that led *Community* showrunner Dan Harmon to pursue his own diagnosis. (Raferty, Brian. "How Dan Harmon Drives Himself Crazy Making *Community*", *Wired*, September 22, 2011. https://www.wired.com/2011/09/mf_harmon.)

⁵⁴ *Community*, "Introduction to Film".

him to address his experiences through a medium other than speech, displays his depth of feeling and affirms the legitimacy of his experiences. While the film itself is humorously amateurish in its aesthetics, the content is positioned as genuinely affecting to the other characters watching. Abed's father, who spends much of the episode controlling and demeaning Abed in highly coded ways⁵⁵, finds the film so moving that he and Abed reconcile and begin to develop a new, more positive relationship. This is a clean, heartwarming, very sitcom-ish resolution to a story, but it is notable that the show affords Abed an avenue through which to experience such a resolution, rather than wallow in the misery of Abed's life as a neurodivergent person. *Community* is able to simultaneously capitalize on the strangeness and silliness of Abed's video without losing the sense of its value for him as an expressive tool.⁵⁶ Though Abed cannot always effectively communicate through expected channels, his film allows him to construct himself as a subject worthy of understanding and empathy, and the show affirms this by providing the story with the expected heartwarming end. Like Shaun, Abed remains within an expected generic frame, but unlike Shaun, Abed's autistic and artistic excesses are used to help him personally, working through his relationship with his father, rather than adding value to his workplace or career.

Community's development of Abed as a figure open to viewer identification and attachment intensifies in its second season, particularly with a Christmas episode, "Abed's Uncontrollable Christmas". While this episode at first alienates Abed by stereotyping him as a strange being with a dangerous brain, the narrative subtly shifts position until Abed's ostentatiously odd perspective becomes the most privileged view of the world.

⁵⁵ Not only does Abed's father refer to him as a "special boy" (emphasis on the special) and complain about how "it was hard enough to raise [Abed] before [he became interested in filmmaking]", Abed's father also reveals the degree to which he has planned Abed's future for him, a future in which Abed is not afforded adult responsibilities or freedoms beyond working at the family falafel restaurant.

⁵⁶ Fox, 179-181.

The premise of “Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas” is a parody-tribute of classic stop-motion and claymation Christmas specials. The explanation for the sudden transfiguration of Greendale Community College is that Abed, his heart broken by his mother, is hallucinating the world as a harmless and pleasant animated Christmas special, a world where Christmas traditions are never abandoned by thoughtless parents.⁵⁷ Here the show seems to suggest that the loss of the routine Abed shared with his mother and drastic changes in both their lives have driven Abed a little crazy. Abed’s brain is out of control, and in his Christmas mania, he is even tased by the campus police. There is concern among various characters that Abed may be dangerous, a stereotype of people with disabilities that is disturbingly common.⁵⁸

Despite scenes like this, the episode enacts one significant concession to Abed’s perspective from the very beginning: the entire episode is done in stop-motion animation, exactly as Abed is seeing the world in his delusional state. To present the amusing visual gimmick of this special episode, the show aligns the viewer completely with Abed’s new vision of reality. This becomes more significant as the episode’s narrative unspools. Abed’s friends persuade him to take them on a Christmas quest which is actually a poorly disguised intervention, led by the recurring character Professor Duncan, a psychologist who hopes to exploit Abed as a subject for study. While the group is on their quest, they are presented as traveling on the Christmas planet, in special Christmas forms selected by Abed.⁵⁹ Everyone must join Abed within the parameters of his imagined world, even while they are trying to convince him to give it up.

Abed’s friends are at first skeptical of his vivid dream world, and inclined to ally themselves with Professor Duncan, who pushes forward an agenda in line with the psychiatric

⁵⁷ *Community*, “Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas”.

⁵⁸ Longmore, Paul K. “Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People”. *Social Policy*, vol. 16, 1985, 33.

⁵⁹ *Community*, “Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas”.

mainstream, emphasizing therapy and the importance of Abed learning to conform. But *Community* resolves this plotline by rejecting Professor Duncan's beliefs and embracing an opposing line of thought, one which seems drawn from the counterculture psychology of thinkers like R.D. Laing. Laing emphasized the importance of meeting psychiatric patients on their own terms and resolving issues through the patient's own interpretive frame, interpretive frames which are not unlike Abed's own Christmas hallucinations. Laing also believed that fantasy was an essential part of human experience and that "if we are stripped of experience, we are stripped of our deeds...we are bereft of our humanity".⁶⁰ By making Abed's visionary experience essential to his personal growth while setting up Professor Duncan as a figure of ridicule, *Community* pronounces Abed's hallucination as more valuable than a professional therapeutic approach which denies the validity of Abed's experience.

By completing his hallucinatory journey, Abed realizes that he must accept his mother's absence. This self-realization is made possible only through the metaphors of the hallucination, which are all specifically meaningful to Abed's deep interests, especially his love of television. Not only does Abed rely on his personal value framework to work through his emotional struggle, he also explicitly rejects the values of normative development and traditional therapy represented by Professor Duncan, who is the episode's clear villain. All Abed's friends, even those who earlier rejected his hallucination, now support him, and when he admits that he is now willing to leave the stop-motion delusion, Abed's friends encourage him to continue seeing the world as animated for as long as he enjoys it.⁶¹ The final moments of the episode show the animated characters gathered to watch Christmas specials together, their live-action selves seen

⁶⁰ Laing, R.D. *The Politics of Experience*. Pantheon Books, 1967. 13-16.

⁶¹ *Community*, "Abed's Uncontrollable Christmas".

in a reflection on the TV screen, connecting the two modes as equal and legible through the medium of TV.

“Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas” unironically advances very radical ideas about mental health. Not only is Abed’s delusion ultimately reframed as a positive experience, the show posits that his extremely non-normative method of working through his feelings (television metaphors, hallucination, a vision quest) is appropriate to his experience, a valid method of “recover[ing] the wholeness of being human” by exploring his relationship to his mother and his friends.⁶² While the episode begins with the other characters questioning the proportionality and sense of Abed’s response to his own unhappiness, the conclusion, and the unification of all his friends in support of his decisions and desires, presents Abed’s experience in this episode as one which makes sense for him, a positive and purposeful path allowing him to accept difficult changes in his life. Abed’s animation hallucination, which is strange and even scary for his friends, is relatable and even charming to the viewer, who shares Abed’s joy in the spectacle of the stop-motion world, rather than the disturbing spectacle of delusion perceived by Abed’s friends. The viewer sees and enjoys the world as it is for Abed, which allows for an appreciation of the value of his experience in a way that would likely be impossible without this direct insight into Abed’s mindscape.⁶³

Community offers its most refined approach to Abed’s psychology in a later episode, season five’s “Geothermal Escapism”. While this episode does not place the viewer directly in Abed’s mind as in “Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas”, its narrative and emotional heft is greater because its central concern is one shared by Abed and the viewer: sorrow and fear at the

⁶² Laing, 32.

⁶³ Laing, 37-38.

permanent departure of Troy, Abed's beloved best friend. Troy was not only the person closest to Abed during the show's tenure, he was also a beloved fan favorite character, and his friendship with Abed a centerpiece of the show. The stakes of providing a meaningful send-off for a beloved character are extremely high, and so, for maximum pathos, the show turns to Abed and his love for Troy, expecting the viewer to be united with Abed in sorrow at Troy's departure.

"Geothermal Escapism" is once again centered on a conceit of Abed's, this time a schoolwide game of "The Floor Is Lava", ostensibly to honor Troy before his departure. This game, played with the greatest imaginable sincerity and focus by everyone in the school pushes Troy and Abed into their usual mode of partnership, even as Britta⁶⁴, taking over the role of psychoanalyst from Duncan, demands Abed acknowledge that he created the game as a means of avoiding Troy's departure.⁶⁵

At first, the episode seems to be taking a similar path to "Abed's Uncontrollable Christmas", as Britta is painted as a villain due to her obsession with getting Abed to acknowledge his feelings and process them through a normative therapeutic framework. But unlike that earlier episode, "Geothermal Escapism" remains outside of Abed's perspective for most of the episode, as the device of the floor as lava remains imaginary even within the diegesis, until the episode's final third. At the climax of the episode, Britta, Abed, and Troy find themselves to be the final surviving players. With Troy and Abed backed into a corner, Troy realizes Abed's secret plan: if the game goes on forever, Troy never has to leave.⁶⁶ This is not only a relatable, if absurd, hope of Abed's, it is a clever gesture towards the ideal nature of

⁶⁴ Another of Abed's friends, Britta, while often incompetent, is extremely compassionate and supportive of Abed throughout the show, paying for the film class his father denies him all the way back in "Introduction to Film".

⁶⁵ *Community*, "Geothermal Escapism".

⁶⁶ *Community*, "Geothermal Escapism".

television shows like *Community*. The goal of the television sitcom is to go on for as long as is profitable and pleasurable, and to make as few changes as possible, preserving the alchemy of cast and crew in perpetuity.⁶⁷ In aligning the pain the viewer likely feels at the departure of a beloved character with Abed's pain at the departure of his best friend, *Community* avoids comparing Abed's emotional state to some arbitrary standard of "normal" or neurotypical feeling. It legitimizes the intensity of Abed's feeling and desire for stability by connecting them to the viewer's own investments in the show.

At this point in the episode, Abed speaks up, explaining that for him the lava is not a metaphor, it is another hallucination like those in "Abed's Uncontrollable Christmas". In an extremely poignant moment, Abed explains: "It's not a game for me, Troy. I'm seeing real lava because you're leaving. It's embarrassing, and I don't want to be crazy, but I am crazy, so I made a game that made you and everyone else see what I see".⁶⁸ At this moment, Troy looks down and sees the floor as lava for the first time in the episode. He shares in Abed's subjectivity through the medium of the game, and realizes the depth of his best friend's distress. Abed believes the floor will remain lava until Troy promises not to leave, and Troy must go.

Faced with this irreconcilable problem, Abed casts himself into the lava, shutting down and becoming unresponsive while Troy and Britta look on in horror. Realizing what Abed has been trying to express with the lava game, Britta now recognizes the importance of his imaginary worlds, and how they can help Abed through emotional struggle.⁶⁹

Together Troy and Britta build a cloning machine from cardboard boxes, which they use to resurrect Abed, along with a series of silly gestures and sound effects. While this spectacle is

⁶⁷ Mittell, 119-123.

⁶⁸ *Community*, "Geothermal Escapism".

⁶⁹ *Community*, "Geothermal Escapism".

ridiculous, both characters take the ritual completely seriously, realizing its importance to Abed. Abed is, in a literal sense, conscious and in perfect health on the floor, but his shutdown is treated with the seriousness of physical damage or death by his friends because of the story he has built, which helps them understand his pain and believe in its validity.⁷⁰

After recovering, Abed explains that he is an imperfect clone, and can now accept Troy's departure. Troy admits that he too is very afraid to leave, and Abed offers the same ritual to his friend. Troy accepts, falling to the floor/plunging into the lava, ready to be resurrected without his anxiety. The elaborate, seemingly incomprehensible behavior system that Abed built for dealing with his distress and anxiety proves not to be a burden, but an experience of value that is equally helpful for Troy, a neurotypical character.⁷¹

In the episode's last scene, Troy gives each of his friends a final, touching good-bye, ending with Abed. They discuss their new status as clones, and Abed explains that he had to splice Clone Troy's DNA with that of a homing pigeon, so that Troy will always want to come back. This story of lava and cloning allows Abed to express himself and his love for Troy in a personally meaningful way, a love which runs counter to normative expectations both for men and for autistic people. Though Abed is not someone who speaks about his feelings in a way that is easily comprehensible to most neurotypical people, his alternative method of communication is presented as fully legitimate, and not only legitimate, but meaningful to other people who take the time to appreciate and understand Abed. Abed is the character to whom the viewer is expected to adhere, his fears relatable and his emotional journey uplifting not because he has overcome his autistic qualities, but because he has found methods of expression and connection

⁷⁰ Laing, 87-89.

⁷¹ Laing, 87-90.

which are nourishing and uniquely his own, connecting him to the world in meaningful, surprising ways.

While earlier episodes like “Abed’s Uncontrollable Christmas” positioned Abed as someone with complex feelings and experiences, “Geothermal Escapism” expands this vision of him into someone who can not only work through his own limitations, but also someone whose interactions with his friends elevate and enrich them. In the social world of *Community*, Abed’s friends take him seriously not because they pity him and hope he will someday become normal, but because experiencing the world alongside him makes for a better world. Abed is not “special” or “gifted” as a strange savant, nor is he superficially strange and otherwise normatively successful.⁷² Abed’s cognitive experience is divergent, sometimes highly so, and in ways that both limit and expand his lived experience and ability to communicate with his friends, a tension that is honored by *Community*’s attention to it. In writing Abed as a rich and complex disabled subject, the creators of *Community* take advantage of the unique affordances of television which place Abed into a social, relational world of which he is an active member. Abed’s place in this network allows him to develop an elaborate personal and emotional history over the course of the show’s run. Rather than have his social struggles counterbalanced by incredible brilliance or professional success, Abed’s greatest moments come from his social breakthroughs, the connections he makes not despite his divergent experience, but through it.

⁷² Freeman Loftis, 59-60. McGrath, 127.

AMOS

Television shows like *Community*, *Atypical*, and *The Good Doctor* speak to the contemporary view of autism and autistic people not only because they are recent pop cultural objects, but also because they are set in the present, and place autistic people into the world as it is, producing a picture of autism which neurotypical viewers might well believe is the definitive version.⁷³ Media depictions of autism contribute to the general understanding of what autism looks and feels like in the present, and what the contemporary presence of autism means. Few creators have investigated what the future of autism might look like and what the place of autistic people might be on other worlds. This limited pool of stories, vastly outnumbered by autism narratives in other genres, have usually appeared in the realm of science fiction, a genre which has often served as a place to explore new dimensions of disability.⁷⁴

Recently television viewers have been drawn to sci-fi action/political thriller *The Expanse*, and its depiction of spaceship mechanic Amos Burton. Amos is a figure of complexity and ambiguity, not explicitly named as autistic, and yet often identified as such by fans. *The Good Doctor* and *Atypical* present autism as a set of boxes to be checked, ticks for Sam to express or standards of heroism for Shaun to meet. Amos is able to maintain the individuality and complexity of his experiences in the face of the general homogeneity of televised autism, though at the cost of direct representation. In his struggle to exist comfortably as a neurodivergent subject, Amos suggests a future for autism which is predicated neither on the erasure provided by a cure nor on the continuity of current marginalization of autistic subjects, a world in which

⁷³ Murray, 88.

⁷⁴ Bérubé, 568-569.

Tidwell, Christy. "‘Everything Is Always Changing’: Autism, Normalcy, and Progress in Elizabeth Moon’s *The Speed of Dark* and Nancy Fulda’s ‘Movement’." *Disability In Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure*, edited by Kathryn Allan, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 153-154.

difference is not dissolved or deleted, but remains a difficult, intractable part of his life, neither compensation nor curse.⁷⁵

Premiering on the SyFy Channel in 2015, *The Expanse* adapts a popular space opera book series to television. Frequently compared to *Game of Thrones*, *The Expanse* novels and television series focus on a large group of characters navigating the complex politics and dangerous underworld of our solar system. While the show is intentionally kaleidoscopic, cycling through characters on multiple planets every season, it maintains a core of four characters who become the main location of audience attachment through their longevity and consistency within the evershifting web of alliances and factions that make up the bulk of *The Expanse*'s plot. These four characters crew a spaceship, The Rocinante, and form a kind of nuclear family led by the heroic James Holden, alongside friendly pilot Alex Kamal, compassionate engineer Naomi Nagata, and Amos, the quiet, sometimes menacing mechanic.

As introduced in the show, Amos is something of a cypher. He first appears as Naomi's assistant, acting as her muscle, both in repair work and when she needs to leverage a bit of physical intimidation against someone. Amos fills a familiar generic role as the tough of the Rocinante's crew, following orders and allowing others to speak for him. He acts as a quietly dangerous presence, punctuating the demands and dialogues of his more social companions with his willingness to intervene violently on their behalf. Amos is, at first, illegible and unidentifiable as more than the heavy hitter usually necessary in an action drama.

Where *The Expanse* differs from many other depictions of this type of character, and where it opens Amos' character to a neurodiverse reading, is in its negotiation of Amos' own

⁷⁵ Freeman Loftis, 59-60.

role in his self-presentation. As the show goes on and Amos begins to involve himself more in the dramatic action of the series, his agency and motivation are complicated, as is the show's own perspective on him. Rather than present as Amos as yet another big dumb enforcer, *The Expanse* suggests ways in which Amos relies on stereotypes which yoke together dullness and strength to cover for parts of his personality which he recognizes as impairing and limiting his ability to succeed in the neurotypical mainstream.

Unlike Shaun, Sam, or Abed, Amos presents few of the stereotypical traits of the new classic autism or of the savant. While Amos is intelligent and skilled at his work, he is never shown to be any more talented than his crewmates, and his employment as ship's mechanic is a relentlessly blue-collar and low-status form of survival. Most crucially, Amos, whose flat affect and difficulty reading expression cause discomfort in those around him, deals with this discomfort by remaining silent most of the time. Where many characters of the "new classic autism" mode would double down on their faux pas or derail conversation continually, Amos is content to allow his more diplomatic friends do most of the talking, and he enters conversation only when he is directly invoked, concerned with the situation, or delighted with the comment he intends to make. Reddit user SardonicLemming notes that Amos even repeatedly adopts phrases said by other characters as a kind of shortcut to expression, allowing him to recycle social movements he's seen work once already.⁷⁶ Amos models an autistic kind of shyness, not the brashness or effusive awkwardness that characterizes so many autistic TV characters.⁷⁷ As an adult, Amos has clearly learned from his extended social history and adopted strategies for

⁷⁶ SardonicLemming, "Amos' one-liners", Reddit, posted September 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/TheExpanse/comments/8v3m9b/amos_oneliners/

⁷⁷ Freeman Loftis, 92-99. McGrath, 127.

dealing with discomfort and awkwardness which render him nearly invisible and purposefully opaque to others. His reticence is a display of social impairment rarely seen on TV, particularly in an adult man.

It is noteworthy too that the show's setting renders moot so many of the autistic traits which obsess modern media depictions. As a crewman aboard a long-haul spaceship, Amos lives a life of familiarity and routine by default. All the crewmembers of the *Rocinante* wear the same clothes and do the same things every day (barring alien attacks and interplanetary war), and so it is neither noteworthy nor laughable that Amos does so as well. Behaviors which are thoroughly and closely examined in the core narratives of *Atypical* and *The Good Doctor*, like Sam and Shaun's shared need for reliable routine, are not made notable in *The Expanse*. These behaviors are not non-normative in Amos' life aboard the *Rocinante*. In spectating the ways that Sam and Shaun struggle with their inability to conform to the standards of daily life, the viewer is necessarily consuming their non-normativity, their disability, for the pleasures of comedic and dramatic amusement. Amos' world is outside the bounds of viewer expectation and understanding, and so his everyday behavior is outside the boundaries of the viewer's expectation as well. His performance of neurodivergent subjectivity instead relies on subtler signals of his alienation, instead of the sprawling obviousness of the autistic signifiers which "must" be shown in present-day narratives in order to produce the expected picture of autism.⁷⁸ The distant, unfamiliar setting of *The Expanse* allows it to focus instead on more subtle forms of repetitive behavior and rigid thinking which affect Amos. In particular, Amos struggles with his

⁷⁸ Freeman Loftis, 15-18.

learned reliance on violence as a solution to problems, and with his own perception of himself as cognitively disabled.

The portrayal of violence in connection with disabled subjects is a highly fraught subject. Though disabled people are almost always the victims of violence from abled and empowered others, media and cultural production have long linked violence and disability, especially cognitive or intellectual disability and uncontrollable violence. In her analysis of the character of Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*, Freeman Loftis astutely observes that the moral quandary of the novel demands that Lennie be seen as an empty and uncontrollable object, driven to kill by his excessive responses to stimuli and a strength which is somehow improperly attached to a body perceived to be mindless.⁷⁹ So often disability and violence are brought together to confirm oppressive stereotypes, rather than draw attention to the oppressive violence deployed against disabled people.

In depicting Amos and his relationship to violence, *The Expanse* charts an entirely different path. Certainly, the concerns of genre are influential here: in an action show, it is more unusual to be a pacifist than a warrior, and characters that eschew violence completely are in the minority. But there is also careful attention paid to characterizing and subtly expositing Amos' relationship to and reliance on violence, one which attends to his own agency in the matter.

Over the course of many episodes, Amos' backstory is slowly unspooled, revealing that he grew up in abject poverty as part of the undocumented underclass of Earth, a group denied even the basic income provided to most citizens of any nation in the solar system. His childhood was dangerous and demanded constant vigilance in order to ensure his survival. Fans like

⁷⁹ Freeman Loftis, 62-71

Tumblr user *almostdefinitelydying* have intertwined this childhood struggle with their understandings of autism, especially when it is comorbid with post-traumatic stress disorder. These analyses have connected Amos' reliance on violence to the idea of the "maladaptive schema", a behavioral system which he has developed in response to the conditions around him.

⁸⁰ Rather than an innate quality precipitated by a disability, Amos learned violence from the (presumably neurotypical) world around him, and incorporated it into his social practice because he saw that it was the standard of effective communication. But even then, as his experiences expand and he observes other ways of navigating the social world, Amos questions his reliance on violence and the possibility of changing his own rigid thought patterns.

Amos, while not aware of social cues and expected behaviors, is very much aware of his own unawareness, his impairment, and this extends to the problems of his learned reliance on violence. Amos explicitly warns people when he feels threatened by them (or when he intends to threaten them), and elects his friends Naomi and Holden to help him navigate intense social moments. This dynamic is visible in many scenes throughout the show, particularly when other "loose cannon", dangerous characters confront Amos.

After the crew of the *Rocinante* make a close escape from a dangerous situation, one which almost broke apart the team, Miller (a grizzled detective in the classic noir mode) confronts Amos for killing one of Miller's close friends in order to save Miller and Holden. Miller is understandably upset by his friend's death. Amos clearly explains his logic to Miller, with the obvious expectation that Miller will be able to process this sequence of events unemotionally. Amos does not register Miller's growing anger until he directly insults Amos.

⁸⁰ *Almostdefinitelydying*, "okay, so the thing about Amos", Tumblr, posted February 18th, 2017, <https://almostdefinitelydying.tumblr.com/post/157406005655/okay-so-the-thing-about-amos>

The conversation quickly turns into a brawl, and Amos easily gets the better of Miller, nearly killing him (as he warned Miller he would), until Naomi intervenes.⁸¹

With this one scene, it becomes clear both how difficult responding to social cues is for Amos, and how violence has become an essential part of his social defense mechanism when reticence is no longer available. Amos approaches Miller calmly and tries to reason with him, explaining the thought process which led him to kill Miller's friend, while also failing to meet Miller's increasing agitation with a more appropriate response.⁸² Amos moves to kill Miller only when he's assessed that Miller is a pressing danger to his safety, acting out exactly the cognitive process he just described to Miller. While Amos' reliance on violence is not an inherently positive portrayal, he is also not the uncontrollable "body without a brain" identified by Freeman Loftis, but rather a person with a very complex reasoning process around violence, one which is influenced by both his traumatic experiences and his autistic traits.

After Amos and Miller fight, Naomi and Miller talk about Amos, and why he acts the way he does. Miller moves immediately to infantilizing stereotype, calling Amos "a two hundred pound homicidal kid," but Naomi resists that characterization. Her description of Amos has a poignant resonance with the experience of disability, especially cognitive disability: "Amos is different... okay, very different. But he's not crazy and he's not evil... He's just always needed someone to help him out with the world".⁸³ Miller accepts Naomi's argument and makes peace with Amos, implicitly affirming Naomi's view as a more correct understanding of Amos.

Even so, this kind of diegetic description and discussion can only do so much to posit Amos as a complex, fully considered character, rather than the common unhinged but

⁸¹ *The Expanse*, "Safe"

⁸² Although it is hard to say how far an apology would go in this situation

⁸³ *The Expanse*, "Safe"

entertaining brawler who pops up in numerous television dramas. For every defense mounted by his friends, there are plenty of in-universe negative reactions to Amos as a “trigger-happy whack job” and a “broken boy[], quick on the trigger, slow on the uptake”.⁸⁴ But critically the show itself affirms Amos’ depth and agency by providing space for Amos to elaborate and reflect on his own self-perception and experiences, instead of allowing the other characters to have the last word on his characterization.

Surprisingly, this differentiation is often clearest when Amos himself draws parallels between his own traits and those of characters who explicitly fit the “zero empathy”, “high-functioning sociopath” mold often applied to generically neurodivergent characters.⁸⁵ Confronted with Cortazar, a mad scientist who has been neurologically altered to feel no empathy or compassion, the Rocinante crew struggles to extract necessary information from such a cognitively alienating person. It is Amos who breaks through to Cortazar by connecting with him through his obsessive interest in the subject of his research, an alien substance which is responsible for the deaths of thousands. Amos, who, if read as autistic, might also have particular insight on fixated interests, plays along with Cortazar, indulging his obsession to draw out details of the alien substance.⁸⁶ But even as Amos connects to this disturbing character through their shared qualities, his dialogue with Cortazar subtly pushes back on the possible conflation of Amos’ cognitive experience and Cortazar’s.

As they converse, Amos and Cortazar develop a rhythm of exchanges, Amos providing details on the effects of the alien substance, Cortazar eagerly filling in details. As Amos describes the horrific scene of a character’s death by the alien substance, Cortazar jumps in to

⁸⁴ *The Expanse*, “Safe”; “Rock Bottom”

⁸⁵ Freeman Loftis, 30.

⁸⁶ *The Expanse*, “Static”

describe the scene as “beautiful”, even as Amos mournfully concludes that the woman was just “dead”.⁸⁷ Amos quickly recuperates the exchange by changing his description to “beautifully dead”.⁸⁸ This reflexive difference in Amos and Cortazar’s interpretations emphasizes what is meant by this scene: that while Amos can relate to Cortazar, he is not the same as Cortazar. The possibility of connection between them as neurodivergent subjects does not render them identical or even ideologically aligned.

In this same episode, after a doctor lays out the technobabble explanation for Cortazar’s sociopathy, Amos asked if the operation can be reversed, clearly thinking of himself as he asks.⁸⁹ Amos considers himself of a piece with Cortazar, but in this self-aware acknowledgment of his difference, Amos disproves their similarity precisely because he is concerned about how he fits into society at large. The idea of a cure for autism is incredibly controversial and ethically dubious, but in acknowledging Amos’ wish to be different, *The Expanse* acknowledges a painful but common part of marginalized experience: that, despite any pride one takes in one’s identity, there are times when one does deeply wish to be “normal”. What differentiates this wish to be normal from similarly wistful scenes in shows like *The Good Doctor* or *Atypical* is that it is passing, momentary. Amos is not defined by a dream of becoming normal or developing the skills to appear neurotypical, even if it is a desire which occasionally occurs to him. More often,

⁸⁷ Devoted viewers of the show will also recall the episode which depicted this horrible death scene Amos describes to Cortazar. Upon first entering the hotel room where this woman died, Amos identifies familiar smells which remind him of similar scenes (“sweat, sick, ozone.”) (*The Expanse*, “Salvage”). Not only a moment resonant with sensory sensitivity and sense-memory (a topic more explicitly explored in *The Good Doctor*), this connection which Amos draws between this woman’s death and his own traumatic past reinforces his discomfort and horror at this awful sight, a discomfort which resurfaces in his conversation with Cortazar.

⁸⁸ *The Expanse*, “Static”

⁸⁹ *The Expanse*, “Static”

The Expanse attends to the complexity of Amos' experience, rather than the unlikely hope that life could be simpler.

In the show's fourth episode, Amos and Naomi are in a very precarious situation, having just watched a friend die and still in danger themselves. Naomi is obviously distressed, and Amos tries to comfort her in a fashion that is both awkward and touching. He can discern that she is upset by their seemingly immanent deaths, and knows that companionship helps people in these situations. But he struggles to express himself, hesitating before sitting next to her, pausing multiple times before speaking, examining her face for some kind of clue as to what words would help. He ultimately thanks her for helping him, and when she says that she wishes she had been able to "say goodbye", Amos bluntly asks who she would say goodbye to. When Naomi doesn't answer, Amos takes her hand, again hesitating, reconsidering, moving awkwardly, and Naomi even looks surprised as he does this.⁹⁰

This scene draws attention to the additional work Amos must put in to act socially, the genuine effort he expends to communicate, and why he might rely on shortcuts and behaviors adopted from others and from experience to ease his social encounters. Unlike so many autistic and autistically-coded characters, whose arcs and storylines consider them in relation to their effect on and usefulness to neurotypical characters, Amos is defined most extensively in his relation to himself, and then how his manner drives him to affect others. While *Atypical* and *The Good Doctor* center themselves on a capital A kind of Autism, Amos is not the center of *The Expanse* at all, a profoundly freeing status, allowing Amos' own characterization to be decentered from direct, obsessive focus on his cognitive divergence. He also avoids the fate of so

⁹⁰ *The Expanse*, "CQB"

many peripheral autistic characters as comic relief, remaining close enough to the center of the show to receive meaningful narrative attention, and far enough from center to avoid becoming someone whose strangeness must be solved. Amos shifts between narrative levels freely, and cannot be pinned down.

Released from the shackles of expectation by his lack of a label, Amos displays an array of autistic traits which do not always align with those commonly pushed to the forefront of film and television. By sacrificing the (extremely valuable) potential for explicitly upending some classic stereotypes of autism, *The Expanse* also opens up a different view of Amos, one which cannot be summed up into a single diagnosis or set of symptoms. The future of autism as portrayed in *The Expanse* is one which is emphatically not spectacular, either for the autistic character or the viewer, but one which is experienced and explicated on a personal and intimate scale. In this way, *The Expanse* imagines a world wildly different from those depicted by other television shows, as Amos develops not through his disability or trauma acting as a shortcut to characterization but through careful attention to the unique textures of his experience, how they cannot be separated or isolated from Amos' person as a whole.

CONCLUSION

By analyzing *Atypical*, *The Good Doctor*, *Community*, and *The Expanse* together, I have implied a certain spectrum or hierarchy of representation, from openly diagnosed ineptitude to veiled subliteral near-invisibility. There are valuable moments to be found in each show which reveal the many ways television shows create (and sometimes limit) the interiority and narrative primacy of their neurodivergent subjects. But, to me at least, it seems that the most powerful depictions of neurodivergence and autism have occurred only without that label, in shows that leave the characters' status and diagnosis unspoken. This raises a difficult question: if the most complex depictions of autism and neurodivergence only happen outside the frame of identification as such, if the most thoughtful depictions are also the least visible, then can there be compelling, enriching, and openly identified depictions of autistic experiences onscreen without reducing them into spectacle for neurotypical viewers?

2017 may have marked a significant numerical boost in autism representation on television, but, as outlined in the sections on *The Good Doctor* and *Atypical*, the new shows that debuted that year present a picture of autism that forecloses on complexity and relies on stale, familiar stock plots and characters reinvigorated by the injection of autism. *Atypical* unleashes every possible trite trait and trope associated with autism as fuel for the intensely normative genre of the family sitcom. Autism becomes the starter button for the narrative, but Sam the autistic person is left in the dust, subordinate to the tremendously overdetermined popular idea of autism. *The Good Doctor*, though it integrates Shaun and his autistic traits into the larger generic operations of the hospital show, finds itself excessively bounded by normative expectation, relying on the spectacular pleasures of savantism to whet viewers' appetites for more access to a

fairly facile picture of autism. Shaun is run through the paces of a neurotypical hero's journey, offering an appealingly simple answer to the question of what an autistic person "would do" in various familiar narrative arrangements. The show becomes an exercise in box-checking, marking off diagnostic and narrative criteria to assure viewers that they have not only seen autism, but seen it justly.

It's this promise to show autism, to render it visible, that makes *Atypical* and *The Good Doctor* ultimately troubling texts. By reifying autism as a thing which can be looked upon, dissected, and examined, whether through television-style therapy sessions like Sam's or the visual flood of knowledge which Shaun can access at will, these shows necessarily reinforce perceptions of autism as something separate from people, something which can be divided out. Whether that separate thing is then framed as part of the hero's repertoire of skills or a poisonous curse on the family, it remains an othered object, an imposition on the body which contains it. When autism is figured as a development or derangement grafted onto a person, it is implicitly separate and discontinuous from personality and identity, able to be extracted, refined, or controlled by normative structures.

Naming and producing an archetypical autistic subject can thus be a form of what McGrath calls "cultural and conceptual confinement", a way to reinforce a singular definition of a wildly diverse mode of existence, as well as perpetuate the idea that autism is a condition slapped onto a person, not an integral element of their cognitive experience.⁹¹ Given this predicament, a potential for greater depth to be found in implicitly autistic characters is hardly surprising. Shielded from the obliterating force of the label of autism, characters like Abed and

⁹¹ McGrath, 186

Amos are displayed for spectatorship as individual persons, without the pressure of explaining their actions through the deficient frame which defines autism as a singular experience.

Even when the viewer is offered a spectacular view into the mind of Abed, or called upon to wonder about Amos' behavior and motivations, these interactions are synthesized into a portrait of an individual, not a disorder. Freeman Loftis quotes Ian Hacking on the idea of autism as a "moving target", a diagnosis and classification which is constantly shifting and being reinvented to exclude or include various populations. Hacking uses this concept to zero in on the constructedness and mutability of medical categories and definitions of illness and dysfunction.⁹² In our own era of great concern over autism and its peculiarities, over defining its parameters and possibilities, autism itself is constantly being defined and redefined by doctors, writers, and anyone else with a stake in the discussion. Boundaries are erected across a continuous and sprawling mode of existence, pressing names and forms onto a diverse range of people. In going unnamed, Amos and Abed are allowed to become moving targets themselves, never pinned down by the suggestion that neurodivergence begins where personhood ends. They possess traits which resonate with neurodivergent behaviors, but their experiences and their selves are all their own.

This new binary of explicit and closed autistic presence against an implicit and open-ended one is not itself particularly desirable, as it completely erases the possibility of rich depictions for autistic characters who do not present normatively enough to remain in the realm of the implicit, and allows for the continued propagation of easy stereotype through explicitly diagnosed stock characters. The attention to personal experience and interiority provided by

⁹² Hacking, quoted in Freeman Loftis, 13-14.

Community and *The Expanse* to their neurodivergent characters stand as a proof of concept, one which has been embraced by fans, and should inform future depictions of autistic subjects. That there are such powerful and moving depictions of neurodivergence on television is heartening, but the fact that these depictions must be unnamed is less so, especially when one considers what this implies about the likelihood of television approaching more visible forms of disability in any great frequency or detail.

The failings of *Atypical* and *The Good Doctor* demonstrate a reciprocal relationship between cultural beliefs about disability and the traditional operational mode of television. Sam and Shaun cannot be described without immediate reference to their autism, which is indicative of the way their autism has been instrumentalized to produce television pitches and loglines, to tell of “**the** autistic doctor” and “**the** autistic teen”. Though Sam and Shaun are active participants in complex and ever-changing serial narratives, they are still the fixed absent objects of autistic stereotype because their motivations, their actions, and their experiences are always reducible to their status as autism made manifest. They serve as a narrative anchor, weighing their respective shows down with an indelible consistency of abnormality which does nothing to express the terrifying wildness of being a mind outside the normative frame.

Conversely, Amos and Abed shift and change and occupy different narrative and conceptual positions with a sense of fluidity that reflects and shares in the fluidity of cognitive experience and difference. They cannot be appropriated to add immediate value to a high-concept pitch as an explicitly identified subject would be, and they cannot be made to represent all of autism in one. The strategies used to depict Abed and Amos as rich, complex subjects would not immediately collapse under a diegetic diagnosis. But the cultural picture of

autism, what it looks like, and what it means, is so heavy that it collapses the ability of neurotypical television creators to depict autism in good faith, as more than a device. While we have begun to see complex portrayals autistic people on TV, we will not be able to name them until we acknowledge the incredible diversity of autistic experience, until we begin to see the many kinds of autistic presence in the world around us. The best thing that Amos and Abed and characters like them can teach us is to watch differently.

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