Autismus in Medien
Repräsentation, Marginalisierung und Epistemische Wirkungsweisen

Autism in Media
Representation, Marginalisation, and Epistemic Impacts

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Titel der Dissertation: Autism in Media. Representation, Marginalisation, and Epistemic Impacts

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[Cian] What's it like, being a girl on the spectrum?
[Olivia] Extremely difficult, considering that there's no girls criteria. It's only boy.
So you get—you get assessed on how male you are.
(Love on the Spectrum Australia, 2019, Season 1, Episode 4, 00:12:22-00:12:30)

Video-Still Trailer "Love on The Spectrum Australia" Season 1 Episode 4
(SE1 EP4, 00:12:27, Love on The Spectrum, 2019)

1. Abstract | English

How do representations of autism in media influence intersectional ways of oppression towards autistic people? Public discourse argues about an “epidemic of autism”. There is a rise in autism diagnoses and in media portrayals. For example, the phenomenon of “Autism-TikTok” emerged, and fictional as well as non-fictional TV series portray autistic protagonists. Hitherto studies on autism reveal that media highly influences public perception of autistic people. Thus, scrutinisation is necessary not only as to *how* media representations potentially deploy oppressive ideas – which would exacerbate the marginalisation of autistic people – but also how they may affect the epistemic reality of such. Therefore, the historic context of autism research will get outlined to reveal how a specific autism stereotype got coined during the Nazi period in Vienna. Subsequently, examples of autism media representations get analysed through media analysis, while the concept of epistemic injustice – coined by Kristie Dotson – serves as a heuristic likewise. Overall, the objective is to uncover how media representations may or may not propel ways of oppression marginalised autistic people are faced with.

2. Abstract | Deutsch

Inwiefern haben mediale Repräsentationen von Autismus Einfluss auf intersektional wirkende Unterdrückungsmechanismen, denen autistische Personen ausgesetzt sind? Öffentliche Diskurse debattieren über eine „Autismus-Epidemie“. Tatsächlich steigen die Autismus-Diagnosen und mediale Darstellungen dessen ebenso. Beispielsweise entstand das Phänomen „Autismus-TikTok“, beziehungsweise integrieren fiktionale sowie non-fiktionale TV-Serien autistische Protagonist*innen. Bisherige Studien brachten jedenfalls hervor, dass Medienrepräsentationen maßgeblich die öffentliche Wahrnehmung von autistischen Menschen beeinflussen. Dies macht eine Analyse erforderlich, die nicht nur die Frage des *wie* Medienrepräsentationen potenziell oppressive Mechanismen reproduzieren und damit die Marginalisierung von Autist*innen fördern, sondern auch abdeckt, inwiefern sich diese auf die epistemische Realität deren auswirkt. Um dies zu bewerkstelligen, wird vorerst der historische Kontext der Autismus Forschung dargelegt. Dadurch wird hervorgebracht, dass ein gewisser Autismus-Stereotyp während der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus in Wien geprägt wurde. Anschließend werden exemplarische Repräsentationen von Autismus anhand einer Medienanalyse untersucht, wobei das Konzept der epistemischen Ungerechtigkeit nach Kristie Dotson darin ebenso als Untersuchungsmethode dient. Jedenfalls ist das Ziel dieser Arbeit aufzudecken, wie die Marginalisierung von Autist*innen durch Medien befähigt werden kann.

3. Introduction

Light needs to be shed on the epistemic impact of representations of autism in media. The latter profoundly shape public knowledge on autism (Brickhill et al., 2023, pp. 1-16; Mittmann et al., 2023a, pp. 8008-8017; Mittmann et al., 2023b, pp. 1-6; S. C. Jones et al., 2023, pp. 2205–2217; S. C. Jones, 2022, pp. 1484-1501; T. W. Ressa & Goldenstein, 2022, pp. 55-63; Fontes & Pino-Juste, 2021, pp. 196–206; Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021, pp. 470-479; T. W. Ressa & Goldstein, 2021, pp. 55-63; T. Ressa, 2021, pp. 1-26; Draaisma, 2009, pp. 1475–1480) and, therefore, must be understood as a vital epistemic resource. Arguably, media representations of marginalised groups influence how people not only think about but also how they treat members of said groups consequently. There is a dire need for a variety of autistic representations in media which reach beyond stereotypes such as the cis white male who is a science nerd (Orm et al., 2023, pp. 1-6; Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021, p. 471; Ressa & Goldstein, 2021, p. 56; Draaisma, 2009, pp. 1475–1480). It will also be necessary to address parameters of media production as well as ways to sensitise viewers in order to foster ways that seek to mitigate the oppression of autistics. This is what this academic endeavour, overall, aims to tackle. It should be noted beforehand that the forthcoming content of this thesis is partially based on two previous conference contributions of mine (Bauer-Zierfuß, 2025, pp. 22-23; Bauer-Zierfuß, 2024, pp. 1-8). However, they have been adapted, refined, and further developed. With this in mind, the main research questions can be outlined.

3.1. Research Questions

Do media representations harden autistic stereotypes that work oppressively towards multiply marginalised autistic people, such as autistic women, autistic people falling under the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual and more) umbrella and/or autistic BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) and if so, how? How do media representations of autism, in general, affect marginalised autistic groups, especially when it comes to epistemic issues?

Selected parts of the following examples of autism media representations will get scrutinised: Firstly, there is the fictional TV series The Good Doctor (*The Good Doctor*, n.d.; *The Good Doctor*, 2017; Shore 2017 till present) which features an autistic surgeon with savant skills (*The Good Doctor*, n.d.; *The Good Doctor*, 2017). Secondly, the Netflix documentary series Love on the Spectrum Australia (*Netflix Series Love on the Spectrum Australia*, 2021; Love on the Spectrum, 2019; Northern Pictures & ABC Publicity, 2019, pp. 1-25) which shows autistic people during their dating experiences (Northern Pictures & ABC Publicity, 2019, pp. 1-25) will get analysed. Lastly, one TikTok video dealing with autism and produced by a marginalised autistic creator (Henson, 2023) will serve as a subject of scrutinisation as well.

3.2. Structure & Methods

First and foremost, it needs to be stressed that – throughout the forthcoming analysis – an intersectional view on oppression will foreground the latter's interweaving forms across multiple social categories. In general, the concept of intersectionality aims to foreground the multilayered nature of mechanisms of marginalisation and oppression (Hare, 2024, pp. 5-7; Watson-Singleton et al., 2024, pp. 34-43; Doyle et al., 2022, pp. 340-356; Mallipeddi & VanDaalen, 2022, pp. 281-289; Saxe, 2017, pp. 1-27; Carbado et al., 2013, pp. 303-312) which is also a key part of thesis' subject. In that regard, Devon Carbado, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Vickie Mays and Barbara Tomlinson point to the roots "of intersectionality" (Carbado et al., 2013, p. 303) which lie "in Black feminism and Critical Race Theory" (Carbado et al., 2013, p. 303). It was introduced by "Black feminist legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw" (Ahmed, 2024, p. 132) in order "to capture how discrimination works, 'like traffic through an intersection'" (Ahmed, 2024, p. 132; Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). Thus – ever since its emergence – intersectionality has been used to analyse multiple "issues, social identities, power dynamics, legal and political systems, and discursive structures" (Carbado et al., 2013, p. 303). For instance, the concept is also widely deployed in the field of Gender and Queer Studies in the quest of scrutinising oppressive dynamics that affect people across "multiple social categories" – as sociologist Nina Degele foregrounds (Degele, 2008, p. 77). It needs to

be noted, however, that these categorial classifications, such as “autistic people”, “women” or “BIPOC” and so forth, are surely not homogenous. They still can be useful in trying to highlight the intertwined nature of oppressive mechanisms and power relations that seem to affect certain demographics particularly. In “The Feminist Killjoy Handbook” (Ahmed, 2024) the BIPOC and queer philosopher Sara Ahmed questions critically the nature of such categories. She still concedes by quoting Ruby Hamad that “the lack of better terms necessitates their use at times” (Ahmed, 2024, p. 63; Hamad, 2021, p. 9).

It also needs to be stressed that I debate autism – and therein, disability – predominantly through a social approach within this thesis. According to scholar Sydney Terroso, one of the strengths of the social model of disability lies in the fact that it does not frame disability “as a problem that resides inside a particular person” (Terroso, 2021, p. 5) which “needs to be fixed, as the medical model of disability” (Terroso, 2021, p. 5) would suggest, but would rather identify and address “external environmental, attitudinal, and organizational factors in society (e.g. systemic barriers, derogatory attitudes, and social exclusion) that make it increasingly difficult for disabled individuals to function in society” (Terroso, 2021, p. 5). Several disability scholars – such as Anna Lawson, Angharad E. Beckett, Sara Goering and Liz Crow – agree in stating that the social model of disability foregrounds socially constructed oppressive dynamics (Lawson & Beckett, 2021, pp. 348-379; Goering, 2015, pp. 134-138; Crow, 1996, pp. 1-21).

However, when utilising the social model of disability, I would like to point out that one may risk desensitisation of what it means to be and live as an autistic person in a capitalist society by obscuring that *inherent* impairments exist which may cause substantial suffering even if all socially oppressive dynamics were resolved. For instance, my autism makes me struggle immensely with light sensitivity. No matter the accommodation, the sunlight will lead to overwhelm, and – no matter what – I will always perceive it as disabling. Hence, when I discuss disability mostly from a social perspective, I try to *foreground* societal and structural aspects that disable autistic people because those societal and structural barriers could and must get adjusted to reach more equity – not only for autistic people.

When trying to grasp the multi-layered ways how oppression of autistic people and their representations in media overlap and interrelate, this thesis utilises three core aspects.

Firstly, there is the historic context of autism research. The latter will get outlined to contextualise the formation of a specific autistic stereotype and, therein, co-occurring oppressive dynamics that have shaped autism science as well as discourse thus far. On the most basic level, a stereotype is understood as a generalisation and oversimplification by, for instance, associating specific attributes with a particular group (Heilman, 2012, pp. 114-115; Peterson et al., 2008, pp. 7-11; Hall, 1997, pp. 234-235). Whilst revealing the formation of stereotypes linked to the concept of autism, focus will be laid upon the history of autism science that particularly happened in Vienna during the Nazi regime (Czech, 2020, pp. 163-175; Czech, 2018, pp. 1-43). The coinage of the autistic condition through the Viennese paediatrician Hans Asperger, the eponym of the infamous “Asperger Syndrome” (Bearer et al., 2023, p. 1; Czech, 2020, pp. 163-165; Sheffer, 2020, p. 14; Czech, 2018, pp. 1-3), has profoundly contributed to the history of autism.

In order to understand the history of autism as a medical concept, one needs to understand the people that profoundly shaped it, as well as the socio-cultural context surrounding their work. When it comes to Hans Asperger, it needs to be foregrounded that he led a particularly fruitful career during the Nazi regime in Vienna, Austria (Sheffer, 2020, pp. 212-213; Czech, 2020, pp. 163-175; Czech, 2018, pp. 1-43). Controversies surrounding his ties to the Nazi regime notwithstanding, the late paediatrician is still widely considered a pioneer in the study of autism (Sheffer, 2020, p. 15; Al Ghazi, 2018, p. 5; Czech, 2018, p. 1; Furfaro, 2018, p. 1; Baker & Lang, 2017, pp. 1-3). It was even claimed that the paediatrician risked his own life to save some of his autistic patients, according to historian Herwig Czech (Czech, 2018, pp. 7-8, p. 17). However, upon reviewing archival records, this turns out to be untruthful, as historian Edith Sheffer also highlights (Sheffer, 2020, p. 16). In fact, it needs to be assumed that Asperger’s empathy was selective.

Asperger not only established several biased assumptions about autism but also treated his autistic patients accordingly. The late paediatrician, for instance, separated those

autistic children that he deemed as having “exceptional originality”, as being gifted, and “socially valuable” (Sheffer, 2020, pp. 12-13, pp. 176-179) from those who he considered as *too* disabled (Czech, 2018, pp. 1-43; Draaisma, 2009, pp. 1475-1480; Sheffer, 2020, pp. 13-23) which came with dire consequences. Some of those children deemed as “not remediable” were sent to the Viennese clinic “Am Spiegelgrund” (Czech, 2018, pp. 1-43; Sheffer, 2020, pp. 100-147). At Spiegelgrund around 800 children were euthanised, starved to death, abused, and/or experimented on during the Nazi regime (Price, 2022, p. 36; Czech, 2020, p. 20; Vörös, 2010, pp. 1-169).

The diagnosis that Hans Asperger would give those patients – who were on what he would consider the more “’favourable’ end of the autistic ‘range’” (Sheffer, 2020, p. 12) – was called “autistic psychopathy” (Hippler & Klicpera, 2003, pp. 291-301; van Krevelen, 1971, pp. 82-86). He was convinced that autism is caused by “an extreme male brain” (Brickhill, 2023, p. 4; van Eijk & Zietsch, 2021, pp. 1597-1608) and is “an extreme variant of male intelligence” (Price, 2022, p. 36; Furfaro, 2019, p. 1; Czech, 2018, p. 31; Baron-Cohen, 2002, pp. 248-254). The diagnostic label “Asperger Syndrome”, however, got medically recognised as late as in the 1990s when British psychiatrist Lorna Wing rediscovered Asperger’s thesis (Sheffer, 2020, p. 14; Singer, 2017, p. 53).

Asperger‘s coinage of autism as a medical concept created some of the foundations for ongoing research biases, as several academic findings revealed (Brickhill et al., 2023, p. 1; Doyle et al., 2022, p. 344; Botha & Cage, 2022, pp. 1-22), such as gender bias (Brickhill, 2023, pp. 1-16; Doyle et al., 2022, pp. 340-356; Draaisma, 2009, pp. 1475-1480) and racial bias (Botha & Cage, 2022, p. 3; D. R. Jones et al., 2020, pp. 1-27). Those biases that work oppressively – and are rooted in the history of autism as a medical concept – have targeted especially those autistic people who are not considered “gifted”, who do not identify as cis, or male, and who are not white.

In fact, oppressive notions have been so persuasive that some of them have gotten internalised by some autistic people themselves. For instance, there exists a phenomenon called “Aspie Supremacy” (De Hooge, 2019, p. 1), according to disability scholar Anna de Hooge. The latter understands Aspie Supremacy as an “ideology [which] consists of an interplay between anti-autistic ableism, and the frame of the Aspie

subject as superior, both to other autistics and to non-autistics" (De Hooge, 2019, p. 1). "Aspie" is an abbreviation for those autistic people who were still diagnosed with the aforementioned Asperger Syndrome (Aspie editorial team, n.d.). One reason why I draw attention to the phenomenon of Aspie Supremacy is because it contains value judgements that seem eerily reminiscent of those that Hans Asperger deployed on his autistic patients during the Nazi regime. As research thus far has disclosed, the late paediatrician's conceptualisation of autism got influenced by the political milieu of Nazism – and, therein, also white supremacy – which was also mirrored in the practice and research of medicine (Czech, 2018, pp. 1-43; Sheffer, 2020, p. 13). The mindset of Asperger, his work, and his bias played vital parts in the formation of stereotypical ideas, some of which, arguably, still get perpetuated today – also in the face of media representations (Mittmann et al., 2023a, p. 8008; S. C. Jones et al., 2023, p. 2206; Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021, pp. 476-477; Draaisma, 2009, pp. 1475-1480).

The second core aspect of this thesis consists of media analysis tackling three examples of autism portrayals in media. Why does such scrutiny become salient in relation to this thesis' topic? One reason is that hitherto studies reveal that autism representations in fictional and non-fictional media frequently stereotype autistic people (Mittmann et al., 2023a, pp. 8008–8017; S. C. Jones et al., 2023, pp. 2205–2217; Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021, pp. 470–479; Sheffer, 2020, pp. 245-248; Draaisma, 2009, pp. 1475-1480). Another reason is media content's "impact on viewer knowledge and understanding of autism" (S. C. Jones et al., 2023, p. 1) as well as its "significant and powerful influence on shaping societal beliefs and attitudes toward others" (S. C. Jones et al., 2023, p. 1). This means, firstly, that viewers might internalise stereotyped ideas around autism which they consumed through media depictions and, secondly, that the latter constitute an epistemic resource – a resource that contributes to knowledge production. As a result, I am to scrutinise depictions of autism in media on the visual and auditorial level as well as on the level of content while equally assessing a media production's embedment in socio-cultural power structures.

Subjects of analysis are going to be the following examples of TV and social media autism representations. Firstly, there are the trailer (Shore, 2017) and selected parts of the first episode of the fictional TV series The Good Doctor (*The Good Doctor*, n.d.; *The*

Good Doctor, 2017; Shore 2017 till present), which features a fictional, autistic main protagonist, namely surgeon Shaun Murphy (*The Good Doctor*, n.d.; *The Good Doctor*, 2017). Secondly, selected sequences of the first episode of season one of the romantic documentary series Love On The Spectrum Australia (*Netflix Series Love on the Spectrum Australia*, 2021; Love on the Spectrum, 2019; Northern Pictures & ABC Publicity, 2019, pp. 1-25) – LOTS AUS for short – which showcases autistic people dating (Northern Pictures & ABC Publicity, 2019, pp. 1-25) will also serve as subject of scrutinisation. Thirdly, a TikTok video – which deals with autism and prejudice (Henson, 2023) and was created by an autistic person – will come under examination.

At this point, I would like to lay out some of the thoughts that prompted me to choose the aforementioned subjects of analysis. One of the formers is The Good Doctor's trailer public availability. Notably, the series can only then get accessed if one has a subscription for a streaming provider. Thus – especially when concerning oneself with marginalisation – it seems only reasonable to try to make the analysis, or at least large parts of it, as accessible as possible to not exacerbate the marginalisation which is the very subject of this thesis. Another reason that made the trailer of The Good Doctor an intriguing subject was its positionality. The trailer for a movie or series tries to not only announce the latter but also present it in the most appealing way possible (Oja, 2019, pp. 200-201; Stanitzek, 2009, p. 53) by, for instance, touting the star cast or using "over-the-top formulations", according to philosophy scholar Georg Stanitzek (Stanitzek, 2009, p. 53). Thus, it is used as a promotional tool and, at the same time, is relatively short in length. Within those characteristics may lie a specific potential when it comes to the forthcoming analysis: The trailer's shortness and purpose may turn it into a catalyst of dense meaning since it tries to introduce the main themes of a film/series within a short time span. This could allow for a particularly in-depth analysis that potentially covers multiple aspects that the series in questions may seek to convey overall.

My first thought on choosing a TikTok video created by an autistic person was that one video can in no way, shape, or form represent the diversity of content and the sheer multitude of marginalised autistic creators who get to use their voice and/or share their lived realities with their audience. However, the analysis of a TikTok clip can work as grounds for opening a broader discourse, and that is "Autism-TikTok" as an epistemic

space wherein autistic creators can curate their own content and present themselves as the experts that they are on their individual autistic experiences. Those videos do not simply enable autistic (self-)representation, but they also serve as tools to get in touch with other autistics through video responses, comments, or private messages. “Autism-TikTok” seems to have a highly participatory and even communal factor to it. All these facets make this specific social media platform a space for knowledge production. In short, the multifacetedness in meaning and effects of “Autism-TikTok” as an epistemic resource prompts further exploration for which the TikTok video to be analysed serves as a starting point. Its scrutinisation aims to foreground the dynamics of power and oppression in which “Autism-TikTok” may be embedded in and/or influenced by.

In trying to make oppressive dynamics in which media representations are produced, consumed, and embedded in more tangible, the concept of epistemic injustice is used as a heuristic. Epistemic injustice is defined as the “wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower” (Fricker, 2007, p. 1), according to feminist philosopher Miranda Fricker who initially coined the term as well as its two sub-forms of epistemic injustice, namely testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice is inflicted by an agent since “a prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility” (Dotson, 2012, p. 26; Fricker, 2007, p. 1; Fricker, 2007, pp. 30-43). Hermeneutical injustice, however, happens structurally by “having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding” (Dotson, 2012, p. 29; Fricker, 2007, pp. 147-169) because of the reliance on “a structural prejudice” (Dotson, 2012, p. 29; Fricker, 2007, pp. 147-169) within “the collective hermeneutical resource” (Dotson, 2012, p. 29; Fricker, 2007, pp. 147-169). In this thesis the terms hermeneutical and epistemic resource are understood as meaning the same – according to Kristie Dotson’s definitions of the two – which will be elaborated on in more detail within the chapter “4.3.2. Hermeneutical Injustice”. Notably, the aforementioned BIPOC feminist philosopher Kristie Dotson (*Kristie Dotson,* n.d.) analysed Miranda Fricker’s coinage of epistemic injustice within her essay “A Cautionary Tale. On Limiting Epistemic Oppression” (Dotson, 2012, pp. 24-101) wherein she ascertains that Fricker herself exerts epistemic injustice through her “closed conceptual” approach (Dotson, 2012, p. 25). Thus, Dotson enhanced Fricker’s initial differentiation between two forms of

epistemic injustice, namely testimonial and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007, p. 1, 9, 147) by adding a third kind of epistemic injustice: Contributory Injustice (Dotson, 2012, pp. 24-47). An “agent’s situated ignorance” (Dotson, 2012, p. 31) works to onset contributory injustice by “maintaining and utilizing structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources” (Dotson, 2012, p. 32). Thus, “[b]oth the structurally prejudiced or biased hermeneutical resources and the agent’s situated ignorance are catalysts for contributory injustice” (Dotson, 2012, p. 31).

Why is it of importance to detect and address injustices accelerated through and by media depictions that affect autistic people? Arguably, public understanding is not only shaped by the content of media representations (Brickhill et al., 2023, pp. 1-16; Mittmann et al., 2023a, pp. 8008-8017; Mittmann et al., 2023b, pp. 1-6; S. C. Jones et al., 2023, pp. 2205–2217; S. C. Jones, 2022, pp. 1484-1501; T. W. Ressa & Goldenstein, 2022, pp. 55-63; Fontes & Pino-Juste, 2021, pp. 196–206; Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021, pp. 470-479; T. W. Ressa & Goldstein, 2021, pp. 55-63; T. Ressa, 2021, pp. 1-26; Draaisma, 2009; pp. 1475–1480), but also by the social and epistemic contexts of said depictions. The latter inevitably affects media producers’ and receivers’ ways of negotiating and reflecting upon the content produced or consumed. For instance, a viewer may project certain internalised negative ideas onto a certain medium, such as social media. That circumstance likely influences the consumer’s perceptions as well as their judgements of the content(s) witnessed on said platforms. Hence, the way a viewer not only assesses but also *reacts* to media representations of autistic people reveals how they may or may not propel epistemic oppression of marginalised autistic people. Thus, the concept of epistemic injustice may prove helpful in the quest to decipher the more liberating as well as the oppressive mechanisms of media representation. The former should aid in establishing a nuanced view on the multifacetedness of marginalisation.

To make more tangible how a consumer’s assessment of and reaction to representations of autism may contribute to instances of epistemic injustice, a hypothetical example may help. Let us assume an individual encounters the content of a queer autistic woman on a social media platform. They read about her autism diagnosis. That individual, let us call them the consumer or recipient, immediately questions the

woman's autism diagnosis because she "does not seem autistic" to the recipient. Their judgement is based upon the assumption that the autistic woman is nothing like those autistic people shown on TV, for example, she does not *look* or *act* like Rain Man (Levinson, 1988) or The Monk (Shalhoub, 2002-2009).
The consumer, however, does not reflect on their premature judgement which does not take the testimony of the autistic woman seriously because they rely on a specific set of hermeneutical resources. Moreover, the recipient may share their opinion by commenting on the post with a statement such as "You do not look autistic to me." Even if said comment came from a well-intentioned place, it would still invalidate the autistic person's identity as well as their knowledge and, thereby, harm them epistemically. In fact, the recipient not only did not reflect on their initial judgement but also did not do so on their reaction to that judgement. Additionally, they also ignored alternating hermeneutical resources, namely those which got used by the autistic woman. An alternative way to react – which would likely have worked to minimise injustice that is epistemically culpable – would be, for instance, the consumer asked the woman about her experience of being autistic and/or told them that they have not yet encountered anyone who identifies as a woman and, simultaneously, is autistic. In all, this scenario only touches upon how media representations may play a part in propelling epistemic injustice. Although it is hypothetical, I know of many autistic people who did experience similar scenarios many times – me included. This prompts me to think about ways of behaving and being that would mitigate instances of epistemic injustice.

Thus – at last – ethical considerations and suggestions for future endeavours in the realm of being a producer or consumer of autism media representations will get introduced, led by the quest to minimise marginalisation of autistic people which gets propelled through media representations. For instance, this will include not only discourse about how viewers can be sensitised but also about how they can address internalised biases. In short, an ethical discussion should be introduced not only on how to become a more conscious consumer as well as creator of media representation but also on ways to treat as well as speak about and to autistic people.

3.3. Motivation, Relevance & Context

There are several reasons why I feel called to conduct this research. First and foremost, I have an intrinsic motivation rooted in my experiences as a marginalised autistic person which led to a process of learning and unlearning that still transcends my personal realm. Nonetheless, I would like to start with some personal facts: I am a queer, autistic woman with ADHD who also acquired some chronic illnesses along the way.

I was diagnosed with autism as an adult, and that came with a great deal of suffering. When I read about epistemic injustice for the first time, many experiences from childhood and teenagerhood came up. Therein, two themes stood out. Firstly, there was my own inability to articulate or to even grasp my everyday struggles. Secondly, there was my surroundings' inability to believe or conceptualise for themselves that my experience has been an autistic one all along, even at the time when I *found language* to articulate some of the alienation that I felt. Those experiences stemming from the aforementioned two themes took a serious toll on my mental and physical health.

The alienation I felt, though, did not originate within myself. Others made me feel ostracised due to experiences of bullying, social exclusion, and a lack of understanding for my "quirky" behaviours. The child whose constant effort to "fit in" took so much energy of her that she turned into a self-harming teenager and, at last, a substance-abusing adult. At some point, I hit rock bottom. One friend, Sandra, got worried about me. At some point, she asked whether I have ever considered having ADHD. After our conversation, I spent hours researching online and browsing through social media, where I ended up on so-called "Autism & ADHD TikTok". The sum of my findings made me learn a great deal about autism and about the fact that autism and ADHD apparently do seem to co-occur.

Nonetheless, I still did not think I could be autistic. Why was that? The answer is, overall, quite simple: I had so frequently experienced what it means to not be believed that I ceased to believe in my own judgements. Additionally, I also clung to an autistic stereotype that I myself had internalised which was the one of the socially awkward, cis, white boy or man who was blunt. But the fact that I was unable to leave my apartment at

that time, that fries became my only daily meal for weeks, and that I almost ceased to stand any external sensory stimuli, such as the traffic noise or the lights in the supermarket, led me to get thoroughly psychologically evaluated. The assessors concluded that I am, in fact, autistic and have ADHD.

After receiving my autism diagnosis, many of my (painful) life experience made sense. It was a welcomed diagnosis simply because it made me understand myself better. In fact, a study by philosophy scholar Kristien Hens and by Raymond Langenberg suggests (Hens & Ramond, 2018, pp. 1-155) that other late-diagnosed autistics feel similarly. Most certainly, the "post-diagnosis phase" included re-evaluating past life experiences. Long-suppressed scenarios came to the surface. This did not only evoke feelings of grief but instigated a rebuild of my personal sense of identity. The times one labelled me as "weird" – which then equalled "wrong" – was not me being "wrong". I was, and I am autistic.

However, even today, as an officially diagnosed autistic woman, I am more often than not confronted with prejudice. Many people to whom I disclose the fact that I am autistic would say things such as "Oh, but how can *you* be autistic?", "Are you good at math?", "But you do not look autistic at all", "But why did not anyone notice before?", "What? You got diagnosed with autism? When and by whom? A psychologist?", or something similar of that sort. Well, my then so-called "disruptive" or "quirky" behaviour did not go unnoticed – on the contrary. It simply did not get labelled as autistic but rather as overly sensitive, hysterical, or quirky – to give a few examples.

In my personal view, a deeply ingrained stereotype of female hysteria coupled with the autistic stereotype of the cis white male savant became my own personal undoing. This is not a "me problem", though. Many marginalised autistic people share similar or far more debilitating and extreme experiences. Studies show that autistic women and genderqueer people have less of a chance to receive an autism diagnosis at all just because of their gender (Codina, 2023, p. 75; Rae Brickhill, 2023, pp. 1-16; Botha & Cage, 2022, p. 16; Price, 2022, p. 8; McQuaid et al., 2021, pp. 1-16; Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019, p. 1900; Saxe, 2017, pp. 1-27). In general, autistic women seem to be underdiagnosed (Saporito, 2022, p. 1, Loomes et al, 2017, p. 1; Moore, 2023, p. 1). The

same holds true for BIPOC who have less of a chance of receiving a diagnosis because of racial prejudice (Hotez & Hudson, 2023, p. 3718; Botha & Cage, 2022, p. 16; Desireee R. Jones, 2020, pp. 1-24; Price, 2022, p. 35). As a matter of fact, groups particularly affected by marginalisation run the risk of not getting diagnosed (Botha & Cage, 2022, pp. 1-22; Price, 2022, p. 35; Thomas et al., 2011, pp. 1-13). By extension, this may constitute a life hazard. It has been suggested that a late diagnosis of autism heightens the risk of suicidal ideation (Jack, 2023, p. 1; South et al., 2021, pp. 1-3; Hens & Langenberg, 2018, p. 57).

On my account, it feels unfathomably unjust what marginalisation does to those affected by it. This constitutes pivotal epistemic issues. Those autistic people who would want to seek a diagnosis – but are not able to do so – get stripped of possible resources. Those who do not come to the realisation that they are autistic may suffer silently. Those who choose to not pursue an official diagnosis may do so out of fear of weaponisation. Autistic psychologist and scholar Devon Price, for instance, asserts that an official autism diagnosis in the US “can even be used against you in divorce proceedings or child custody cases” (Price, 2022, p. 45) or can “force a legal adult under a financial conservatorship” (Price, 2022, p. 45).

What I infer through my personal experience is that receiving a diagnosis, educating myself on- and offline, connecting with autistic people, consuming media representations that did feel closer to my embodiment of autism, rethinking my own internalised biases and, as a result, changing the way I talk to and about marginalised groups felt life-changing: I was allowed to learn about different epistemologies and, in brief, about the diversity of human existence. Therein, I did realise the epistemic impact media representations embody. Sadly, I also got the impression that marginalised autistic creators on TikTok, for instance, received a fair or even excessive amount of harassment and bullying which made me think about the possible reasons why that is. I did suspect internalised sexism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism, and ableism to be some of them, thus prompting me to analyse the reasons for people’s judgements on and actions towards autistic people. In any case, epistemologist Amandine Catala emphasises that autistic people, overall, encounter “many, mutually reinforcing types of epistemic injustice” (Catala et al., 2021, p. 9035).

Because of all these aforementioned aspects, I want to contribute to a more just world for all autistic people and, therein, want to highlight the importance of our testimonies. A study conducted by a team of autistic and non-autistic scholars titled "'We have so much to offer': Community members' perspectives on autism research" (Haar et al., 2024, pp. 1-14) inspired me particularly in that respect. Therein, emphasis is put on the circumstance that "[a]utism research is changing. Autistic activists and researchers want Autistic people in the community to have more of a say about what is researched and how" (Haar et al., 2024, p. 1).

Undoubtedly, the prerequisite in the strive for justice is the need for perspectives from marginalised groups. Hence, it seems especially vexing that non-autistic people have prevalently conducted research on autism. However, there are autistic researchers to whose collective body of work I aim to contribute. Firstly, there is autistic trans psychology scholar and author Devon Price. With their groundbreaking book "Unmasking Autism" (Price, 2022) they left a significant mark within autism discourse. Price has worked on the oppressive notions formed by neurotypicality and by a predominantly non-autistic society, amongst many other aspects. Secondly, there is sociologist Judy Singer who introduced the term "neurodiversity" (Hare, 2024, pp. 7-9, Singer, 2017, p. 9). However, I would consider some of the notions she drew in her work "Neurodiversity. The Birth of an Idea" (Singer, 2017) as being a product of internalised ableism. For example, Singer refuses to identify as autistic because "the word […] carries too much heavy freight" (Singer, 2017, p. 16) to her. Nonetheless, she did contribute significantly to the onset of the neurodiversity movement which – as a social or "civil rights movement" (Singer, 2017, p. 9; Singer, 2017, p. 20) – has made a meaningful difference when it comes to the effort of breaking through the notion that there is something such as a "normal" mind or a "normal" way of neurocognitive functioning (Singer, 2017, pp. 34-40; Hare, 2024, pp. 10-12).

As already stated at a previous point, an intersectional approach seems vital when it comes to the study of dynamics of oppression. Therefore, scholars who have researched the multiple effects and impacts of (epistemic) injustice are equally important to me. One of whom is BIPOC feminist philosopher Kristie Dotson. In my view, her work clearly brings forth how perspectives from marginalised people matter since, arguably,

only they can provide aspects to matters of marginalisation that people who are not affected by such cannot.

An additional reason for choosing this thesis' subject is the fact that media has been a crucial part of my professional life. I've worked as a self-employed filmmaker and media artist for the past ten years. Within my body of work, topics such as queer identity, emotional abuse, illness, death, and grief became prominent. Additionally, and just recently, I finalised a film about the autistic experience which was created together with an autistic girl and an autistic non-binary child. Moreover, I've worked with and in social media on several occasions. Thus, I conclude that my singular perspective will enrich the debate around the issues that I am going to tackle.

Having outlined that, the limitations of this thesis need mentioning. It is vital to point out that I am a white person, born and raised in Austria, a central European country. This comes not only with a tremendous amount of privilege but also with certain ways of how I think and engage with the world. Thus, even if I put much effort into reflecting on my internalised biases and try to work on resolving them, I still have them, and to some I am surely completely oblivious. It is my understanding that certain internalised biases or simply certain ways of thinking and interacting with the world are shaped not only but also by the privileges I hold. The predicament of that may be that only someone *differently* marginalised and, thereby, having access to other sets of hermeneutical resources may be able to detect my yet unconscious bias. This leads me to another point. In the quest for studying the marginalisation of autistic people, I seek to incorporate the entire autism spectrum in the ways I think about our disability. However, I have had hardly any interactions with non- or semi-verbal autistics. I would not claim that I could empathise with their strengths, their hardships or their overall experiences. Although I try to actively incorporate semi- and non-verbal autistics in my thought processes, I can't speak *for* them. In fact, they do have a voice of their own – even if they do not speak audibly.

It is also essential to note that I do not aim to provide *the* answers to the various issues happening in autism science and discourse. In fact, I do not even aim to provide any answers in the sense that I would not claim my conclusions to be *the* truth. The latter is

a subjective construct based on one's social, cultural, political, and economic context(s). What "truth" may signify to me could mean something entirely different to someone who grew up with different sets of hermeneutical resources. What I aim to provide through this thesis is *one* perspective that could turn out helpful in the quest for more justice for autistic people and, in fact, for anyone.

4. Definitions

When trying to contribute positively to the quest for more justice, language seems to be of pivotal importance (Singer, 2017, pp. 44-45). Undoubtedly, terminology influences our thinking and our perception, thus, how we make sense of the world and ourselves (Kapitan & Kapitan, 2023, p. 65). The following chapter elaborates on the reasoning why I choose to use certain expressions, whereas I refrain from deploying others.

4.1. Autism

On the most basic level, if one attempts to concern oneself with "autism", a distinct definition of the latter becomes salient. When I refer to autism throughout this thesis, I have the definition of trans autistic psychology scholar and author Nick Walker in mind (Walker, 2025a; Walker, 2021, p. 4). She defines autism as follows:

> *"Autism is a genetically-based human neurological variant. The complex set of interrelated characteristics that distinguish autistic neurology from non-autistic neurology is not yet fully understood, but current evidence indicates that the central distinction is that autistic brains are characterized by particularly high levels of synaptic connectivity and responsiveness. This tends to make the autistic individual's subjective experience more intense and chaotic than that of non-autistic individuals: on both the sensorimotor and cognitive levels, the autistic mind tends to register more information, and the impact of each bit of information tends to be both stronger and less predictable.*

Autism is a developmental phenomenon, meaning that it begins in utero and has a pervasive influence on development, on multiple levels, throughout the lifespan. Autism produces distinctive, atypical ways of thinking, moving, interaction, and sensory and cognitive processing. One analogy that has often been made is that autistic individuals have a different neurological "operating system" than non-autistic individuals.

[…] Despite underlying neurological commonalities, autistic individuals are vastly different from one another. Some autistic individuals exhibit exceptional cognitive talents. However, in the context of a society designed around the sensory, cognitive, developmental, and social needs of non-autistic individuals, autistic individuals are almost always disabled to some degree – sometimes quite obviously, and sometimes more subtly.

The realm of social interaction is one context in which autistic individuals tend to consistently be disabled. […]

Autism is still widely regarded as a 'disorder,' but this view has been challenged in recent years by proponents of the neurodiversity model, which holds that autism and other neurocognitive variants are simply part of the natural spectrum of human biodiversity, like variations in ethnicity or sexual orientation (which have also been pathologized in the past). Ultimately, to describe autism as a disorder represents a value judgment rather than a scientific fact" (Walker, 2025b, p. 1).

4.2. The Autism Spectrum & the Social Model of Disability

There are several facets as to why the medical label "Asperger Syndrome" is not going to get used throughout this thesis to refer to those who once were diagnosed with such (including myself), except in those instances where the term is embedded in a quotation, is used in a historical or explanatory context or is needed to build a specific argument. The reasons why I refrain from using "Asperger Syndrome", overall, will be explored during this chapter.

As of today, the diagnostic term “Asperger Syndrome” can still be found in the International Classification of Diseases Vol. 10, or ICD-10 for short, (Dilling et al., 2015, p. 351) which is a manual used for diagnosing mental and neurodevelopmental conditions. Notably, the fact that the updated version – the ICD-11 (“6A02 Autism spectrum disorder”, n.d.) – has only recently been translated into German, namely in June 2024 (Broich et al., 2024, pp. 290-298) makes the ICD-10 still *the* diagnostic tool in Austria, for instance. Within the ICD-10, autism is defined as a “pervasive developmental disorder” (Dilling et al., 2015, p. 351). Therein, a distinction is drawn between different types of autism, namely Infantile Autism (Dilling et al., 2015, pp. 344-346), Atypical Autism (Dilling et al., 2015, pp. 346-347), and Asperger’s Syndrome.

Arguably, the division into different “types” of autism evolved through a coinage that significantly contributed to the marginalisation of some autistic groups which will get profoundly elaborated on during the chapter “4. History of Autism”. Hans Asperger, the eponym of the Asperger Syndrome (Bearer et al., 2023, p. 582; Czech, 2020, pp. 163-165; Sheffer, 2020, p. 14; Czech, 2018, pp. 1-3), lead a vital career during the Nazi regime (Czech, 2018, p. 9). It can be inferred that the late paediatrician’s conceptualisation of autism was crucially influenced by the socio-political environment of that time since the Nazi government strictly controlled the practises and research of medicine (Czech, 2018, pp. 1-43; Sheffer, 2020, p. 13). As psychologist and professor Douwe Draaisma contends, “Asperger grappled with issues that are still very much with us, issues of labelling, description and stereotyping” (Draaisma, 2009, p. 1475). Notably, Asperger categorised some autistics to be on the more “favourable” end of the spectrum (Sheffer, 2020, p. 12), as historian Edith Sheffer reveals. Meanwhile, *others* got dismissed by the late paediatrician since he rendered them to not be “educatable” and, therefore, not bring any “social value” to the Nazi state (Sheffer, 2020, p. 13).

Clearly, by establishing the distinction between individuals deemed as either “socially valuable” or “not socially valuable”, a *value judgement* became inherent. In other words, those patients who occupied the “favourable” (Sheffer, 2020, p. 12) end were seen as *normal enough*, however, were still essentially deemed as flawed. Simultaneously, those labelled as “more disabled” (Sheffer, 2020, p. 13) got defined to be “less than”. According to philosophy professor Kristien Hens, these differentiations into “types” of

autism led to the notion that “the challenges of the ‘high-functioning’ autistic person – often associated with the stereotypical image of the highly gifted person with Asperger syndrome – are less than those of the person” (Hens, 2021, p. 5) on the ‘low-functioning’ end (Hens, 2021, p. 5). However, Hens’s statement still foregrounds the struggles of *some* autistics, but the underlying issue is that these early categorisations of autism in better vs. worse or high vs. low functioning created more issues. As Hens already outlined, those who have gotten labelled as “high-functioning” have overall had their struggles not being taken seriously, whereas those considered to be “low-functioning” have possibly gotten stripped off their autonomy a priori. In fact, the established differentiations may play off one “autistic group” against “the other”, although both share a set of challenges that could, arguably, work to unite them rather than differentiate them. Hence, nowadays autism is considered a spectrum and, therein, also medically referred to as “Autism Spectrum Disorder” (“6A02 Autism spectrum disorder”, n.d.) within the ICD-11. Conversely, autistic scholars and non-scholars, as well as autism advocates have increasingly discussed autism as just one of many forms of neurocognitive functioning and, therein, have questioned and discoursed whether autism should be labelled as a “disorder” at all (Hare, 2024, pp. 13-24; Codina, 2023, p. 72; Dwyer, 2022, pp. 73-92; Walker, 2021, pp. 13-24; Seidel, 2020, p. 93; Singer, 2017, pp. 9-10).

For those reasons, I gravitate towards terminology such as *autism* or *autistic* people, rather than autism spectrum *disorder*. I do not intend to thereby linguistically erase the struggles of autistics. However, it needs to be noted that the term “disorder” does not only imply that the autistic mind is disordered but possibly also that there is a “favourable”, non-disordered counterpart to it (Hens, 2021, pp. 74-75; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022, pp. 381-392; Walker, 2021, pp. 17-28; Sheffer, 2020, p. 12; Singer, 2017, pp. 34-40). Based on the assumption that autism is a condition that needs to be cured (“FAKE NEWS. The claim: Autism can be cured”, n.d.), autistic individuals have been subjected to substantial abuse. For instance, some were made to drink bleach in the hopes of curing their autism (Max Evans, 2021, p. 1; Zadrozny, 2019, p. 1; Mammoser, 2018, p. 1; Ryan, 2016, p. 1).

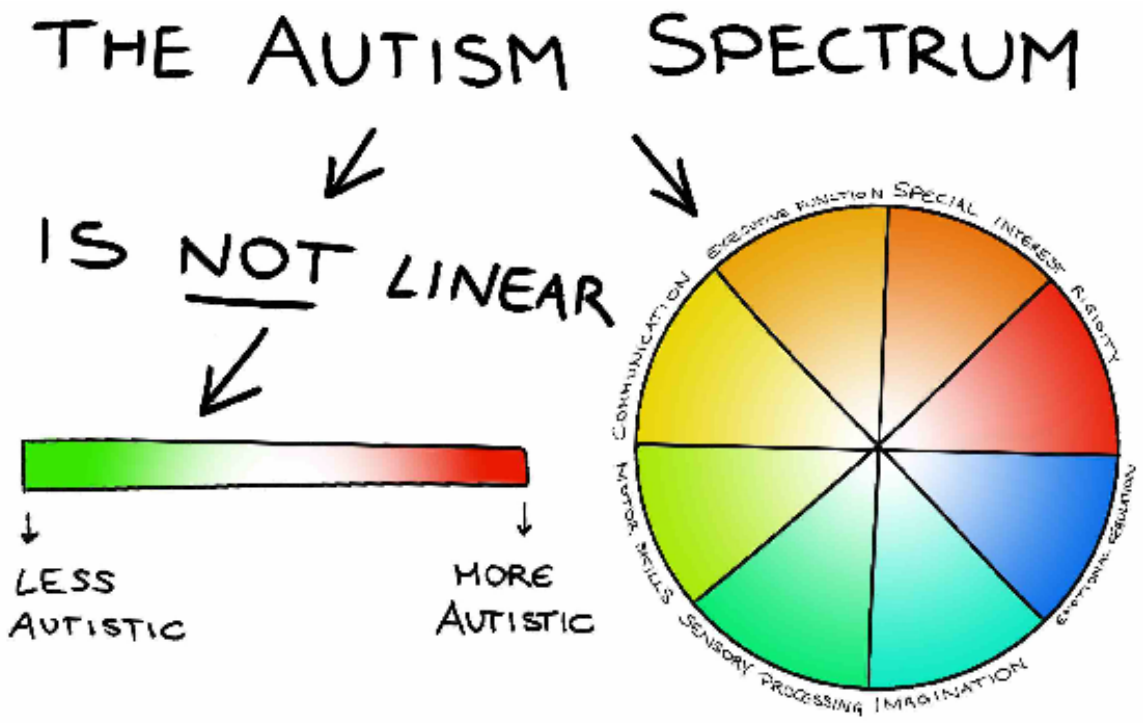


Figure 1: The Autism Spectrum; graphic by the author (2025)

Viewing a neurotype through a *mere* medical lens puts the focus on medical aspects. Throughout this thesis, socially and structurally oppressive ideas are a focal point and, thus, autism is primarily looked at from a social perspective.

I would like to draw attention to some particularly restrictive aspects of the medical view. When it comes to autism, the requirements for a clinical diagnosis according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (DSM-V for short) – which is another diagnostic manual mainly used in the US (*DSM-5*, 2022) – are that "[s]ymptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of current functioning" (Vivanti & Tennison, 2017, p.1). This stance would automatically exclude people who exhibit autistic traits but do not experience *suffering*. Thus, when looking at autism through a solely medical lens, autism is linked to the experience of distress *a priori.* Additionally, the medical approach has failed many autistic people thus far. Autistic masking, for instance, has not been taken sufficiently into account within autism research, albeit several scholars brought forth that it causes significant mental suffering (Cleary et al., 2023, pp. 801-802; Bradley et al., 2021, pp.

320-329; McQuaid et al., 2021, p. 1; Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019, pp. 1899-1911; Saxe, 2017, p. 146; Saxe, 2017, p. 164).

Thus, this thesis seeks to counterbalance the predominant medical view on autism/disability which, according to disability scholar Liz Crow, labels certain ways of people's existences as pathologies by reinforcing the presupposition that "a person's functional limitations (impairments) are the root cause of any disadvantages experienced, and these disadvantages can therefore only be rectified by treatment or cure" (Crow, 1996, p. 4). Again, the categorisation in opposites such as "normal vs. a-normal" bodies or minds creates the grounds for the advantaged group ("the norm") to act as effective epistemic agents, whereas those diverting from said norm are inhibited in doing so. According to epistemologist Kristie Dotson, epistemic agency refers to one's ability "to utilize persuasively shared epistemic resources within a given epistemic community in order to participate in knowledge production and, if required, the revision of those same resources" (Dotson, 2012, p. 24). Arguably, an unevenness in being able to utilise one's epistemic agency could allow the advantaged "norm", for instance, to weaponise a diagnosis of the "disordered" person. In that regard, the "norm" gets *enabled* (Goering, 2015, pp. 134-138; Lawson & Beckett, 2020, pp. 348-379) and those diverting from said norm *disabled*.

By contrast, the social model of disability emerged through the claim that disability is "a political issue" (Singer, 2007, p. 34). According to Singer, "they [disability rights activists] define disability not as a flaw in an individual, but as an outcome of disabling barriers and social practices" (Singer, 2007, p. 34). Disability Studies researchers Anna Lawson and Angharad E. Beckett agree by stating that the social model of disability "presents disability as a form of socially created oppression" (Lawson & Beckett, 2020, p. 348). Philosopher Sara Goering concurs by affirming that "[f]or many people with disabilities, the main disadvantage they experience does not stem directly from their bodies, but rather from their unwelcome reception in the world, in terms of how physical structures, institutional norms, and social attitudes exclude them" (Goering, 2015, p. 134). Moreover, on account of scholars Desiree R. Jones and Judy Singer, the social model of disability differentiates between the term "impairment" and the term "disability" (D. R. Jones, 2023, p. 7; Singer, 2017, p. 34). Therein, the word disability "is used to describe

the socially created disadvantage and marginalisation experienced by people who have (or are perceived to have) 'impairments'" (Lawson et al., 2021, p. 348; Hens, 2021, pp. 69-70) which makes the state of being disabled equal to being oppressed (Lawson et al., 2021, p. 349). For example, when a person is deaf, their impairment is a lack of hearing capacity. However, they get disabled by the lack of access to sign language or the lack of having interpreters available when needed.

In the case of an autistic person, for instance, their modes of communicating would not inherently be considered as disordered within the social model of disability. In fact, the phenomenon "the double empathy problem" (Milton et al., 2020, pp. 1-8; Milton, 2012, pp. 1-5; Walker, 2021, pp. 31-32) may serve as a para-example of how autistic ways of being are a priori labelled as disordered simply because autistic people constitute a minority. Catherine Crompton, Kilee DeBrabander, Brett Heasman, Damian Milton and Noah J. Sasson state in their work "DOUBLE EMPATHY. WHY AUTISTIC PEOPLE ARE OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD" (Crompton et al., 2021, pp. 1-8) that "[a]ccording to the double empathy problem, empathy is a two-way process that depends a lot on our ways of doing things and our expectations from previous social experiences which can be very different for autistic and non-autistic people" (Crompton et al., 2021, p. 2), thus leading to "communication barriers" (Crompton et al., 2021, p. 2) between autistic and non-autistic people. Academic findings on the double empathy problem delineate that autistic people appear to get along better with other autistic people in social contexts (Crompton et al., 2021, p. 4; Morrison et al., 2019, pp. 1067-1080). In fact, the outcome of one study revealed that two autistic people communicated as effectively with each other as two non-autistic people did (Morrison et al., 2019, p. 1067).

In summary, the social model of disability shifts the responsibility of accessibility on society as a whole and not merely on the disabled person (Hens, 2021, p. 69). However, it needs to be emphasised that viewing disability or impairment through a mere social view may, likewise, entail the erasure of inherent struggles of disabled people. By extension, the social model of disability serves as grassroots for a shift in perspective while seeking nuance in the discourse of autistic marginalisation throughout this thesis.

4.3. Epistemic Injustice

The circumstance that autistic people experience intersectional injustices – some of which are epistemically culpable – has gotten some scholarly attention. For instance, philosophy professor Amandine Catala and her colleagues Luc Faucher and Pierre Poirier state that there are “many, mutually reinforcing types of epistemic injustice autistic persons face” (Catala et al., 2021, p. 9035). The scholars locate the source of such “in neuronormativity and neurotypical ignorance” (Catala et al., 2021, p. 9035). Neurodivergent philosopher Robert Chapman and their colleague Havi Carel concur with the notion that autistic people face substantial and complex experiences of epistemic injustice (Chapman & Carel, 2022, p. 2). As a result, this chapter aims to outline how epistemic injustice is defined within this thesis in order to be able to incorporate it as a heuristic.

Most generally, epistemic injustice refers to “a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower” (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). Originally, philosopher Miranda Fricker defined two ways of epistemic injustice, namely testimonial and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). Interestingly, upon scrutinising Fricker’s stance in defining epistemic injustice, philosopher Kristie Dotson detected instances in which Fricker herself perpetuated epistemic injustice through her closed conceptual definitions (Dotson, 2012, p. 25; Dotson, 2012, p. 37; Dotson, 2012, p. 41). Thus, Kristie Dotson expanded Fricker’s coinage and added a third form of epistemic injustice, that being “contributory injustice” (Dotson, 2012, pp. 25-31).

4.3.1. Testimonial Injustice

Testimonial injustice “occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word” (Fricker, 2007, p. 1; Fricker, 2007, p. 17) and gets perpetuated by an agent (Dotson, 2012, p. 29). Aforementioned prejudice evolves through a “negative identity-prejudicial stereotype” (Dotson, 2012, p. 26; Ficker, 2007, p. 35). Fricker defines the latter as follows:

> *"A widely held disparaging association between a social group and one or more attributes, where this association embodies a generalization that displays some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence owning to an ethically bad affective investment"* (Fricker, 2007, p. 35).

Kristie Dotson illustrates an example of testimonial injustice in "A Cautionary Tale. On Limiting Epistemic Oppression" (Dotson, 2012, pp. 24-101). Therein, she describes Patricia Williams' experience of being denied entry at a Benetton's store (Dotson, 2017, p. 26). Williams assured that she was not given a reason why she was denied access. Hence, she could only assume a racial prejudice rooting in negative beliefs about Black people whom she represented (Williams, 1991, pp. 24-27; Dotson, 2012, pp. 26-28). When Williams tried to tell her story, she was faced with being stripped of credibility continuously (Dotson, 2012, pp. 26-28). Clearly, Williams experienced a credibility deficit. She states:

> "*A rumor got started that the Benetton's (Soho shop) story wasn't true, that I had made it up, that it was a fantasy, a lie that was probably the product of a diseased mind trying to make all white people feel guilty. At this point I realized it almost didn't make any difference whether I was telling the truth or not—that the greater issue I had to face was the overwhelming weight of a disbelief that goes beyond mere disinclination to believe and becomes active suppression of anything I might have to say. The greater problem is a powerfully oppressive mechanism for denial of self-knowledge and expression. And this denial cannot be separated from the simultaneously pathological willingness to believe certain things about blacks—not believe them, but things about them"* (Dotson, 2012, p. 27; Williams, 1991, pp. 24-35).

An ingrained stereotype about African Americans hindered Williams' ability as a testifier "to appear trustworthy even if she [was]" (Dotson, 2012, p. 27). Additionally, Dotson mentions that some individuals faced with the outlined incident argued that they wanted to stay neutral and not pick a side. Therein, those people also perpetuate epistemic injustice under the disguise of neutrality by "preserving a state of not knowing and not wanting to know" (Dotson, 2012, p. 28). These examples may already highlight the need

for not only knowledge and awareness about the faces of epistemic injustice but also the need for concrete actions that could help in minimising epistemic injustice, especially in those cases “where credibility still confers authority”, according to Dotson (Dotson, 2012, p. 8). Hence, epistemic injustice will get used in this thesis to not only detect instances of such but also to formulate actions that may help in hindering further marginalisation in the end.

4.3.2. Hermeneutical Injustice

Conversely to testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice happens at a prior stage (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). Hermeneutical injustice is “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource” (Fricker, 2007, p. 155). A “structural-identity-prejudice” (Dotson, 2012, p. 29) – which facilitates hermeneutical injustice – is different from a negative-identity prejudicial stereotype which is linked to testimonial injustice (Dotson, 2012, p. 29). Kristie Dotson stresses that

> *“[a] structural-identity prejudice is not primarily located within the cognitive landscape of individual perceivers per se. It exists within collective hermeneutical resources themselves. That is to say, our resources for making sense of our worlds can become discriminatory due to an asymmetrical ability of some groups to affect the ways in which a given society makes sense of the world”* (Dotson, 2012, p. 29).

According to Dotson, hermeneutical injustice hinders a certain group in their ability to influence the current way of how a given society – which relies on a specific set of hermeneutical resources – “makes sense of the world” (Dotson, 2012, p. 29). Dotson adds that she takes “Fricker’s concept of hermeneutical resources to be akin to Gaile Pohlhaus’s concept of epistemic resources” (Dotson, 2012, p. 29). Pohlhaus declares intelligibly that “[k]nowing requires resources of the mind, such as language to formulate propositions, concepts to make sense of experience, procedures to approach the world, and standards to judge particular accounts of experiences” (Pohlhaus, 2011, p. 718). By Fricker’s account, those affected by such unequal distribution of resources are

“hermeneutically marginalised” (Fricker, 2007, p. 153) and this may also be particularly the case with autistic people. In that regard, Judy Singer stresses that “life on a ‘spectrum’ requires words that don’t even exist yet” (Singer, 2017, p. 44). Thus, this thesis may also try to find new vocabulary concerning the marginalisation of autistic people.

Fricker brings forth an example of hermeneutical injustice by unfolding the contexts in which the term “sexual harassment” (Fricker, 2007, p. 150) evolved. Therein, she describes Carmita Wood’s experience of such as a university employee at a time during which that expression did not exist yet. Being subjected to a specific kind of abuse took a serious toll on Wood’s health which is why she, in the end, quit her job (Fricker, 2007, p. 150). However, “Wood was denied unemployment benefits due to an inability to describe her experience” (Dotson, 2012, p. 30). This prompted the survivor to discourse her experience with others who had similar ones. Consequently, it was necessary to establish vocabulary to enable Wood’s legal team to fight for her right to unemployment benefits. It was agreed upon the term *sexual harassment* (Dotson, 2012, p. 30). Another almost akin example is the evolvement of the term *stalking* during the 1990s in the quest to, in like fashion, describe specific acts of violence (Mullen et al., 2011, pp. 9-16).

Moreover, Dotson serves another specimen example of hermeneutical injustice, namely “biased hermeneutical resources” (Dotson, 2012, p. 29) that have led to the structural suppression of the knowledge of women of colour, for instance. Hence, that contributed to their marginalisation which has already been explored profoundly in academic works (Kastrup, 2023, pp. 232-243; Sadeeq & Mohammed, 2022, pp. 1139-1149; Uchem, 2001, pp. 1-11). Notably, marginalisation frequently works intersectionally (Watson-Singleton et al., 2024, pp. 34-42; Carbado et al., 2013, pp. 303-312) and, as a result, enables “interlocking systems of oppression” (Watson-Singleton et al., 2024, p. 35). Autistic people’s experiences of marginalisation, too, have gained further scholarly attention in recent years (Mallipeddi & VanDaalen, 2022, pp. 281-289; Tabor, 2020, pp. 41-43). Thus, it is nothing but reasonable to assume that knowledge of particularly marginalised autistic groups has been suppressed because of the ways forms of marginalisation work, including epistemically culpable ones.

The previously outlined cases of hermeneutical injustice illustrate that "[w]hen gaps in collective hermeneutical resources create significant and potentially harmful obstacles to diagnosing and understanding one's own experiences, one is encountering hermeneutical injustice" (Dotson, 2012, p. 30). Therefore, when wanting to address and minimise epistemic injustice, one must understand that it happens not only in agential ways but also in structural ways. Hence, "the very structure itself must come under examination" (Dotson, 2012, p. 30), as Dotson claims. However, Kristie Dotson reveals that there are cases of epistemic injustice that would not fall in either of the two categories of testimonial or hermeneutical injustice. Fricker would call these cases being the result of "epistemic bad luck" (Dotson, 2012, p. 25.) and therefore "an antithesis to epistemic injustice" (Dotson, 2012, p. 25). As a result, Kristie Dotson revealed that Fricker herself exerted epistemic injustice by using her own closed conceptual approach (Dotson, 2012, p. 25; Dotson, 2012, pp. 35-38) which prompted Dotson to introduce a third kind of epistemic injustice, contributory injustice (Dotson, 2012, p. 31).

4.3.3. Contributory Injustice

Kristie Dotson describes contributory injustice as follows:

> *"Contributory injustice is caused by an epistemic agent's situated ignorance, in the form of willful hermeneutical ignorance, in maintaining and utilizing structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources that result in epistemic harm to the epistemic agency of a knower. Both the structurally prejudiced or biased hermeneutical resources and the agent's situated ignorance are catalysts for contributory injustice. As such, it is located within the gray area between agential and structural perpetuation of epistemic injustice"* (Dotson, 2012, p. 31).

An example of such contributory injustice when it comes to autism could play out as follows: A still undiagnosed autistic woman visits a psychiatrist, describing her difficulties whilst airing that she highly suspects to be autistic in a time when autism is still not profoundly understood in women or other marginalised groups. However, that woman brings a folder with her in which she documented her suspected autistic traits. She

learned about her suspicion through exchanges with other autistic women online. The psychiatrist, however, dismisses their patient's claims because they rely on a specific set of hermeneutical resources (which perpetuate a certain autistic stereotype) and ignores an alternating set of resources provided by their client. Hence, the medical professional wilfully ignores the references the undiagnosed autistic woman accumulated.

Although the previous example may be hypothetical, similar scenarios are still likely the reality of many undiagnosed and marginalised autistic groups. In this regard, the National Autistic Society, for instance, emphasises on their website that "[d]octors and other healthcare professionals can lack knowledge about how autism may present differently in women" (National Autistic Society, n.d.) which leads to the misdiagnosis of women and girls "with mental health issues" (National Autistic Society, n.d.). However, in some cases women do not get diagnosed with autism although they display "classicly autistic behaviours", according to autistic scholar Devon Price (Price, 2022, p. 8). As already pointed out earlier, there is a significant race and gender bias present in autism science (Brickhill, 2023, pp. 1-16; Botha & Cage, 2022, p. 3; Doyle et al., 2022, pp. 340-356; D. R. Jones et al., 2020, pp. 1-27; Draaisma, 2009, pp. 1475-1480) which can also work intersectionally. For instance, an autistic Black woman could be exposed to gender and racial prejudice as well as ableist beliefs. Thus, there seems to be a more profound problem at hand, possibly in the face of internalised bias and wilful ignorance. According to Kristie Dotson's, "[i]n contributory injustice an epistemic agent, as a result of wilful hermeneutical ignorance, obscures or distorts genuine epistemic differences through the use of a different, incompatible set of hermeneutical resources" (Dotson, 2012, p. 38). Thus, if one does not make the effort to learn about "alternative hermeneutical resources" (Dotson, 2012, p. 36; Dotson, 2012, p. 40), but ignores them, one acts wilfully ignorant. In Fricker's coinage of epistemic injustice the aforementioned scenario would have been a case of "epistemic bad luck" (Fricker, 2007, p. 103), since the psychiatrist did rely on resources that would support their decision of dismissing the woman's suggestion. Kristie Dotson outlines the issue with Fricker's stance as follow:

> *"[Fricker's] assumption fails to take into account alternative epistemologies, countermythologies, and hidden transcripts that exist in hermeneutically marginalized communities among themselves. It also fails to curtail the role power plays in hindering the hermeneutical resources of the marginalization. […] Recognition of this reality, however, is thwarted by situated ignorance"* (Dotson, 2012, p. 31).

In sum, the past chapters on epistemic injustice brought forth its immediacy for marginalised autistic people. The concept of epistemic injustice – as it is coined by Kristie Dotson particularly – may help in scrutinising the possible oppressive or even liberating structures of autism media presentations as well as the means that could possibly elevate the minimisation of further marginalisation.

However, before one can efficaciously begin to detect, address and open a discourse about ways of minimising epistemic injustice inflicted on marginalised autistic people through media depictions, one needs to understand the formation of stereotypical ideas about autism that have contributed significantly to the oppression of marginalised autistic people in the first place.

5. History of Autism

When embarking on the quest to detect autism stereotypes and discourse about their role in the process of marginalisation of autistic people, a profound look at the historical roots of stereotypes becomes necessary.

5.1. The Onset of Autism

How did the term “autism” or “autistic” evolve? Before it turned into a medical label, the word “autistic” or “autism had already been used to refer to introverted children” (Hens, 2021, p. 4), according to philosophy scholar Kristien Hens. It began turning into a medical term once it started getting deployed to describe adult patients by “the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler (1857-1939), who used the term “autistic” to denote a specific symptom of schizophrenia: the withdrawal of reality”, as Hens writes (Hens, 2021, p. 4; Crespi, 2010, p. 495; Bleuler, 1921, pp. 159-167). In the 1940s, the research conducted by child psychiatrist Leo Kanner and paediatrician Hans Asperger led to autism being defined as a distinct clinical concept (Hens, 2021, p. 4; Van Krevelen, 1971, pp. 82-83). Therefore, Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger are seen as the “founding fathers” when it comes to the coinage of autism as an independent clinical concept (Baker & Lang, 2017, pp. 1-3; Al Ghazi, 2018, pp. 5-17).

Leo Kanner was a Jewish Austrian who emigrated to the United States, where he introduced child psychiatry (Jodlowski, 2009, pp. 35-36). For the first time, the psychiatrist differentiated autistic children distinctly from schizophrenic ones (Hens, 2021, p. 8; Kanner, 1943, p. 250). When it comes to autism, Kanner is particularly well known for his article “AUTISTIC DISTURBANCES OF AFFECTIVE CONTACT” (Kanner, 1943) which was published in 1943. Therein, he states that “[since] 1938, there have come to our attention a number of children whose condition differs so markedly and uniquely from anything reported so far, that each case merits – and, I hope, will eventually receive – a detailed consideration of its fascinating peculiarities” (Kanner, 1943, p. 217). He goes on by describing 11 cases of autistic patients who have not outreached the age of 11 years. In his conclusion he stresses that,

> "*[t]he combination of extreme autism, obsessiveness, stereotypy, and echolalia brings the total picture into relationship with some of the basic schizophrenic phenomena. Some of the children have indeed been diagnosed as of this type at one time or another. But in spite of the remarkable similarities, the condition differs in many respects from all other known instances of childhood schizophrenia"* (Kanner, 1943, p. 248).

Leo Kanner coined the medical label "Infantile Autism" ("Frühkindlicher Autismus") which also got referred to as "Kanner syndrome" (*the history of autism* n.d.; Dilling et al., 2015, pp. 344-345).

In like fashion, the Viennese paediatrician Hans Asperger described children with similar behavioural traits to those observed by Leo Kanner, but with "less severe symptoms" (Sheffer, 2020, pp. 14-16; Baker & Lang, 2017, p. 2; Van Krevelen, 1971, pp. 82-86). Within Asperger's dissertation the medical label "autistic psychopaths" (Hippler & Klicpera, 2003, pp. 291-301; Asperger, 1943, pp. 76-136) got introduced. Subsequently, a clear distinction got drawn between Kanner's as well as Asperger's labels of autism (Al Ghazi, 2018, pp. 5-17; Baker & Lang, 2017, pp. 1-3; Hippler & Klicpera, 2003, pp. 291-301; Van Krevelen, 1971, pp. 82-86), as Figure 2 illustrates (Van Krevelen, 1971, p. 84).

Early Infantile Autism	*Autistic Psychopathy*
1. Manifestation age: first month of life.	1. Manifestation age: third year of life or later.
2. Child walks earlier than he speaks; speech is retarded or absent.	2. Child walks late, speaks earlier.
3. Language does not attain the function of communication.	3. Language aims at communication but remains "one-way traffic."
4. Eye contact: other people do not exist.	4. Eye contact: other people are evaded.
5. The child lives in a world of his own.	5. The child lives in our world in his own way.
6. Social prognosis is poor.	6. Social prognosis is rather good.
7. A psychotic process.	7. A personality trait.

Figure 2: Arn Van Krevelen, 1971, p. 84

Only “in 1981, British psychiatrist Lorna Wing rediscovered Hans Asperger’s thesis” (Jaojoco, 2022, p. 5) – and therein his coinage of autism – which led to its introduction as “Asperger Syndrome” in 1994, according to Jodie Hare, Patrick Jaojoco, Kristien Hens, Loredana Al Ghazi, Kathrin Hippler and Christian Klicpera (Hare, 2024, p. 16; Jaojoco, 2022, p. 5; Hens, 2021, pp. 9-10; Al Ghazi, 2018, p. 5; Hippler & Klicpera, 2003, p. 291).

5.2. Asperger's Coinage of "Autistic Psychopaths"

In trying to decipher a specific autistic stereotype which, arguably, stems not merely but substantially from Hans Asperger's work on autism, it is pivotal to disclose how the paediatrician coined autism as a condition. The following descriptions of the characteristics that Asperger ascribed to his patients whom he diagnosed with "autistic psychopathy" (Hippler & Klicpera, 2003, pp. 291-301; Asperger, 1943, pp. 76-136) are obtained from his work "Die 'Autistischen Psychpathen' im Kindesalter" (Asperger, 1943, pp. 76-136) and were translated by me, the author of this thesis.

Right at the beginning of this work of his, Asperger stresses that every human is an individual, yet he tries to find common characteristics for the phenomenon that he refers to as "autistic psychopathy" (Asperger, 1943, pp. 83-84). He claims that those individuals share a common "basic fault" that pervades every part of their being. According to Asperger, they fail to integrate into society, but some can compensate for this through their "particular originality in thinking and feeling" as well as their "special performance" in some areas (Asperger, 1943, p. 84). They seem to have compulsions and be rigid in their behavioural patterns (Asperger, 1943, p. 85). Asperger adduces Bleuler's idea of autism and its correlation with schizophrenic characteristics. By the paediatrician's account, those who are affected by it show relationships that are "severely disturbed" and "constricted" (Asperger, 1943, p. 84). He claims that autistic psychopaths are "only themselves" and not part of "a greater organism" (Asperger, 1943, p. 84).

Through a series of four case studies, Hans Asperger tried to assign certain characteristics to the new condition, autistic psychopathy. Four exemplary cases of these were the four boys Fritz, Harro, Ernst and Hellmuth (Asperger, 1943, pp. 85-111) whom Asperger could count as his patients being "treated" in the department for "Heilpädagogik" at the Medical University Hospital in Vienna which Asperger was the head of (Czech, 2018, p. 5). Thus, the forthcoming subchapters aim to summarise Asperger's idea of autism, his bias that – arguably – is mirrored through his demeaning description, and his conclusions that led to the coinage of a specific stereotype.

5.2.1. Fritz

Overall, Asperger assigns the following traits to Fritz, whom he diagnosed with “autistic psychopathy” (Asperger, 1943, pp. 85-96). The paediatrician describes the boy as especially motorically clumsy (Asperger, 1943, p. 89), that he lacks motivation, is stubborn, does not comply to commands, speaks like “a little professor”, acts aggressively, has difficulty with integrating at school and, hence, struggles to attend such (Asperger, 1943, pp. 85-96).

Asperger continues with his description of Fritz as follows. He states that his young patient touches things constantly and spends his time mostly by himself (Asperger, 1943, pp. 86-90). Additionally, the paediatrician claims that Fritz lacks empathy in the sense that his (rare) affectionate behaviour seems non-authentic, that he provokes quarrels, disregards authority, acts obtrusively and impulsively (Asperger, 1943, p. 86), is spiteful (Asperger, 1943, p. 88) and has a peculiar way of talking (Asperger, 1943, p. 87). The boy, according to Asperger, exhibits stereotypical mannerisms but is also exceedingly more intelligent than others in his age range (Asperger, 1943, p. 89). Moreover – according to Asperger – Fritz seems to be particularly gifted when it comes to maths (Asperger, 1943, p. 90). As a result, Asperger points to the typically autistic “Sonderinteresse” – special interest – in which Fritz showed exceptional skills (Asperger, 1943, p. 90). Notably, Hans Asperger judges Fritz’s emotional state of mind by making derogatory remarks on his appearance (Asperger, 1943, pp. 87-88). Therein, the former stresses the boy’s gaze to have either a “mischievous glow” to it or to seem “empty” (Asperger, 1943, p. 87).

Concerning Fritz’s familial background, Asperger notes that his mother’s side of the family is highly intellectual. Many family members are loners and had to attend private schools because they could not cope in public ones (Asperger, 1943, pp. 86-87). In fact, Asperger describes in detail the striking similarities between Fritz’s mother’s and her son’s behavioural patterns. However, the paediatrician judges this circumstance to be peculiar since the kind of behaviour displayed by Fritz and his mother *cannot* be expected from a woman. She should rather display more “instinct” and “more emotion rather than intellect”, according to the paediatrician (Asperger, 1943, pp. 86-87). The

latter also emphasises Fritz's mother's possible negative influence on her son's behaviour. Therein, one of Asperger's notes may strike a reader as particularly judgemental. He describes the following scenario: When Fritz's mother becomes overwhelmed, she leaves everything as is and travels into the mountains to spend a week in isolation, not giving a care in the world about the men in the family (Asperger, 1943, p. 87). In the original formulation of Asperger's words, there appears to be a particularly reproachful undertone.

5.2.2. Harro

Hans Asperger starts his description of Harro by stating his similarity to Fritz, wherein he contends that the boy's relationship to his environment is not "as disordered" (Asperger, 1943, p. 96) as it was the case with Fritz (Asperger, 1943, pp. 96-104). The paediatrician highlights that Harro exhibits more "of the positive effects" of the condition he calls "autistic psychopathy" (Asperger, 1943, p. 96). In all, Asperger describes Harro as a boy who has problems with discipline, acts overly self-reliant, is bold and cheeky but – at the same time – extraordinarily gifted. Additionally, Harro is described as reacting sensitively to harsh remarks by others that are targeted at him. However, Asperger deems those harsh remarks to be justified considering Harro being so "weird" (Asperger, 1946, p. 97). Additionally, Harro is described as an obsessive reader who displays stiff, inflexible facial expressions as well as clumsiness (Asperger, 1943, pp. 101-102).

5.2.3. Ernst

Ernst gets introduced as a “negative example” of autistic psychopathy (Asperger, 1943, pp. 104-110). The reason for that is, according to Asperger’s records, the boy’s lack of intelligence (Asperger, 1943, pp. 104-107). Furthermore, the paediatrician describes Ernst to be of ambiguous nature: On the one hand, he can act meticulously. This is exemplified by Ernst’s need for some things to be in a particular order and/or get done in the exact same manner each time. On the other hand, Asperger judges the boy to be sloppy in other areas. Moreover, Asperger remarks that the boy speaks like an adult with a caricatural voice (Asperger, 1943, pp. 104-105) and, overall, talks non-stop (Asperger, 1943, p. 105).

5.2.4. Hellmuth

In like fashion, Asperger makes derogatory and judgemental remarks on his young patient Hellmuth. The latter’s description includes him supposedly looking “grotesque”, his gaze being “absent” or “mischievous” (Asperger, 1954, pp. 110-111). In Hellmuth’s case, the paediatrician calls him an “immobile hulk” (Asperger, 1943, p. 110) or ascertains that in his – Asperger’s – opinion it does not seem surprising that Hellmuth gets bullied since he makes such a “ridiculous” impression (Asperger, 1943, p. 101). Additionally, Asperger described the boy to be especially pedantic. For instance, Hellmuth allegedly washes his hands frequently, is particularly neat and does everything in a “ritualistic way” (Asperger, 1943, pp. 110-111). Furthermore, Hans Asperger notes that one may be surprised about how witty Hellmuth’s remarks are. The boy seems to have a talent when it comes to literary expression (Asperger, 1943, pp. 110-111).

5.2.5. Characteristics of a Stereotype

The preceding chapters on Hans Asperger's description of specimen for "autistic psychopaths" in "Die 'Autistischen Psychpathen' im Kindesalter" (Asperger, 1943, pp. 76-136) bring forth certain characteristics that the paediatrician ascribes to his newly coined diagnosis of that time (Asperger, 1943, pp. 76-136) which also reflect his biased view on his findings. Those characteristics Hans Asperger associates with "autistic psychopathy" can be summarised as follows:

- "An extreme variant of male intelligence" and the "male character" (Price, 2022, p. 36; Sheffer, 2020, p. 171; Draaisma, 2009, p. 1476; Asperger, 1943, p. 129)
- A condition being most prominent and tied to the male sex (Sheffer, 2020, p. 171; Draaisma, 2009, p. 1476; Asperger, 1943, p. 129).
- A condition occurring in "intellectual" families (Asperger, 1943, p. 129), such as those which can count "great scientists" or "great artists" to be among them (Asperger, 1943, p. 129).
- People who are affected by the condition speak and look more like adults rather than kids (Asperger, 1943, p. 86; Asperger, 1943, p. 114), have a peculiar and/or original way of talking or expressing themselves (Asperger, 1943, p. 86; Asperger, 1943, p. 105; Asperger, 1943, pp. 110-111), act disrespectfully by, for instance, not obeying to authority (Asperger, 1943, p. 86)
- Their gestures, verbal and facial expressions are flat or simply "different". The former could, for example, appear "exaggerated" (Sheffer, 2020, p. 12; Asperger, 1943, p. 118).
- The ones on the "most favourable end" (Sheffer, 2020, p. 12) are gifted or even display genius-level skills (Hens, 2021, p. 8; Asperger, 1943, p. 89; Asperger, 1943, p. 118) and are "educatable" due to their intelligence (Sheffer, 2020, pp. 12-13; Asperger, 1943, p. 84; Asperger, 1943, p. 134).

Moreover, Hans Asperger claims that those who are affected by the condition

- display obsessive investment in interests (Asperger, 1943, p. 188) and have special abilities and skills in such (Sheffer, 2020, p. 12; Asperger, 1943, p. 118), most prominently in areas like mathematics or technical subjects (Asperger, 1943, p. 90; Asperger, 1943, p. 116)
- are and/or look odd (Asperger, 1943, p. 97; Asperger, 1943, p. 110)
- are motorically clumsy (Asperger, 1943, p. 86; Asperger, 1943, p. 89; Asperger, 1943, p. 110; Asperger, 1943, p. 118)
- are and act egocentric (Asperger, 1943, p. 125)
- are abstract thinkers (Asperger, 1943, p. 118)
- are very “clear-sighted” in the sense that they can detect and find patterns easily – also in human behaviour and in attitudes towards them (Asperger, 1943, p. 117)
- are loners or – more generally speaking – socially withdrawn (Asperger, 1943, p. 125)
- act impulsively (Asperger, 1943, p. 88; Asperger, 1943, p. 125)
- have sensory difficulties (Asperger, 1943, p. 125)
- have problems with learning and school settings because external stimuli overwhelm them (Asperger, 1943, pp. 119-121)
- have a meticulous and even compulsive nature (Asperger, 1943, p. 104; Asperger, 1943, p. 111)
- have “unique characters” and display “exceptional originality” (Sheffer, 2020, p. 12; Asperger, 1943, p. 112)
- have a “lost” gaze (Asperger, 1943, p. 87; Asperger, 1943, pp. 112-113)
- lack empathy/social feeling (Sheffer, 2020, p. 12; Asperger, 1943, p. 86; Asperger, 1943, p. 121)
- lack a sense of humour (Sheffer, 2020, p. 12)
- lack awareness of personal distance (Asperger, 1943, pp. 125-126)

Notably, when reading through Hans Asperger's description, one does encounter several remarks that seem particularly biased – and harsh. An observation with which the Austrian historian and professor in medicinal history Herwig Czech – who recently published a book that deals with Hans Asperger's career during the Nazi regime (Czech, 2024, pp. 1-160) and who investigated the late paediatrician's "problematic role" (Czech, 2018, p. 1) in depth for years, vetting Asperger's status as a "pioneer of autism research" (Czech, 2018, pp. 1-2) – concurs. The historian's research strongly indicates that Hans Asperger displayed prejudicial ideas and biases towards women by, for instance, referring to some of his female patients as "born prostitutes" (Czech, 2018, p. 14) or "(i)n cases of sexual abuse" (Czech, 2018, p. 14) Asperger used to blame "the victims, based on the notion of constitutionally determined patterns of behaviour which supposedly encouraged (or 'seduced') the perpetrators" (Czech, 2018, p. 14; Jekelius, 1942, pp. 385-386). Additionally, Asperger excluded women by default from the diagnosis of autistic psychopathy simply because the behaviour associated with such was not expected of the role that the concept of a woman embodied (Asperger, 1943, pp. 86-87). Historian Czech concludes that the patients' assessments conducted "do not support Asperger's self-professed 'pedagogic optimism' or his alleged benevolence towards his patients – quite the opposite" (Czech, 2018, p. 32).

In the quest of trying to detect and analyse a stereotype as well as its potential oppressive forces on marginalised autistic people, not merely the definition itself becomes necessary. What is equally salient is the socio-political environment in which said stereotype was coined and influenced by.

5.3. The Socio-Political Context of Hans Asperger's Research

The concept of autism and stereotypical ideas coined by Hans Asperger are, at the same time, equally influenced by the socio-political environment of Nazism. Therefore, the paediatrician's research is rooted in a mindset that supports racial hygiene measures which the paediatrician openly "legitimized" (Czech, 2018, p. 1). Historian Edith Sheffer, who worked in-depth on Hans Asperger's heritage, asserts that his research is a product "of Nazi psychiatry and the world in which he lived" (Sheffer, 2020, p. 15). Thus, some key facts about Asperger's research in the context of Nazism need to get outlined in order to make current oppressive stereotypical ideas decipherable.

Most notably, Hans Asperger led a fruitful career during the Nazi regime (Czech, 2018, p. 9) and, thus, profited from the expulsion of Jewish physicians (Czech, 2018, p. 2) as well as from his compliance with Nazi ideology (Czech, 2020, p. 166; Sheffer, 2020, p. 95; Czech, 2018, pp. 11-14). Documents that "include (among others) Asperger's personnel files, political assessments by Nazi authorities, and medical case records from various institutions, most importantly from the child 'euthanasia' clinic 'Am Spiegelgrund' and Asperger's Heilpädagogik ward" (Czech, 2018, p. 4) support that argument, according to historian Herwig Czech, since these documents offer substantial insight into Asperger's work and morale.

Despite never joining the Nazi party NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei), Asperger fostered close links to Nazi-associated circles which propelled the prospering of his career (Czech, 2018, p. 9). One major tie of his was the one to Franz Hamburger. The latter acted as Asperger's mentor and was one of the "NSDAP's figureheads", as Czech stresses (Czech, 2020, p. 166; Czech, 2018, p. 10).

When Franz Hamburger took over as director of the Viennese Children's Clinic, he became well known for three aspects in particular. Firstly, there was the introduction of anti-Jewish guidelines (Czech, 2018, p. 5). Secondly, there was the attempt to remove women from the workforce (Czech, 2018, p. 5) and, thirdly, the drastic decline in international scientific recognition of the clinic (Czech, 2020, p. 166; Sheffer, 2020, p. 42; Czech, 2018, p. 5). Notably, one of Franz Hamburger's first endeavours upon becoming

director of the Vienna University Children's Clinic was hiring Hans Asperger, who was subsequently promoted to become head of the clinic's Heilpädagogik ward although his research in that medicinal area was scarce (Czech, 2018, p. 4). Remarkably, Asperger's snubbed competitor for the position – the Jewish physician Georg Frankl – was not only Asperger's senior in age but also in expertise (Czech, 2018, p. 4).

Another tie of Asperger's to Nazi circles was the one to Erwin Jekelius. In fact, Asperger and Jekelius worked together at the Heilpädagogik ward (Czech, 2018, pp. 3-5). At some point, Jekelius – who was the "main organizer of the 'T4' killing operation" (Czech, 2018, p. 15) – got assigned as head of the Am Spiegelgrund unit, which – on Czech's record – "became responsible for the deaths of thousands of psychiatric patients and mentally disabled children" (Czech, 2018, p. 5). Clearly, Hans Asperger was moving in Nazi circles enough to be respected and supported by some of the most fervent Nazis (Czech, 2018, pp. 3-5).

It needs to be stressed that to be able to pursue a career in medicine as Asperger did during the Nazi regime, one needed to adhere substantially to Nazi ideology since "(a)ccording to Nazi doctrine, medicine should be based both on science and the ideology of National Socialism" (Czech, 2018, p. 11). Although the NSDAP was indeed sceptical about Asperger at first, he was able to prove his compliance sufficiently, especially when it comes to matters such as racial hygiene and, therein, forced sterilisation measures (Czech, 2020, p. 166; Sheffer, 2020, p. 95; Czech, 2018, pp. 11-14). In fact, NSDAP authorities approved of Asperger's work and his conformity with Nazi ideology in written form on multiple occasions (Czech, 2018, pp. 8-10).

What makes Hans Asperger's coinage of "autistic psychopathy" so problematic are not only his biased views but also the fact that he judged his patients according to their levels of "functioning" and "social value" (Sheffer, 2020, p. 13; Czech, 2018, p. 16) for the Nazi state. In fact, Asperger did not speak in favour of those he considered to not be "remediable" (Sheffer, 2020, p. 16; Czech, 2018, p. 31) wherein his assessments could turn into "a death sentence" (Sheffer, 2020, p. 13; Czech, 2018, p. 8). The paediatrician authorised for some of his patients to be sent to the notorious Am Spiegelgrund unit, where around 800 children were euthanised, starved to death, abused, and

experimented on during the Nazi regime (Price, 2022, p. 36; Czech, 2018, p. 3; Czech, 2018, p. 8; Czech, 2018, p. 15; Czech, 2018, pp. 18-31). In total, around 30 of his patients were deemed as “uneducable” and “unemployable” by Asperger which were “keywords for ‘euthanasia’”, as historian Herwig Czech stresses (Czech, 2018, p. 24). Asperger’s empathy must be considered selective and even calculated which the following quote by historian Czech supports:

> *“[I]t would be a misunderstanding to assume that the small subset of his patients he diagnosed as ‘autistic psychopaths’ benefited as a group from the fact that he considered some of them of superior intelligence. Just as with other diagnoses, everything depended on where they fell on the spectrum of intellectual and other abilities”* (Czech, 2020, p. 30).

In short, Hans Asperger was significantly influenced by Nazi doctrine which shaped his coinage of “autistic psychopathy” and, therein, perpetuated the idea of some lives being of more value than others. Moreover, conclusions of his appear highly biased even transcending Nazi doctrine, since Asperger came to harsh and judgemental assumptions on patients based on their gender, for instance, which – arguably – planted the seeds for the emergence of a significant gender and racial bias (Brickhill, 2023, pp. 1-16; Botha & Cage, 2022, p. 3; Doyle et al., 2022, pp. 340–356; D. R. Jones et al., 2020, pp. 1-27; Draaisma, 2009, pp. 1475-1480) that has perpetuated autism science. At this point it needs to be pointed out again that Asperger’s biased notions on autism still affect autistics today. For example, “women with really classically Autistic behaviors” (Price, 2020, p. 8) elude “diagnosis for years, simply because they are women” (Price, 2020, p. 8), according to autistic scholar Devon Price (Price, 2020, p. 8; Mazumder et al., 2019, pp. 96-107).

What is particularly notable in regard to this thesis’ focus of research is the positionality of media representations when it comes to the perpetuation as well as the perseverance of autism stereotypes established during the Nazism doctrine and their harmful implications. Autism representations, undoubtedly, play a big part in how society at large learns about autism (Brickhill et al., 2023, pp. 1-16; Mittmann et al., 2023a, pp. 8008-8017; Mittmann et al., 2023b, pp. 1-6; S. C. Jones et al., 2023, pp. 2205–2217; S. C.

Jones, 2022, pp. 1484-1501; T. W. Ressa & Goldenstein, 2022, pp. 55-63; Fontes & Pino-Juste, 2021, pp. 196–206; Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021, pp. 470-479; T. W. Ressa & Goldstein, 2021, pp. 55-63; T. Ressa, 2021, pp. 1-26; Draaisma, 2009, pp. 1475–1480). In fact, Sandra C. Jones stresses media representations' "potential to have either positive or detrimental impacts on the lives of autistic people" (D. R. Jones, 2023, p. 2) while others concur in stating that said depictions frequently stereotype autistic people (Mittmann et al., 2023a, pp. 8008–8017; S. C. Jones et al., 2023, pp. 2205–2217; Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021 pp. 470–479; Sheffer, 2020, pp. 245-248; Draaisma, 2009, pp. 1475-1480). Thus, analysis of examples of representations of autism should help to decipher whether and how stereotypical and biased ideas coined by Asperger, as well as other oppressive notions, are still perpetuated to this day and age. Therefore, the following chapter aims to tackle just that.

6. Autism Media Representations

As has been established, autism media representations impact the lives of autistics. Thus, this chapter aims to find out whether and how an autistic stereotype coined by Hans Asperger and other co-occurring oppressive notions get enforced within those selected media examples. Therein, epistemic aspects and effects alike receive close attention since media representations constitute vital epistemic resources. Scholars Stian Orm, Michelle Dean, Sue Fletcher-Watson and Anders Nordahl-Hansen emphasise the aforementioned epistemic positionality and importance. They state that "these portrayals represent important sources by which public perceptions of, and attitudes towards, autistic individuals are shaped" (Orm et al., 2023, p.1). For that reason, the next chapter embarks on a media analysis of three representations of auism – a fictional one, a documentary one and one available on TikTok. Focus is on the question of whether stereotypical ideas coined by Hans Asperger and/or other oppressive notions get reinforced as well as which epistemic consequences might ensue, affecting (intersectionally) marginalised autistic groups.

6.1. Contextualising Film as Medium

Before diving into media analysis, a clarification of how film as medium is contextualised within this analysis gets enclosed. Overall, film has undergone a multitude of developments (P. Murphy, 2005, pp. 1552-5112). By foreshadowing the upcoming media analysis, I would like to draw attention to an understanding of film which was coined during the late 1800s and early 1900s by Hungarian film critic Béla Balázs who introduced what he would refer to as the "schöpferische Kamera" (Balázs, 1972, p. 37). The latter could get translated as the creative, transformative and sense-giving potential of the filmic camera. Through the like, filmmakers do not merely reproduce images but *create* them. This idea of how to contextualise film got coined by Balázs but got adopted, adapted or reformulated by other film scholars and filmmakers subsequently. Film scholar Jan Marie Peters, for instance, stated that film inherently carries a certain attitude towards the depicted. Through moving images, a thought or feeling should get conveyed (Peters, 1972, p. 173). Surely, filmic tools and narrative choices direct a viewer's attention (Hickethier, 2012, pp. 59-60) and, in doing so, manipulate it.

Subsequently, film theory got highly influenced by psychoanalytic ideas, especially by those stemming from Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan (P. Murphy, 2005, pp. 1552-5112). Apparently, this development laid the grounds for film theory turning more political, especially in the face of the emergence of feminist film theory. Laura Mulvey has been highly influential within the latter. In her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Mulvey, 1975, pp. 803-816) she analysed how oppressive structures towards women became perceivable as well as reproduced by the medium of film.

Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey deciphered patriarchal objectification of women, using psychoanalytic ideas as a heuristic. She asserts that – within her scrutinisation – psychoanalytic theory seems appropriate "as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 803). However, she exposes a paradox, namely the need for feminists to "fight the unconscious structured like a language […] while still caught within the language of the patriarchy" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 803). This thought will constitute a focal point for this analysis, whereby it prompts adaption which I will attend to at a later point.

When circling back to the contextualisation of film as a medium, it needs to be highlighted that film (theory) has been highly influenced by male-dominated views of how to *depict* and thereby make sense of the world. This not only applies to film theory but also – as already mentioned – to autism science. Male scientists' views on autism have dominated discourse which was thoroughly discussed in the chapter "4. History of Autism". Moreover, studying autism as an unfavourable deviation from the norm has perpetuated science (Botha & Cage, 2022, pp. 1-22; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022, pp. 281-396) which, arguably, stems from a non-autistic stance framing itself as epistemically superior. These assertions are pivotal. The way the forthcoming chapter utilises film analysis aims to inspire autistics as well as their allies to come up with "new language" to describe certain ways of being and experiencing. Late Black Feminist, activist and poet Audre Lorde asserts that "[t]he master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, 2017, p. 16). As such, the viewpoints of marginalised autistic people should get foregrounded while addressing potentially unconscious ableist beliefs. This may foster an approach that moves away from a tradition that foregrounds viewpoints rooted in the patriarchy or rather in "the master's house" (Lorde, 2017, p. 16). I, as a marginalised autistic person, aim to decipher possible (unconscious) oppressive ideas that get perpetuated through filmic narratives.

6.2. Example: TV Series "The Good Doctor"

The following chapter scrutinises one example of autistic representation in the face of the Netflix series "The Good Doctor" (Shore, 2017 till present) through a critical film/media analysis which simultaneously incorporates the concept of epistemic injustice. Here, media analysis is understood based on the definition by scholar Knuth Hickethier who maintains that film, TV and video analysis should try to formulate insights linguistically by examining the aesthetic structures of a particular filmic work while recognising that through said "Versprachlichung" (engl. "Verbalisation"), the sensual "Gesamtgestalt" of the film gets deconstructed (Hickethier, 2012, pp. 28-29).

According to the media scientist, “Gesamtgestalt” – which I interpret as the film’s elements and their effects upon the viewer – gets construed through the rhizomic interplay of the filmic elements and the viewer’s reception. Hickethier stresses that those elements of film which are mainly non-linguistic make the filmic experience unique. This happens through the complex interplay of sound, camera angles, and montage. As a result, according to Hickethier, film analysis should not aim to reproduce a film but rather – through verbalisation – try to get a deeper understanding of its effects (Hickethier, 2012, p. 28). To gain said understanding, one needs to define the aspects one seeks to gain understanding upon (Hickethier, 2012, p. 29).

In doing so, the following analysis focuses on whether and how stereotypical ideas and, most generally speaking, oppressive notions about autism get perpetuated and which potential epistemic effects this might entail. Primarily, a stereotype coined by Hans Asperger receives particular attention because it played heavily into the emergence of biased views on autism, leading to the marginalisation of certain autistic demographics. Again, the most obvious biases are gender and racial bias (Brickhill, 2023, pp. 1-16; Botha & Cage, 2022, p. 3; Doyle et al., 2022, pp. 340-356; D. R. Jones et al., 2020, pp. 1-27; Draaisma, 2009, pp. 1475-1480). Those become exorbitantly blatant when summarising Asperger’s descriptions and findings: Most generally, the paediatrician defined autism as a male condition (Price, 2022, p. 36; Sheffer, 2020, p. 171; Draaisma, 2009, p. 1476; Asperger, 1943, p. 129) that comes with genius-like abilities (Hens, 2021, p. 8; Sheffer, 2020, pp. 12-13; Asperger, 1943, p. 84; Asperger, 1943, p. 89; Asperger, 1943, p. 118; Asperger, 1943, p. 134) which make some autistic individuals “more worthy” (Hens, 2021, p. 8; Asperger, 1943, p. 89, 118) or “special” (Sheffer, 2020, p. 12; Asperger, 1943, p. 112) but still defined autism as a detriment (Asperger, 1942, pp. 76-136). Hans Asperger described autism as an “extreme variant of male intelligence” (Price, 2022, p. 36; Sheffer, 2020, p. 171; Draaisma, 2009, p. 1476, Baron-Cohen, 2002, p. 251; Asperger, 1943, p. 129) and “identified a pattern of behavior and abilities” (Turkington & Annan, 2007, p. 8), such as “a lack of empathy, little ability to form friendships, [having] one-sided conversation[s]” (Turkington & Annan, 2007, p. 9), displaying “intense absorption in a special interest” (Turkington & Annan, 2007, p. 9), moving clumsily (Turkington & Annan, 2007, p. 9), as well as having normal to above

average intelligence (Czech, 2018, p. 29; Hens, 2021, p. 8; Turkington & Annan, 2007, p. 10; Asperger, 1943, p. 89; Asperger, 1943, p. 118) or even having “superior intelligence” (Czech, 2018, p. 31). As has already been established, Hans Asperger coined a then-new condition named “autistic psychopathy” (Czech, 2018, p. 1) during the Nazi regime which was later renamed as “Asperger Syndrome” in the 1990s (Sheffer, 2020, p. 14; Singer, 2017, p. 53). However, those biased and oppressive ideas still reside with us today – also in the form of media representations. Debatably, those biased ideas create multi- and inter-layered mechanisms of oppressive forces. Thus, the upcoming film/media analysis seeks to gain insight on whether and how autism stereotypes and oppressive notions get reinforced while looking at their possible epistemic effects.

Selected excerpts of season one’s first episode (EP1SE1 for short) as well as its official trailer (Shore, 2017) will serve as concrete subjects for scrutinisation of the drama series The Good Doctor (Shore, 2017 till present) written by David Shore. There are several reasons why the aforementioned constitute compelling examples for analysis. This warrants a brief exploration.

The two main aspects that make the trailer as a filmic genre appear to be an intriguing theme to examine in the context of this thesis’ topic are not only its public availability to the reader but also its unique assets. When it comes to the latter, the following appeared most striking. Overall, a trailer aims to announce and advertise the movie or – in this case – the series, according to media studies and literary scholar Georg Stanitzek. By doing so, it concentrates “on plot summaries” which are “typically incomplete”, touting the star cast while using “over-the-top formulations” (Stanitzek, 2009, p. 53). Conclusively, a trailer is “dense”: It tries to represent a whole series or film in a relatively short period of time. The question arises whether the trailer reinforces autistic stereotypes or oppressive ideas for the *gain* of catching an audience’s interest. Apart from that, it will be important to make most parts of the upcoming analysis available to as many – particularly autistic – people as possible in order to provide accessibility and not to accelerate the marginalised status of those who are the most affected by this thesis’ research subject. Thus, it is reasonable to choose the trailer as a widely available source of media.

However, the subsequent analysis seeks to likewise examine selected parts of The Good Doctor's first episode of season one in the quest to add depth to the analysis. Notably, the series' production's context, too, makes the series itself a compelling subject of scrutinisation due to featuring a fictional autistic main protagonist (*The Good Doctor*, 2017). Over the course of the series, the non-autistic actor Freddie Highmore embodies the young autistic surgeon Shaun Murphy, who also has "savant syndrome" (Kurchak, 2024, p. 1; *The Good Doctor*, 2017). The viewer can accompany the protagonist's journey during which he consistently uses "his extraordinary medical gifts" (*The Good Doctor*, n.d.).

The series' popularity as well as its wide distribution constitute reasons for it being a vital source for analysis of autistic representation. The Good Doctor has been produced in the USA since 2017, totalling no less than 126 episodes as of today[1] (Shore, 2017 till present; *The Good Doctor*, 2017). As mentioned before, the series registers substantial popularity. According to TIME magazine, it "was the highest-rated new show of the 2017-2018 season and remained in the top 30 for the majority of its run" (Kurack, 2024, p. 1). Its popularity gets mirrored in the number of nominations it has received as well as its bestowal of awards. The Internet Movie Database (short IMDb) chronicles that the show has won seven awards and was nominated for such 30 times (*The Good Doctor - Auszeichnungen*, n.d.). Prestigiously, actor Freddie Highmore even received a nomination at the Golden Globes in the category "Best Performance by an Actor in a Television show" (*The Good Doctor - Auszeichnungen*, n.d.). It becomes apparent that the autistic representation propelled through The Good Doctor reached and influenced a tremendous amount of people, consequently turning it into a substantial epistemic resource. Hence, the following chapter will ultimately address what the revealed findings possibly entail when it comes to their epistemic effects and the marginalisation of autistic people.

[1] 20/01/2025

6.2.1. Media analysis – Trailer for The Good Doctor Season 1

The following media analysis aims to investigate whether and how autism stereotypes coined by Hans Asperger and other oppressive mechanisms that contribute to the marginalisation of autistic people get reinforced. As part of the scrutinisation, the chapter will process its insights through closely focusing on its epistemic influence since it will close with suggestions directed at film and media makers as well as viewers. Proposals directed at the former lay focus on ways to minimise oppressive dynamics when *creating* autism media representation. Subsequently, suggestions directed at viewers wish to provide ways of questioning oneself as a media consumer to become a more sensitive one.

6.2.1.1. Introduction of Protagonist Shaun Murphy

Several close-up shots reveal hands buttoning a shirt, neatly arranged clothing placed on a bed and two arms packing some of the neatly folded items into a travel bag (Shore, 2017). If not familiar with the series, one is not yet able to identify that those shown bodily parts belong to the protagonist of the series: Shaun Murphy.

Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 (00:00:02, Shore, 2017)

The trailer (Shore, 2017) continues with a filmic image displaying a shelf on which two family photos are placed. One of those photographs shows two brothers: There is Steve, the younger sibling. Then there is teenage Shaun, the older sibling.

Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 (00:00:04, Shore, 2017)

Teenage-Shaun’s body – visible from head to mid-torso – takes up the whole right rectangle of that photo. By contrast, on the left side of such, merely the younger brother’s head is revealed. The latter is smiling, noticeably contrasting Shaun’s earnest expression. Given the socio-cultural context in which The Good Doctor has been produced, it appears that Shaun’s brother is established as looking and/or acting in a way that would be culturally expected of him, which would be the cultural norm of displaying a friendly, smiley facial expression on a family photo as a sign of happiness, friendliness or something similar. Already, this dramaturgical filmic choice may spatially establish a distinction between the two brothers. In other words: Making Shaun Murphy take up more space spatially may figuratively already stand for him taking up space in a non-physical way.

This *taking up of more space* may hint at an alienation to be set that works on an emotional as well as on a social level: One brother gets established adhering to “the norm” and one seems to be othered. Possibly, one does not only spatially but also emotionally take up more space than the other. In any case, a visual difference between the two brothers is surely set in place which may symbolise an alienation that goes far beyond a mere spatial one. Whether that supposition holds true will eventually unfold over the course of the trailer.

The trailer continues with yet another close-up shot from a bird’s-eye perspective that captures a now fully packed bag as well as the process of its zipper getting closed swiftly.

Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 (00:00:05, Shore, 2017)

Thereby, Shaun’s hands, arms, and the top of his head get shown rather fragmented. As Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener contend, the perceived closeness a close-up shot establishes may lead to an alienation (“Verfremdung”) of the shown subject because, according to the film scholars seeing – or rather watching – as a mode of perception requires some form of distance (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2007, p. 92). In that case, the visual closeness does not equate emotional closeness between the viewer

and the watched. It may, in fact, contribute to an estrangement between those two. Presumably, the visual fragmentation of Shaun's body may rather obscure the protagonist's identity/persona.

Suddenly, a very light blue-ish graphic follows within the filmic frame. The bold lettered text "FROM THE CREATOR OF HOUSE" gets inserted. Consecutively, a close-up shot displays the full face of Shaun Murphy for the first time.

Video-Still Trailer "The Good Doctor" SE1 (00:00:07, Shore, 2017)

Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 – Shaun’s face in a mirror (00:00:10, Shore, 2017)

Finally, the viewer can see protagonist Shaun’s adult face. The first most basic characteristics one possibly identifies in Shaun are him being a white man who appears to be between 20 and 30 years old. His eye colour is hazel brown, as is his hair. Thereafter, one can observe Shaun looking at his own reflection in a mirror while carrying an earnest facial expression. The protagonist neatly combs his hair.

Up until this point, close-up shots predominate. Film theorist and philosopher Gilles Deleuze, for instance, ascribed pivotal significance to the close-up shot (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2007, pp. 77-78) by assuming that the depicted face reminds the viewer of a mirrored image of themselves. Film theorist Thomas Elsaesser and media theorist Malte Hagener argue that the close-up shot, overall, oscillates between two states. On the one hand, there may evolve a state of self-reflection on the viewers’ end being instigated by, for instance, the fragmented view of a face. This way the viewer is being made aware of his own position as an observer which, according to Elsaesser and Hagener, leads to an alienation (“Verfremdung”) of the object watched (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2007, p. 92). On the other hand, they claim that there may develop an identification with the shown

subject (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2007, p. 101) as the viewer understands the screen as a mirrored image of themselves, hence possibly equalling the protagonist's depiction to their own mirrored reflection (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2007, pp. 77-78; Elsaesser & Hagener, 2007, p. 101).

But how can one contextualise the observations by Elsaesser and Hagener pertaining to the close-ups utilised in the trailer for The Good Doctor SE1? Contrary to their conclusions, one may counterargue that close-up shots do not necessarily need to oscillate between those opposing states established by the two media & film theorists. The viewer may neither get reminded of their position as a voyeur, nor identifies with the depicted subject. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's notion of the film consumer's experience may back up said claim. To her, the attraction of watching a film emerges from the curious urge of being a voyeur which comes with the objectification of the observed (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2007, p. 119; Mulvey, 1975, pp. 393-394). Thereby, the viewer embodies a sense of control. That voyeuristic (predominantly male-connoted) view – also referred to as the "male-gaze" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 812) – is based on the patriarchal order that gets reflected within the modes of film and is rooted in the erotic desire to objectify the desired (Mulvey, 1975, pp. 803-816). Interestingly, what may happen in the case of the opening scene of the trailer for The Good Doctor is not so much a Male-Gaze, but rather an "Allistic-Gaze": A gaze created through an "allistic" (Salladin, n.d.) – non-autistic – order of being and, thus, creating film, objectifying the autistic object for the desire of the allistic viewer and thereby reinforcing a position of power that is created between the one watching and the one being watched. Here, the autistic protagonist may get objectified for the lustful entertainment of the supposed allistic viewer.

How could that sense of control, which can get embodied by the viewer, dissolve? It may do so by, for instance, letting the subject being watched reciprocate the viewer's gaze and thus not only take back control but also break through the closed diegesis. Challenging the border between the filmic and the viewer's reality, which gets marked by the "fourth wall", may remind them of their positionality as an observer (Auter & Davis, 1991, p. 165). Notably, the absence of the camera apparatus within the filmic narrative upholds the impression on the viewer's end that they enter a reality which would not

exist outside said fictional narrative as well as outside the viewer's act of observation (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2007, p. 119; P. Murphy, 2005, pp. 1-26). If Shaun's self-fashioning act wherein he combs his hair would have been shown through his point-of-view, the viewer, consequently, would have become aware of his position as an observer. However, the *illusion* of his POV would not be the actor's actual POV, since the camera would then become visible since, in that case, the camera would replace the mirror and, thereby, create the illusion of Shaun's POV. Shaun would not have gazed into his own eyes but into the camera lens and, hence, the eyes of the viewer. Conversely, Shaun's actions get shown through the perspective of a person standing beside him, *observing* him closely. Thus, the viewer rather turns into an extra-diegetic witness of a private moment of self-fashioning.

Simultaneously, an older man's voice – which belongs to the series' character Dr. Aaron Glassman – becomes audible from outside the mise-en-scène. Glassman talks *about* the protagonist: "I met Shaun Murphy when he was 14 years old" (00:00:09-00:00:12, Shore, 2017). Meanwhile, one watches a moving image of adult Shaun crossfading into one of his teenage self. As a result, Shaun gets audibly introduced through the words of someone else and not through his own.

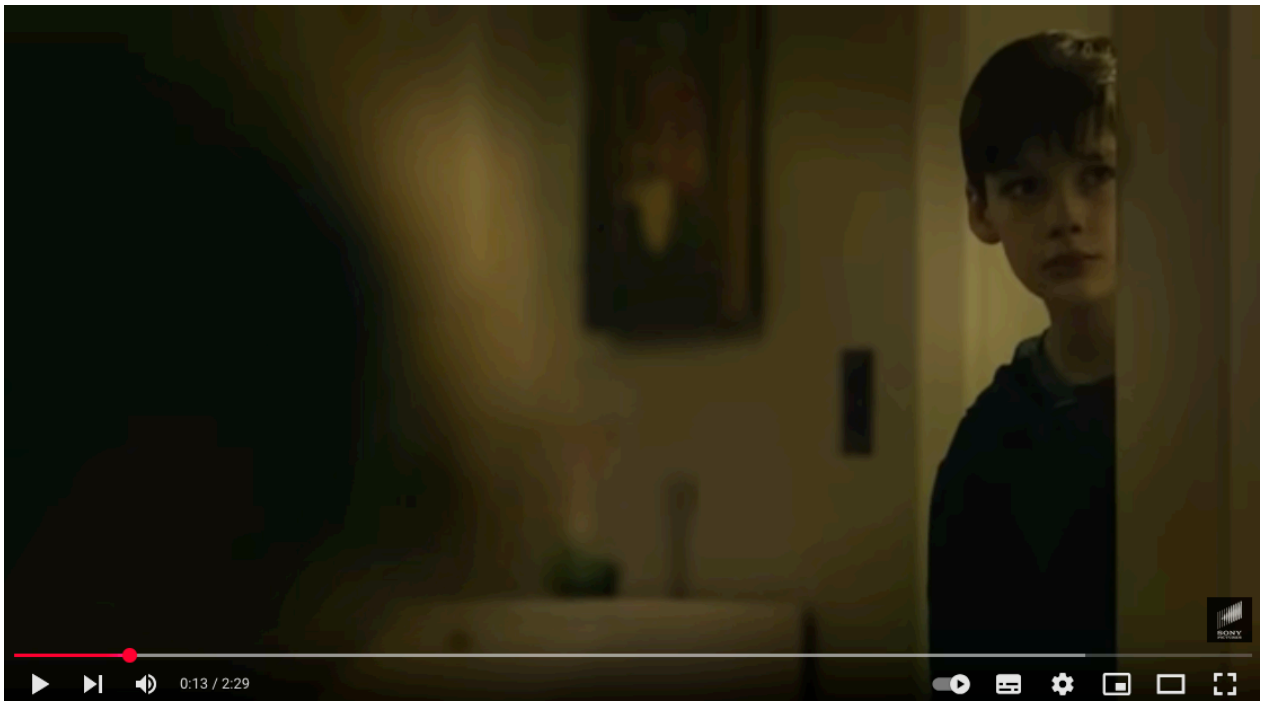
6.2.1.2. Victimisation

From a frog-eyes-perspective, one can discern teenage-Shaun sitting while, at the same time, rocking back and forth (00:00:09-00:00:12, Shore, 2017). The room in which the scene takes place appears gloomy. It has brown undertones. Dimmed, yellowish light emanates from a lamp placed almost entirely outside of the frame.

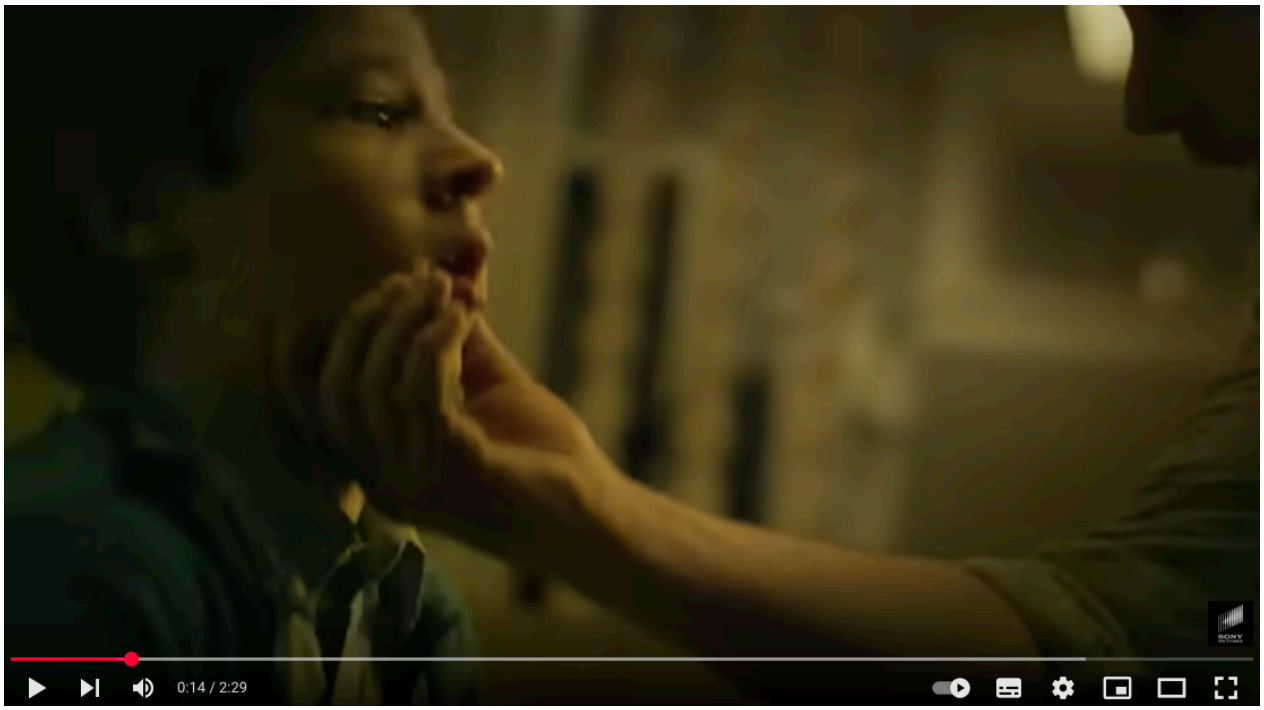
Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 – Teenage-Shaun
(00:00:11, Shore, 2017)

The simultaneous, audible introduction of Shaun by Dr. Aaron Glassman’s voice as well as the visual display of teenage-Shaun makes it unambiguous that the teenager displayed is, in fact, Shaun’s younger self.

It becomes increasingly clear that this scene marks a throwback sequence. Throughout, Shaun becomes more tangible as a (fictional) persona. What follows are several, densely edited visual recaps representing some of the protagonist’s childhood experiences: Steve, his younger brother, is displayed hiding behind a door frame while observing Shaun enduring physical abuse at the hands of their father (00:00:10-00:00:16, Shore, 2017).



Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 – Steve (00:00:13, Shore, 2017)



Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 (00:00:14, Shore, 2017)

Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 (00:00:15, Shore, 2017)

Steve, the younger sibling, reacts by trying to hinder their father from continuing his violent acts. Throughout this throwback sequence, Shaun’s and Steve’s father’s voice is discernible. The latter becomes audible within the diegesis, which means in the “On”, screaming at Shaun, and continues as a voice from the “Off” throughout the rest of the sequence, during which more acts of violence exerted on Shaun are explicitly on display. The father can be heard screaming, “Shaun, just act like a normal human being” (00:00:13-00:00:16, Shore, 2017).

The physical and verbal abuse inflicted on the autistic protagonist is significantly highlighted and, apparently, serves as a substantial element in the narrative in diverse ways. First of all, it positions Shaun audibly as “not normal” through the father’s remarks. Additionally, the younger of the two siblings is shown trying to shield his older brother from the aggression that gets exclusively directed at the latter.

Arguably, by means of the saliently detailed display of abuse, not only Shaun – the direct victim – gets victimised, but also his sibling Steve. The latter – a child – is quite explicitly put into the role of the protector. The viewer may consciously or unconsciously *feel for* the younger brother who could expect – when having cultural norms of the

production's context in mind – that the older brother should be protective of the younger one, and not vice versa. Surely, that is a relational dynamic which is likely to be more culturally expected than what is depicted.

At the very least, Steve gets victimised by turning *witness* to such brutal violence done to his brother. Thereby, Shaun gets depicted as not being able to fend for himself, wherein an alienation between the two boys emerges: Shaun is displayed as passive, as helpless or, if nothing else, in the need for protection and, thereby, positioned as the "abnormal" child. As a consequence, Steve, the younger sibling, turns into "the other" which, here, equals the protector and "the normal" as well as a "desirable" counterpart since he does not get abused for his implicitly normal behaviour by their father after all.

Interestingly, Shaun seems to become alienated from the viewer as well, not only by the obscure introduction of his character but also by building his identity as one of a mere victim. The position as a victim gets displayed as a significant part of his persona which gets gradually built *for* the viewer. In other words: One may argue that Shaun represents otherness rather than relatability. The overly gloomy atmosphere throughout the recap sequence, as well as the fact that Shaun is not shown to speak or act for himself, strengthens that argument. Overall, as early as within the throwback sequence, the trailer positions Steve as the "normal" child and Shaun as the "abnormal" one. The source of their victimisation is nothing less than Shaun's autism. The latter is also what makes him "different".

The issue of victimising siblings of autistic children, however, constitutes a pivotal subject of ambivalence and a potential ground for internalised oppressive ideas towards autistic people. Its genesis seems to be twofold. On the one hand, there is the victimisation of children living with a sibling who is disabled or chronically ill – for which a term came into existence, namely "glass children" (Hanvey et al., 2022, p. 936), in order to describe their supposed state of feeling invisible (Hanvey et al., 2022, p. 936). On the other hand, and as has been revealed in chapter "4. History of autism", autism was coined as something "defective" residing within the individual, and that labelling came with a value judgement which linked levels of "functioning" to societal worth. That viewpoint seems to have been perpetuated so thoroughly that its residue still seems to

linger within our collective memory. Arguably, the idea of assessing someone's "worth" according to their "usefulness" in capitalist societies has been internalised and thereby even persists in the ways studies on autism – which examined the relationship between autistic and non-autistic siblings – have been conducted thus far.

Although those aforementioned studies – at least those that I have come across – acknowledge a lack of research in that realm or admit to limitations in their own body of work, those limitations, which were particularly connected to sample size and methodology, warrant close consideration as they may have led to skewed or even biased results. One aspect that particularly caught my attention was the *focus* those studies set. What they seem to have in common is the quest to find proof that siblings of autistic children are negatively impacted by their brother's or sister's autism (Meyer et al., 2011, p. 1419; Orsmond & Seltzer, 2007, pp. 313-320).

For example, a psychology study by Katherina A. Meyer, Brooke Ingersoll and David Z. Hambrick concludes "that adjustment problems in siblings of children with ASD are related both to increased symptom severity in the child with ASD, via its effect on maternal depressive symptoms, and the expression of a greater number of characteristics of autism in the siblings themselves" (Meyer et al., 2011, p. 1419). The authors claim that prior studies tackling the subject indicated "that siblings of children with ASD experience increased behavioral or emotional problems" (Meyer et al., 2011, p. 1413). It must be noted at this point that several limitations of their study become apparent. Firstly, the scholars did not screen the supposedly non-autistic siblings in question for possibly being autistic themselves, even though they displayed autistic characteristics. A fact that was even acknowledged by the authors of the study. Thus, the results do not offer reliable insights considering the preformulated goal which sought to evaluate whether a child's autism increases adjustment problems in their *non-autistic* sibling specifically (Meyer et al., 2011, p. 1413).
Secondly, reflection seems to be lacking on the authors' ends upon the possible multilayered circumstances of *why* siblings of autistic children may suffer emotionally in one way or another. For instance, the source of their examined adjustment problems may not be the autism of a sibling by default but could originate in other aspects, such as the societal discrimination experienced by families which is rooted in a lack of

understanding for autistic minds. Other possible sources of siblings' adjustment problems could be the lack of accommodations provided to the autistic child which, in turn, would influence *all* caring family members. If an autistic individual is not properly accommodated and, hence, starts to exhibit perceptible symptoms of distress, such as frequent autistic meltdowns, other family members might co-suffer.

Arguably, the author's establishment of a supposed link between depressive symptoms in the mothers of autistic children and the adjustment problems of their non-autistic siblings may hint towards a bigger, more complex issue. The mother's development of depressive symptoms could likewise be a result of, again, diverse and interlinked forces. They might evolve because of feelings of overwhelm when it comes to handling an autistic child. Those feelings of overwhelm, however, could result from a lack of access to knowledge and resources, a lack of accommodation or support, as well as the experience of social isolation. The latter seems to be prevalent in parents of autistic children (Farmad et al., 2024, pp. 217-224). All these aspects, nonetheless, would not identify the root of the mother's emotional anguish within the autistic child's mind rather than in complex individual issues coupled with societal ones.

In light of those aspects, it seems unlikely that autism can be identified as *the* source of a family unit's emotional hardships. The latter's existence seems to result from the intertwinement of diverse circumstances, one of which being societal forces. Hence the *reaction* to a child's autism, from individuals as well as society at large, would be an issue that needs closer investigation and consideration. The conclusions within the psychological study by Meyer, Ingersoll and Hambrick – which, in short, identify autism in a sibling as one major root of adjustment problems in the non-autistic sibling – seem biased upon closer investigation.

This biased view may not come as such a surprise when one looks at the study's funding. During the authors' acknowledgments, they reveal that the first and second authors were supported through grants provided by Autism Speaks (Meyer et al., 2011, p. 1419). The latter is the "world's most powerful autism organization" (Kapp, 2020, p. 14). Yet, it is largely seen as a highly controversial organisation within the autism community (Tabor, 2020, pp. 41-43). How so? For one, Autism Speaks took part in borderline conspiracy theories, such as the idea that there is a link between vaccines

and the emergence of autism in children (Robison, 2020, p. 223). Moreover, the organisation has depicted autism “as a fate literally worse than death” (Meg Evans, 2020, p. 130). Supposedly, Autism Speaks has funded a great deal of research that would, according to autistic author John Elder Robison, do “next to nothing that had potential to resolve the problems [he] saw among autistics” (Robison, 2020, p. 225). In fact, Robison – who is also a parent of an autistic child – briefly tried to positively advise Autism Speaks by being a member of their science board but ended up resigning shortly after because the organisation continued to frame autism as a tragedy that ruins families and robs them of their children (Robison, 2020, p. 229).

When it comes to the victimisation of brothers and sisters of autistics, another scoping review of several studies that dealt with the quality of life among siblings of autistic individuals (Quatrosi et al., 2023) may catch one’s attention. Said review reveals that “non-autistic siblings of autistic individuals experienced decreased psychological well-being, less perceived social support, increased aggressiveness and conflict-proneness, and higher levels of anxiety and stress impacting their QoL” (Quatrosi et al., 2023, p. 1), short for Quality of Life. Even though the scholars who conducted the review acknowledge that the examined studies often “lacked appropriate sampling methods to address the research goal(s)” (Quatrosi et al., 2023, p. 13), they still come to the conclusion that “being a non-autistic sibling of an autistic individual is commonly undervalued” (Quatrosi et al., 2023, p. 1) which leads the authors to advocate for the improvement of “support services” (Quatrosi et al., 2023, p. 1) for siblings of autistics. The authors presupposed good intentions notwithstanding, the scoping review foregrounds the victimisation of siblings of autistic individuals and, thereby, forecloses crucial aspects that may lead to the presumed decreased quality of life of siblings of autistic children, such as the lack of support for the autistic individual themselves. In fact, accommodations for autistic children are often lacking, sparse or not sufficient (Wallace-Watkin & Waddington, 2023, pp. 588-601; Lindsay et al., 2013, pp. 347–362). Moreover, the scoping review eludes the unique and complex dynamics within family units of autistic individuals (or any individuals for that matter) that all have their singular set of needs.

Another study titled “Parent’s Voices: experiences and coping as a parent of a child with autism spectrum disorder” (Reddy et al., 2019, pp. 43-50), in like fashion, incorporated a small sample size but aimed to investigate the experiences and coping mechanisms of parents of an autistic child. Its conclusions concur with the results of the aforementioned scoping review insofar as an autistic child supposedly “presented as an immense burden to the families” (Reddy et al., 2019, p. 49). Nonetheless, the scholars who conducted the study acknowledge that the participating parents’ efforts to “cope” were challenged by the lack of resources, “financial burdens”, as well as “stigma due to reduced awareness” (Reddy et al., 2019, p. 49). Again, one may argue that the supposed aspects linked to the families’ “suffering” are not related to a child’s autism per se, but rather to structural and social reactions to and attitudes towards autism.

Contrary to those studies – which implicitly victimise siblings of autistic individuals – there exists one titled “A longitudinal study of sibling bullying and mental health in autistic adolescents: The role of self-esteem” (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023, pp. 1533-1549). It was conducted by Emre Deniz and Umar Toseeb and examined how sibling bullying impacts the mental health of autistic individuals. Despite its strengths, there are also limitations present in said study. One of the formers can be identified in the data collection. It is “drawn from a UK-based representative cohort study” (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023, p. 1545) which comes with a large sample size: The testimony of 416 autistic adolescents (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023, pp. 1533-1549) is used. Although the sample size being high, the authors contend that the participants’ gender is predominantly male, namely 78 percent (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023, p. 1545). Therefore, the scholars recognise that “females may be under-represented in both autism research and diagnosis” (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023, p. 1545). Either way, the study resulted in the conclusion “that sibling bullying is highly prevalent in the lives of autistic adolescents, as nearly one in two autistic adolescents experience sibling bullying about once a week” (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023. p. 1546). Moreover, the authors also brought forth that autistic adolescents, who were subjected to bullying by their siblings, were especially those who “were late-diagnosed, had a shared bedroom, and lived in a low-income household” (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023, p. 1533) which again hints at multiple societal issues including but not limited to the lack of awareness and education about autism overall, a lack of access to

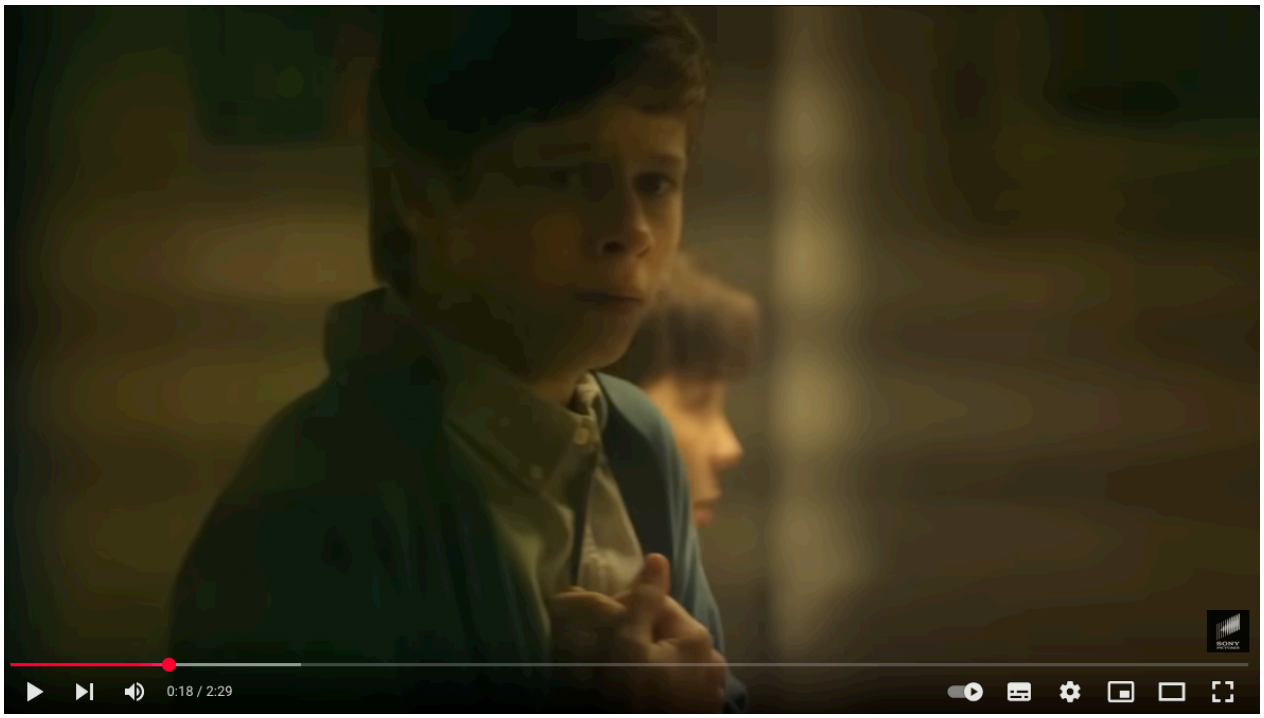
psychological resources indicated by the late-diagnosis of the autistic individuals in question, and the circumstance that a seemingly substantial amount of families with an autistic amongst them are not sufficiently financially supported which hinders them in providing a living space that would allow all members to have a private room to themselves.

Overall, the authors of the study reasoned that “increased sibling bullying in early adolescence was a significant predictor of reduced self-esteem in mid-adolescence; in turn, reduced self-esteem predicted poorer mental health and wellbeing in late adolescence. Our findings indicate that sibling bullying in early adolescence may indirectly lead to poorer mental health and wellbeing in late adolescence through a reduction in self-esteem in mid-adolescence in autistic adolescents” (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023, p. 1533). This quote makes clear that sibling bullying appears to lead to poorer mental health in the autistic individual. Thus, the scholars not only conclude that sibling bullying is “a serious form of violence” (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023, p. 1548) but also highlight “the immediate need for sibling bullying prevention programmes in families of autistic adolescents” (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023, p. 1548) as well as the need for “interventions targeting the self-esteem” (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023, p. 1548) of autistic individuals since sibling bullying is a phenomenon happening “behind closed doors” (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023, p. 1548). The authors continue by acknowledging the hidden figure of autistics who are possibly subjected to sibling bullying since many might not report such to their parents (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023, p. 1548).

Having the preceding observations in mind when circling back to the media analysis of The Good Doctor’s trailer, it may become clear that the victimisation of Steve – the non-autistic sibling of Shaun – could feed into notions that render autism as something defective that leads to suffering in their so-called “normal” counterparts which would also elevate dynamics that not only foreclose autistic testimony but also define and foreground autism as a “problem” when, in fact, societal attitudes and (internalised) oppressive forces are culpable.

6.2.1.3. Alienation

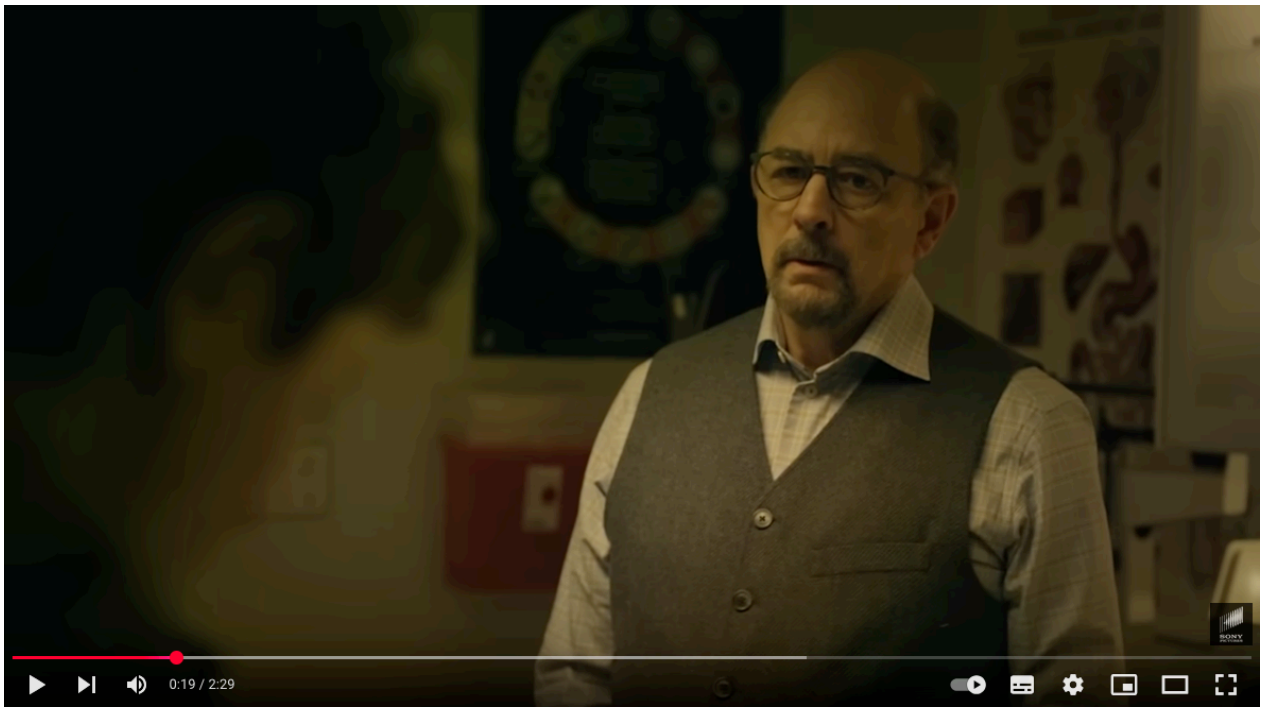
This chapter will continue to dive into the ways how the alienation of Shaun as “other” gets driven further within the trailer of The Good Doctor (Shaun, 2017).
The precedingly established throwback scene continues with Dr. Aaron Glassman’s voice being audible from the “Off” while teenage-Shaun stays visible, bringing the viewer back to the protagonist’s familial experiences in a dysfunctional home.



Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 (00:00:18, Shore, 2017)

Dr. Aaron Glassman comments *on* Shaun, “He [Shaun] was, and he still is an extraordinary young man” (00:00:18-00:00:22, Shore, 2017) and thereby explicitly positions Shaun as not ordinary but *extra*ordinary.

Subsequently, Dr. Aaron Glassman – who might strike some viewers as a mentor or grandfatherly figure – becomes not only audibly but also visually a part of the childhood recap. The next frame displays the significantly older man as he is finishing his introductory statement that started just an instant ago in the “Off” as a voice-over.



Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 – Aaron Glassman
(00:00:19, Shore, 2017)

Therein, the viewer gets acquainted with another scenery. Glassman sits at a large table in a bright conference room. The former is located opposite of what will be revealed to be the board of the hospital at which adult Shaun aspires to work as a surgeon. It becomes gradually apparent that Glassman has known Shaun for a long time.
The scene continues with the older doctor talking about the aspiring surgeon to the present board members.

Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 – Aaron Glassman
(00:00:21, Shore, 2017)

Notably, the scenery has changed drastically, distinguishing it clearly from the gloomy imagery during the childhood throwback. The following sequences appear alternately on the level of sound as well as on the level of imagery. Therein, the viewer can perceive scenes which happen in the conference room alternating with scenes of Shaun’s more recent past as an adult. Throughout the latter, Murphy is shown leaving his childhood home, for example. He can be seen carrying the fully packed bag which one might remember from the initial close-up shots.

Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 – Shaun’s childhood home (00:00:24, Shore, 2017)

Thereupon, Dr. Andrews is introduced, residing in the conference room. He serves as the president of St. Bonaventure Hospital at which Dr. Glassman advocates for Shaun Murphy to be taken on as a surgeon. The exact identity of Dr. Andrews stays undisclosed in the trailer, however.

Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 – Dr. Andrews (00:00:27, Shore, 2017)

The sequence continues by showing Dr. Andrews arguing with Dr. Glassman. The former asserts, “Autism, difficulty in communicating…” (00:00:25-00:00:27, Shore, 2017), while Glassman is no longer sitting but standing up. Glassman counters, “He [Shaun] is high-functioning, he is capable of living on his own” (00:00:27-00:00:29, Shore, 2017), upon which Andrews responds with, “Difficulty in using language and abstract concepts” (00:00:30-00:00:35, Shore, 2017).

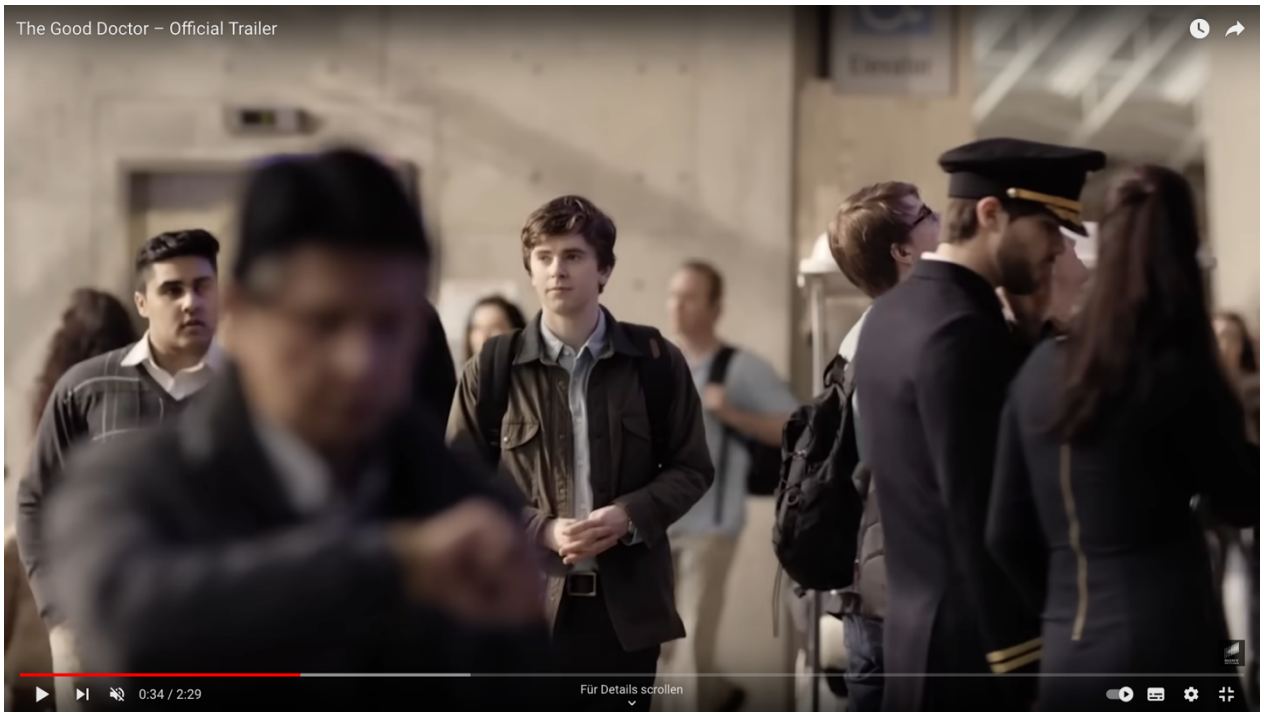
Shaun’s alienation is exacerbated by two aspects in particular. Firstly, regarding the dispute between Dr. Andrews and Dr. Glassman: Not Shaun’s qualifications get discussed, but *merely* his autism diagnosis which works to set him apart from others. Thereby, Shaun as a whole – his character as well as his abilities – gets judged based on his diagnosis rather than his professional experience, for example.
Secondly, Shaun’s coinage as “other” is established throughout the throwback scene by victimising him as well as his brother through framing his autism as the root of the family unit’s problems. Arguably, it gets subtly implied that Shaun’s autism is a closed entity within the make-up of his personality. Autism, however, is an innate way of neurocognitive functioning that affects the whole psyche of an autistic person (Walker,

2025, p. 1; Hare, 2024, pp. 13-24; Codina, 2023, p. 72; Dwyer, 2022, pp. 73-92; Walker, 2021, pp. 13-24; Seidel, 2020, p. 93; Singer, 2017, pp. 9-10). By framing autism as a separate, undesirable part residing within an individual, one plays into the stereotype coined by Hans Asperger which got exemplified in the chapter “5.2.5. Characteristics of a Stereotype”.

Those aspects which hint towards the alienation of Shaun as “other” – not only within the narrative, but also to the viewer – get supported by yet another, albeit more subtle connotation ascribed to Shaun. This happens, paradoxically, through Glassman’s defence. The latter poses an argument in favour of the young surgeon: Shaun is “extraordinary”, which gets ascribed a positive connotation. That positive connotation of the state of being extraordinary aims to outweigh Dr. Andrew’s counterargument which frames autism as something negative. Here, Shaun is alienated by not only the foregrounding of his extraordinary character but also by making the latter the ultra-argument for him to reach some degree of normalcy. Said degree of normalcy is framed as *the* possibility that could grant him the chance to work as a surgeon. In other words, emphasising that the protagonist is “high-functioning” which, consequently, works to make him seem “more normal”, elevates his alienation.

Positioning Shaun as “high-functioning” and attributing that state with a positive connotation simultaneously infers that there are autistic people who are *not* high-functioning while turning them into Shaun’s non-desirable autistic counterparts. By extension, Shaun is staged to be *qualified* because of his positionality as a “high-functioning” autistic, which gets directly linked with specific abilities, such as the fact that he can live on his own. In this case, the state of being able to live on one’s own suggests that Shaun could pass as normal *enough* or that he is not *that* disabled. Consequently, a certain level of what it means to function “normally” is set in place as well as framed as a desirable goal.

The trailer continues with a scene that shows Dr. Shaun Murphy at the airport in San Jose, capital of Silicon Valley. He can be seen folding his hands, fidgeting nervously, looking around while a stream of people passes him.



Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 (00:00:34, Shore, 2017)

Although being in a public space full of people, Shaun appears as the only one being uncomfortable to some degree which – again – *differentiates* him from his surroundings.

On the audio level, the sound of the airport’s surroundings changes drastically by getting accentuated. Overall, the airport noise turns louder and louder. What follows are close-up shots from Shaun’s POV (point-of-view), whereby the viewer supposedly gets to see the world through Shaun’s eyes and ears: These sequences disclose piercingly noisy walking legs as well as rolling luggage.

There is clearly an attempt to simulate Shaun’s *autistic* perception, namely his inferred heightened sensory perception. This stresses, however, how *different* Shaun’s experiences are to the rest of the people at the airport. Moreover, his alienation is exacerbated through the usage of music which, too, turns significantly louder, faster and more dramatic.

Suddenly, one can perceive a glass board falling to the ground, crashing and, thereby, hitting and injuring a boy standing below it. The filmic editing elevates, wherein it shows Shaun's reaction, who flinches. Tension seems to be built up dramatically by means of sound and montage. An editorial cut is made which brings the viewer back to the conference room. This is when the music turns abruptly subtle. Then, Dr. Andrews presses, "Does it sound like I am describing a surgeon?" (00:00:42-00:00:44, Shore, 2017).

The accompanying music changes abruptly yet again, now into an even more dramatic mode while the viewer can watch Shaun kneeling in front of the injured boy. Both are surrounded by a great number of worried bystanders. Dr. Murphy seems to accomplish something *extraordinary*: He improvises with the simple means available to him and starts to perform an operation on the injured. Murphy wears surgical gloves while he initiates a cut into the boy's torso by using a Stanley knife. By showing the moment of the knife reaching and gliding into the injured's flesh so closely, it causes a dramatic effect: Attention gets clearly drawn to the moment of *extraordinary* action. Thereafter, Shaun can be seen putting a tube inside the incision. Another doctor – yet appearing significantly older compared to Shaun – enters the scene. Suddenly, the injured utters a desperately deep breath. The dramatic moments notwithstanding, Shaun appears exceptionally calm and collected while astounded bystanders watch the events unfold.

Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 (00:00:47, Shore, 2017)

Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 (00:00:50, Shore, 2017)

The two doctors face each other. The older one utters in an astonished manner, “He is breathing” (00:00:52-00:00:52, Shore, 2017). In response, a relieved bystander hugs Shaun Murphy. Others gasp in admiration. Overall, the crowd seems ecstatic about Dr. Murphy’s heroic actions. The voice of the second doctor on scene can be heard saying, “He [Shaun] saved his [the injured’s] life” (00:00:53-00:00:53, Shore, 2017). Clearly, Shaun’s almost otherworldly-seeming capabilities get stressed significantly. The impression that the young doctor made something seemingly impossible possible got successfully established.

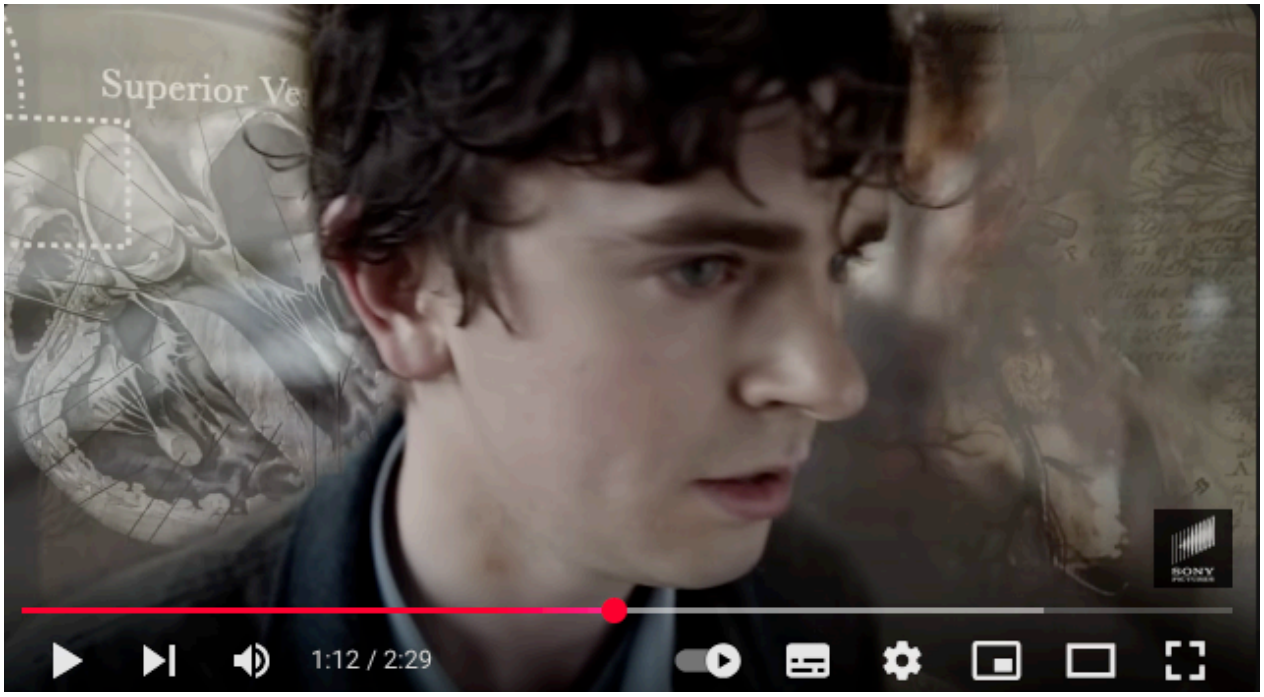
Subsequently, Shaun gets asked by his doctoral colleague, “Who are you?” whereupon the viewer can hear Shaun’s voice for the very first time. The latter answers in a matter-of-fact, sober manner, “I am Doctor Shaun Murphy. I am a surgical resident at San Jose Bonaventure Hospital” (00:00:55-00:00:59, Shore, 2017).

Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” SE1 (00:01:01, Shore, 2017)

Next, a text insert on a white and light blue-ish background becomes visible. It reads: “HIS MIND IS EXTRAORDINARY” (00:00:59-00:01:01, Shore, 2017), whereupon alternating images – which show either Shaun or the board members in the conference room – follow.

The latter can still be observed discussing whether Dr. Shaun Murphy would qualify as fit when it comes to working as a surgeon. Thereby, Shaun's autism is yet again in the limelight since doubts about Shaun's capabilities get directly linked to his autism diagnosis while disavowing other possible factors that would contribute to the board's decision.

Subsequently, another text insert appears on white background. It states: "SOMETIMES BEING DIFFERENT" (00:01:07-00:01:08, Shore, 2017). Thereafter, several alternating images unveil Shaun in various settings. One can, for instance, watch the protagonist walk along a football field while simultaneously witnessing an animation that represents the protagonist's thoughts on human anatomy.



Video-Still Trailer "The Good Doctor" Season 1 (00:01:12, Shore, 2017)

At the same time, Dr. Glassman can be heard saying, "He also has savant syndrome, genius-level skills in several areas" (00:01:09-00:01:13, Shore, 2017). Again, a text on a white, light blue-ish background follows. It reads, "CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE" (00:01:13-00:01:15, Shore, 2017).

Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” Season 1 (00:01:15, Shore, 2017)

The trailer continues by highlighting Shaun’s social awkwardness, his bluntness as well as his positionality as a misfit while interacting with his colleagues at the hospital.

However, what gets particularly stressed are Shaun’s exceptional *savant* abilities. This is achieved by, for instance, another brief recap sequence showing Shaun’s younger brother Steve reassuring his old sibling, “Never forget, you are the smart one. You can do anything” (00:02:15-00:02:19, Shore, 2017). It appears that Shaun’s genius abilities as well as his status as a “high-functioning” autistic get highlighted by Dr. Glassman as well as by Steve. Those attributes ascribed to the protagonist turn into a kind of ultra-reason why Shaun should be granted a chance to work as a surgeon *despite* being autistic.

As has been established, not only does autism get instrumentalised, but also Shaun’s “worthiness” gets tied to characteristics that would bring Shaun closer to a “passing-as-normal-enough-threshold”. Framing savant skills as a kind of compensation for one’s autism – which is implicitly ascribed as a deficit that may strip one from aspired possibilities in life or may at least be encountered with strong scepticism and judgements on one’s character – could reinforce a mindset coined by Hans Asperger,

namely categorising and judging autistic people according to their levels of “functioning” and, thus, their levels of “normalcy”. This stereotype may resonate through the character of Shaun even more profoundly when considering the fact that he is a white man. The closing sequence of the trailer does not help in counterposing this impression, since it shows a highly edited still image of Shaun in which, notably, his hazel eyes got replaced by piercingly crystal blue ones. On top of that, Shaun’s complexion got whiten-ed as well, which makes him appear to be *closer* to Aryan ideals of physical appearance which can be summarised as “blonde, blue-eyed, athletic, and tall”, according to the website of the United States’ holocaust memorial museum (*Nazi Racism*, 2022). The practise of modifying skin colour in order to look whiter while framing such as desirable has been a practice rooted in colonisation and white supremacy (Riccio et al., 2024, pp. 1-15). This is mirrored also in media depictions, such as in advertisements of Pear’s Soap, as well as through the construction of beauty filters used on social media platforms (Riccio et al., 2024, pp. 1-15; Van Dijk, 2011, pp. 1-39).

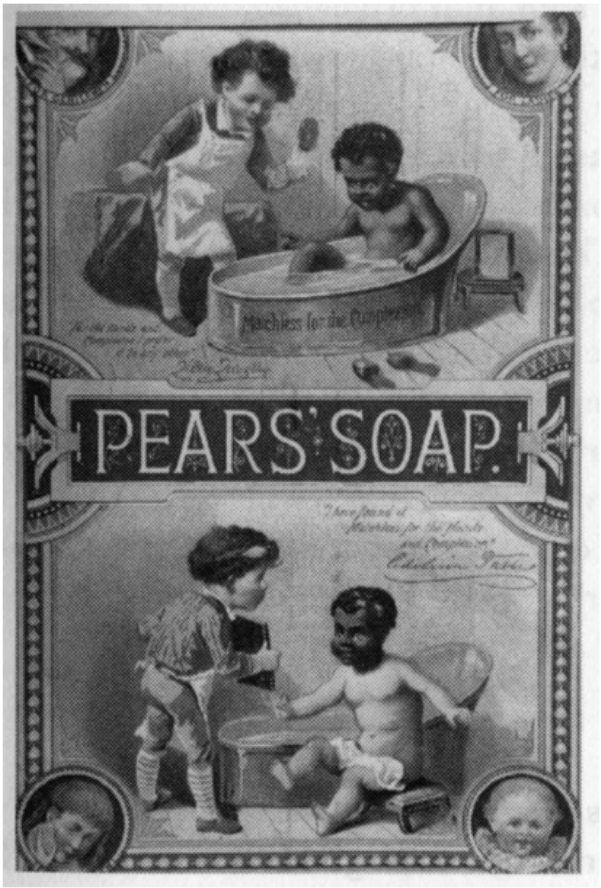


Figure 3: Van Dijk, 2011, p. 27

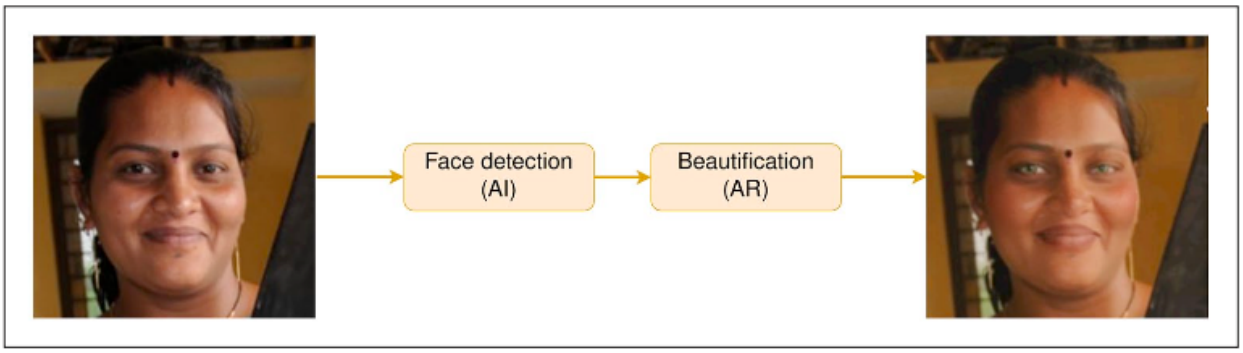


Figure 4: Riccio et al., 2024, p. 2

Video-Still Trailer “The Good Doctor” Season 1 (00:02:22, Shore, 2017)

Indisputably, an alienation of Shaun is set in place throughout the trailer’s narrative. In short, it conveys the following to the viewer: Shaun is not ordinary, nor is he a relatable figure, and therein autism does not get normalised.

6.2.1.4. Key Findings

Throughout the trailer, an alienation of the protagonist Shaun is set in place on multiple occasions, not only within the narrative itself but also in relation to the viewer. Two points seem to be crucially salient.

Firstly, there is the instrumentalisation of both Shaun Murphy's savant syndrome, as well as his autism. For one, his genius abilities and his positionality as a "high-functioning" autistic man get displayed as the tools to make Shaun "normal enough".
At the same time, his autism gets introduced as an undesirable detriment for which, apparently, only his genius abilities can compensate. His positionality as a savant gets positioned as the ace up the protagonist's sleeve which could grant him a chance to not only mingle into the continuum of normal but also to make him more *worthy*, particularly when it comes to him being a surgeon. Clearly, Shaun's savant skills get connotated positively, his autism negatively. By establishing autism as a detriment that needs to be compensated for in order to adhere to some level of normalcy, the trailer paints Shaun's overall persona to be closely reminiscent of the stereotype coined by Hans Asperger (see chapter "5.2.5. Characteristics of a Stereotype") and thereby reinforces oppressive structures that are rooted in white supremacy. By reproducing said stereotype, the marginalisation of those who do not fit such may get exacerbated at the same time.

Secondly, Shaun's and his younger sibling Steve's victimisation plays into the former's alienation. Teenage-Murphy's autism gets framed as *the* burden to the family unit which not only leads to his father subjecting him to physical and verbal abuse but also to his brother's victimisation by displaying him as Shaun's protector. Additionally, the teenage version of Murphy is displayed as helpless. Overall, the autistic savant Dr. Shaun Murphy is displayed as a-normal, as a victim, as extraordinary to the point that his actions and abilities seem exorbitant. He is not displayed as a relatable figure to the viewers of the series.

It needs to be noted, however, that this analysis did *not* aim to convey the idea that autistic people reminiscent of the fictional character of Shaun Murphy do not exist, because they do. What it tried to display is that a specific stereotype gets largely reinforced which emerged during and through a political era and ideology that is not only rooted in racial hygiene measures but also instigated ongoing bias in autism science that led to the marginalisation of those autistic people who do not fit that specific stereotype (D. R. Jones, 2023, pp. 1-105; Botha & Cage, 2022, pp. 1-22; Mallipeddi & VanDaalen, 2022, pp. 281-289; Price, 2022, pp. 32-38).

It begs consideration that the character Shaun represents – or rather foregrounds – one niche version of autism. However, those autistic people who do not display savant skills may not feel represented in the slightest. Even those who do may not feel represented either, since the skills and abilities of Dr. Murphy appear exaggeratedly exorbitant. So, the question arises, which demographic should this character represent and, most importantly, for what purpose?

The conclusion of this analysis emphasises that oppressive ideas reproduced through The Good Doctor's trailer may likely get internalised by its numerous viewers. If this is the case, this again would contribute to the hardening of stereotypical assumptions which especially disadvantage (intersectionally) marginalised autistic groups. However, closer scrutiny of the first episode of season one should bring more nuance to the observations established thus far.

6.2.2. Media Analysis – The Good Doctor SE1EP1

The following media analysis aims to scrutinise thoroughly selected scenes from the first episode of The Good Doctor's season one (Shore, 2022) while, as has been established through the analysis of its trailer, aiming to decipher whether and how oppressive ideas towards autism get reinforced and what epistemic consequences that might entail.

Throughout the first episode compartmentalised parts of related scenes appear alternately. However, for the purpose of understandability in this analysis, those parts got assembled into multiple, singular chapters. For example, there is a closed scene happening at the airport during the series' episode, yet sequences of that scene appear alternately with other sequences of other scenes.

6.2.2.1. Introductory Sequence

The introduction sequence of The Good Doctor's first episode of season one – SE1EP1 for short – starts off by displaying Shaun (Shore, 2022) getting ready to leave his childhood home, as has similarly been done in the trailer. There is notable emphasis on the activities of washing his hands, combing his hair and packing up his clothes which are executed meticulously and diligently. For instance, one observes Shaun arranging his perfectly folded clothing or lining up his multiple, solved puzzle cubes.

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:00:18, Shore, 2022)

The usage of mirrors, too, seems prominent in the first moments of the episode. As happened in the trailer, the protagonist does not reference the viewer in their position as a voyeur. Although Shaun looks at himself in the mirror which, notably, fills out the filmic frame, he does not look into the camera. The viewer is left comfortable in their position as a close witness to a rather intimate setting, considering the protagonist is displayed to be by himself.

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:00:16, Shore, 2017)

Additionally, several close-ups highlight the act of Shaun unpacking a plastic play-knife in a noticeably neat manner. The opening scene appears strikingly alike, if not almost identical to that of the trailer.

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:00:24, Shore, 2017)

Shaun's meticulous nature as well as the usage of mirrors becomes even more prominent. This emphasises the orderly fashion in which he executes his actions (washing his hands, combing his hair, etc.). As the analysis of the trailer also concludes, mirrors are used as means to *closely* observe Shaun, who is looking at himself, while not disrupting the gaze on the viewer's end since Shaun never dares to look *directly* into the camera. The viewer's position as a *close* voyeur, an observer of private actions happening in a private space, stays largely preserved. Additionally, one may already identify more obvious characteristics of the stereotypical definition of autism established by Hans Asperger (see chapter "5.2.5. Characteristics of a Stereotype"). Overall, the introductory sequence works in very similar ways to the trailer's one, albeit elevating the emphasis on some aspects, such as the display of stereotypical traits associated with Hans Asperger's notion of autism.

6.2.2.2. Childhood Throwback: Football Field

Shaun is shown standing on the edge of a football field. A football accidentally lands in front of his feet which triggers a childhood memory.

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:01:16, Shore, 2022)

A crossfade introduces the younger version of Shaun lying on the ground. Yet another football is prominently placed in front of him. Shaun has a visible head injury. One can witness him getting kicked by multiple boys whose identities mostly stay obscured since their faces do not get shown.

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:01:23, Shore, 2022)

Evidently, violent acts inflicted on the autistic teenager get emphasised. By focusing on the display of violence in such detail, Shaun’s coinage as a victim gets explicitly formed. Overall, highlighting the display of violent acts through multiple slow-motion images and close-ups as well as the use of dramatic music, not only does Shaun’s victimisation get foregrounded, but also the inflicted violence gets aestheticised for the sake of the viewer’s *entertainment*.

Apart from the striking physicality prevalent during this sequence, it might hint at something profound – metaphorically speaking – and that is football as a physical activity that has a culturally connotated communal factor and, hence, can also be closely associated with a social group setting consisting of its football players. Thus, the viewer might infer that Shaun sought to belong to such a group. Displaying Shaun being subjected to violence, which likely also stands for his social exclusion from the group of boys, positions him as a supposed involuntary outsider. Unfortunately, it is a fact that many autistic children, adolescents (Humphrey & Hebron, 2015, pp. 845-862; Ferrigno et al., 2022, pp. 127-134) as well as adults share a much greater likelihood to experience bullying than their neurotypical counterparts (Weiss & Fardella, 2018, pp. 1-

10). In fact, it is suggested that autistics suffer from the barriers they face when wanting to belong in social spaces but still long for the feeling of community (Milton & Sims, 2016, pp. 520-534; Sinclair, 2010, p. 1).

Subsequently, Shaun's sibling gets introduced. Heroically, the younger runs up to his older brother, whereupon he pulls away the latter's bullies. Shaun's younger, non-autistic brother Steve yet again gets coined as the protector of his seemingly helpless older sibling who still can be seen lying on the ground.

Video-Still "The Good Doctor" EP1SE1 (00:01:33, Shore, 2022)

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:01:34, Shore, 2022)

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:01:37, Shore, 2022)

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:01:41, Shore, 2022)

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:01:43, Shore, 2022)

At this point, adult Shaun's childhood memory in the shape of a recap sequence ends. The episode continues with the appearance of an unknown boy who addresses the protagonist as "Mister", likely anticipating him to kick the football back.

Video-Still "The Good Doctor" EP1SE1 (00:01:53, Shore, 2022)

Murphy seems to be stuck in his thoughts. No verbal reaction happens on his part. Nonetheless, Shaun clumsily kicks the football to the boy standing across from him.

At this point it needs to be stressed that the continuous accumulation of stereotypical traits and associations connected to the notion of autism coined by Hans Asperger becomes almost undeniable. Two minutes into the episode, the protagonist Shaun gets coined and presented, firstly, as being motorically clumsy and as not verbally responsive when he gets addressed directly by a stranger.
Secondly, Shaun is introduced as a white man who exhibits rigidity in his behaviour. One example of this would be his preoccupation with orderliness.
These particularly stereotypical characteristics seem, at the very least, strikingly similar to the type of autism coined by Hans Asperger (see "5.2.5. Characteristics of a Stereotype").

In all, this specific recap scene exacerbates Shaun's position as a victim. The focus on the detailed display of violence and bullying may, at the same time, trivialise the struggles of autistic people by aestheticising violent behaviour for the sake of entertainment. Moreover, Shaun seems to gradually exhibit more and more stereotypical traits that can be linked to Hans Asperger's coinage of autism.

6.2.2.3. The Airport

The scene unravelling at the airport of San Jose in Silicon Valley starts off by simulating Shaun's sensory experience. This may be an attempt to not only introduce another autistic characteristic but also to make the latter *experienceable* to allistic people. In trying to accomplish this feat, the on-site noises are edited to an exceedingly loud volume. Scary and overwhelming may be some adjectives that come to mind when watching the simulation of Shaun's *enacted* autistic experience.

Although the attempt at trying to reconstruct an autistic experience might be done to evoke empathy on the viewer's end, it may, unfortunately, result in the exact opposite. By trying to imitate Shaun's autistic experience, the latter gets alienated. The simulation of his sensory perceptions – which in and of itself cannot be reconstructed or mimicked anyway – creates more distance from the "normal" or the "regular" experience and sets that very differentiation between normal and a-normal in place. Supposedly, in trying to display *two* ways of perceiving the world – when, again, there is no such thing because everyone perceives the world singularly – it does exactly what it implies: At best, it brings the non-autistic viewer further apart from being able to empathise with the autistic experience. However, they might be tricked into thinking otherwise.

At this point, the protagonist is shown engaging in self-soothing behaviour by fidgeting with both the piece of cloth that covers Shaun's toy knife as well as with the toy knife itself. Shaun clearly appears to be in distress. Non-autistic viewers may deem the act of fidgeting as *awkward*, especially when enacted by an adult man. This presumption is rooted in the fact that fidgeting is one of those autistic behaviours that has been deemed as "problematic" or "harmful" (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022, p. 384; Shkedy et al.,

2022, p. 127) to the point where behavioural interventions like ABA (Applied Behavioural Analysis) have aimed to decrease them (Gupta et al., 2024, p. 4; Mathur et al., 2024, p. 477; Sabinson, 2024, p. 3485; Cumming et al., 2020, p. 75). In any case, self-soothing behaviours like stimming are highly stigmatised and judged as inappropriate by neurotypical norms (Mathur et al., 2024, p. 477; Kapp et al., 2019, pp. 1782-1792).

The episode's narrative moves on to a boy getting seriously injured by a glass board falling onto him which puts the injured into a life-threatening condition. Another doctor who is significantly older than Shaun tries to help and save the boy's life. However, the young surgeon challenges the older doctor's actions which – given the socio-cultural context – may get interpreted by the viewer as challenging the older doctor's authority. The concept of "authority" is, in fact, something many autistic people seem to interpret and react to in ways that do not adhere to its common socio-cultural connotations. For instance, to many autistic people rules or norms, which are inherently based upon the concept of authority, need "to make sense" so that the autistic person can comply with them (Wharmby, 2019, p. 1).

At this point, I would like to insert a personal stance. I, as an autistic person, can highly relate to this particular issue since I view the concept of authority as utterly trivial. This, notably, is also a stance that epistemologist Kristie Dotson stresses. She mentions that "credibility" is still often associated with "authority" (Dotson, 2012, p. 28) which is arbitrary. A person's position within a hierarchical structure does not necessarily account for the quality or quantity of their knowledge on a particular subject, nor whether that amount or *kind* of knowledge is deemed *valuable* to one individual or another. Thus, in my view, respect for authority must be *earned* and not simply accepted.

Even though this sequence during EP1 depicts a struggle that presumably many autistic people face, Shaun's behaviour may still get alienated rather than normalised. This happens by not addressing Shaun's *reasons* which prompt him to not simply accept the second doctor's stance and therein his authority but focusing on his *difference* in reaction to what is implied to be socially expected. Additionally, Shaun's seeming disregard for authority in combination with all the other aspects that mould Shaun Murphy's character likely plays into the stereotype introduced by Hans Asperger.

The scene proceeds with Shaun disclosing his apparent in-depth medicinal knowledge, as he tells the second doctor that he is killing the injured by the measures he applies (00:00:03:31-00:00:03:37, Shore, 2022). It becomes apparent that the older doctor takes offence. The latter makes a snappy response by saying, “I think I know enough of Anatomy 101 to know where the jugular vein is” (00:00:03:37-00:00:03:40, Shore, 2022). Shaun, however, evokes emotions in the bystanders, possibly oscillating between admiration and bewilderment.

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:03:31, Shore, 2022)

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:03:37, Shore, 2022)

Thereafter, Shaun simply takes things into his own hands – quite literally – by taking over in the quest to save the injured boy’s life while everyone around him is visibly and audibly in awe of his knowledge and, arguably, of his confidence. While the older doctor seems to gradually let go of his bruised pride, he also starts to become baffled by Shaun’s actions.

However, Murphy does encounter difficulties during his heroic progress. The fact that he appears to neither grasp social cues nor rules gets him in trouble. One can see Shaun asking a security employee or police officer (the distinction does not become entirely clear) whether they would hand him a sharp knife because of a medical emergency. That employee denies the request because of public safety concerns. Following this, Shaun ignores his authority, grabs a Stanley knife anyway and wanders off with it. When he gets caught, he gets pushed to the ground and almost handcuffed until the injured boy’s mother explains to the police or security personnel that Shaun is indeed trying to save her child’s life.

This sequence addresses a topic of sensitive nature, and that is police violence towards autistic people. Studies suggest that autistic individuals are more likely to be "misperceived as suspicious or as failing to comply with instructions" (Calton & Hall, 2022, p. 276) by police personnel, as psychology scholars Sophia Calton and Guy Hall point out (Calton & Hall, 2022, p. 276; Crane et al., 2016, pp. 2028-2041). Additionally, autistics are supposedly more frequently targeted and stopped by police without having committed an offence (Calton & Hall, 2022, p. 287; Rava et al., 2017, pp. 340-346). This may likely stem from law enforcement predominantly not being trained when it comes to autism (Calton & Hall, 2022, p. 276; Chown, 2010, pp. 256–273; Modell et al., 2008, pp. 183-189).

However, not all autistic demographics are at the same risk of police violence (Hutson et al., 2022, p. 1). "Law enforcement contact disparities are a present problem impacting the Black community" (Davenport et al., 2023, p. 1385), according to a recent study conducted by psychology scholar Mattina Davenport and colleagues that came out in 2023 (Davenport et al., 2023, p. 1385; McLeod et al., 2020, pp. 10-27). Cases such as the murder of 15-year-old, Black autistic teenager Ryan Gainer lend particular weight to such claims. Gainer was holding a gardening tool in the form of a stick over his head which prompted the officer to shoot at the teenager within only five seconds of seeing him (Levin, 2024, p. 1). Autistic scholar Devon Price discloses the testimony of African American autistic writer and researcher Timotheus Gordon Junior (*Timotheus Gordon Jr*, n.d.) in his book "Unmasking Autism" (Price, 2022). Therein, Timotheus Gordon Junior states that if he were to walk around the neighbourhood and fidget with toys, he fears police might think of him as strange or doing something illegal which could get him beaten up, arrested, or killed (Price, 2022, p. 28).

Circling back to EP1SE1 of The Good Doctor with the previous observations about police violence in mind, I would like to invite the reader to a thought experiment: Imagine if the main protagonist of The Good Doctor were not a white man but a Black one. What would that do to the narrative and the urgency of the scene that just unfolded? If one believes that it would differ from the one displayed, this would underline the sensitivity of the issue when it comes to the marginalisation of autistic people who are not white.

Even though protagonist Shaun encounters challenges during his heroic acts, he seems to make something almost unimaginable possible, in the end. He improvises and executes a surgical procedure on the injured boy with tools at hand and, thereby, saves his life after all. A huge round of applause from those witnessing the scene follows.

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:14:25, Shore, 2022)

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:14:32, Shore, 2022)

The episode proceeds by showing Shaun reluctantly receiving hugs from multiple people present. Through these interactions a few more layers get added to the rather stereotypical display of autism embodied by the character Shaun Murphy.

Overall, the preceding scene seems to alienate Shaun in several ways. This is achieved by, for instance, highlighting Shaun’s extraordinary actions as well as the attempt to simulate his autistic, sensory experience by filmic means. While the latter likely intends to create empathy, it exacerbates a lacuna between the non-autistic and the autistic experience. Additionally, Shaun’s stimming behaviour may also be judged as awkward, considering that stimming has been highly stigmatised to this day (Mathur et al., 2024, p. 477; Kapp et al., 2019, pp. 1782-1792). Similarly, Shaun’s disregard for authority does not get put into a wider context and therefore fails to outline Shaun’s motivations. Likewise, the instance in which the protagonist gets misperceived and mistreated by police highlights the violence happening to him because of his *autistic* behaviour. By extension, this does not accelerate familiarity but rather the protagonist’s alienation and his similarity to the autistic stereotype coined by Hans Asperger.

6.2.2.4. The Conference Room

The series' narrative continues in a conference. A board of medical professionals is gathered, sitting around a large table. The head of the surgical department – Dr. Marcus Andrews – opens the debate that is about to unfold by reciting from a glossary, "Autism. A mental condition characterised by difficulty in communicating and using language and abstract concepts. That is the definition. Does it sound like I am describing a surgeon?" (00:04:30-00:04:43, Shore, 2022). The source of the aforementioned definition presented by Dr. Andrews remains unknown, however.

Video-Still "The Good Doctor" EP1SE1 (00:04:34, Shore, 2022)

Although autism is, in fact, listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of *Mental* Disorders (DSM-5), it has become controversial to view autism as a mental condition, as has been outlined in chapter "4.2. The Autism Spectrum and the Social Model of Disability". But even in medical discourse, definitions of autism differ from the one used in this scene of The Good Doctor. According to the NHS, for instance, to be autistic means that "your brain works in a different way" (*What is autism?*, 2022). The National Institute of Mental Health defines "[a]utism spectrum disorder" as "a neurological and

developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave" (*Autism Spectrum Disorder*, 2024).

Since The Good Doctor aired in 2017 for the first time, one may think that the definition of autism provided by Dr. Andrews might have been different at that point in time. Certainly, awareness around the discourse of viewing autism as a variant in neurocognitive functioning was more sparce, however, it was not non-existent. Nick Walker, for instance, concluded as early as in 2014 that autism was "a genetically-based human neurological variant" (Walker, 2014, p. 11). Another article published in November 2000 by the journal "Neuron" states that "[a]utism is a neurodevelopmental syndrome" (Lord et al., 2000, p. 355). The reasons why framing autism as a "mental condition" can be viewed as epistemically problematic in various respects shall be discussed in depth at a later point in this thesis. As for now, one can at least account for the following: The definition of autism being drawn within EP1 might, on the most basic level, distort the viewers' understanding of such significantly.

Following this, Dr. Aaron Glassman has his take. The latter advocates for Shaun, encouraging the board to agree to hire Dr. Murphy as a surgeon. Glassman needs to justify his decision, however. He starts his defence by saying, "He [Shaun] is not Rain Man. He is high-functioning. He is capable of living on his own, capable of managing his own affairs" (00:04:43-00:04:50, Shore, 2022). At this point another autistic stereotype and filmic character gets used as a negative counterexample compared to Shaun, and that is Rain Man. The former, however, was based on a real-life persona, namely Kim Peek, who was also considered a savant, ironically (Perina, 2012, p. 1).

It becomes more and more apparent that Shaun's professional abilities or credentials have not gotten any attention thus far. In fact, one argument is quite prominently put forward for not wanting to hire the autistic surgeon, and that is his autism diagnosis. Additionally, another board member supports the doubts whether someone with an autism diagnosis could be a fit surgeon.

Thereupon, Aaron Glassman continues by explaining how long he has known Shaun and describes him to be “an extraordinary young man” (00:05:55-00:05:58, Shore, 2022) and that he “has autism, but he also has savant syndrome, genius-level skills in several areas. He has almost perfect recall. He has spatial intelligence. And he sees things and analyses things in ways that are just remarkable. In ways that we can’t even begin to understand. Those are assets” (00:05:58-00:06:19, Shore, 2022). Dr. Andrews speaks up, “A surgeon needs to communicate, not just information, but sympathy, empathy. Can Dr. Shaun Murphy do that?” (00:21:36-00:21:45, Shore, 2022). The underlying assumption behind the posed question is, yet again, a rather stereotypical assumption, namely that an autistic person lacks empathy (Turkington & Annan, 2007, p. 8; see chapter “5.2.5. Characteristics of a Stereotype).

The dispute between Andrews and Glassman continues. The former poses the question why no other equally qualified people – who do not have Shaun’s “issues” – were given the position. Glassman responds by assuring the board that Murphy’s qualifications *and* his difference are the exact reasons why they should hire him and argues, convincingly, that the hospital also did not hire Black doctors or female doctors in the past. In bringing such an argument forward, Glassman not only, for the first time, mentions Murphy’s qualifications, but also addresses other marginalised groups’ history of being discriminated against and the unjust treatment such have endured while subtly reminding the viewer of the multitudes of marginalisation. Dr. Andrews, however, is not convinced. Another point of discussion becomes the question of what patients of the hospital might think about the “image” of the hospital when an autistic surgeon gets hired. Then a long angle shot ensues. Glassman makes an emotional statement. He raises his voice and exclaims that if the hospital gave Shaun a chance this would act as a signal to other people with “limitations” to realise that those limitations “are not what they think they are” and that “they do have a shot” (00:22:52-00:22:59, Shore, 2022).

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:22:48, Shore, 2022)

While Glassman’s enthusiasm, arguably, aims to empower autistic people, the formulation used for prompting autistic people’s equity gets reduced to their limitations, or rather, *reframing* such limitations as assets. This could insinuate that the solution to equity would be the erasure of limitations within the autistic person by not getting rid of them, but by simply re-naming or re-framing them as assets without considering the structural parameters that would need to change for some limitations to potentially turn into advantages. In any case, the term “asset” itself could imply “usefulness”. Within that logic, limitations should be *made* useful when, realistically, some limitations are not prone to be of any usefulness and cannot be (magically) turned into such. For instance, no matter the accommodations, some autistics may always get overwhelmed by things like the fluorescent lights in a room or by the sound of birds. Notably, the unfolding narrative may implicitly and subtly link autistic people’s worthiness to their level of “functioning” or “usefulness”.

Despite Dr. Glassman's efforts to convince the board of Shaun's "worth", the board declines the appointment of Shaun as a surgeon. However, that decision gets overturned swiftly when the board members find out through social media that Shaun saved the life of a severely injured boy at the San Jose airport. Now that Shaun's heroic act is not only evident but is also publicly and therefore widely known, it can be used in favour of the hospital's reputation. From that moment on, Shaun does not seem like such a bad choice anymore. By extension, what seems particularly striking is how much Shaun seems to need to prove his worth to be granted a fair chance. His qualifications – which hardly got any mention – do not suffice, the recommendation of another qualified doctor who also acts as the president of the hospital does not help either. It appears as if a higher standard is demanded from the autistic person who only then is seen as "worthy" when performing "extraordinarily".

To conclude, the preceding sequence plays into stereotypes and Shaun's alienation. Firstly, an outdated definition of autism is provided by Dr. Andrews, describing autism as a mental condition. Secondly, Shaun's positionality as a savant yet again gets instrumentalised for the sake of compensating for his autism which is connotated as negative. Thirdly, Dr. Glassman's message of reframing Shaun's limitations as assets obscures not only the structural changes necessary to provide equity to autistic people but also skews the fact that certain limitations cannot be turned into assets, no matter the accommodations and the shifts in mindsets. At last, Shaun is only then deemed "worthy" when his heroic actions can get used by the hospital in order to polish their public image.

6.2.2.5. Childhood Throwback: Family Life

The scene opens with a childhood memory of Shaun. It starts by displaying Shaun gently holding and stroking a bunny while rocking back and forth in an attempt to soothe himself.

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:15:48, Shore, 2022)

Almost identical to the trailer-sequence, one becomes witness to the violence Shaun had to endure within his family home. Murphy’s parents can be heard arguing in the background about the fact that their son got thrown out of the third school he attended. The father expects Shaun to “act like a normal human being” (00:15:49-00:15:51, Shore, 2022). Shaun’s brother counters, “he doesn’t know how” (00:15:51-00:15:52, Shore, 2022).

Shaun’s behaviour not only gets stigmatised by his father’s comment, but also by his brother’s. This is done in several ways. Firstly, the concept of what is defined as desirable “normal behaviour” – and which social consequences the display of such behaviour would entail – remains unquestioned. Thus, autism continues to not get normalised. Secondly, the terminology used implies that Shaun simply doesn’t *know*

how. Steve's statement disavows that an autistic person might not *be able* to act differently, depending on the context and their level of support needs. However, said context does not get revealed to the viewer who, hence, is left to speculate on the reasons why Shaun's behaviour supposedly got him kicked out of school. Was he, for instance, violent to others? If so, could that have been prevented in case his needs were met? Or was he simply stimming by rocking back and forth or fidgeting, for instance, and was therefore judged as inattentive or disruptive?

What perseveres is that the viewer can observe in great detail how Shaun gets physically and verbally abused for "not being normal". The younger sibling, Steve, tries to jump in and protect Shaun from further violence. On top of all that, Shaun's pet-bunny gets ripped out of his grip and thrown across the room by his father. This leaves Shaun non-speaking and in shock. Similarly to the trailer, exorbitantly strong emphasis is put on the abusive dynamic within the family. Shaun's autism is framed as the source of dysfunction: It is shown to be the root of why he experiences violence as well as the root of worry experienced by his brother and his mother. Shaun's autism is surely displayed as the source of multiple forms of "suffering" within the family: His own, his brother's, his mother's.

Thereupon, Shaun and Steve are shown visiting a doctor's office since Shaun's bunny died at the hands of their father. In desperate attempts to save the bunny's life, the brothers seek help and encounter Dr. Glassman in a healthcare facility. Glassman confirms the bunny as dead and emphatically suggests the two boys to grant their furry friend a nice funeral.

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:20:53, Shore, 2022)

Teenage-Shaun can be watched crying in distress. He asks, “Has he gone to heaven?” (00:20:54-00:20:56, Shore, 2022). Glassman responds encouragingly which turns Shaun even more sorrowful. The later-to-be-surgeon exclaims, “No, I don’t want him to go to heaven! I want him to be here!” (00:21:03-00:21:03, Shore, 2022) This moment challenges the previously made assumption that Shaun lacks empathy. Nuance gets added to his character by showing that Shaun does, in fact, care deeply.

The scene continues with his brother reacting sympathetically likewise. He tries to encourage Shaun by telling him that the two of them won’t return to their dysfunctional home. Steve asserts that the two brothers have each other. “That’s all we need” (00:21:24-00:21:26, Shore, 2022), says the younger brother while Dr. Glassman observes the two boys with compassion. Shaun holds his deceased bunny closely to his chest as he leaves the doctor’s room together with his brother Steve. Here, the viewer may be able to discern some multifacetedness of Shaun. At the very least, this particular sequence shows that the autistic protagonist cares deeply.

With regard to being autistic and fostering close relationships with animal companions, I feel prompted to add a personal stance. Surely, I cannot speak for other autistic individuals, but from my perspective, I was able to empathise with that representation provided in the series, because of my experiences with other non-human species which I highly benefited from, arguably because I did not need to worry about saying the wrong thing, or to be anxious about the animal acting inauthentically towards me, contrary to human interactions. That is not to say that I find human-to-human friendships to be less valuable. It simply means that the hierarchy that seems to exist in my social and cultural surroundings defines certain friendships to be more valuable than others based on which species the counterpart belongs to and that never really made much sense to me. However, I might not be alone in this experience. Some findings suggest that autistic people benefit from the incorporation of animals in their life and therapy sessions (O'Haire et al., 2013, pp. 1-10). However, some of those studies do provide quite contradictory results, presumably due to lack of methodological accuracy (Sissons et al., 2022, pp.1320-1340; Nieforth et al., 2021, pp. 255-280). Hence, the previous stance remains a personal one.

Simultaneously, one could also argue that Shaun Murphy's connection to his bunny may get judged as odd by the non-autistic viewer since the latter may rely on concepts rooted in values based on neurotypicality. The latter may be more prone to connote human-to-human relationships as "more valid". Since The Good Doctor seemingly relies on the medical model of disability – by linguistically, narratively and thus both visually and audibly pathologizing autism – this particular scene may likewise encourage viewers to see the autistic protagonist as *different*.

At this point it seems necessary to address the possible instrumentalisation of interspecies friendships when looked at them through a non-autistic standpoint. For autistics specifically, to foster close relationships with animals seems to be "an often discussed aspect of autistic people's experiences" (Monroe, 2019, p. 89), according to scholar Hannah Monroe (Monroe, 2019, pp. 89-100). However, autism research has historically used such autistic experiences to de-humanise, objectify, stigmatise and label autistics as "sub-human" (Botha & Cage, 2022, p. 1; Botha & Cage, 2022, p. 18). Even the well-known representatives of the autistic community Temple Grandin

conducted research on the question whether autistic savants have more similarities to animals in thinking and perceiving than to other humans (Grandin, 2002, pp. 241-248). Generally, it seems that “[a]utistic people have been compared to non-human animals and described as less domesticated than non-autistic people, described as lacking in agency, rationality, epistemic authority, the ability to form community or share culture” (Botha & Cage, 2022, pp. 3-4) in order to de-humanize them, according to psychology scholars Monique Botha and Eilidh Cage. Rather than simply accepting and appreciating interspecies friendships and their potential, focus seemingly got laid upon the effort to find *similarity* in perception which, arguably, could be used to pathologizes such friendships.

In brief, the preceding scene once again foregrounds Shaun’s positionality as a victim and, thereby, hardens his alienation by portraying the young version of Murphy as the source of his family’s dysfunction. However, one stereotypical assumption about the notion of autism coined by Hans Asperger – namely stipulating that autistic people lack empathy – is challenged by highlighting Shaun’s deep bond with his pet bunny. However, it remains unclear whether the portrayal of their interspecies friendship also contributes to the protagonist’s alienation.

6.2.2.6. Arrival at the Hospital

The scene introduces the viewer to the emergency drive to St. Jose Hospital transporting the boy who got injured at the airport (00:16:28, Shore, 2022). The ambulance harbours several people including the injured, his parents, Shaun, and a paramedic. On their way, Shaun lets the paramedic know that he *must* go to the aforementioned hospital specifically. He does not seem to do so because of concern for the injured patient, but because he is supposed to have a job interview there. Some viewers might interpret his behaviour as insensitive or egocentric considering that the context codes this as a rather stereotypical trait according to Asperger’s coinage of autism.

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:16:31, Shore, 2022)

Be that as it may, the scene in the ambulance continues by Dr. Murphy discerning a pattern: The ECG of the injured boy changes suddenly which prompts Shaun to provide the paramedic with that information. However, that evokes irritation on the paramedic’s side who states matter-of-factly that the ECG did not change. That dispute starts to spread worry among the parents of the injured. However, Shaun’s claim turns out to be truthful upon arrival at the hospital.

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:16:45, Shore, 2022)

What seems to stand out at this point is that Dr. Murphy is hardly believed almost by default. He seems to be misunderstood frequently. Thereby, the series thematises an issue many autistics seem to encounter. In this regard, a recent study by Aieshea L. Banks, Karen J. Mainess, Heather Javaherian, and Misaki N. Natsuaki determined “five major themes” (Banks et al., 2024, p. 1628) that their autistic participants identified as challenging. One of them was feeling to be “very misunderstood” (Banks et al., 2024, p. 1628) because of their communication style and social behaviour (Banks et al., 2024, p. 1628). Other studies show quite similar outcomes too (Crompton et al., 2021, pp. 1-8; Wilson et al., 2023, pp. 1-15).

Upon arrival at the hospital, Dr. Claire Browne – a surgeon – takes over the injured’s case of emergency (00:18:14, Shore, 2022). Still, Dr. Murphy tries to explain to her that the boy is in urgent need of an echocardiogram. He does so by speaking in a mumbling tone while insisting that he is, in fact, a doctor. Claire eyes Shaun suspiciously, supposedly because of his mannerism. The former demands for him to stay where he is. Dr. Browne insists that the heart of the young patient is fine. However, Murphy continues

to repeatedly object which finally leads Dr. Browne to draw a line: She tells him to stay put or otherwise she will get him removed from the building.

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 – Dr. Browne (00:18:40, Shore, 2022)

Arguably, Dr. Browne challenges Dr. Murphy not only because she thinks that she is in the right, but also because she finds Dr. Murphy’s behaviour odd and, hence, renders his testimony unreliable. This does not hinder Shaun to put truthfulness above authority. He can be seen trying to run after the patient in order to continue saving his life. Shaun’s insistence and his weirdness – as it gets referred to – are the reasons why he gets removed from the building. However, he stays tenacious by checking every entrance for a possible way inside the hospital. Security stays ahead of Shaun each time, nonetheless.

Dr. Claire Browne, in the meantime, performs surgery on the injured boy. She witnesses her superior Dr. Melendez confirming what Shaun already correctly ascertained: The patients ECG does show inconsistencies. Through conversation it finally comes to light that “the weird guy” already deciphered a pattern before the other doctors and medical professionals did. That label of “the weird guy”, however, has made people not believe Shaun’s testimony. People underestimate Shaun in his abilities because of his “weird

behaviour" which is used, arguably, as an equivalent for "autistic behaviour". In like fashion, this scene coincides with the argument installed in the foregoing paragraph, namely that autistic people frequently seem to get misunderstood and judged prematurely because of the way they act and communicate.

All in all, more complexity was gradually added to Shaun's character. Nonetheless, a substantial number of stereotypical ideas about autism got accentuated. Most notably, Shaun is portrayed as potentially untrustworthy because of his behaviour and mannerisms.

6.2.2.7. Shaun's Speech

Contrary to the content of the previously analysed sequences that unfolded in the conference room, Shaun does finally get a chance to speak for himself to the board and outline the reasons which lead him to wanting to become a doctor. Initially, the board seems to react sceptically to Shaun's appearance, since the latter takes his time in answering questions, for instance. Therein, the occurring moments of silence seem to irritate everyone present, everyone but Shaun.

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:35:59, Shore, 2022)

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:35:04, Shore, 2022)

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:36:09, Shore, 2022)

Video-Still “The Good Doctor” EP1SE1 (00:36:10, Shore, 2022)

The scene cross fades to yet another sequence displaying a childhood memory of Shaun's. It reveals how his younger brother Steve died accidently and tragically while the two boys were playing together with friends in what seems to be an abandoned warehouse. Thereafter, the viewer gets taken back to the conference room in which Shaun begins making his statement, accompanied by melancholic music. He says,

> *"The day that the rain smelled like ice cream, my bunny went to heaven in front of my eyes. The day that the copper pipes in the old building smelled like burnt food, my brother went to heaven in front of my eyes. I couldn't save them. It's sad. Neither one had the chance to become an adult. They should have become adults. They should have had children of their own and loved those children. And I want to make that possible for other people. [Pause] And I want to make a lot of money so that I can have a television" (*00:17:56-00:19:13, Shore, 2022).

Shaun gives testimony on how he became witness to two deaths that have impacted him greatly. Dr. Murphy does so in a poetic way as he juxtaposes a personal, sensory memory of smell with the incidents of death and, therein, takes the listener within the narrative as well as the viewer outside that narrative, to varying extends, back to the atmosphere of the times and dates his brother and his bunny, respectively, passed away. Shaun's statements are orchestrated as authentic.

By outlining the protagonist's feelings of helplessness when these incidents of death happened, he also speaks about what he would have wished for his bunny as well as his brother if they were still alive. There may be lingering presumed emotional or social connotations regarding which incidence of death is supposed to be experienced as *more* tragic or sorrowful. Shaun, however, does not seem to draw that differentiation. To Shaun, both deaths – that of his pet and that of his brother – equally left emotional marks on him. In fact, Shaun implicitly equates the worth of two species, namely that of Oryctolagus cuniculus and that of Homo sapiens. By extension, one may argue that he highlights the preciousness of every lifeform. Through his speech it is made explicitly clear that those experiences of loss became the catalyst for Shaun's intentions to make the world a better place. Arguably, his remarks show signs of emotional depth and thus counterpose the stereotypical imagery of autism coined by Hans Asperger. Shaun's

whole character and, therein, his autism grow to be more nuanced. Finally, humour also comes into the picture by Shaun making the blunt remark of wanting to earn a lot of money as a surgeon in order to be able to buy a television, which leaves board members smiling yet impressed by Shaun's honest testimony. Finally, Shaun's statement convinced the board to, subsequently, hire him as a surgeon.

Through this sequence, the viewer gets the chance to delve into a more multifaceted display of autism portrayed by the fictional character Shaun Murphy. For instance, this is done by adding nuance to how stereotypical autistic traits, such as bluntness, can appear diversely.

6.2.2.8. Key Findings

The preceding analysis of sequences of The Good Doctor's first episode of season one tried to examine whether oppressive themes – such as those already introduced by the analysis of the series' trailer for which the stereotypical image of autism according to Hans Asperger, alienation and victimisation would be examples of – occurred since those could harden marginalisation of autistic people since media representations are such a vital epistemic resource to people in learning about autism. Thus, an overview of the main findings becomes salient.

- Instrumentalisation

  There are instances of instrumentalisation/weaponisation which also work to alienate the protagonist, Shaun Murphy. This is done in several ways, one of which is executed by, for instance, establishing a differentiation between two seemingly separate aspects of Shaun's personality – his autism and his genius level skills – while simultaneously framing one of these as detrimental and one as heroic. Thereby, the protagonist's diagnosis gets instrumentalised to make a value judgement about his character.

  The series seems to convey, at large, that the fictional autistic character only then is deemed "worthy" or "equally worthy" to his non-autistic counterparts when he can overcome his limitations which singularly his autism is framed to be the cause

of. Additionally, him being “high-functioning” and being “able to live on his own” highlight the underlying idea that there is an unspoken threshold of “normal” that is considered aspirational. This framing not only reinforces the concept of an ideal state of being which is labelled as “the norm,” but also sets an expectation onto autistic people, namely, to compensate for their so-called limitations with exceptional “genius-level-skills”. This could make one wonder: What about all the autistic people who do not have genius-level-skills, or who do not fit into the functioning label embodied by Shaun Murphy? The aforementioned implications seem to reflect misanthropic ideas rooted in the historic background of an autism stereotype coined by Hans Asperger during the Nazi regime. Therein, an autistic person was labelled “high-functioning” when they were seen as *somehow* worthy to society. In short, matters of weaponisation and instrumentalisation of autism came explicitly forth through the analysis. However, in occasional instances, Shaun’s characterisation did gain more nuance and counterposed some stereotypical assumptions about autism.

- <u>Victimisation</u>

  Another way the character Shaun Murphy gets alienated is through the process of victimisation. His identity is built upon the label of being a victim of bullying as well as a victim of a myriad of forms of violence. As has been revealed through the analysis, many autistic people do become victims of violence and bullying during their life. The series, possibly, has emphasised the brutality of violence and the latter’s aftermath to induce compassion for the autistic protagonist. Certainly, the verbal and physical as well as structural violence Shaun Murphy endures gets exorbitantly highlighted and explicitly shown. However, the acts of violence were *aestheticised* and *desensitized* by their over-simplification. This hints at the series being produced for a non-autistic viewer, rather than an autistic one. At times, it almost seems like Shaun Murphy’s entire identity gets reduced to traumatic experiences or to his counterposing heroic acts which may not only lead viewers to see autistic people as victims by default but also may induce pity rather than compassion.

- Attempt to Reconstruct Shaun's Autistic Experience

  Shaun's alienation also seems to get upheld by the attempt to reconstruct his autistic sensory experience. However, this may lead to a skewed assumption on the viewer's end, namely that they are able to empathise with autistic people because they become witness of an enacted attempt in reconstructing a singular yet fictional autistic experience. Thereby, the viewer may be misled to believe that they now know something about *being* autistic.

- Autism as Mental Condition

  Another factor that works oppressively is that autism is not portrayed as an innate variant of neurocognitive functioning, but rather as a mental condition that can and should be overcome. The latter definition does not only reinforce the medical model of disability, but it also states something as fact that would, arguably, be viewed as questionable even within the medical model of disability since, in medical terms, autism is described as a neurodevelopmental disorder. By referring to autism as a mental condition, however, one unwittingly insinuates that it can or should be treated or cured.

- Alienation

  Overall, with regard to Shaun Murphy's alienation which goes hand in hand with instances of instrumentalisation and victimisation, it can be said that the protagonist gets depicted as *different* from everyone around him which more likely than not frames the protagonist as *unrelatable* to the viewer.

6.2.2.9. Allistic Gaze

After summarising the outcomes of the preceding examination, I would like to find new terminology and, therein, issue a concept that is, most generally, inspired by Laura Mulvey's notion of the "male gaze" (Mulvey, 1975, pp. 903-816) which, overall, can be defined as the way film evolved through a phallocentric order/patriarchal structure and, thereby, came with representations and ways of seeing and looking that would objectify women for the voyeuristic pleasures of men which, consequently, works oppressively (Mulvey, 1975, pp. 803-816). The Male Gaze ingrains patriarchal structures within its presentation, such as the male subject being depicted as active, the female object as passive. Interestingly, Mulvey coins said term by using psychoanalysis as her heuristic. Therefore, she examines oppressive visual mechanisms of patriarchy by using one of its tools. Mulvey writes,

> *"There is an obvious interest in this analysis for feminists, a beauty in its exact rendering of the frustration experienced under the phallocentric order. It gets us nearer to the roots of our oppression, it brings an articulation of the problem closer, it faces us with the ultimate challenge: how to fight the unconscious structured like a language […] while still caught within the language of the patriarchy."* (Mulvey, 1975, p. 804)

Surely, even if appreciating Mulvey's sharp observations, not only ways of seeing have changed/evolved, but also the dynamics of oppression. Intersectionality, for instance, has become prominent in helping to grasp the multifacetedness of marginalization, discrimination and other forms of oppression (Watson-Singleton et al., 2024, pp. 34-43; Mallipeddi & VanDaalen, 2022, pp. 281-289; Saxe, 2017, pp. 1-27; Carbado et al., 2013, pp. 303-312).

Thus, Mulvey's male gaze is used as a mere matrix for the coinage of a concept that explicitly tackles the oppressive ways of watching and depicting exerted on autistic people. Despite its definition being formulated to help addressing oppressive ways of visual representation, it will most likely not grasp all the possible interweaving oppressive mechanism at work. This means that even by aiming to find language, a

descriptive term may imply a closed conceptual system which, in practice, it is not. Simply by looking at ways of marginalization and oppression many factors come into play, such as one's neurotype, one's gender, class and race, for instance. Having stated this, I would like to define the term "Allistic Gaze" as such:

> *The Allistic Gaze relies on ways of seeing, looking at, depicting and representing autistic people through the lens of a non-autistic standpoint. It objectifies people by rendering them as "less than" within the framework of neurotypicality and its ensuing concepts, values and structures which, overall, foreclose autistic people of being able to fully participate in and shape said concepts, values and structures. The Allistic Gaze works oppressively, especially onto autistics who are multiply marginalised by their gender, race, sexual orientation, class, disability or other factors. Therein, the Allistic Gaze works in various and diverse ways. It may objectify autistic people for the sake of laughter, inspiration for the non-autistic viewer or as a source to reinforce the presupposed superiority of the state of being non-autistic. It may alienate the autistic subject within the narrative to other characters and/or to the consumer by positioning the autistic subject as clearly "other" (e.g. through highlighting the lack of certain abilities compared to non-autistic standards or by foregrounding their extraordinary abilities). In short, the Allistic Gaze objectifies and/or alienates the autistic subject for the entertainment of a non-autistic viewer.*

In brief, the preceding analysis of parts of the series The Good Doctor brings forth a predominance of what I would like to refer to as an Allistic Gaze. Although some analysed parts of the first episode of season one showed nuance when it comes to the moulding of the autistic character Shaun Murphy, others relied predominantly on the established autistic stereotype introduced by Hans Asperger and on other oppressive mechanisms such as victimisation or weaponisation.

6.2.3. The Good Doctor - Epistemic Exploration & Future Outlook

The preceding conclusions were not made to prove that autistic people like the fictional character Shaun Murphy do not exist, albeit tried to foreground that media representations have a major educational and, hence, epistemic effect. Shaun Murphy represents a social group at large, and these are *autistic* people. The way in which autistic characters are moulded influences the audience's ideas on autism and, therein, potentially oppressive ideas ingrained within a media's narrative would be reinforced on the viewers end too.

Notably, media depictions may not only influence how consumers think about autism, but also how they react to or treat autistic people as a consequence. Arguably, those who are part of the more marginalised autistic groups have been affected the most by the majority of media representations thus far which seem to have stereotyped autistic people, according to multiple scholars (Mittmann et al., 2023a, pp. 8008–8017; S. C. Jones et al., 2023, pp. 2205–2217; Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021, pp. 470–479; Sheffer, 2020, pp. 245-248; Draaisma, 2009, pp. 1475-1480).

The repetition and reproduction of stereotypes and other oppressive notions further accelerate the already marginalised status of autistic genderqueers or women, BIPOC and autistics who are disadvantaged economically, for instance. Scholarly endeavours have found that these groups experience profoundly intersectional discrimination and stigmatisation (Yau et al., 2023, pp. 1-15; Davis et al., 2022, pp. 306-314; Maroney & Horne, 2022, p. 2; Hillier et al., 2019, pp. 98-110). When trying to tackle the issue of oppressive mechanisms affecting marginalised autistic people, an intersectional approach thus seems inevitable (Saxe, 2017, pp. 1-27). For this reason, I would like to establish a discussion that goes further *beyond* the level of a particular media's narrative but incorporates its socio-cultural context by deploying the concept of epistemic injustice as a heuristic. The main question is: How do oppressive ideas reflected in media representations possibly affect autistic people?

In order to find answers to that question, one major issue needs to be kept in mind: Marginalised autistic people are already largely not being taken seriously and not being believed because of their marginalised status that stems from society's projection of stereotypes and prejudice (Haar et al., 2024, pp. 1-14; Catala et al., 2021, p. 9018). Autistic people have been exposed to "many, mutually reinforcing types of epistemic injustice", according to philosophy professor Amandine Catala and colleagues (Catala et al., 2021, p. 9035). This entails, for instance, societal expectations for autistics to change their behaviour according to standards associated with neurotypicality (Haar et al., 2024, p. 6) or medical professionals relying on outdated or one specific set of hermeneutical resources (National Autistic Society, n.d.) that makes them disavow autistic testimony. This can also come in the face of patronizing behaviours towards autistic people (Chapman & Carel, 2022, p. 13) rooted in "neurotypical ignorance", a term introduced by Robert Chapman and Havi Carel (Chapman & Carel, 2022, p. 13). Regardless, epistemic injustice issues have been so persistent that they got internalised by autistic people too, apparently. According to health scientist Laura Foran Lewis, potential barriers to seeking a diagnosis for some autistic people are the "fear of not being believed" as well as a "mistrust in healthcare professionals" (Lewis, 2017, p. 2416).

When it comes to The Good Doctor as an epistemic resource it must be noted that – although the series may challenge some stereotypical ideas about autism – it nonetheless relies heavily on dynamics rooted in an Allistic Gaze.

In fact, I would argue that the creators of The Good Doctor likely contribute to cases of contributory injustice. According to Kristie Dotson, this form of epistemic injustice involves the situated ignorance of an agent, wilful hermeneutical ignorance and the use of structurally biased hermeneutical resources resulting in epistemic harm done to other knowers (Dotson, 2012, pp. 25-41). In the next paragraphs I will delineate why that seems to be the case when it comes to the representation of autism through The Good Doctor.

First and foremost, although there is no single concrete agent and no single concrete target when it comes to the producer vs. consumer dichotomy, there is still a circulation of epistemic resources happening: There are biased resources being used and then distributed through media representation. The film production *creates* an epistemic resource. This creation is done with the help of financial resources and through the exchange of intellectual resources provided by a substantial number of people. The financial resources also aid in the acquisition of epistemic resources, such as information on autism. They also bring a number of people and their intellectual properties together in order to create a film, an epistemic resource. Their interactions in the process of creation consist of exchanges of epistemic resources. The latter come together, mingle together. The production still, however, creates an outcome that reproduces a stereotypical representation of autism.

Thus, I may argue that the production displayed wilful hermeneutical ignorance, situated ignorance as well as used biased hermeneutical resources. There is a high likelihood that those agents involved simply used epistemic resources that aligned with their own ways of making sense of the world, and that did not particularly challenge them. There would have been several alternating resources available, such as online forums or blogs frequented and created by autistic people who do not fit the stereotypical image reproduced by The Good Doctor. However, the production *chose* to rely on an already dominant narrative regarding autism and, therein, a particularly narrow set of biased hermeneutical resources.

But how does the production harm (autistic) agents by their representation of autism? Notably, there are recipients who use the film as an epistemic resource. In this case, a media consumer receives information about autism and is likely to use that information when forming opinions about autistic people. Those opinions constitute the grounds for how future interactions between agents take place. In other words, viewers learn through media representation about autism, form opinions on autism based on what they see and, by extension, treat autistic people accordingly. In short, if people think of autistic people as inferior, they will likely treat them as inferior.

As has been established, media consumers could rely on one or more biased sets of resources, draw assumptions from them and then project those assumptions on autistic people. If viewers likewise neither question the epistemic resources they consume, nor consider the set of hermeneutical resources used by autistic people they encounter, they would also contribute to epistemic injustice. Arguably, the simple act of dismissing stances that do not coincide with one's own beliefs *a priori* and projecting one's own ideas and ideals onto others – even if there were no "objective" or "reliable" counter-resources available compelling one's own conclusions – is epistemically unjust. Even if a testimony has no available resource to prove it to be true or valid, that does not automatically make it any less true or valid, as examples of hermeneutical injustices revealed in the chapter "4.3.2. Hermeneutical Injustice". In fact, even concepts such as "objectivity" have proven to be products of androcentrism which has been shown by feminist scholars and sociologists such as Nina Degele, Brück Brigitte, Heike Kahlert, Marianne Krüll, Helga Milz, Astrid Osterland and Ingeborg Wegehaupt-Schneider (Degele, 2008, p. 37; Brück et al., 1997, pp. 20-26). Therefore, even allegedly so-called "objective sources" must come under examination of potential underlying bias.

Additionally, when autistics are judged based on one or more sets of prejudiced beliefs, they may also be left *feeling* inferior due to having their set of hermeneutical resources get dismissed *by default*. In case they aired their emotions and, again, got encountered with hardened preconceptions, were met with doubt or the dismissal of their emotions, this case would, in fact, account for "emotional injustice" (Pismenny et al., 2024, p. 151) which can have epistemic implications – but not necessarily – according to philosophy scholars Arina Pismenny, Gen Eickers and Jesse Prinz. The aforementioned scholars state that "[e]motional injustice occurs when the treatment of emotions is unjust, or emotions are used to treat people unjustly" (Pismenny et al., 2024, p. 154).

As for The Good Doctor's production's context, there are also further epistemic issues at hand that have not yet been discussed. Two aspects appear especially prominent. Firstly, there were no openly, and knowingly autistic people involved in the writing or the production of the series (Kurchak, 2024, p. 1). This circumstance plays into a dynamic that, thus far, has worked to oppress autistic people by excluding their testimony from knowledge production (Haar et al., 2024, p. 7; Botha, 2021, pp. 1-12; Milton, 2014, pp.

1-14) although only autistic perspectives can give insight on the experience of *being* autistic (Thompson-Hodgetts, 2022, p. 1) – even if "autistics" can also not be defined as one homogenous group. In that regard, also notions of "valid expertise and research" have been weaponized to devalue autistic testimony (Botha, 2021, p. 1; Milton, 2014, pp. 3-4). Secondly, the actor Freddie Highmore – who embodies Shaun Murphy – is not autistic himself (Kurchak, 2024, p. 1). That circumstance creates what scholar Theodoto Ressa would refer to as a "false identity" (Ressa, 2021, pp. 18-19). The latter is defined as actors trying to reproduce a state of being they themselves cannot and have not experienced and, hence, are not able to authentically empathise with (Ressa, 2021, pp. 18-19). Thus, the fact that knowingly autistic people were not partaking in the production of the series constitutes an epistemic injustice issue. In fact, Jack Elliott McIntosh asserts that the lack of autistic people involved in production teams leads to a "construction of autistic subjectivity from an outsider perspective" that "created a fictional version of the condition that has embedded itself into the public consciousness, propagating gross misunderstandings about autistic people" (McIntosh, 2024, p. 3).

How can we collectively and individually try to tackle the previously identified epistemic issues? In trying to hinder further marginalisation and epistemic injustice it will be necessary not only to implement varieties of autistic representation, but also to enforce a profound paradigm change that integrates and values autistic testimony when it comes to knowledge production.

Therefore, regarding media depictions, I would suggest – on the most basic level – that autistic people not only need to be incorporated in the writing process but should also get hired as actors as well as production team members. This would also go hand in hand with an already formulated suggestion within a study conducted by psychology scholar Stian Orm (Orm et al., 2023, pp. 1-7). Therein, recommendations have been listed that should help improve autism representations in TV-series and movies. Notably, those formulations were developed by autistic people. Some recommendations formulated were to appoint "autistic writers" (Orm et al., 2023, p. 3) and make "autism incidental and not central to the plot" (Orm et al., 2023, p. 3) as well as "casting autistic actors" (Orm et al., 2023, p. 3).

To be able to represent autistic people in a way that works to hinder epistemic harm, crew and cast need to be educated on oppressive dynamics autistics have been subjected to thus far. By extension, said education should be gained from more than one autistic perspective to do an intersectional approach justice. Multiple autistic voices of different races, classes and/or genders, in turn, provide singular insights into the multifaceted nature of forms of oppression. One also should not be blinded by the idea that academic credentials necessarily equal fundamental knowledge about the *experience* of oppression, especially considering that academia is – more often than not – either inaccessible or discriminatory towards those marginalised groups who are predominantly affected by oppressive forces. This is a circumstance that has been proven on multiple accounts by various feminist scholars and activists such as by Sara Ahmed and Miki Kendall who both lay focus on the intersectional nature of discrimination. They also expose the ways in which current societal structures and institutions – like universities – are built that make it easy to discriminate against marginalised people in particular (Ahmed, 2021, pp. 1-359; Kendall, 2020, pp. 1-267). In all, it will be necessary to integrate various autistic testimonies into the whole production process of film and media.

Since the inclusion of autistic voices in film and media productions that aim to represent autistics is inevitable, it will be equally obligatory to make sure that the means for them to access certain spaces and places are provided. When working with autistic people, one also needs to make sure that their *individual* needs are met by default. Room needs to be *made for* autistic people to be able to openly communicate their needs while already being met with accommodations that make the aforementioned prompt even possible. This would also mean that non-autistic colleagues must be held accountable for following certain rules that accommodate autistic colleagues, such as not automatically switching on lights in a room, but asking whether doing so would hinder someone from accessing the shared space equally.

It must be highlighted how easy it is for a media consumer or producer to unknowingly contribute to epistemic injustice that affects marginalised autistics. Therefore, consumers of media representations of autistics, or of any other marginalised group in fact, are advised to seek further and diverse information about the represented

marginalised group in question. Media producers may highly benefit from using multiple sets of hermeneutical resources when creating media representations of particular social groups.

Overall, in case one encounters an autistic person, they may limit instances of epistemic injustice through refraining from automatically making assumptions about autistics but *ask* them about their experiences. It will be of utmost importance, overall, to question one's own internalised prejudice and adjust one's reaction accordingly.

6.3. Example: TV Series "Love on the Spectrum"

The preceding chapter of this thesis dealt with an example of a fictional autism media representation. Conversely, the subsequent one aims to scrutinise a documentary series named Love on the Spectrum Australia (LOTS AUS for short), which started off as an Australian reality TV show but is also available on Netflix (*Netflix Series Love on the Spectrum Australia*, 2021; *Love on the Spectrum*, 2019; Northern Pictures & ABC Publicity, 2019). In like fashion, the following chapter aims to detect and discuss whether and how the autism stereotype coined by Hans Asperger gets reinforced, or whether and how other oppressive mechanisms, such as the presence of an Allistic Gaze, get deployed. Therein, I will make some presumptions about how non-autistic people or autistic people – who may have internalised normative standards of neurotypicality – could interpret certain sequences.

The reason I feel confident to draw conclusions about possible assessments rooted in neurotypicality and normativity is that I have been confronted with (internalised) presuppositions rooted in prejudice towards autistic people. Although my interpretations may seem suggestive to some, they still are valuable in this context, considering that autistic testimony has been deemed as not *as valuable* when applying and upholding a concept of what "true" or "valid" knowledge is (Botha, 2021, p. 1; Miton, 2014, pp. 3-4). The chapter closes with a summary of its key findings intertwined with the explorations of epistemic issues at hand. In order to do so successfully, information about the production's context, as well as its reception by the general public and the autistic

community at large, will be helpful. The following paragraphs will be dedicated to just that.

The romantic comedy series LOTS AUS aired on Netflix in July 2020. It showcases autistic adults – mostly in their twenties and thirties – while exploring dating and romantic love (MacCary, 2024, p. 1; Ryalls, 2023, pp. 150-162). In total, Northern Pictures as well as ZigZag Post produced two seasons for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (Kulick, 2024, p. 309). Those two seasons totalled 11 episodes, each lasting around 40 minutes. Cian O'Clery, an Australian filmmaker, directed the series.

LOTS AUS proved to be an international success, leading it to receive the International Emmy Award for Non-Scripted Entertainment in 2022 (Love on the spectrum, n.d.; Love on the spectrum, n.d. b; *Cian O'Clery (Australia) Series Producer / Director Northern Pictures*, n.d.; *Netflix Series Love on the Spectrum Australia*, n.d.).

Thereupon, the production company Northern Pictures coupled with The Werk Howse to produce an US equivalent (*Love on the Spectrum USA*, n.d.) called Love on the Spectrum USA (LOTS US for short). Again, two seasons were produced totalling 13 episodes. The format and aesthetic remained relatively the same as in its Australian predecessor. As with the Australian original, Netflix acted as distributor and Cian O'Clery as director (Love on the Spectrum USA, n.d.; *Netflix Series Love on the Spectrum*, n.d.; Love on the Spectrum, 2019).

LOTS, overall, received positive reception from the general public as well as from the autistic community. Autistic writer and poet Alex Creece stresses the show's "good intentions and charming participants" (Creece, 2020, p. 1). According to CNN's senior writer AJ Willingham, the show became "the most visible program" when it comes to getting to know "real autistic adults" (Willingham, 2024, p. 1). The psychiatrist Chelsea Cosner concurs. Cosner highlights that LOTS challenges autism stereotypes by showing "real autistic people" (Cosner, 2023, p. 22). Additionally, Rebecca Nicholson – writer for The Guardian and The Observer – praises the show not only for the insight and joy it offers, but also for the "wonderful, supportive and compassionate" nature of the autistic

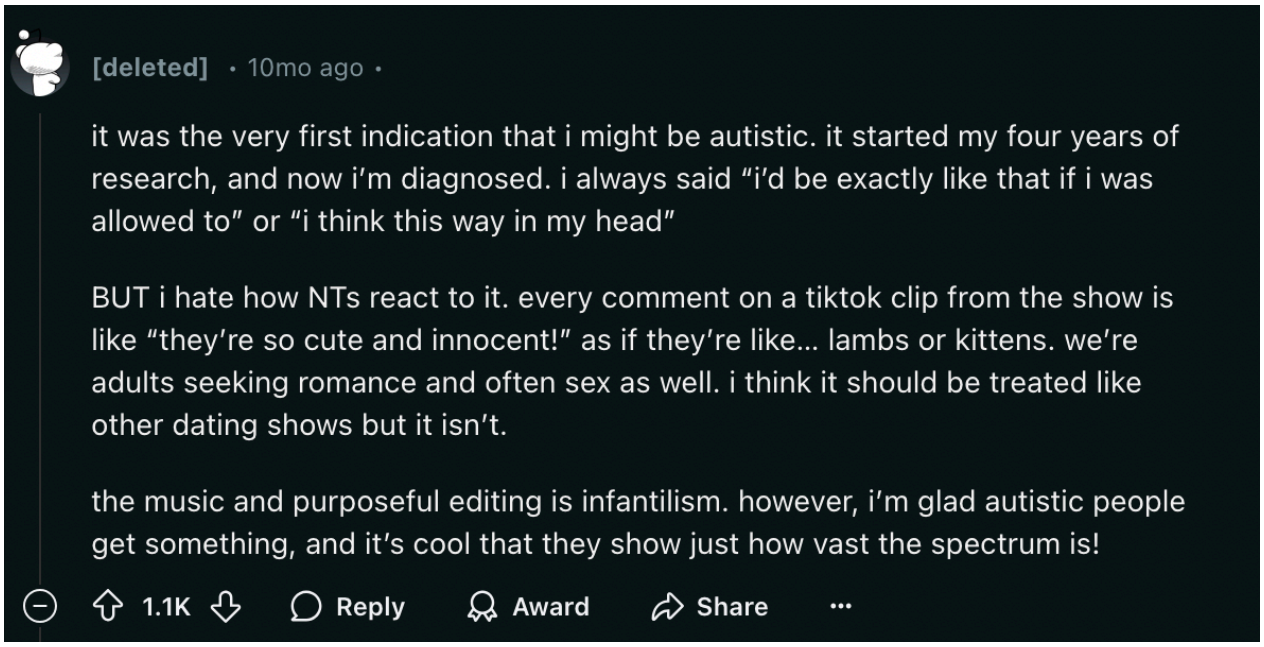
protagonists' parents who frequently appear in the show, while highlighting that LOTS busts the myth that autistic people "are happy not to date" (Nicholson, 2020, p. 1).

Nevertheless, the show did receive a fair amount of critical feedback, especially coming from the autistic community. Therein, several facets of LOTS received said criticism, one of which seems to be "the tone" of the show. It was perceived as condescending as well as infantilizing towards autistic people. Previously mentioned autistic writer Alex Creece asserts that the show seems to be made for a "neurotypical eye" (Creece, 2020, p. 1) by framing autistic experiences of "wins and losses" (Creece, 2020, p. 1) to seem cute and make them the source of laughter (Creece, 2020, p. 1). She stresses that the show emphasises labels such as "quirkiness" and "abnormality" attributed to autistic people (Creece, 2020, p. 1).

Another comment representative of critical autistic voices is that of a Reddit user on the #autism subreddit writing about LOTS US:

> *"While it's nice to see representation, some of the ways they portray people's behaviors and their likes and dislikes feel like they're playing into stereotypes of autistic people as being weird or childlike when they're not"* (Willingham, 2024, p. 1).

In fact, lively discourse seems to have emerged amongst autistic people and their allies in subreddits. Those discussions seem to revolve around emancipatory, but also around potential oppressive aspects of LOTS. Some testimonies on the subreddits such as r/AutismInWomen "Does Love on the Spectrum Bother Anyone Else?" (*r/AutismInWomen*, n.d.), r/LoveOnTheSpectrumShow "The trouble with love on the spectrum U.S" (*r/LoveOnTheSpectrumShow*, n.d.), r/aspergirls "Thoughts on Netflix's Love on the Spectrum?" (*r/aspergirls*, n.d.), or r/SpicyAutism "Love on the spectrum" (*r/SpicyAutism*, n.d.), may exemplify said assumption.

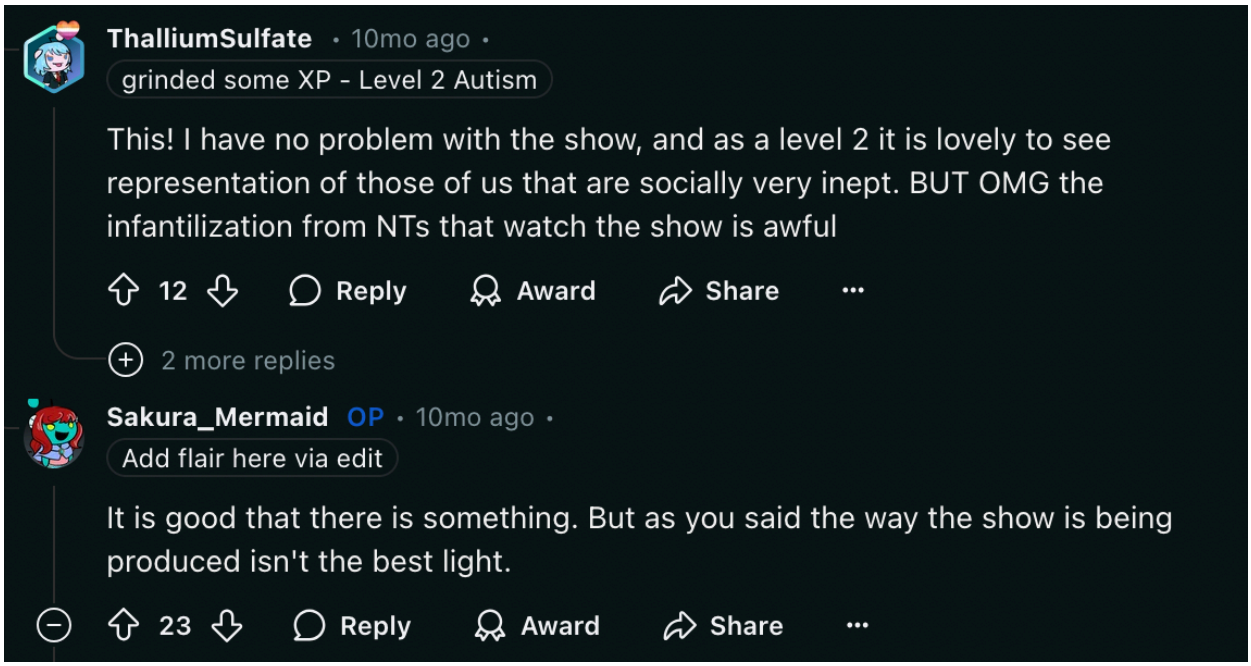


Statement by deleted user in r/AutismInWomen "Does Love on the Spectrum Bother Anyone Else?" (*r/AutismInWomen*, n.d.)

Statement by user "binzy90" in r/AutismInWomen "Does Love on the Spectrum Bother Anyone Else?" (*r/AutismInWomen*, n.d.)

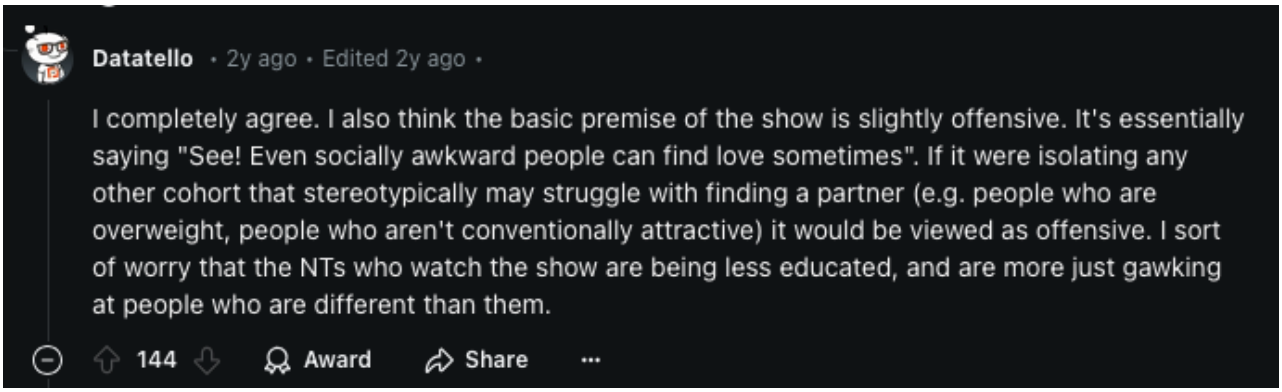
User [deleted] (*r/AutismInWomen*, n.d.) as well as binzy90 (*r/AutismInWomen*, n.d.) claim that LOTS turned out to be a steppingstone in their own realisation of being autistic. User [deleted] mentions sceptically the supposedly occurring infantilisation of autistic people which, arguably, gets particularly elevated by the usage of music and the

way the show is edited. Other Reddit users seem to agree with that assessment, as the following posts illustrate.

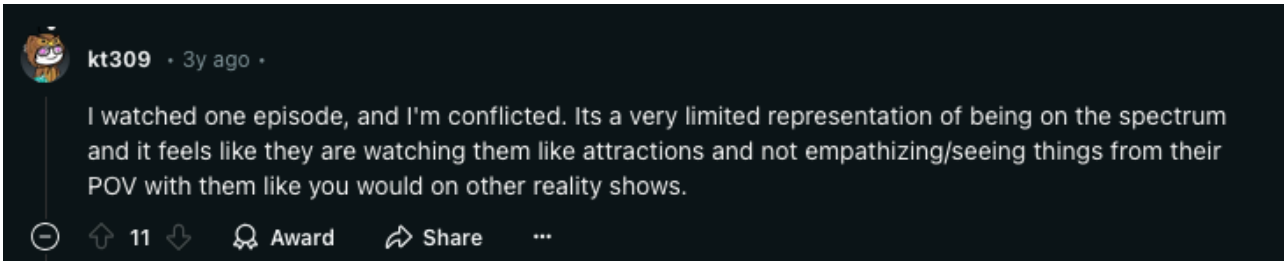


Statement by users “ThalliumSulfate” and “Sakura_Mermaid” in r/AutismInWomen “Does Love on the Spectrum Bother Anyone Else?” (*r/AutismInWomen*, n.d.)

Statement by user “Royalewithnaynays” in r/autism “what are your opinions on Love on the spectrum?” (*r/autism*, n.d.)



Statement by user “Datatello” in r/autism “what are your opinions on Love on the spectrum?” (*r/autism*, n.d.)



Statement by user “kt309” in r/aspergirls “Thoughts on Netflix’s Love on the Spectrum?” (*r/aspergirls*, n.d.)

Apart from the supposed infantilisation during the series LOTS, other aspects likewise received criticism. LOTS appears to encourage its autistic participants to try to act ‘more normal’ by making them “suppressing natural autistic tendencies” (Willingham, 2024, p. 1). In the article “As an autistic person, Netflix’s Love on the Spectrum is painful to watch” (Eloise, 2020) published in Cosmopolitan magazine, one learns that autistic writer Marianne Eloise agrees strongly with the suspicion that LOTS champions its protagonists to reach some degree of “normalcy”. The suspected endeavour of LOTS trying to imply that autistics are supposed to reach some level of “normalcy” would simultaneously lead to alienation of its protagonists which also gets pointed out by autistic writer and poet Alex Creece (Creece, 2020, p. 1).

This presumed alienation may manifest through the effort in trying to make autistic people act more “normal” whereby they get defined as distinctly “other”. Therein, the embodiment of “normal” is connoted as “desirable”, a belief that – as this thesis has already touched upon – has led to substantial suffering for autistic individuals. For instance, several studies suggest that a substantial amount of autistic people experience camouflaging their autistic traits to be extremely exhausting and stressful. Consequently, autistic masking leads to several serious mental health issues and even suicidality (Bradley et al., 2021, pp. 320-329; Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019, pp. 1899–1911; Pearson & Rose, 2021, pp. 52-60; Cleary et al., 2023, pp. 799-808).

The establishment of a “desirable state of normalcy” within the series would classify LOTS as so-called “inspiration porn” (Kulick, 2024, p. 310; Kulick, 2024, p. 325; Creece, 2020, p. 1; Haller & Preston, 2016, pp. 1-16) which also goes hand in hand with the previously coined term Allistic Gaze. Disability activist Stelly Young came up with the expression Inspiration Porn in order to describe the objectification of disabled lives for the benefit or inspiration of non-disabled people (Kulick, 2024, p. 310; Kulick, 2024, p. 325; Haller & Preston, 2016, pp. 1-16). Inspiration Porn can be categorised as stories/images depicting struggles of disabled people in striving to become “normal”. According to scholars Beth Haller and Jeffrey Preston, those narratives are handled as “celebrations of human strength and promises of human resilience” (Haller & Preston, 2016, p. 1) and, as a result, objectify disabled people to inspire non-disabled ones (Haller & Preston, 2016, p. 1).

Overall, the show reminded autistic journalist Marianne Eloise of how people see autistic people as “other” by highlighting their differences (Eloise, 2020, p. 1). Alex Creece agrees by stating that LOTS alienates autistic people and appears to be created solely for the entertainment of “non-disabled viewers” (Creece, 2020, p. 1).

The previously listed observations show that LOTS has evoked positive reactions especially among the general public by applauding the visibility LOTS gives to autistic people, the participants’ authenticity, the protagonists’ parents’ positionality within the show as well as the insight and joy viewers supposedly gain from watching it – which

may already hint at LOTS classifying as “inspiration porn” or being made through and for an Allistic Gaze.

Some autistic voices do appreciate the authenticity of the protagonists, the representation the show provides as well as the fact that some discovered their own autistic identity through the show. However, LOTS also induced ambiguous opinions particularly within the autistic community. Critical aspects seem to be the potential infantilisation of autistic people, which is suspected to be the product of the show’s editing as well as its usage of music, the alienation of autistics as well as the introduction of some degree of desirable “normalcy”.

With the conclusions of the previous chapters in mind as well as considering LOTS’s public reception, one may seek to explore the show’s director’s intentions in order to contextualise the possible presence of oppressively working notions being reproduced. In an article published in Variety and written by Julia MacCary, director Cian O’Clery maintains that he has always “wanted to make something in the dating space that featured real people” (MacCary, 2024, p. 1). Moreover, he asserts that he wanted to contribute to *more* visibility of autistic people while showing the diversity of the autistic spectrum as both have seemed to be lacking in media. The film crew on set reputedly tried to adapt to each autistic individual’s needs, such as making the set as “low-key as possible”, using smaller cameras, or hiding crew members in corners (Nicholson, 2020, p. 1).

Regarding sensitivity training when it comes to the show and its production members the director states – at least for the LOTS US version which followed the AUS version – that there were “several neurodiverse crew members” and a “permanent autism consultant” (Nicholson, 2020, p. 1) by the name of Dr. Kerry Magro who is autistic himself. In all, the director states to be proud of the series because it “escapes the Hollywood pattern of featuring just one autistic character in a series cast” (Nicholson, 2020, p. 1). By his own account, Cian O’Clery generally is “attracted to projects that have something to say, while remembering who they are for: the audience” (*Cian O’Clery (Australia) Series Producer / Director Northern Pictures*, n.d.).

6.3.1. Media Analysis - LOTS AUS SE1EP1

Media analysis will help in deciphering whether and how autistic stereotypes and other oppressive notions may or may not be reproduced through Love on the Spectrum AUS. Therein, the following questions are of particular interest, considering the previously revealed findings on the series' production context and the public reaction to the series.

Does LOTS infantilise its autistic protagonists? What role does the protagonists' parents' testimony play in the series? Does the series create a desired state of normalcy which the participants are encouraged to aspire to? Does LOTS enable an Allistic Gaze and, therein, objectify autistic people? If so, how? As subjects of analysis will serve selected parts of the first episode of season one of Love on the Spectrum Australia (LOTS AUS SE1EP1 for short).

6.3.1.1. Trailer/Opening Sequence

The trailer of LOTS AUS SE1EP1 (O'Clery, 2022) introduces its main cast both visually and audibly. It starts off by director Cian breaking the fourth wall through, asking questions directed at the protagonists who are placed individually right in the centre of the picture frame. The director himself discloses his own physical appearance.

The first question O'Clery directs at the autistic protagonists is, "What do you think love is?" Subsequently, several cast members of the show's first season – but not all of them – are shown one after another while answering said question. Naturally, the protagonists' responses turn out to be diverse.

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Kelvin (00:00:11, O'Clery, 2022)

Kelvin, the protagonist who appears first on screen, concludes that, "It [love] will be like a fairytale" (00:00:11-00:00:13, O'Clery, 2022), whereas Olivia states, "A natural high, I suppose?" (00:00:14-00:00:15, O'Clery, 2022).

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Olivia (00:00:13, O'Clery, 2022)

Cast member Mark assures, “Gets your heart racing” while Maddi declares, “Can make people do crazy things” and, lastly, Michael claims, “You just feel very warm inside yourself as a person” (00:00:15-00:00:23, O’Clery, 2022).

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Mark (00:00:15, O’Clery, 2022)

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Maddie (00:00:16, O’Clery, 2022)

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Michael (00:00:21, O'Clery, 2022)

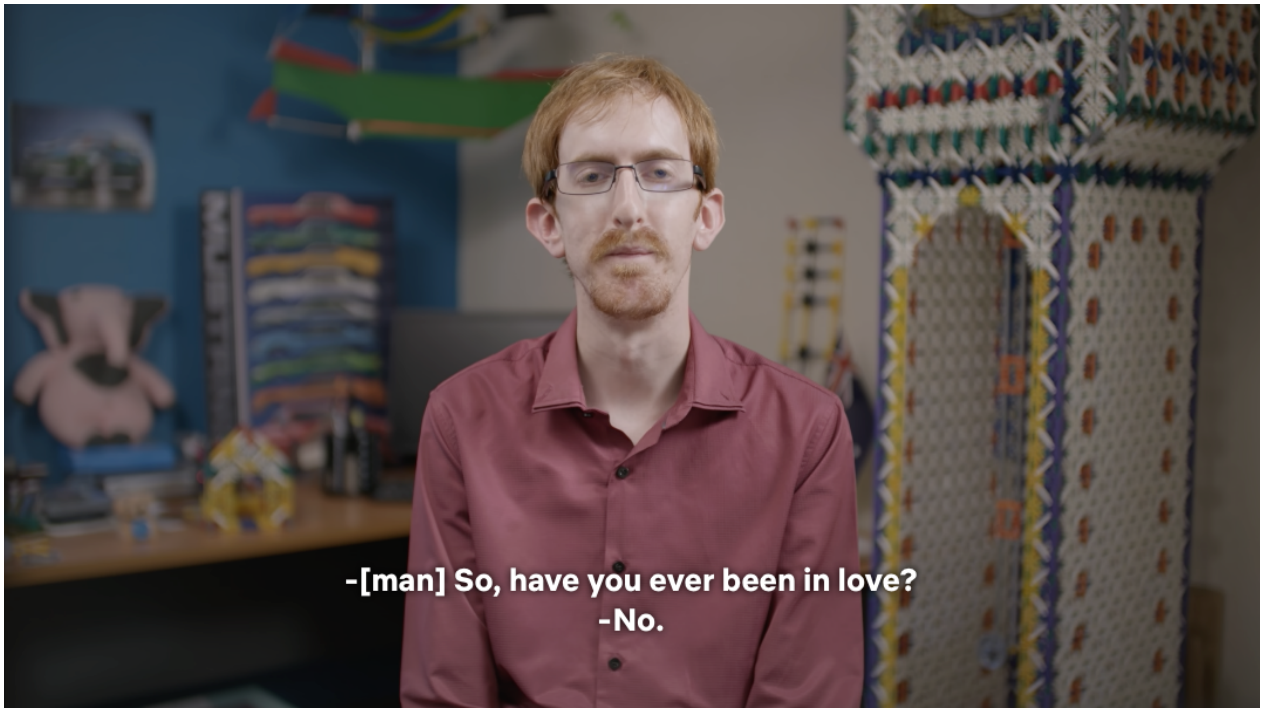
This brief introductory sequence might already evoke a humorous impression. One may ask oneself whether and how humour is constituted, and whether that happens at the expense of the protagonists. One indicator for that might be that the cast's presented answers are extracted from a greater context in which the question of what "love" means to them was raised and, therein, possibly gets instrumentalised. In any case, what seems to happen is that the cast gets interrupted by the editorial cut which leads to their answers appearing to be especially short in length when, in fact, they might have been more elaborated.

Prompting the chosen question itself could work to support the cast's alienation through positioning them as "other" because of the way they answered and how those answers are depicted. Generally speaking, questions such as "What does love mean to you?", or "What does sadness mean to you?" are used for autism diagnostic purposes in teenagers and adults by the means of the ADOS-2 modules three or four (a diagnostic interview scheme) which, inherently, aims to detect the *difference* in reaction and behaviour compared to allistic people on the assessed one's end (*What is the ADOS Observation?*, n.d.; *Ados 2 Module 3 Cheat Sheet*, n.d.; Gupts et al., 2024, pp. 1-16; Chaidi et al., 2020, p. 94; Losh & Capps, 2006, p. 809).

Thus, exploring the question whether LOTS makes fun *of* its protagonists or has fun *with* them could help in deciphering whether humour is used as means to objectify the protagonists. In fact, Don Kulick – a queer theorist, linguist and anthropologist – precedingly endeavoured to analyse the thin line between the possibility of laughing with or laughing at the protagonists of LOTS (Kulick, 2024, pp. 307-308). In his work, he affirms that said delicate line is impossible to avoid. The reason for that is rooted in – again – a historical background tracing back to “comic stereotypes of western culture” at the expense of disabled bodies, according to disability researcher, sociologist and bioethicist Tom Shakespeare (Kulick, 2024, p. 307; Shakespeare, 1999, p. 48).

With some of Kulick’s observations in mind, the following analysis tries to shine light on the question of whether LOTS AUS enables objectification through an Allistic Gaze that would render the series’ protagonists objects of laughter.

The first few moments of LOTS AUS continue by director Cian – who is positioned behind the camera – asking multiple questions. In this case, his query is directed at one protagonist only, namely Andrew. Cian asks, “So, have you ever been in love?”, whereupon Andrew answers, “No”.

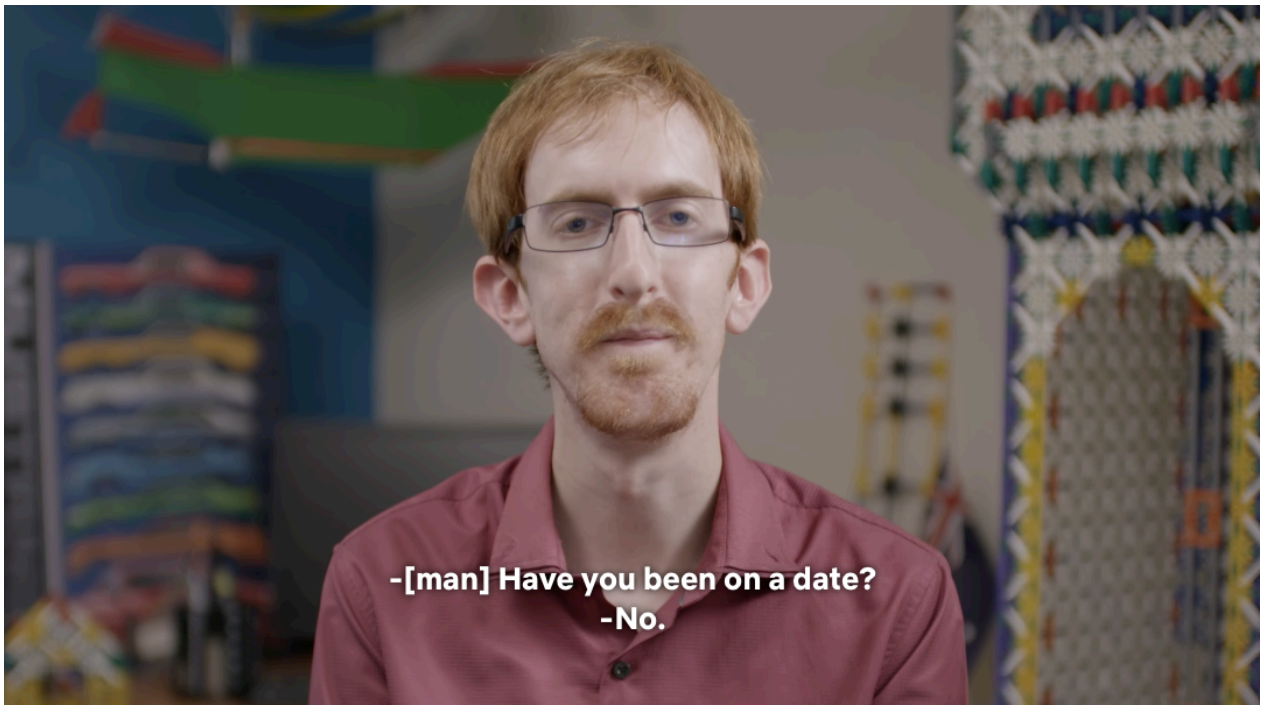


Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Andrew (00:00:25, O’Clery, 2022).

The director continues by posing yet another question, “Have you been in a relationship?”, while the camera angle turns narrower, thus appearing to get closer to Andrew. The latter, again, answers “No”.

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Andrew (00:00:25, O’Clery, 2022).

O’Clery continues, “Have you been on a date?” In like fashion, the camera angle narrows, whereby it discloses even more of Andrew’s face whose answer is again “No”.



Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Andrew (00:00:27, O'Clery, 2022).

The repetitive questioning, the filmic frame turning narrower gradually and, therein, revealing more of Andrew in combination with the protagonist's repeated negative response ("No") – first and foremost – likely introduce *lack*: The filmmakers underscore Andrew's *lack* of experience with so-called "romantic love".

By highlighting and exposing that Andrew has not experienced romantic relationships, this sequence could evoke pity not only by means of editing, but also through the constitution of a premise, and that would be a level of normalcy that gets co-defined with the heteronormative concept of love. This may work towards positioning the autistic participants as distinctly "different" or "other". What does seem to stand out is alienation, rather than familiarity and relatability. At the very least, the sequence purposely highlights that Andrew has not been in love or in a relationship yet. Whether this short introductory sequence already foreshadows a more ingrained pattern of objectification is yet to be found out.

As the opening sequence of LOTS AUS goes on, a female voice – which acts as a narrator – becomes audible. The narrator says,

> *"Finding love can be hard for anyone. And for some people, it can feel like an impossible dream. This series follows young adults on the autism spectrum as they navigate the confusing world of relationships and dating"* (00:00:29-00:00:54, O'Clery, 2022).

This tool "commonly equated with a 'Voice of God'" (Wolfe, 1997, p. 149), according to Charles Wolfe, is one associated with the "'classical' documentary of the 1930s and 1940s" (Wolfe, 1997, p. 149). Arguably, it is not only "disembodied" (Wolfe, 1997, p. 149), but through its commentary on what the viewer can *already see* it holds "a position of absolute mastery and knowledge outside of the spatial and temporal boundaries of the social world the film depicts" (Wolfe, 1997, p. 149). In the 1950s and 1960s, as Wolfe asserts, that off-voice-commentary got widely dismissed because of its "authoritarian" (Wolfe, 1997, p. 149) and "didactic" (Wolfe, 1997, p. 149) character. However, this is not the off-voice's only connotation. Especially in essay film, a voice-over works to support the essay's poetic nature (Warner, 2011, pp. 91-95; Rascaroli, 2008, pp. 24-47).

In the case of LOTS AUS, the voice-over arguably works in a didactic manner – not only because of its omni-present nature providing commentary *on* the protagonist, but also because of its content since the statement "Finding love can be hard for anyone", for instance, would have sufficed on its own. Notably, I would like to draw attention to the added assertion which is, "for *some* people it can feel like an impossible dream". The latter phrase implies that finding love can feel like an impossible dream specifically to *autistic* people. An imaginative conclusion is set in place by showing autistic people visually who then become representative of the audibly mentioned "some people". At the very least, semantically there would have been variables. For instance, the phrase "To those people in the series finding love feels like an impossible dream" were a statement describing the cast's personal experience – if that was their personal experience.

Furthermore, the off-voice could also be interpreted as a substitute for the filmmakers, being their voice in the narrative. If so, the uttered assertion would subtly imply that the filmmakers may seek to appear as if they could make the proposed impossible possible. This would then match Alex Creece suspicion that LOTS "plays into the typical power dynamic wherein non-autistic people frame our narratives, produce our interactions, and act as our mentors" (Creece, 2020, p. 1). In short, LOTS establishes that finding "love" – regardless of its forms of expressions or definitions – gets *looked at* or *spoken of* as something presumably unreachable for autistic people, yet it is set to be a desirable goal which hints towards the introduction of a degree of normalcy as well as an Allistic Gaze.

Yet another aspect gets introduced by the commentary of the off-voice which likely plays into the protagonists' alienation. It is the adjective "confusing" that is used to describe the presumably autistic "world of relationships and dating" which inherently allocates a specific ascription to the experience that it refers to. One may counterargue that the statement, "this series follows young adults on the autism spectrum as they navigate the confusing world of relationships and dating", simply constitutes a general statement which would just equally apply to non-autistic people. When looking at the sentence on its own, this seems probable. However, when circling back and bringing the historically constituted thin line between laughing with or at disabled people back into our vision's field, some issues appear to stand out.

Most importantly, although strategies of devaluation are common in reality TV shows overall (Johanssen, 2017, pp. 197-208), they cannot all be equated. Since autistic people have been an oppressed group, their modes of devaluation not only work distinctly, but – when applied – run the risk to exacerbate their marginalised status. British sociologist Damian Milton utilised the political theorist Iris Young's model of "the five faces of oppression" (Milton 2016, p. 1404; Young, 1990, pp. 91-104) to exemplify this. Thereby, he reveals that autistic people as a group have been economically exploited, left in feeling powerless, subjected to violence and been affected by cultural imperialism (Milton, 2016, p. 1404; Young, 1990, pp. 91-104). Here, I would like to draw special attention to the latter since it states that "[t]he process of cultural imperialism […] involves the establishment of a ruling-class ideology as the hegemonic norm" (Milton, 2016, p. 1404; Young, 1990, pp. 91-104).

The “hegemonic norm” (Milton, 2016, p. 1404; Young, 1990, pp. 91-104) works oppressively in various ways. Setting standards of “normal” bodies and minds and, therein, setting standards of “normal” behaviour too, enables the intersectional discrimination based on one’s neurotype, disability, gender, race or class (Watson-Singleton et al., 2024, pp. 34-42; Mallipeddi & VanDaalen, 2022, pp. 281-282). Thus, if one were to depict autistic or allistic people in the same manner, the *meaning* and *effect* attached to such representations could turn out to be fundamentally different.

Even when applying the hypothetical scenario in which no historically inherited oppressive connotations were ingrained in the representation of autistic people, one could still argue the following: Autistic people get their dating experience connoted as “confusing”. The usage of the adjective “confusing” to describe the protagonists’ dating experiences does not arise from their own testimony but is used by an external voice speaking for them and commenting *on* them.

Another set of instances that occur during the introductory scene seem to stick out when it comes to the early presence of an Allistic Gaze. For example, protagonist Kelvin is shown at his home saying, “Some girls don’t feel like dating with someone with disabilities” (00:00:38-00:00:42, O’Clery, 2022).

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Kelvin (00:00:39, O'Clery, 2022).

The subsequent imagery displays Kelvin holding an R2D2 plushie while revoicing R2D2 sounds ("Beep, beep, bi, boop") (00:00:40-00:00:43, O'Clery, 2022).

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Kelvin (00:00:41, O'Clery, 2022)

When Kelvin states that “Some girls don’t feel like dating someone with disabilities”, he addresses something which, arguably, constitutes a vital issue to many people with disabilities who aspire to date, as studies on disability stigma substantiate. The latter have shown that disabled people who are seeking romantic and/or sexual relationships encounter stigmatising assumptions during their quest (Zewude & Habtegiorgis, 2021, pp. 1-17; Esmail et al., 2010, pp. 1148-1155). In the scoping review titled “Autism and Online Dating” (Neumann et al., 2024, pp. 1-11) predoctoral research associate in psychology Matthias Neumann along with his colleagues Verena Steiner-Hofbauer and Gloria Mittmann reviewed studies conducted on autism and online dating specifically, as the latter presents itself as potentially more accessible to autistic people, according to the scholars. Therein, they reveal that existing studies on autism and dating are of “relatively low quality” (Neumann et al., 2024, p. 8) while highlighting the fact that research, up until the point of their findings, was mostly focused on male autistics, contrary to research on autistic women. In fact, they could not find any research at all when it comes to online dating and autistic people who define themselves beyond the binary scope of gender.

Current studies on autism and (online) dating may still provide a slight hint towards autism stigma being a major reason why people do not consider autistic people as potential dating partners, according to Neumann, Hofbauer, and Mittmann (Neumann et al., 2024, pp. 1-9). The scholars find that this is “especially concerning given that stigma towards autism remains pervasive” (Neumann et al., 2024, p. 8) which is a conclusion that would also go along with other findings on that subject (Han et al., 2022, pp. 12-26; Turnock et al., 2022, pp. 76-91). Apparently, some of that stigma is rooted in stereotypical media representations (Neumann et al., 2024, p. 1; Neumann et al., 2024, p. 8; S. C. Jones et al., 2023, pp. 2005-2217; S. C. Jones, 2022, pp. 1484-1501; Mittmann et al., 2023a, pp. 8008-8015). Neumann, Hofbauer, and Mittmann stress that “[s]uch media portrayals can lead to unrealistic expectations and increased stigma, which could then ultimately result in lower success rates for autistic individuals on dating apps” (Neumann et al., 2024, p. 8). This also highlights media representations’ great epistemic impacts. Either way, the previous findings support the assumption that Kelvin

addresses a vital issue concerning a societal prejudice which also seems to have been reinforced by media thus far.

Said disability issues raised by protagonist Kelvin do not get treated as critical within the series, nonetheless. When observing Kelvin holding a R2D2 toy and reenacting the sounds of the Star Wars character, viewers may interpret the protagonist's behaviour as childlike because of the production's decision to *see* and *frame* Kelvin's behaviour in a childlike manner: The stark contrast emerging through (or rather in-between) Kelvin's initial serious statement addressing a disability rights issue and the subsequent sequence showing him with a toy may work to devalue his testimony. In doing so, arguably, the editing turns the display of what is likely autistic stimming – a typically autistic self-regulatory behaviour (Kapp et al., 2019, pp. 1782-1790) – into behaviour that seems childlike. Framing the protagonist's behaviour as childlike functions as a response to his initial serious statement about an issue many people with disabilities face which, consequently, allows the viewer to not take the issue raised through Kelvin's testimony seriously.

To be seen as childlike and, hence, as undesirable has been a hardened stereotype and assumption that has rendered autistic people not only to be uninterested in romantic or sexual relationships, but also as non-capable of engaging in such, according to scholars Bennett Matthew, Amanda Webster, Emma Lynne Goodall and Susannah Rowland (Bennett et al., 2018, pp. 195-211). The latter claim that said misconception had been especially prevalent up until the 1970s (Bennett et al., 2018, pp. 195-211), constituting a theme that has led to misbeliefs about autistic people's sexual and/or romantic desires (Bennett et al., 2018, pp. 195-211). In fact, junior researcher Mario Concetta Lo Bosco validates that "discriminatory practises such as infantilization" (Lo Bosco, 2023, p. 1) play a major role in autistics having their "sexual desires" (Lo Bosco, 2023, p. 1) disregarded.

Another sequence that seemingly reinforces an Allistic Gaze is the one in which the viewer can observe Mark sitting on a park bench with his date Maddie (00:00:53-00:00:57, O'Clery, 2022). During this scene, he asks her whether she wants to get

married. Maddie's reaction is then on display. She tilts her head slightly away from Mark while uttering an "Uhm".

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Mark & Maddie (00:00:55, O'Clery, 2022)

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Mark & Maddie (00:00:56, O'Clery, 2022)

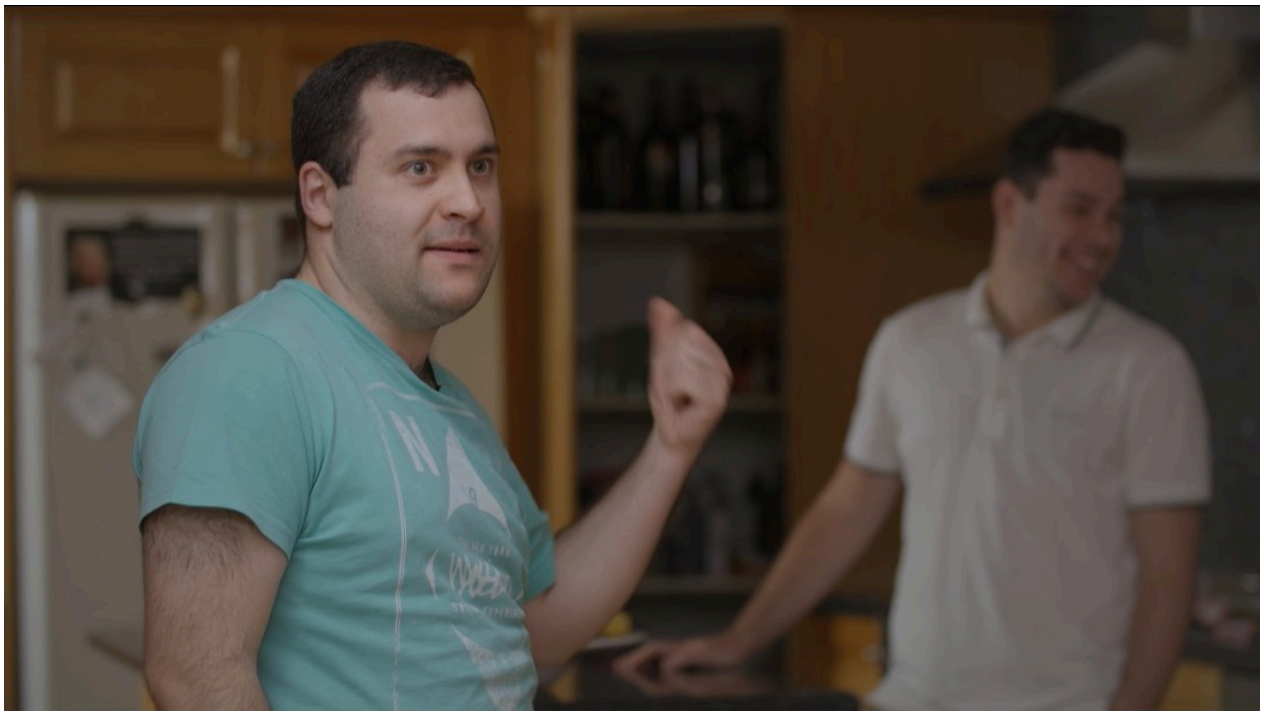
One is inclined to conclude that the raised question made Maddie uncomfortable. However, the scenario was taken out of its broader context to such an extent that its meaning got substantially altered. Mark did not ask Maddie specifically to marry him, as one may assume when watching this seemingly short interaction. As a matter of fact, the viewer can find out during the course of the series that Mark's question served as a general enquiry whether Maddie would consider getting married at some point in her life. The alteration of meaning not only makes the scene appear more sensational but also ascribes a new meaning to Mark's remark. The suspicion that the series may use means to sensationalise could also be mirrored in a statement that director Cian made on his intentions regarding the series. He claimed to be "attracted to projects that have something to say, while remembering who they are for: the audience" (*Cian O'Clery (Australia) Series Producer / Director Northern Pictures*, n.d.). Nonetheless, while trying to create a humorous reality TV show, punchlines seem to work at the expense of the protagonists.

Although I personally have great admiration for the protagonists, the modes of filmmaking discernible in the trailer seem to be rooted in an Allistic Gaze that objectifies autistic people by alienating them for the gain of non-autistic viewers. Further analysis may help to reveal additional instances of the previously identified discriminatory practises reflected in and by the series.

6.3.1.2. The Families & Objectification

What seems to be an elementary part of the construction of the filmic narrative in LOTS AUS is the testimony of some of the autistic protagonists' parents. Scholar Don Kulick highlights that the parents' positionality seemed to have evoked substantial critique by autistic viewers (Kulick, 2024, pp. 310-312). To stress this, he cites Marianne Eloise's article "As an autistic person, Love on the Spectrum is painful to watch" (Eloise, 2020) wherein the autistic author lays bare that LOTS's protagonists' "parents often speak for them or about them while they're there, as if they're invisible, laughing at the 'rude' things they say" (Eloise, 2020, p. 1; Kulick, 2024, p. 311) which prompts further exploration.

For instance, protagonist Michael's family gets introduced by the latter exhibiting what seems to be self-deprecating humour: Michael makes a remark directed at the filmmakers on set revealing that he often refers to his younger brother as a "fresh cut of meat from God" whereas he would see himself as "a double scoop of dog shit" (00:03:02-00:03:13, O'Clery, 2022).



Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Michael (00:03:08, O'Clery, 2022)

Thereupon, Michael's brother smilingly responds by saying, "Why on earth he wanted to compare himself to me, I don't know, but…" (00:03:14-00:03:17, O'Clery, 2022). Notably, Michael does not leave that question unanswered. He says, "It's because I have often felt inferior to my brother. Adam has been able to get himself into a relationship easily whereas I myself had trouble doing so" (00:03:17-00:03:25, O'Clery, 2022). If taken seriously, Michael's comparison to his brother could be a humorous, yet important indicator of self-esteem issues. A circumstance with which the autistic protagonist would not at all be alone.

Given the discriminatory and oppressive dynamics many autistic people are faced with, studies suggest that many autistics struggle with their self-esteem (Van der Cruijsen & Boyer, 2021, pp. 349–360; Cooper et al., 2017, pp. 1-155; Hofvander et al., 2009, pp. 1-9;). In fact, a study conducted in 2017 by psychology scholars Kate Cooper, Laura Smith and Ailsa Russell revealed that autistics showed an elevated occurrence of depression and anxiety compared to their non-autistic control group (Cooper et al., 2017, p. 18). Professor of psychology Will Mandy concurs by disclosing that "autistic people have a high chance of developing mental health problems" (Mandy, 2022, p. 289) during all stages of life and across all genders (Mandy, 2022, p. 289).

The reasons for autistics to develop poor mental health are multifaceted, but may not come as a surprise considering the intertwined forms of oppressive mechanisms autistic people face (D. R. Jones, 2023, pp. 1-151; Doyle et al., 2022, pp. 340-356; Mallipeddi & VanDaalen, 2022, pp. 281-289; Catala et al., 2021, p. 9035; D. R. Jones et al., 2020, pp. 1-27; Tabor, 2020, pp. 41-43; Saxe, 2017, pp. 1-27; Milton, 2016, pp. 1403-1407).

Rather than pathologizing autistic people, I would like to draw attention to those reasons *why* autistic people may be prone to struggling mentally.
First and foremost, it needs to be stressed once more emphatically at this point that autistic people – as a marginalised group – have been subjected to dehumanisation and prejudiced ideas (McIntosh, 2024, p. 1; Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2022, pp. 360-374; Cage, 2019, pp. 1373–1383) as well as to ostracization (Lam, 2024, pp. 2166-2169) and intersectional stigma and discrimination (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022, pp. 93-107; Doyle et al., 2022, pp. 340-354; Saxe, 2017, pp. 153-170). They supposedly also have a

higher probability to get bullied as children by peers and, generally, to be subjected to adverse childhood experiences (Hartley et al., 2023, pp. 2297-2315; Kaufmann, 2017, pp. 128-132). Moreover, they seem to have a substantially higher risk for experiencing child abuse (M. H. Fisher et al., 2018, pp. 1335–1340). In fact, a recent study suggests that sibling bullying appears to be especially "prevalent in the lives of autistic adolescents" (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023, p. 1533) which, ultimately, would also contribute to self-esteem issues (Deniz & Toseeb, 2023, p. 1533). Additionally, the lack of proper resources and services regarding autistic mental health (Mandy, 2022, p. 289; Ning et al., 2019, pp. 1-9) surely adds to the issue. Already back in 2001, the National Autistic Society reported that "[s]tatutory agencies are failing adults with autism and Asperger syndrome. The majority of individuals and their families are excluded from the care system. They are either ignored or discriminated against through rigid eligibility criteria, often established through ignorance of autism spectrum disorders" (Barnard et al., 2001, p. 7). Such rigidity may also be reflected in the diagnostic criteria of autism and/or in the interpretation thereof. Devon Price, autistic and trans scholar as well as psychologist, asserts in his book "Unmasking Autism" (Price, 2022) that autistic women, for instance, elude diagnosis for years simply because their experiences are taken less seriously. The same holds true for genderqueer autistics and BIPOC (Price, 2022, p. 8; Price, 2022, p. 35; Price, 2022, p. 53). Moreover, autistic people are likely to experience belittling (Lam, 2024, pp. 2167-2168), as well as be perceived to lack self-control or be child-like (Cage et al., 2019, p. 6).

Infantilisation particularly prohibits autistic testimony from being perceived as serious. Disability Studies scholar Sonja Freeman Loftis stresses that "[o]ne of the governing strands of the metanarrative of autism is the notion of eternal childhood (i.e. the erroneous belief that all autistic people are children or child-like)" (Loftis, 2021, p. 1) and that this very conception of perceiving autism as a "child-like condition" leads to "fake credibility to the authority that neurotypical adults frequently assume over their autistic counterparts" (Loftis, 2021, p. 1). I may add, that – personally – I would not see any reason as to why so-called "childlike" behaviour displayed in an adult would render their testimony in any way less credible. A society in which perceived childlike behaviours displayed by some of its members are directly linked to a value-judgement which

renders their truth and, therein, knowledge to be *less* valuable compared to others', enables its very members to also render some lives to be more valuable than others since "[p]ractises of knowing and being are not isolatable, but rather mutually implicated" (Barad, 2003, p. 829), according to Karen Barad.

The myriads of oppressive forces faced by autistics which also contribute to the development of poor mental health and serious self-esteem issues notwithstanding, LOTS' protagonist Michael's blatantly self-deprecating statement does not get any further attention during the series except for his brother's smiley reaction during which uplifting music adds to a rather comical atmosphere. Michael clearly describes feeling "inferior" (00:03:17-00:03:25, O'Clery, 2022) which equates to feeling *less than*. This circumstance likely points to a certain degree of *indifference* toward Michael's testimony within the production's context. The academics Catala Amandine, Faucher Luc and Poirier Pierre would call this form of indifference "neurotypical ignorance" (Catala et al., 2021, p. 9035). In fact, the experience of autistic people being met systemically with such indifference regarding their needs for support, their personal struggles as well as their capacities, is itself an issue that fundamentally harms autistic individuals – epistemically and otherwise. In short, Michael's statement – in which he refers to himself as "a double scoop of dog shit" and to his presumably allistic sibling as "a fresh cut of meat from god" (00:03:02-00:03:13, O'Clery, 2022) – gets handled rather indifferently by the filmmakers.

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Michael (00:04:13, O'Clery, 2022)

In fact, during Kulick's analysis, the scholar points out a possible premise for Michael's infantilisation within the series without, arguably, realising it. The former states that the protagonist displays typically autistic traits such as "a general attitude of seriousness even when talking about topics that others clearly find humorous […] and a marked reluctance to let go of a topic that interlocutors clearly find socially awkward" (Kulick, 2024, p. 311). By stating so, Kulick justifies laughter *at* Michael's remarks by implicitly rendering the allistic conversational partners' attitudes or judgements towards Michael's demeanour as "right" or "appropriate". For instance, Kulick stresses Michael's seriousness about topics *even* if others find those humorous which implies that laughter at Michael's remarks would be justified simply because his allistic conversational partners – who represent "the norm" – deem the content of said remarks as humorous. Another one of Kulick's observations may exemplify the aforementioned conclusion. He writes that "[t]he program invites us to smile at Michael's hopeful earnestness when he tells us that his love ducks, which promise, if you sit them beside your bed, 'love is sure to come your way' were purchased six years previously, and also to smile at the fact that Michael's plaque for his future wife remains devoid of a photo five years after he bought it" (Kulick, 2024, p. 312).

Another sequence involving Michael's family – which consists of his mother, his father, his younger brother and sister – introduces another layer to his objectification/infantilisation. The five of them can be seen gathered around a table while having dinner together (00:03:29, O'Clery, 2022).

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Michael & his family at dinner (00:03:29, O'Clery, 2022)

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Liv (00:03:33, O'Clery, 2022)

Liv, Michael's sister, reasons with her older brother that many people struggle to find proper love – not just autistic people (00:03:30-00:03:39, O'Clery, 2022). Hereby, Michael's sister may try to *normalise* her brother's supposed problems with romantic relationships by providing a new perspective of how to look at the issue at hand. This impression hardens in the light of Liv's consecutive assertion, namely that "love hasn't worked out for her either", and that it just "turns to shit" (SE1EP1, 00:03:47-00:03:54, O'Clery, 2022). In this sense, Liv looks at Michael's issues and hers as equals. Liv's statement, however, stays open to further interpretation. By equating her and *other* people's experiences with dating to that of her autistic brother, she may, simultaneously, draw a comparison between two parties (allistic and autistic people) that do not equal to such comparison given the current discriminatory power-structures upheld between these two groups, especially when it comes to the topic of dating.

One may bear in mind that Michael, representing autistic people as a marginalised group, has not explored "romantic love" – or at least not the presumed heteronormative concept of such – up until that point in time, which may also be due to discriminatory ideas when it comes to the sexual and/or romantic desires of autistic people (Lo Bosco,

2023, p. 1; Zewude & Habtegiorgis, 2021, pp. 1-17; Bennett et al., 2018, pp. 195-211; Esmail et al., 2010, pp. 1148-1155). Subsequently, Michael's responds to Liv's contribution by stating that many people their age "are not interested in commitment, they are simply interested in intercourse" (00:03:54-00:03:59, O'Clery, 2022). Thereafter, laughter erupts from the rest of the family constituting an instant within the series that also got special attention in Don Kulick analysis of LOTS AUS. Therein, Kulick writes:

> *Michael responds by saying, with no trace of humor, 'That's also because a lot of people our age aren't interested in commitment. They're only interested in intercourse.' This assertion raises bursts of laughter from his family members and become part of a running joking sequence. Michael continues by looking sternly across the table at his sister and intoning in a stentorian voice, 'I've also noticed that a lot of girls when they're your age Liv, when they're still in high school, they only want a boyfriend for" – at which point his brother, who is sitting beside Michael at the dinner table, interrupts him, saying, "For intercourse.' Everyone except Michael laughs at this, and the laughter intensifies when Michael turns to his brother, raises his index finger in a lecturing manner, and continues, 'Not just for intercourse. But also as a bodyguard. And as a sugar daddy.' This one-minute sequence finishes with Michael's mother recovering from a laughing fit and says aloud to no one in particular, 'I think every family should have a Michael. It just adds something different.' That a sequence of shared laughter occurs in the opening minutes of the first episode of the first series of Love on the Spectrum is clearly a deliberate choice on the part of the producers. It sets a tone of playfulness that continues throughout. That Michael's family obviously finds Michael delightful and funny authorizes viewers to find Michael delightful and funny. The gaze of caring family members is the nerve that runs throughout the entire series. It is a crucial narrative device that authorizes viewers to regard the protagonists' funnily serious behavior as seriously funny* (Kulick, 2024, pp. 312-313).

I would like to draw attention to Kulick's conclusion that the analysed "sequence of shared laughter" authorises the viewers to laugh along with the parents since they "give permission" to the viewer to laugh too (Kulick, 2024, pp. 312-313). However, one could look at said moment from a different angle, too. Kulick points out that everybody

gathered around the table laughs *at* Michael's remarks, except for himself. Michael possibly utters what could be – to him – a serious statement. If so, his testimony would yet again be diminished in the sense that his expressions get *judged* as funny. Granted, the laughter from Michael's family could have emerged for multiple reasons rather than solely from rendering his statement alone as funny. For example, the family could have felt a tad uncomfortable with Michael's bluntness in the presence of the camera.

The question of whether laughter within the filmic narrative as well as that on the viewer's end may or may not evolve because of someone's disability is still up for debate. Having said so, it seems reasonable not to exclude the possibility that Michael's family may (unconsciously) infantilise Michael by not taking his (blunt) remarks seriously *because* of his autism. During this scene I personally asked myself whether the family would have reacted the same way if a non-autistic family member had aired the remarks made by Michael. In any case, Kulick uses the family's care and affection towards Michael as a justification for their laughter while the scholar may overlook that feelings of affection and care do not exclude the possibility of parents and siblings of autistic people having internalised stigmatizing attitudes towards their autistic family members.

I would like to argue that internalised ableism is a multifaceted, oppressive mechanism exerted by both disabled as well as by non-disabled people since it is so pervasive that it "is almost inevitable" (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2022, p. 362), according to diversity scholars Jóhannsdóttir Ásta, Snæfrí›ur fióra Egilson, and Freya Haraldsdóttir. In fact, internalised ableism is a form of "internalized oppression" (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2022, p. 362) which got shaped by "critical race theory" (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2022, p. 362; Crenshaw et al., 1995, pp. 276-291) as well as "postcolonial theory" (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2022, p. 362; Hook, 2012, pp. 1-264) initially. The coinage of internalised ableism determined that it does not only happen structurally through "laws and policies" (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2022, p. 362) but that it can also get exerted through social norms (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2022, p. 362; David, 2013, pp. 1-238) in the shape of mechanisms of exclusion, devaluation of one's own (disabled) group or microaggressions (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2022, pp. 360-376; David, 2013, pp. 1-238; Buchanan, 2011, pp. 336-337). The latter, for instance, occur "as intangible discriminating and prejudiced interactions, whether intentional or unintentional" (Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2022, p. 362) as Jóhannsdóttir, Egilson, and

Haraldsdóttir state. Moreover, a study conducted by psychology scholars and researchers Cheryl Dickter, Joshua Burk, Janice Zeman and Sara Taylor – in which they deployed implicit association testing – revealed that even if people seem to exhibit explicit (conscious) positive attitudes towards autistic people, they do carry implicit (unconscious) negative attitudes towards them (Dickter et al., 2020, pp. 144-151). When circling back to LOTS and evaluating Michael's family-dinner-scene while keeping the aforementioned findings in mind, one could conclude that internalised forms of exclusion and oppression were probably enforced.

The next source of analysis is a sequence that starts off by showing autistic protagonist Chloé together with her rather obscurely positioned family members, except for her father with whom she is shown having a conversation about dating. The tenor of said conversation consists mostly of the parental figure advising Chloé about "the whole dating thing" (00:06:13-00:06:19, O'Clery, 2022).

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Chloé with family (00:06:13, O'Clery, 2022)

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Chloé with family (00:06:23, O'Clery, 2022)

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Chloé with family (00:06:33, O'Clery, 2022)

Subsequently, the protagonist discloses her relationship with food by directly addressing the filmmakers behind the camera. Chloé explains that she does not like certain foods to touch when on her plate. One also sees her father who is about to prepare a dinner serving for his daughter. She reminds him that the beans should not touch the rest of the food. Hereby, the viewer learns about Chloé as a person and, implicitly, how her autism affects her relationship with food. Thereupon, a sudden change in atmosphere takes place. The music's funny undertone turns into a melancholic, saddening one. Chloé's dad is about to get interviewed by director Cian (00:06:50-00:07:29, O'Clery, 2022).

At first glance, the filmic interview setup seems to resemble that of the autistic protagonists. Despite the resemblance, the way the autistic cast are shown while providing testimony is different from the way their presumably non-autistic family members are displayed while airing their testimonies. In fact, all the autistic main characters look directly into the camera and get positioned face front within the centre frame while predominantly clearly audible, comical music gets added during the course of their interviews.

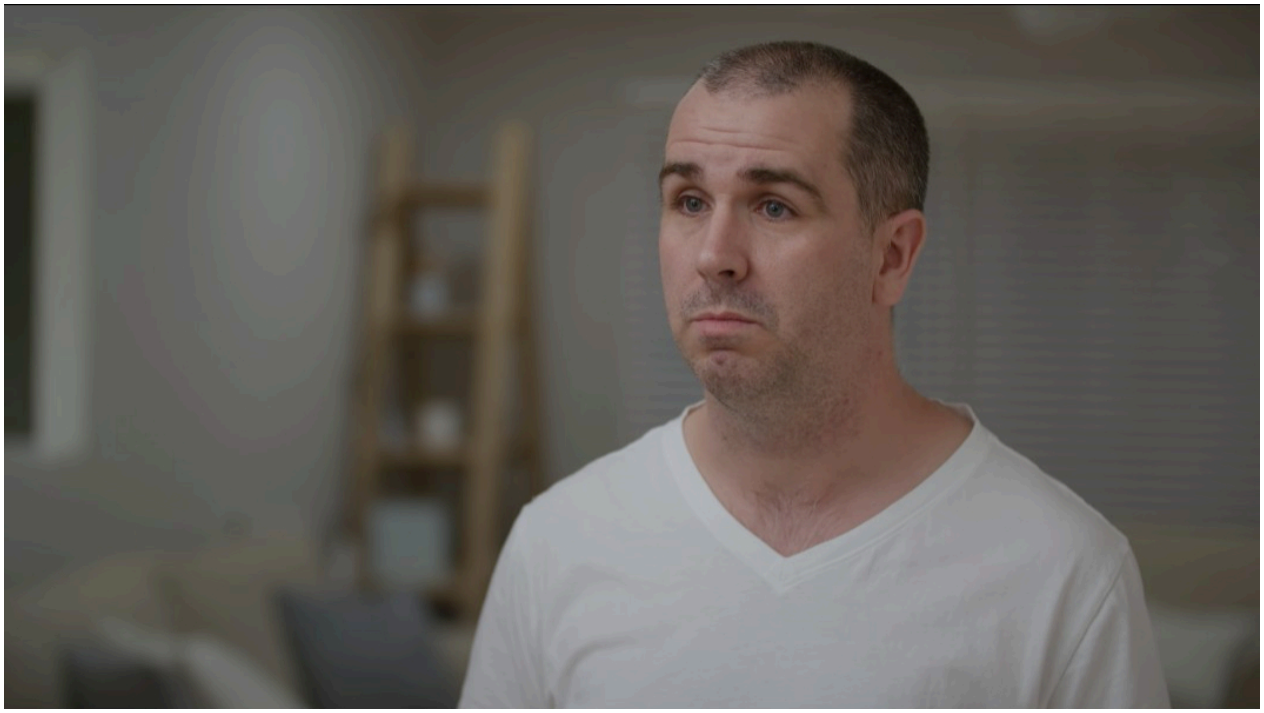
Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Chloé (00:04:32, O'Clery, 2022)

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Chloé's father (00:01:08, O'Clery, 2022)

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Chloé's father (00:09:30, O'Clery, 2022)

The direct gaze into the camera was a significant filmic tool during the flourishing times of “the cinema of attractions” (Gunning, 1995, p. 114). The latter evolved approximately before the year of 1906 (Gunning, 1986, pp. 63-70). Its prior aim was to offer the viewer a spectacle to satisfy the spectator’s curiosity, according to film and media theorist Tom Gunning (Gunning, 1995, p. 114). When looking at the way autistics are displayed during their interviews in LOTS AUS, the modes of display are reminiscent of those used in the cinema of attractions. This constitutes another indicator of a deployed Allistic Gaze which objectifies the autistic protagonists.

The presence of an Allistic Gaze may become even more apparent when looking at the way Chloé’s father gets shown during his interview. In contrast to the autistic main cast, he is shown in a different light. Notably, the camera angle (the interviewee does not gaze into the camera) as well as the bodily positioning (the interviewee is not placed in the centre frame) are unlike the ones used when displaying the autistic protagonists. Additionally, no comical music gets added to the parents’ interviews.



Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Chloé’s father (00:06:54, O’Clery, 2022)

Chloé's dad addresses director Cian when he talks about his daughter. His testimony gets intertwined with filmic images of Chloé as well as photos from her childhood. Chloé's father states:

> *"She is a really intelligent girl. She's, you know, incredibly intelligent, but socially she's not. She's often had a lot of problems with difficulties with reading someone's emotions. It's a lot harder to make a friendship. So, to move onto anything intimate, I think it would be a HUGE challenge. From the little girl that couldn't say any words to me, to the day she said "daddy", for the first time, to where she is now, yeah, I'm hugely proud of where she's come from. She's… She's done fantastically. She's um… yeah. After everything she's had against her. (inhales deeply) Yep, sorry. (chuckles)"* (00:06:50-00:07:29, O'Clery, 2022)

At this point, Chloé's father is close to tears. Undoubtedly, one witnesses an emotional moment. A father talks about his daughter's journey of living with a disability.

In general, the parents seem to be of great importance when it comes to getting their autistic sons' and daughters' needs met. For instance, Chloé and Michael live with their parents. Possibly because of their close familial relationships, the protagonists' parents get room to speak about their sons' and daughters' experiences, about how they perceive their struggles. Nonetheless, simply because the protagonists live with their parents, this does not take away that they are able to provide their own elaborate perspectives. However, the parents speak *for* their children which, arguably, could be seen as an indicator that the autistic testimony does not suffice from a non-autistic viewpoint.

Moreover, prominent use of melancholic and sentimental music that is deployed during the parents' testimonies could possibly work to evoke feelings of pity directed at the parents for having an autistic child. The aforementioned supposition may become even more salient when looking at the next sequence which reveals yet another testimony by protagonist Chloé. Suddenly, the melancholic music prevailing during her father's interview fades out. Thereafter, Chloé starts to talk about her experience and challenges. She says,

> *“I used to get bullied quite a lot in school in England for how I look. I got called names, I got pushed. I had, you know, my work ripped up and called me deaf, and then I got called ‘skeleton’. I think, you know, being bullied has made me who I am, and if I wasn’t bullied, I would’ve been someone completely different.”* (00:07:31-00:07:49, O’Clery, 2022)

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Chloé (00:07:33, O’Clery, 2022)

Chloé reveals that there is no look to autism. Therein, she challenges the idea that autism is a phenomenon predominantly prevalent in boys or men. Additionally, one finds out through her testimony that she was subjected to intersectional discrimination at school since she got bullied for the way she looks as well as for her autism. Chloé also confidently shares that she is proud of who she is. Moreover, one finds out during the episode that Chloé is bisexual which challenges the idea of heteronormative love which the series – at other points – reinforces. In brief, Chloé clearly counteracts multiple stereotypical ideas related to autism.

What seems particularly striking regarding the way filmic means are being deployed during the autistic protagonists' interviews is not only the repetitive use of the direct gaze into the camera but also the abrupt non-usage of music or the use of a comical one. The discrepancies in depiction concerning Chloé's and her father's testimonies likely work to evoke feelings of pity for the parent for having an autistic child. Even the slight probability for this to happen requires attention in light of discourses surrounding parents of autistic children, since the latter worked towards the marginalisation of autistics and, thus, their oppression.

During the first phase, when parental voices got established to take part in autism discourse from the 1960s until the 1980s, parents of autistic children – especially mothers – were faced with tremendous stigma (Williams & Murray, 2024, pp. 1-10; Waltz, 2015, pp. 353-358; Langan, 2011, pp. 193-205). The myth of the "refrigerator mother" needed to be fought. The latter was defined as not providing her child with enough emotional warmth and, hence, was deemed responsible for the development of autism in her child or children (Williams & Murray, 2024, pp. 1-10; Langan, 2011, pp. 193-205; Waltz, 2015, pp. 353-358). In fact, the adamant concept of the refrigerator mother contributed to the evolvement of behavioural therapeutic endeavours aiming to treat or "cure" autism, such as Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA for short) which was invented by Ole Lovaas who – at the same time – played a vital role in the development of the not only unscientific but also abusive so-called "conversion therapy" for homosexual individuals (Shkedy et al., 2022, p. 172; Gibson & Douglas, 2018, pp. 1-28; Waltz, 2015, p. 355). ABA's cornerstone has been its reliance on obedience in order to "make them [autistic children] indistinguishable from their peers" (Waltz, 2015, p. 355; Loovas, 1987, pp. 3-9). To combat this, up to 40 hours of therapy a week – during which the mothers are supposed to be present (Cumming et al., 2020, p. 73; Waltz, 2015, p. 355) – are required. As of today, ABA therapy is still considered the "gold standard" (Gupta et al., 2024, pp. 1-9; Cumming et al., 2020, p. 73; Keenan et al., 2010, p. 132; Keenan et al., 2010, p. 137) of therapeutic intervention when it comes to autism.

During the second phase of parental voices in autism discourse, which happened from the 1900s onwards, autism has been widely referred to as an "epidemic" (Langan, 2011, p. 198) which, at the same time, led to a phenomenon called "autism moms" (Waltz,

2015, p. 355). Disability scholar Mitzi Waltz describes “the autism mom” as a “child-saving hero, expected and encouraged to do anything and everything in pursuit of normalcy, from special diets to special schools, from medications to therapeutic toys” (Waltz, 2015, p. 355). Other scholars support said definition. For instance, Karen Williams and Duncan Murrey define the concept of the “autism mom” – to which they also refer to as the “medicalized warrior mother” (Williams & Murray, 2024, pp. 1-7) – as an ableist notion that upholds a narrative which presents the “autism-free child” as desirable and obtainable (Karen Williams & Murray, 2024, pp. 1-4). Consequently, the attempt to “cure” autism shifted into the home by, for instance, giving autistic children Lupron injections or subjecting them to bleach enemas (Evans, 2021, p. 1; Zadrozny, 2019, p. 1; Mammoser, 2018, p. 1; Waltz, 2015, p. 356; Hensley, 2009, p.1; Ryan, 2016, p. 1). This development also seemed to work as a matrix for the emergence of new myths, such as the notion that vaccines caused autism (Waltz, 2015, p. 355; Langan, 2011, p. 199).

Arguably, the possibility of evoking pity through media representations directed at parents for having an autistic child warrants attention since that reinforces preconceived notions that contribute to autistic marginalisation.

Another sequence that might add nuance to the parents’ positionality in LOTS is the following. It not only involves Michael and his parents but also Jodi, the dating coach (00:15:55-00:18:46, O’Clery, 2022). The scene starts off by showing the four of them gathered around a kitchen counter, whereupon Michael starts a conversation by declaring that he has never had a romantic partner before.

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Michael's father, mother, Michael himself and dating coach Jody (00:15:56, O'Clery, 2022)

Thereupon, Jody brings up the subject of body language. She asks Michael whether he experiences trouble reading somebody's body language, upon which he promptly asserts that he has "very little trouble" (00:16:15-00:16:17, O'Clery, 2022) doing so. Michael's assertion instigates his mother's elaboration on various prejudicial assumptions she was faced with when Michael got diagnosed with autism as a child. Michael's mother shares her opinion about her autistic son being exceptionally good at reading people. She says that when he got diagnosed, she was told that "he won't have any empathy for others" which she then calls the "biggest bunch of rubbish" she has "ever heard" (00:16:42-00:17:29, O'Clery, 2022).

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Michael's mother (00:16:43, O'Clery, 2022)

The family members concur in their opinion of Michael experiencing empathy and state that, overall, autistic people may simply do things "differently" than allistic people. Thereby, they challenge an established stereotype and prejudice which was elaborated on thoroughly in the chapter "5.2.5. Characteristics of a Stereotype".

Notably, the prejudicial assumption that autistic people lack empathy – which has been treated as fact – got overruled. Firstly, it was established that different types of empathy exist (Williams & Gaines, 2023, p. 1) and that empathy can be expressed diversely (Fletcher-Watson & Bird, 2020, pp. 3-6).
Secondly, a phenomenon known as "double-empathy" (Crompton et al., 2021, pp. 1-8; Milton et al., 2020, pp. 1-8; Milton, 2012, pp. 1-5) has received scholarly attention. The concept of double-empathy shows that autistic people find it easier to empathise with other autistic people (Crompton et al., 2021, pp. 1-8; Milton, 2012, pp. 1-5).
However, it must be noted that when discussing the prejudicial idea of autistic people lacking empathy, one still should remain aware of a possible underlying assumption that sets a certain level of empathy as a desirable goal. In that case, one may deem people occupying certain types and levels of empathy to be "better people".

In all, although sequences featuring the protagonists' parents in LOTS AUS SE1EP1 seem to address and dismantle some prejudicial ideas regarding autism, they still enforce mechanisms that align with an Allistic Gaze by, for instance, infantilising and objectifying autistic people. This goes hand in hand with the notion of Inspiration Porn (Kulick, 2024, p. 310). Although scholar Kulick concludes in his analysis of LOTS AUS that the latter does not infantilise autistic people (Kulick, 2024, p. 321), I object to this assumption since the scholar's analysis disregards diverse dynamics of oppression autistic people have been subjected to. Overall, it can be assumed that LOTS AUS creates instances that enable the viewer to laugh at the expense of the autistic protagonists.

With the previous findings in mind, further critical exploration appears salient when it comes to the process of "othering" and thereby objectifying autistic people by construing a level of normalcy which, similarly, would play into the dynamics of an Allistic Gaze.

6.3.1.3. Aspired Normalcy

This chapter aims to discern whether LOTS AUS upholds and enforces concepts of normalcy by, for instance, conceptualising "romantic love" through a heteronormative approach. I presume that an implicit, yet aspired level of normalcy gets perpetuated as early in the series as during the introduction of protagonist Michael which starts by Director Cian – who is placed behind the camera and hence invisible yet audible to the viewer – asking Michael, "How do you feel about being on the spectrum?" (00:01:21-00:01:23, O'Clery, 2022), whereupon Michael answers, "Well, autism is just a neurological disability" (00:01:23-00:01:27, O'Clery, 2022).

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Michael (00:01:22, O'Clery, 2022)

Michael's inserted *just* implies that there are "worse" disabilities than autism. With which criteria can one assess such severity? Is it measured by the level of acceptance or support that exists, or by the level of happiness the person experiences, or by the amount of physical or emotional suffering that is present? Given the circumstance that suffering is a "subjective experience" (Russo, 2024, pp. 334–349; Stilwell et al., 2022, p. 731) as well as that "pain" and "suffering" are issues that seem to be "poorly defined" (Stilwell et al., 2022, p. 730) one may realise the complexity of "measuring" or assessing disability. However, categorising disabilities on a scale from "better" to "worse" seems reductionist and, when it comes to autism, may also play into Hans Asperger's notion of assessing autism according to one's societal value (Hens, 2021, p. 8; Sheffer, 2020, pp. 12-13; Asperger, 1943, p. 84; Asperger, 1943, p. 118; Asperger, 1943, p. 134).

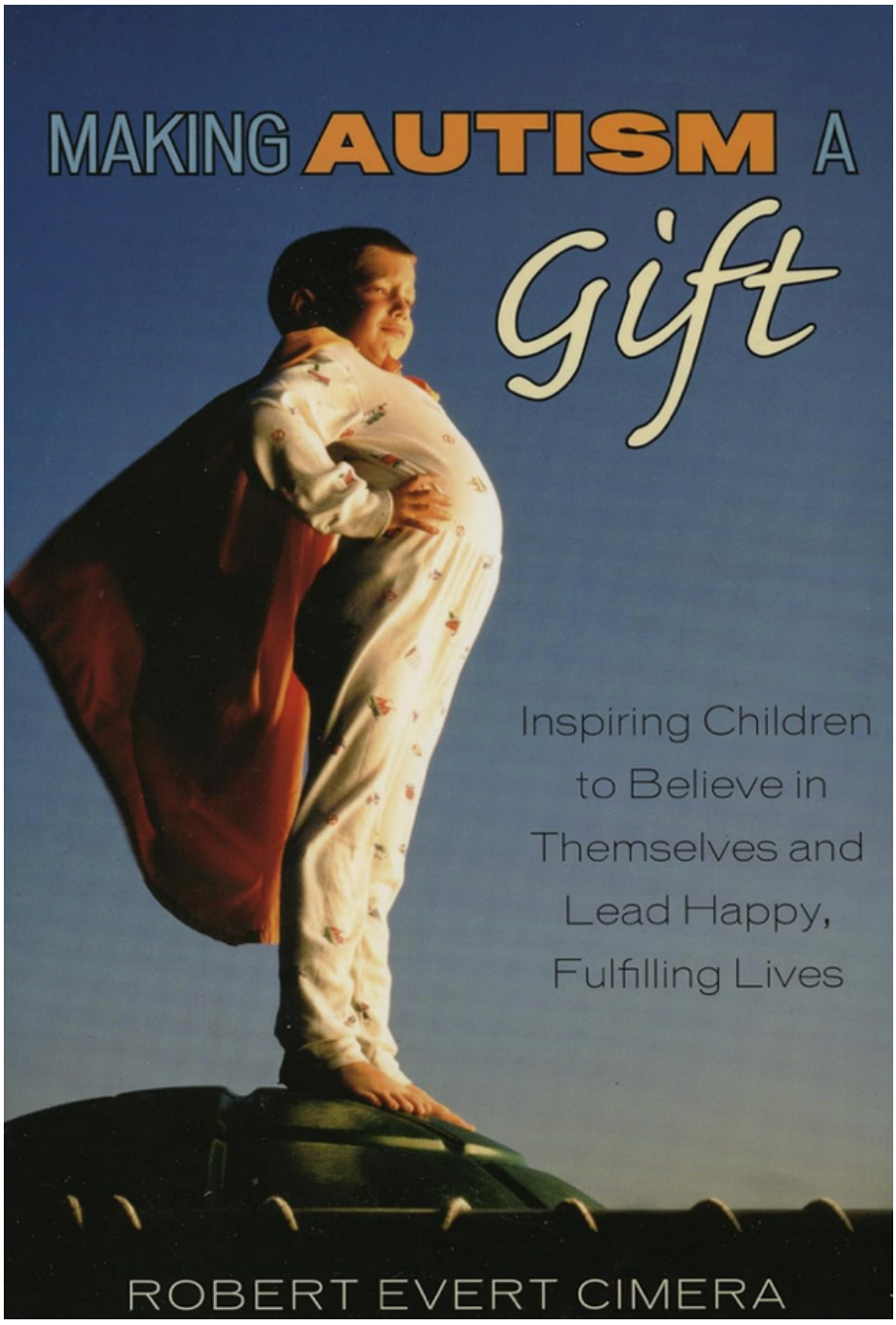
The scene continues with protagonist Michael saying, "People with Asperger's or autism, they just learn things a different way" and "As far as I'm concerned, if anything, it's actually more of a gift" (00:01:27-00:01:36, O'Clery, 2022). The filmic editing makes it hard to decipher whether those statements were originally made in a broader context. In order not to treat Michael epistemically unjustly, one needs to acknowledge that – as a

viewer of the series – it is impossible to know which epistemic resources he has had access to in order to come to his conclusion. Nonetheless, one may still consider the ambiguous nature of his testimony without projecting one's own opinions onto it or assuming superiority to one's own stance.

In any case, it becomes clear that Michael sees his Asperger Syndrome, with which he was diagnosed when he was a child, "as a gift". A definition that has been reproduced but originates from Hans Asperger's coinage which was made clear throughout the chapter "4. History of Autism".

Overall, the narrative of framing autism as a gift has been far-flung. However, by titling autism as a gift, one may be inclined to eradicate the difficulties that come with being autistic and/or one may create an expectation autistic people are then expected to meet. Therein, only a particular demographic of autistics is foregrounded, whereas those who are not presumed to be "gifted" are left out of the discourse and, thereby, become more marginalised. The attempt to connote autism as a gift could rather be understood as an attempt to compensate for someone's associated "negative aspects" that come with the label of autism rather than working towards a mindset that affirms any (autistic) person's equal worth which is not tied to functioning abilities.

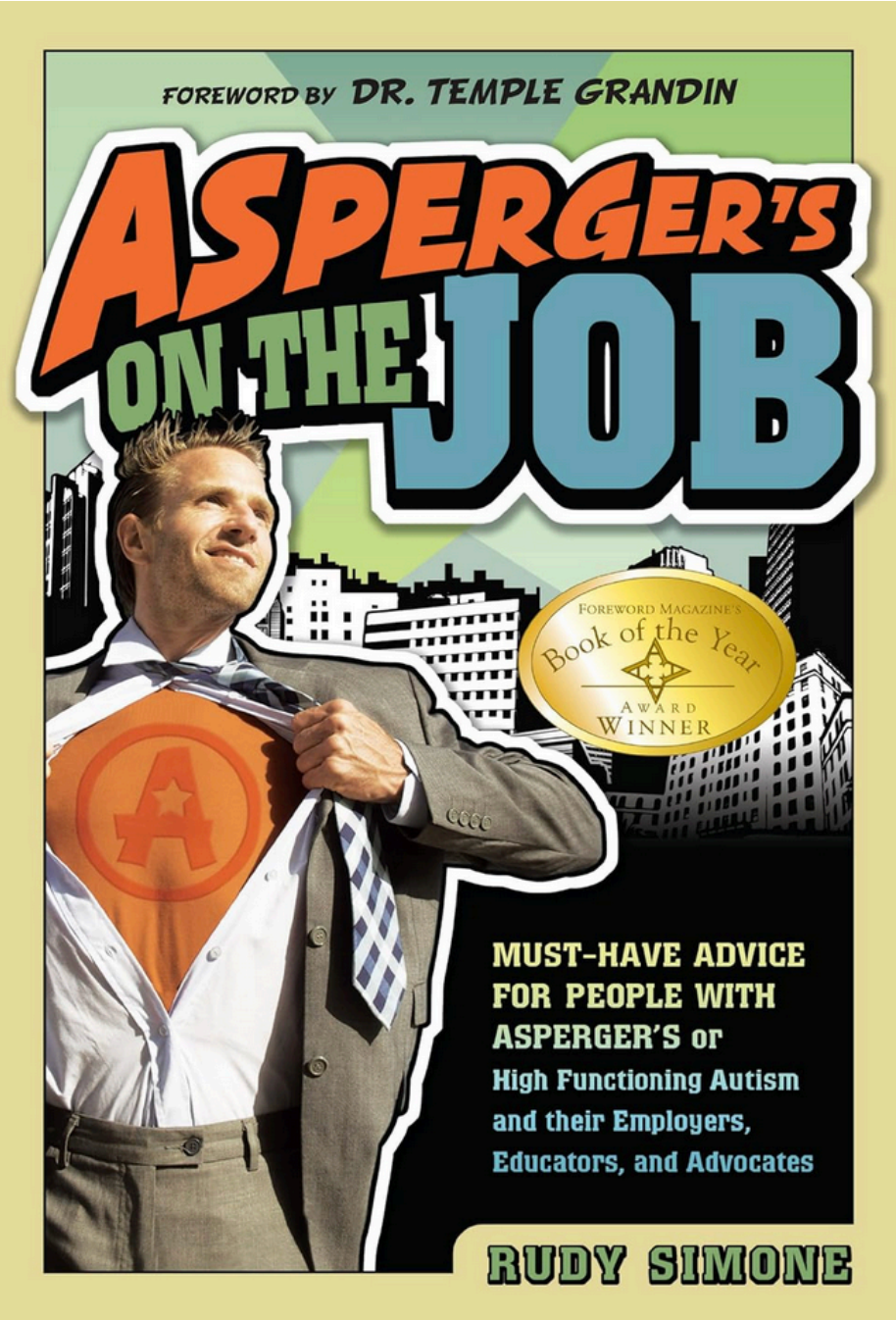
In fact, the narrative to rebrand autism as a gift or "superpower", so to speak, seems prevalent. Books exist which are dedicated to that matter, such as "Making autism a gift" (Cimera, 2007) by Robert Evert Cimera. Its cover shows a supposedly autistic, male-presenting child with a red cape on its back while standing on what appears to resemble a spaceship. This depiction may remind one of depictions of Superman (see book cover "Making Autism a Gift" and image "Superman! Champion of the Oppressed").



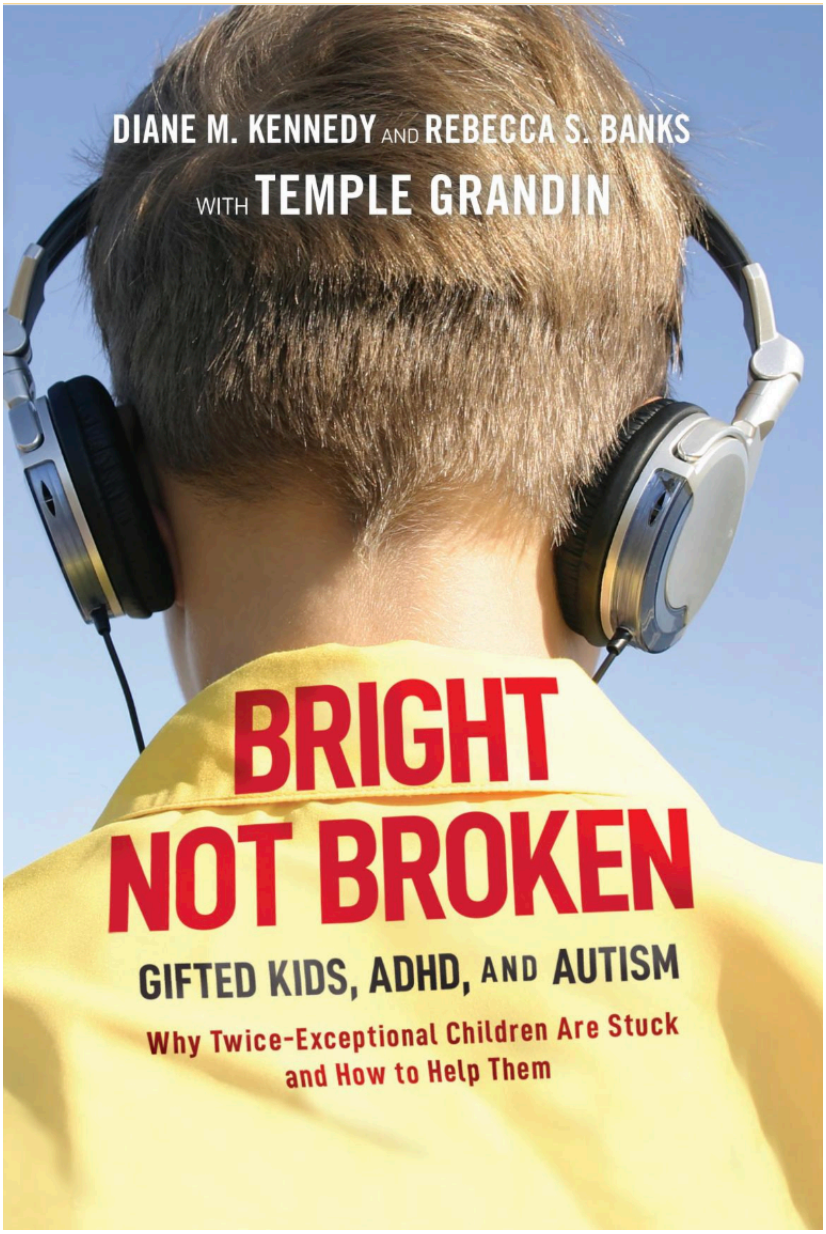
Book Cover “Making Autism a Gift. Inspiring Children to Believe in Themselves and Lead Happy, Fulfilling Lives” (Cimera, 2007)

Comic “Superman! Champion of the Oppressed” (Shuster, 1938)

Another example of a book that hardens the autism-is-a-gift-narrative is “Asperger’s on the Job” by Rudy Simone (Simone, 2010). It depicts a male-presenting person who is dressed in a suit which gets pulled aside by this very person to reveal the shirt that is worn underneath. The letter “A” is printed on it which stands for “Asperger’s”.



Book cover “Asperger’s on the Job” (Simone, 2010)



Book cover “Bright Not Broken” (Kennedy & Banks, 2011)

Yet another book that equates autism and ADHD with “exceptionality” is “Bright Not Broken. Gifted Kids, ADHD and Autism” (Kennedy & Banks, 2011) by Diane M. Kennedy and Rebecca S. Banks. From a slight frog perspective, the cover depicts what appears to be a young male-presenting person’s back. He has a white skin complexion, fair hair and wears a bright yellow shirt as well as over-ear headphones. What these books have in common is the display of male-presenting white people with clean haircuts. Notably, the content of said books also seems to be addressed to so-called “high-functioning”

autistics or “Asperger autistics” which plays into the marginalisation of those autistic people who are, for instance, non-verbal.

Moreover, those books perpetuate the idea that those diagnosed with the so-called “Asperger Syndrome” or “High-Functioning-Autism” are not *that* disabled and can or should reach a certain level of normalcy when given the right tools, as the following statements by special education scholar Cimera support:

> *“Autism isn’t horrible. It isn’t a death sentence. People with autism aren’t destined to be failures”* (Cimera, 2007, p. 2).

The tonus of Cimera’s book “Making Autism a Gift” suggests that there are certain measures which – when applied – help autistic people to not be or become so-called failures. By doing so, the elephant is put in the room[2]: The possibility of autistic people becoming so-called “failures” *simply* because of their autism is set in place. More fundamentally, Cimera’s sentiment construes a space in which some ways of being and acting are labelled as failures which is even more explicitly supported by the next statement:

> *“People with autism can be successful! They can lead great lives! They can live independently in the community, go on to get their Ph.D.s, write books, have terrific high-paying jobs, fall in and out of love, and do everything that you and I can do”* (Cimera, 2007, p. 3).

Here, being successful equates to having a “career”, such as acquiring a PhD or writing a book or earning a substantial amount of money. Those actions and states of being are framed as desirable goals. And yet, the conclusions drawn by the author seem restrictive. For instance, people from some socioeconomic backgrounds may simply not be able to afford to study at a university. Some non-verbal autistics with average to high cognitive intelligence, for example, may find themselves not getting provided with proper accessibility tools which help them navigate academia even if they are intellectually

[2] Quote: “If you say there is an elephant in the room, you mean that there is an obvious problem or difficult situation that people do not want to talk about” (*An Elephant In The Room*, n.d.)

capable of doing so. Apart from that, by trying to achieve Cimera's suggested points, many autistics needed to mask their autistic traits to get by in a society that often discriminates against autistic behaviour, such as exhibiting less eye contact (Cleary et al., 2023, pp. 799-808) which, for instance, can be interpreted as a "poor cultural fit in job interviews" (Gonzales, 2022, p. 1).

Notably, autistic masking is considered to have substantially harmful effects on autistic people. Studies indicate that camouflaging autistic traits can lead to mental health problems and suicidality (Bradley et al., 2021, pp. 320-329; Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019, pp. 1899-1911; Pearson & Rose, 2021, pp. 52-60; Cleary et al., 2023, pp. 799-808).

However, ideas about a desired state of normalcy – which are inherently ableist – can work unconsciously in the minds of non-disabled/allistic people but can also get internalised by disabled people. The following statement, which got published in Kennedy and Bank's book "Bright Not Broken" (Kennedy & Banks, 2011) but was made by autistic public figure and professor of Animal Science Temple Grandin, shall serve as an example for the presence of internalised ableist ideas in autistic people.

> *"Today I am seeing too many kids who have less severe symptoms than I had, going nowhere. One of the reasons this is happening is that there are not high enough expectations for them. Some parents have adopted a "handicapped" mentality and rely too much on medication to control their children. They think 'Oh, poor little Joey. He can't do this because he has ADHD (or autism or some other disorder).' I have seen smart, fully verbal twelve-year-olds who have never learned how to purchase a meal in a restaurant because it was always done for them"* (Kennedy & Banks, 2011, p. 20).

The first sentence of the preceding quotation establishes the idea that autistic "symptoms" are visible to or detectable by the outside, thereby ignoring that an autistic individual may also suffer internally. Moreover, Temple Gardin seems to introduce a criterion derived from her own set of abilities and makes said criterion a template by which she presumably assesses other individuals' potential. Following this, she offers a

sentiment/an observation of hers (“there are not high enough expectations for them”) wherein Gardin defines a certain way of being and acting as desirable. By stating that parents try to exert control over their children using medication, the author makes her opinion appear to be a fact which would define the presumably prescribed use of medication as something that negatively influences children. Furthermore, Gardin mentions ADHD exemplarily as a neurocognitive variety, whose disabling effects some can mitigate via the use of medication. Contrary to Gardin’s sentiment, studies have suggested that ADHD medication significantly improves ADHD-related symptoms that are experienced as negative by those who have them (Le, 2023, p. 1; Storebø et al., 2023, pp. 1-917; Miller-Horn et al., 2008, pp. 5-10).

Moreover, Temple Gardin equates “being smart” and “fully verbal” with the inherent ability to order a meal at a restaurant. However, the latter can indeed be particularly challenging for various autistic individuals (Burton & Schenk, 2024, p. 1; “Going to a Restaurant or Café”, 2024, p. 1), especially in the light of the fact that some autistics also exhibit traits of selective mutism (Muris & Ollendick, 2021, pp. 294-325). Apart from that, Gardin does not seem to consider valuable details when forming her opinion, such as, considering that an autistic person’s state and “functioning” can vary from day to day, or that the ability to be able to order in a restaurant could be tied to the size of the restaurant or whether the restaurant is one frequently visited by the autistic person in question.

The supposedly internalised ideas of normalcy introduced by Gardin certainly perpetuate the medical view on disability by identifying the disablement *solely* in the individual and not at least partly also in their cultural, political, social or economic surroundings. In any case, it still needs to be pointed out that there certainly are diverse accommodations and coping mechanisms that help autistics individually. The question arises: How does one think about and deal with autistic individuals who do not have the capability to reach a hypothetical level of normalcy even when applying coping mechanisms? There could be multiple (intertwined) reasons why an autistic individual may have lifelong difficulty with something as presumably simple as ordering a meal in a restaurant.

Circling back to LOTS AUS protagonist Michael's opinion to characterise autism as a gift, that very idea seems to stem from an internalised idea of desired normalcy. As a matter of fact, the idea of framing the "Asperger Syndrome" as "favourable" compared to "other autism varieties" is a form of ableism that has been coined "Aspie supremacy".

Disability Studies scholar Anna de Hooge defines Aspie supremacy as "an interplay between anti-autistic ableism, and the frame of the Aspie subject as superior, both to other autistics and to non-autistics. This superiority is defined in terms of whiteness, masculinity and economic worthiness" (Hooge, 2019, p. 1). To categorise some groups of people as superior and some as inferior is also in line with Hans Asperger's coinage of autism (see "4. History of Autism").

At the same time, Aspie Supremacy can also occur as a form of *internalised* ableism. The latter is defined as "the distancing of disabled people from each other and the emulation by disabled people of ableist norms" (Campell, 2008, p. 7) according to disability scholar Fiona Kumari Campbell. According to Campbell, ableism "is an unrealistic path of perfection and a deeply ingrained way of thinking about bodies" (Campell, 2019, pp. 1-17; Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2022, p. 361) and, arguably, about minds.

What becomes apparent is that oppressive mechanisms, which take a level of normalcy as their matrix, seem to dictate certain standards to which bodies and minds are expected to adhere in order to be labelled as "productive" and hence "useful" to a given society. It can be concluded that the introduction of normalcy as an aspired form devalues certain ways of being and acting that divert from said norm.

Nonetheless, when witnessing Michael using the term "Asperger Syndrome" as an identity-building label, it also needs to be considered that he got diagnosed with such as a child. That very fact may play a crucial part in him identifying as an "Aspie". The latter was and still is a label which evolved to be fundamental to many autistic people. In fact, the Aspie-Community also turned into a vibrant online communal space (Parsloe, 2015, pp. 336-356; Singer, 2017, p. 29; Singer, 2017, p. 53). When the "Asperger Syndrome" got removed from the DSM-V many members of said Aspie-community supposedly felt like their identity was stripped away from them, according to Psychology scholar David

C. Giles (Giles, 2013, pp. 179-195). Michael may be one of those “Aspies” to whom the term became a major identity-builder.

Another way in which LOTS AUS seems to enforce normalcy is by framing certain states of being and certain actions to be desirable within the concept of heteronormative love. LOTS AUS appears to display heteronormative love as a tool that would enable autistics to live independently and, thus, reach a degree of normalcy. This claim becomes prominent when considering the off-voice commentary during the appearance of the autistic couple Ruth and Thomas. The female off-voice states,

> *“For Ruth and Thomas, finding love has led to independence. They moved in together just over a year ago”* (00:11:03-00:11:11, O’Clery, 2022).

Video-Still LOTS AUS SE1EP1 – Thomas and Ruth (00:10:26, O’Clery, 2022)

6.3.1.4. Key Findings

Those aspects displayed through LOTS AUS, which would likely enforce stereotypical as well as other oppressive ideas towards autistic people, can be summarised as follows.

- Most strikingly, an Allistic Gaze was deployed in multiple instances.
- This would include issues such as the objectification and infantilisation of the protagonists. In the construction of the latter, the testimony of the cast's parents and the filmic editing turned out to mutually reinforce this.
- A desired state of normalcy the protagonists were implicitly expected to meet or represent was created.
- Some prejudicial ideas rooted in the coinage of autism by Hans Asperger were reproduced at some points but also challenged at others. For instance, the oversimplified notion that autistic people lack empathy a priori gets questioned. Another example would be that the protagonist Chloé works to counteract the prejudicial notion that autism is a "male condition".

In all, various stereotypical and oppressive ideas towards autism were subtly but also not-so-subtly installed. Nonetheless, the series also incidentally challenged autistic stereotypes.

6.3.2. LOTS AUS - Epistemic Exploration & Future Outlook

It has already been stressed at several instances that media representations are epistemic resources that contribute to knowledge production (Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2022, p. 470; Fontes & Pino-Juste, 2021, p. 196; S. C. Jones et al., 2023, p. 1; Mittmann et al., 2023a, p. 8008; Mittmann et al., 2023b, pp. 1-6; Orm et al., 2023, pp. 1-7; Akhtar & Dinishak, 2024, pp. 1-6). Certainly, people learn about autism through media representations which are likely to influence how they treat autistic people when encountering them, too. Thus, media representations could contribute to instances of

epistemic injustice when they reinforce notions that have already served to exacerbate epistemic injustice autistics were subjected to.

Regarding the previously analysed parts of LOTS AUS, the identified oppressive notions also seem to be epistemic issues at their core. For instance, autistic testimony was not taken seriously in many instances. It was not only taken out of context or sensationalised, but moments in which the protagonists' raised issues of discrimination were ignored. In like fashion, the voice-over commented *on* the protagonists of the series, and these commentaries also included value judgements. Nonetheless, it needs to be noted that at other points within the series – such as through Chloés testimony – the viewer learns about intersectional discrimination many autistics seem to, overall, be subjected to (Yau et al., 2023, pp. 1-15; Davis et al., 2022, pp. 306-314; Maroney & Horne, 2022, p. 2; Hillier et al., 2019, pp. 98-110).

With the conclusions of the previous paragraph as well as those made in the chapter "6.2.3. The Good Doctor - Epistemic Explorations & Future Outlook" in mind, one may pose the question: How can one try to limit epistemic injustice in future endeavours regarding media representations similar to LOTS AUS?

When it comes to those producing media depictions of autistic people, I may propose to feature a range of autistics across genders, racial backgrounds, sexual orientations, and ranges of support needs, as well as coming from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Variety in representation, however, will not suffice when battling epistemic injustice. As for further suggestions on how to try to minimise epistemic injustice propelled by TV medial representation, I would like to refer to those previously established through the analysis of the fictional TV series The Good Doctor (see chapter "6.2.3. The Good Doctor - Epistemic Issues & Future Outlook"). Concerning autistic representation in documentary formats specifically, one suggestion becomes crucially salient, however: The involvement of multiple autistic perspectives with a variety of expertise. There may be a specific need for autistics who are versed in the ways oppressive dynamics transcend through media representation. Most fundamentally, autistic people should be significantly involved in the processes of writing, directing and editing of a series concerning itself with autism.

When it comes to the role of media consumers and their part in being able to minimise epistemic injustice issues propelled through media, I may refer to those suggestions thoroughly explored throughout chapter “6.2.3. The Good Doctor - Epistemic Issues & Future Outlook”.

Despite those instances in which LOTS AUS perpetuates oppressive dynamics, it still exhibits epistemically liberating aspects. As has become obvious by consulting Reddit forums, some people seem to have come to the realisation of being autistic through the series. Thereby, the series managed to contribute to knowledge production by providing its consumers with a set of hermeneutical resources that they did not have access to before. Additionally, for some protagonists from LOTS AUS (as well as from LOTS US) the series opened the doors to job opportunities. Given that a fair number of autistic people struggles with unemployment (Hill, 2025, p. 1) within socio-political and cultural realms that, overall, do not accommodate autistic needs well enough for them to be able to fully access working environments, this factor should be stressed. Protagonist Michael Theo, for instance, got cast for the comedy-drama series “Austin” (Aroesti, 2025, p. 1).

Another liberating epistemic effect of LOTS might be an increase in people being more willing to listen to autistic people’s experiences since, in some cases, the TV show made some of its protagonists reach a substantial audience on social media platforms. Autistic psychotherapist Kaeylynn Partlow – a protagonist from LOTS US – gained a large following on the social media platform TikTok, on which she regularly posts educational content on autism (Partlow, 2021).

In general, marginalised autistics should not only be encouraged to use and spread their knowledge but should also be taken seriously in their capacity as knowers. In fact, a space where marginalised autistic people seem to be particularly present in larger numbers is social media. Hence, I would like to explore the topic of autism media representations in the face of social media further throughout the next chapter.

6.4. Example: “Autism-TikTok”

“Autism-TikTok" has evoked public outrage as well as scholarly attention. The "self-diagnosis trend", for instance, got labelled as alarming in news media (Cassata, 2024, p. 1; Kelly, 2023, p. 1; K. S. Murphy, 2023, p. 1). Studies by scholars remarked that videos on TikTok about autism are of “unsatisfactory quality” (Brown et al., 2024, p. 1) and “misaligned with current knowledge” (Aragon-Guevara et al., 2023, pp. 1-2).

How can one contextualise such alarmism, especially when looking at it through the lens of epistemic injustice? A number of factors need to be considered when striving to answer said question. Notably, there seems to be a multitude of marginalised autistic creators who share and engage in content about autism on social media and TikTok specifically in different manners and for different purposes. On the one hand, and as early as in 2017, autistic scholar Judy Singer called computers “the essential prosthetic device” (Singer, 2017, p. 65) since they also enable modes of communication that do not involve as many sensory stimuli, for instance (Singer, 2017, pp. 65-86). On the other hand, scholar Brittany Haslem suspects TikTok to be “a viable space for activism” (Haslem, 2022, pp. 92-93). It appears as if TikTok videos enable autistic (self-)representation and, at the same time, the social media platform may entail a communal factor due to its participatory nature (Gilmore et al., 2024, pp. 95-105). Thus, I may argue that TikTok is a vital epistemic source for marginalised autistic voices. It creates space to educate oneself, to share knowledge and, thereby, contributes to knowledge production.

The strong reactions to so-called “Autism-TikTok” may be rooted in internalised ableist and, arguably, misogynistic or racist assumptions that render the testimony of marginalised voices less than. As the chapter “4.3. Epistemic Injustice” showed, epistemologist Kristie Dotson disclosed, for instance, that Fricker’s closed conceptual approach to epistemic injustice led to her exerting epistemic injustice (Dotson, 2012, p. 25, pp. 35-38). By revealing that even an expert on epistemic injustice could foreclose certain forms of such, Dotson not only showcases its pervasiveness (Dotson, 2012, p. 37), but also reveals that one can exert it *unconsciously*. This insight may be particularly significant when circling back to the issue of public discourse around Autism-TikTok and

the so-called – presumably harmful – self-diagnosis trend that is often associated with social media content of autism. Articles published for a broad audience, such as “People Are Misdiagnosing Themselves with Autism from TikTok Misinformation” (Cassata, 2024, p. 1) or “Teens are using social media to diagnose themselves with ADHD, autism and more. Parents are alarmed” (Kelly, 2023, p. 1) exemplify said claim. In fact, academia seems to have put focus on the “negative” effects of so-called “Autism-TikTok”, likewise. The study “Self-diagnosis of psychiatric conditions as a threat to personal autonomy” (Isufi, 2024, pp. 1-24) claims that the “recurring practise of self-diagnosis of psychiatric conditions such as autism spectrum disorder […] on social media platforms poses a threat to personal autonomy […]” (Isufi, 2024, p. 1). Other studies claim that autism content on TikTok is mostly inaccurate or “overgeneralised” (Aragon-Guevara et al., 2023, pp. 1-5) as well as “misleading” (Brown et al., 2024, p. 6).

Despite the predominantly controversial reaction to and reception of autism content on social media, said subject may not be perceived and understood in such a negative light by a large number of autistics. Hitherto findings suggest that social media contributed positively to many autistics’ lives since online spaces have helped to elude offline social settings that are potentially overstimulating while supporting connection and possibly the formation of friendships as well (Antunes & Dhoest, 2021, p. 207). Autistic sociologist Judy Singer even goes as far as calling the internet a “prosthetic device” to autistic people (Singer, 2017, p. 65).

Nonetheless, studies that have focused on the potential liberating aspects as well as on the downsides of “Autism-TikTok” and, therein, brought nuance to the matter seem to be rare. However, I did come across one: Hanna Sofie Berg-Egge and Elia Gabarron examined 60 videos under the hashtag #actuallyautistic while addressing the limitations of their endeavour, one of which being the exceptionally small sampling number (Berg-Egge & Gabarron, 2024, p. 1894). The authors concluded that the examined videos seem to “normalise” autistic difficulties (Berg-Egge & Gabarron, 2024, p. 1892) by providing the viewers with “firsthand insights” (Berg-Egge & Gabarron, 2024, p. 1892) which, in the end, might contribute to a broadening of “the conversation around autism” (Berg-Egge & Gabarron, 2024, p. 1892). The limitations notwithstanding, this study

focuses on the testimonies of autistic people as well as seeks to contribute to a conversation and, therein, the exchange of alternating epistemic resources.

Regarding the subject of self-diagnosis of autism – which seems to frequently be interlinked with social media content – there exist academic findings that highlight not only the positive value of autism self-identification to those who conduct it (Overton et al., 2024, pp. 682-702; Price, 2022, p. 44; “Self-Diagnosis-Friendly Resources and Communities“, 2022; Lewis, 2016, pp. 575-580) but also their potential to be accurate (Overton et al., 2023, pp. 689-690; “Self-Diagnosis-Friendly Resources and Communities“, 2022). As a matter of fact, the University of Washington Autism Centre published a guide to self-diagnose autism because a formal diagnosis can be time consuming and expensive – costing up to 1500 to 5000 dollars without insurance in the US (Price, 2022, p. 41) and hence not being accessible to everyone (Overton et al., 2023, p. 682; “Self-Diagnosis-Friendly Resources and Communities“, 2022; Lewis, 2017, pp. 2410-2424). Despite this, there is a race (Botha & Cage, 2022, p. 3; D. R. Jones et al., 2020, pp. 1-27) and gender bias (Brickhill, 2023, pp. 1-16; Doyle et al., 2022, pp. 340-356; Draaisma, 2009, pp. 1475-1480) when it comes to autism research. Thus, those biases also get mirrored in diagnostic processes (Brickhill et al., 2023, pp. 1-16; Price, 2022, p. 42; Price, 2022, pp. 53-54; Jones et al., 2020, pp. 4-27). Apart from that, supportive services for autistic adults seem to be extremely scarce (Mandy, 2022, pp. 289-290; “Self-Diagnosis-Friendly Resources and Communities”, 2022; Ning et al., 2019, pp. 6-7; Lewis, 2016, p. 576). Additionally, self-identification apparently helps autistic people to understand themselves better, and that state seems to open the pathway to pursue a formal diagnosis in some cases (Overton et al., 2023, pp. 182-701; “Self-Diagnosis-Friendly Resources and Communities”, 2022; Lewis, 2016, p. 575).

Overall, it becomes clear that the subject of autism content on TikTok interlinked with the subject of autism self-diagnosis is a controversial one that results in conflicting scholarly findings. The supposed diversity in meaning, function and impact of Autism-TikTok coupled with the discourse around autism self-diagnosis prompts further exploration which the next chapters aim to embark on.

6.4.1. Biased Views & “Autism-TikTok”

Considering the contradicting and polarising ideas when it comes to content about autism on TikTok, one may ask whether those who stand strictly against autism self-diagnosis and focus solely on the negative effects of autism content on TikTok possibly do so by unconsciously confirming their own bias and internalised prejudice. This suspicion stems from the recognition that socio-historical structures of power have come with suppression and marginalisation (Foucault, 2013, pp. 71-72). This also holds true when it comes to marginalised autistic voices (Walker, 2021, pp. 125-131; Singer, 2017, pp. 55-50; Milton, 2016, pp. 1403-1406). When reminding the viewer of the example of epistemologist Kristie Dotson coining a third form of epistemic injustice because she was able to detect instances of such within and through the definition of epistemic injustice by philosopher Miranda Fricker, one comes to realise how persistent epistemic injustice is and that it can happen even if one does not intend to (Dotson, 2012, pp. 24-101). It can be assumed that internalised prejudicial ideas about autism are ingrained in collective consciousness. Thus, internalised ableism harms autistic people – especially epistemically. An analysis of the dynamics of oppressive mechanisms within autism studies may help to contextualise the discourse around Autism-TikTok and self-diagnosis.

The study “The Reach and Accuracy of Information on Autism on TikTok” (Aragon-Guevara et al., 2023, pp. 1-7) conducted by scholars Diego Aragon-Guevara, Elisabeth Sheridan, Grace Castle and Giacomo Vivanti will serve as the subject of scrutiny to identify possible (internalised) bias ingrained within the study’s design.

Generally speaking, the goal of the study was to estimate the reach and assess the quality of autism videos on TikTok. The researchers state that the aforementioned social media platform can bias the general public’s view (Aragon-Guevara et al., 2023, pp. 1-2). In this context, the scholars emphasise the misinformation that spreads on TikTok regarding “other conditions” (Aragon-Guevara et al., 2023, p. 5), such as diabetes, cancer or Covid-19 which serves as a justification for their endeavour to assess autism content’s accuracy on TikTok since, arguably, potential inaccurate information could pose “public health risks” (Aragon-Guevara et al., 2023, p. 3).

The scholars implicitly equate autism – an innate form of neurocognitive functioning – with conditions induced by viruses and that conditions that are not innate, which suggests that those conditions can and *should* get treated. An association between autism content and content about the Covid-19 pandemic is set in place. Notably, the latter contributed to the emergence of conspiracy theories (Corso et al., 2024, pp. 1-14). This may linguistically and contextually reinforce the oppressive notion that autism equals illness and is defined as a condition that needs to be cured (Hens, 2021, p. 74). On top of this, the potential distinct discourses happening on TikTok linked to autism get foreclosed prematurely.

The idea that autism is an illness that prompts treatment was enforced as early as with the myth of the “refrigerator mother” (Williams & Murray, 2024, p. 2) and with the coinage of autism by Hans Asperger which have already been elaborated on in the chapter “4. History of Autism” as well as in the analysis of LOTS AUS, especially within the chapter “6.3.1.2. The Families & Objectification”. Defining autism as something defective led to (psychiatric) efforts aimed at treating or “curing” autism. To achieve this, ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis) therapy (Gibson & Douglas, 2018, pp. 1-24; Waltz, 2015, pp. 355-356; Langan, 2011, pp. 3-13) was developed. To remind the reader, ABA therapy was introduced by Ole Lovaas who also played a pivotal role in the development of “conversion therapy” (Gibson & Douglas, 2018, pp. 2-22; Waltz, 2015, pp. 354-356). The foundation of ABA relies on the obedience of autistic children to “make them indistinguishable from their peers” (Waltz, 2015, p. 355; Lovaas, 1987, pp. 3-9). Despite testimonies from people who underwent ABA therapy describing it as a system of “rewards and punishments” (Cumming et al., 2020, p. 76) and scholars pointing out its lack of viability and long-term effectiveness (Shkedy et al., 2021, p. 131; Cumming et al., 2020, p. 80), ABA therapy is still regarded as the “gold standard” (Gupta et al., 2024, pp. 2-7; Cumming et al., 2020, p. 73; Keenan et al., 2010, p. 132) for therapeutic interventions when it comes to autism. Considering the aforementioned aspects, one might conclude that the authors of the study “The Reach and Accuracy of Information on Autism on TikTok” (Aragon-Guevara et al., 2023, pp. 1-7) lack critical awareness regarding autism discourse, thereby laying the grounds for confirmation bias.

The methodology deployed in the aforementioned study contains indicators of potential bias, likewise. Firstly, only 133 videos associated with the hashtag #autism were examined, which is a particularly small sample size given the studies' objective of assessing the quality of autism-related content.

Secondly, clips about autism produced by non-autistic people were included in the study. This prompts the question of how the scholars defined autism content in the first place. Analysing multiple hashtags and incorporating minority perspectives, such as videos tagged with #autizzy – a hashtag used by BIPOC autistics only – would have contributed to more representative results.

Thirdly, personal content was omitted. The fact that each autistic experience is unique and therefore inherently personal raises even more doubt about potentially skewed results. Moreover, the categorisation of videos into "accurate", "inaccurate" and "overgeneralised" seems restrictive in equal measure. How can TikTok videos avoid being overgeneralising considering their brief nature?

Most prominently, the lack of transparency regarding the specific frameworks used to evaluate video samples elevates concerns.

Finally, the authors claimed that two independent coders evaluated the samples based "on current knowledge on autism", although they did not provide any specific source. In like fashion, the senior author allegedly reviewed the coders' assessments and made corrections. However, the authors neither disclosed which videos were corrected nor the basis for the corrections made. In fact, the scholars state to have used a "conservative approach" and – again – do not disclose the sources for said approach.

In sum, the lack of sensitivity and transparency, along with poor methodology and the exclusion of diverse autistic testimonies, leads one to presume that the researchers have confirmed their biases through their study.

6.4.2. Epistemic Explorations – TikTok Clip "Who Is Faking Autism?"

A TikTok video's content should illustrate the possible nuances associated with autism-related content, considering their epistemic impacts. On the 10th of March 2023 user @adhdcoachsheila stitched a video from the BIPOC autistic TikTok user @venusfrogtrap who posed the question, "What would happen if everybody pretended to have autism?" @adhdcoachsheila stitched said video and provided the viewers a humorous response through a role play, in which she embodies both an autistic individual and someone who feigns autism (Henson, 2023). Therein, the autistic creator addresses the topic of self-diagnosis and some of its possible implications. The role play unravels as follows (Henson, 2023):

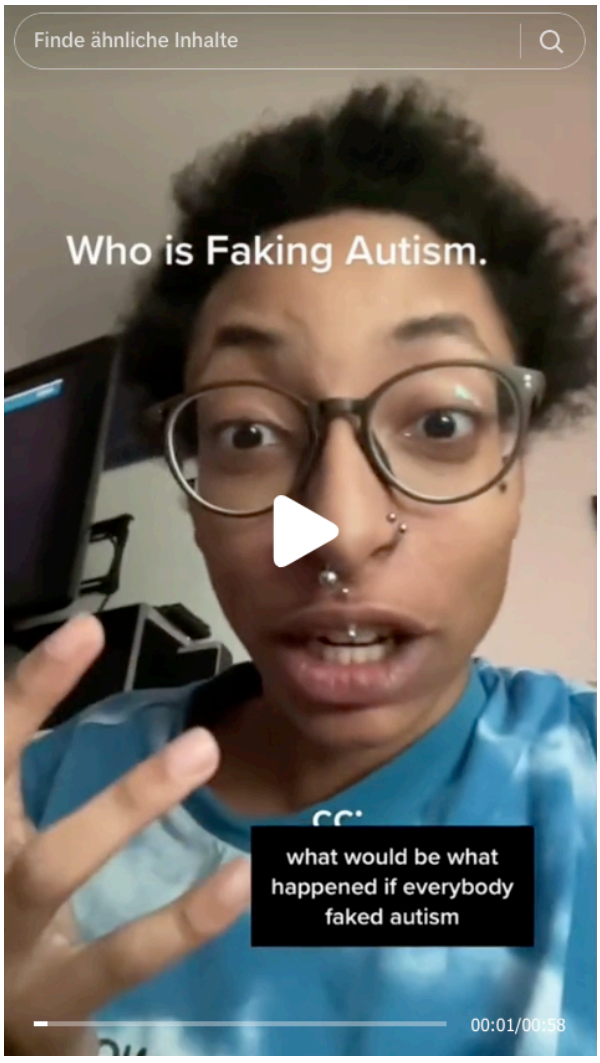
Person faking autism (PFA),	*"Hi, I have autism"*
Autistic person (AP),	*"Okay"*
PFA,	*"So, what do I get?"*
AP,	*"Well, you could get some noise cancelling headphones, more alone time, you could get some notification before a big change happens."*
PFA,	*"I'm not really interested in any of that. What about attention, can I get attention?"*
AP,	*"Yeah, I mean you could get people invalidating your experience, generally with a lot of rage, or you could have pity or infantilization. Is that the kind of attention you're looking for?"*
PFA,	*"Oh, that doesn't sound fun at all. What about like accommodations, extra support, medication?"*

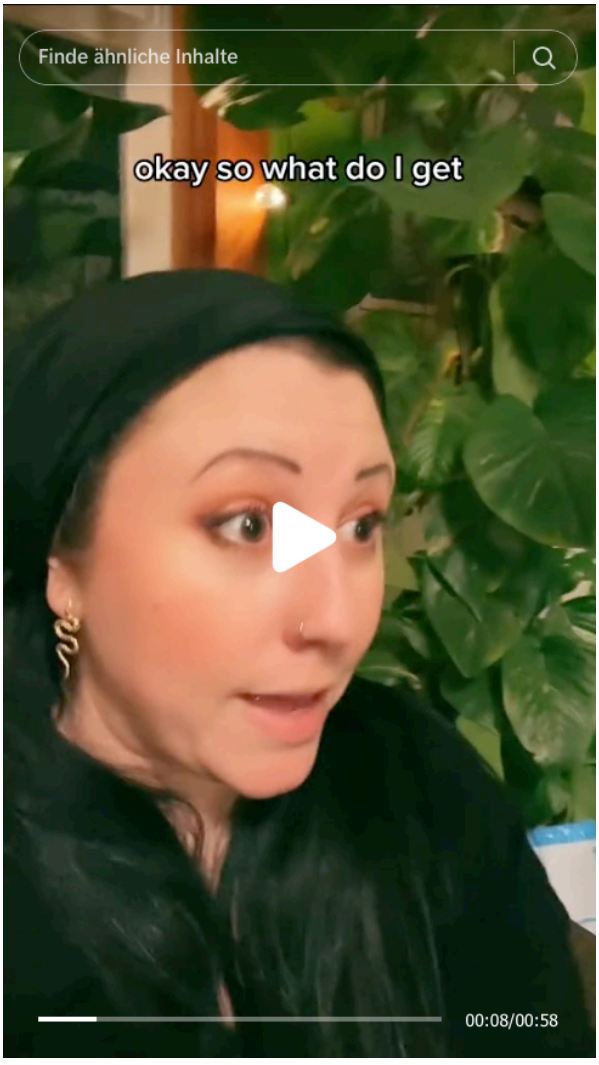
AP, *“Yeah, you’re gonna need a formal diagnosis for that. Do you have that?”*

PFA, *“Oh, no, I don’t have that. What about like community, people who really understand me?”*

AP, *“Yeah, sure, you could be with autistic people, talking about experiences that you also experience.”*

PFA, *“Yeah, that actually doesn’t sound like fun because I’m faking autism for some reason.”*





Video-Still Stitch with @venusfrogtrap (Henson, 2023)

The viewer is presented with a hypothetical scenario. I understood this video as a response to the alarmism concerning “Autism TikTok” and self-diagnosis.

Evidently, @adhdcoachsheila outlines some disadvantages of being autistic through her video. For instance, the creator identifies infantilisation and pity as two forms of attention that individuals receive when disclosing their autism. In fact, studies indicate that autistic people are prone to experiencing infantilisation (Lam, 2024, pp. 2166-2171) by being perceived as child-like, for example (Cage et al., 2019, p. 6). Disability Studies scholar Freeman Loftis stresses that viewing autism as a “child-like condition” (Loftis, 2021, p. 94) leads to “fake credibility to the automatic authority that neurotypical adults frequently assume over their autistic counterparts” (Loftis, 2021, p. 94), potentially creating an epistemic injustice issue: Marginalised autistic people are often disbelieved, as their testimonies are rendered less trustworthy, a situation exacerbated by their belittlement (Lam, 2024, pp. 2166-2169; Price, 2022, p. 8; Singer, 2017, p. 59).

So why would someone self-diagnose as autistic? One reason for conducting a self-diagnosis of autism may very well be to strengthen one’s epistemic agency. A self-diagnosis comes with language and, thereby, with the chance to understand and conceptualise oneself better (Skafle et al., 2024, pp. 1-14). Moreover, epistemic oppression seems to be so persistent that it even gets internalised by those affected. A study by Laura Foran Lewis identified several supposed barriers that hinder individuals from seeking a formal autism diagnosis. These barriers include anxiety in the patient about making a professional appointment, limited access to ASD specialists, difficulty in articulating one’s own symptoms, mistrust of healthcare professionals and, most importantly, the “fear of not being believed” (Lewis, 2017, pp. 2410; Lewis, 2017, pp. 2414; Lewis, 2017, pp. 2417). Furthermore, other undiagnosed autistics may fear that a formal diagnosis could be weaponised against them. Psychology scholar Devon Price states that “[a] diagnosis can even be used against you in divorce proceedings or child custody cases or to force a legal adult under a financial conservatorship” (Price, 2022, p. 44).

The weaponisation of an official diagnosis can take various forms. This circumstance is especially present in western medical systems that are based on colonial structures (Au & Cornet, 2021, p. 99-133), whereby diagnoses turn into tools that can be used to

discriminate and stigmatise. It can be concluded that some autistics choose to self-identify, as this allows them to acquire terminology that enhances their understanding of themselves and their experiences (Skafle et al., 2024, pp. 1-14) and helps them to communicate these experiences to others (Dotson, 2012, pp. 29-35).

When discussing Autism-TikTok and autism self-diagnosis, it seems vital to establish a nuanced approach by recognising that TikTok may serve not only as a platform for representation and information but also as a communal space that could contribute to knowledge production regarding issues affecting marginalised autistic people specifically. In the early stages of the neurodiversity movement, autistic sociologist Judy Singer noted that the internet potentially provides support for those who struggle in certain offline environments. Therefore, “Autism-TikTok” can be understood as an extension of a movement that began in the 1990s within internet forums (Walker, 2021, pp. 77-29; Singer, 2017, p. 29; Singer, 2017, pp. 17-22).

The key difference today is that those marginalised autistic groups – who once connected merely through forums that required conscious effort to access – are now also visible to those on TikTok who do not necessarily seek to engage with content on autism. As a result, users may inadvertently encounter autistic creators simply due to TikTok’s algorithm. Marginalised autistics’ testimonies are no longer semi-closed off. Historically speaking, however, marginalised autistic individuals have been taken less seriously and have been oppressed. In this light, it may not be surprising that content on TikTok featuring these individuals and their experiences results in public invalidation. The latter may be driven by internalised prejudicial ideas not only about autism but also about women, BIPOC and transgender people. Consequently, intersecting social categories may influence viewers’ perceptions and assessments of content created by marginalised groups.

6.4.3. Summary & Key Findings

The preceding chapter revealed that content about autism on TikTok may be perceived and judged as “harmful” prematurely since viewers are at risk of projecting their own internalised bias onto a creator’s content and persona.

Internalised and stereotypical epistemically culpable oppressive forces may be so persistent that even researchers tackling topics such as Autism-TikTok may confirm their own bias towards autistic people without being aware of doing so. The design of the study “The Reach and Accuracy of Information on Autism on TikTok” (Aragon-Guevara et al., 2023, pp. 1-7) by Aragon-Guevara, Castle, Sheridan and Vivanti strongly indicates the presence of (internalised) bias reproduced within the research process, for instance. Thereby, autistic testimony is suppressed in the production of “new” knowledge. The reception of the study’s findings may likely contribute to the existing oppressive mechanisms that devalue the testimony of marginalised autistic individuals.

The following signs that hint towards biased results in academic endeavours were identified through a comprehensive analysis of the study “The Reach and Accuracy of Information on Autism on TikTok” (Aragon-Guevara et al., 2023, pp. 1-7) by Aragon-Guevara, Castle, Sheridan and Vivanti:

- The lack of linguistic awareness regarding terminology that reinforces oppressive mechanisms within autism discourse.
- The focus on a limited number of videos that appeared under a single hashtag. This limitation renders the study’s outcomes neither representative of the overall reach nor of the “accuracy” which was the predefined goal set by the authors.
- The exclusion of videos addressing “personal experiences” which has led to a reduction in the representation of autistic testimonies across various demographics. Furthermore, each autistic experience is unique and can therefore be classified as personal. The specific criteria used to evaluate these videos were not disclosed either.

- The categorisation of videos into “accurate”, “inaccurate” and “overgeneralised” can be considered an overgeneralisation itself. Moreover, the sources upon which these categorisations are based have not been disclosed.
- The modification of results provided by two independent coders was done by the study’s senior author. In like fashion, neither the coders’ outcomes nor the author’s modifications were disclosed.

There is clearly a need for nuance in the discourse surrounding autism self-diagnosis and social media content, prompting a move away from binary perspectives. Numerous factors must be taken into consideration.

- Autistic people encounter multifaceted barriers when seeking an official diagnosis, including high costs, limited access to ASD specialists, fear of not being believed, and stigma associated with an autism diagnosis (Lewis, 2017, pp. 2410–2424).
- Some individuals may fear that their diagnosis could be weaponised against them (Price, 2022, p. 44).
- Self-diagnosis can help some in gaining a better understanding of themselves (Lewis, 2017, p. 2411). Being provided with language not only enables individuals to comprehend their own experiences but also allows them to communicate those experiences to others (Dotson, 2012, pp. 29-35; Fricker, 2009, pp. 147-175).
- Content on TikTok created by marginalised autistic individuals seems to serve not only as a tool for representation but also as a communal space that fosters discourse and, overall, knowledge production.
- Public alarmism and the premature dismissal of Autism-TikTok may arise from intersectional prejudice stemming from a combination of (internalised) ableism in the form of (internalised) biases against women, BIPOC, and trans autistic individuals.
- It must be acknowledged that the discourse surrounding self-diagnosis in relation to autism and Autism-TikTok is multifaceted and complex, necessitating intentional self-reflection from those participating in it to challenge their own potentially prejudicial internalised beliefs.

7. Conclusion

This thesis delineated how easy it is for media creators and consumers, as well as scholars, to reproduce oppressive notions and confirm their own bias. On multiple accounts, The Good Doctor as well as Love on the Spectrum displayed interweaving mechanisms of instrumentalisation, victimisation, alienation, weaponisation, and stereotypes, some of which are rooted in Nazi ideology. All these aspects fundamentally harm autistics who are affected by intersecting forms of marginalisation. The following suggestions were established to help media makers reduce instances of epistemic injustice through media representations.

- Variety in representation
  On the most basic level, there is a need for more variety when it comes to autistic representations. The latter should not repeatedly make use of stereotypical ideas that stem from a history of oppression.
- Integration of multiple autistic perspectives
  Film and media productions need to appreciate and respect autistic testimony through tangible actions and not mere lip service. Autistics need to be in charge and thus also part of the writing process, get hired as actors and as production team members too.
- Sensitising crew & cast
  It is vital that crew and cast not only get educated on the myriads and the intersectional nature of oppressive dynamics autistics – and other marginalised groups for that matter – have been subjected to thus far. This education should be provided by multiple autistics from different backgrounds regarding their levels of education, class, gender and race. Naturally, they must be justly compensated.

- Accessibility

  Producers need to take responsibility and provide accessibility. The latter should not be framed as a hassle or a burden or a favour in the face of (internalised) ideas of normativity. Each autistic person's singular needs need to be met, and that should be seen as the bare minimum that it is. This requires the creation of an atmosphere in collaboration with the autistic crew and cast that facilitates the open communication of their needs. Non-autistic colleagues are not to question certain behavioural rules that function as accommodations for their disabled colleagues.
- Paradigm change

  The aforementioned suggestions may be usefully implemented in many current structures of media landscapes. In the future, however, a larger paradigm change will be necessary that prompts fundamental re-imagining and re-modelling of societal structures and institutions by dismantling oppressive forces that permeate them.

When it comes to the viewers' possibilities to mitigate the epistemic harm done through media representations, the following points were proposed:

- Viewers should question their assessment of media representations of autistics and foster self-reflection, tackling whether their assessments are infiltrated with unconscious -isms.
- Consumers may benefit from seeking out diverse epistemic resources when learning about marginalised groups.
- When being presented with a depiction of autism that contradicts one's own knowledge about autism, one is invited to ask oneself, for instance, why they would render certain social media content made by marginalised autistic groups as "alarming". Is it because said content could realistically "endanger" others individually or society at large, or is it because seeing genderqueer people and/or people of colour talking about their autistic identity feels unfamiliar?

- Furthermore, one always has the chance to reassess one's thoughts/judgements and adjust one's behaviour accordingly in the quest to forge a way of behaving and being through which marginalised voices are increasingly taken seriously.

As a viewer who tries to take the aforementioned suggestions to heart, some points seem exceptionally pivotal. Firstly, there is the fact that there are different sets of hermeneutical resources one needs to be aware of. To be able to effectively "shift" between those differing hermeneutical resources, one requires "fluency" (Dotson, 2012, p. 34) as epistemologist Kristie Dotson suggests. By doing so, she cites Mariana Ortega's words:

> *"'World'-traveling has to do with actual experience; it requires a tremendous commitment to practice: to actually engage in activities where one will experience what others experience; to deal with flesh and blood people not just their theoretical construction; to learn people's language in order to understand them better not to use it against them; to really listen to people's interpretations however different they are from one's own; and to see people as worthy of respect rather than helpless beings that require help" (Dotson, 2012, p. 35; Ortega, 2006, p. 69).*

Secondly, it needs to be considered that "life on a 'spectrum' requires words that don't even exist yet" (Singer, 2017, p. 44). This thesis tried combating this lack of language by establishing the term *Allistic Gaze.* At this point, I issue the caution that instances of injustice are still happening which have not yet been awarded terminology. Future endeavours should aim to incorporate a wide range of autistic first-hand experiences in trying to find language for the multitude of forms of their oppression.

Thirdly, fostering epistemic humility seems vital in the quest to limit oppressive forces against marginalised autistic people. On the one hand, one needs to realise how astonishingly easy it is to commit an epistemic injustice. Prejudicial and epistemically culpable instances of injustice are often rooted in internalised notions which have historically grown and are deeply ingrained on structural levels. On the other hand, one may be cautious to not exert more epistemic injustice by assuming moral superiority when being encountered with sets of hermetical resources differing from one's own –

especially in those instances where one's notions are based on knowledge that is at that point in time historically, socially and politically deemed to be of "more value". There is an urgent necessity for the will to self-reflect and the will to act upon the insights gained from the acknowledgement that there are a multitude of lived experiences and one can learn about them by listening without the claim of being able to *feel* or *live* them.

As an autistic person, I need to make myself account for not including more testimonies coming from marginalised autistic people, especially from those who are non- or semi-verbal. I acknowledge the dire need for the inclusion and appreciation of marginalised autistic people of all kinds, be it in film or media production, in research or on social media platforms such as TikTok.

Future exploration as to how or why marginalised people use social media platforms as communal spaces is needed to deepen the understanding of their lived realities and the various oppressive forces they are continually faced with. There is an urgent demand for concrete measures that make it possible for autistics to accessibly enter spaces as well as to contribute to the knowledge production on matters that concern them. Thereby, one may foster an intersectional approach and, at the same time, discuss autism not merely from a medical point of view. As an example for doing so, I would like to direct attention to the Māori expression for autism coined by linguist and educator Keri Opai: *Takiwātanga* which means "in their own time and space" (Education Gazette editors, 2023; Opai, 2020, p. 1).

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