

The Social Model of Disability as Represented in Film

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There are a number of filmic portrayals of autism spectrum disorders. As with literary portraits, these films run the gamut anywhere from studied biopics about real individuals' lives to fictive caricatures or even docudramas about others who try to assist those on the spectrum for either personal or occupational reasons. I focus in this paper on several films that serve as examples along this gamut, realizing that the film industry is still somewhat new to the progression that the disability studies movement has made possible in all the arts. I start with a classic film, Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of high-functioning but institutionalized Raymond Sanford, in director Barry Levinson's 1988 film, *Rain Man*.

In the late 1980s, definitions of autism were still locked into a medical model approach to disability. While there are certainly factions of the medical industry who still subscribe to this particular approach, those of us trained along more humanistic and less scientific avenues are quick to point out the ethical oversights in medicine that define illnesses as specific to and generated by individuals rather than locating disability as a cultural construct. One good example of this would be Scott Robertson's observation that "Very few studies of autism present it as a form of human diversity akin to other societal forms of diversity (e.g. ethnicity, nationality, gender, etc.)".¹ Although Robertson's alignment of autism with ethnicity, nationality and gender positions this disorder in highly non-scientific camps of identity theory, he manages to imagine neurodiversity as a new way of looking at disability cultures which provides a perspective that "describes the neurology and personhood of autistic people through the lens of human

diversity” (Ibid). A 2011 audience for *Rain Man* might or might not be convinced by this shift in disability perspectives when watching the 1988 film.

In very simplistic ways, we could argue that the doctors in this film are part of an old guard whose first impulse with a condition such as autism is to quarantine it, to lock the offending members of society away in medical establishments that lets the world assume they are better cared for medically and forgotten. Although Raymond’s brother, Charlie, begins his search for Ray at the institution with money as his sole motivating factor due to his disinheritance of his father’s fortune, we soon realize the numerous other dimensions of this encounter with an autistic older brother who Charlie was forced to forget. What Charlie comes to learn by the film’s end is that their father had only the best intentions in mind.

In some respects, the film does no better than the more medically-oriented conservative study of autism that identifies both ends of hyper-ability and lack of ability present in those on the autism spectrum, but does nothing to locate this existence socioculturally as part of a diversity model. As Stuart Murray notes, in spite of these limitations, “Levinson’s film... is still the ‘breakthrough cultural text’ that brought the condition to a wide public awareness.”² This fact, if no other, remains the primary reason for this film’s inclusion in my discussion.

Rain Man remains a classic film representation of autistic experience and behavior that won a total of four Emmy awards for various elements, but we can now recognize it as a product of its time: we have now moved beyond the stereotypical portrayal of autistic behavior demonstrated in this film and are perhaps more prepared for the 2010 biopic *Temple Grandin* that

HBO made about this real individual with autism, played by nondisabled actress, Claire Danes.

Whereas Dustin Hoffman played a fictional character and no doubt did his own version of Method Acting preparation for this role by studying real individuals on the spectrum, Danes took on the daunting task of impersonating a woman who is still alive. She quite literally took the spirit and embodiment of Temple Grandin into her own body in order to accurately portray this person. The film crew greatly aided her in this pursuit, and new authors revised a film script that was originally written at the turn of the century to better fit a 2010 understanding of autistic behavior. In other words, this film managed a revision of disability narrative that succeeded in moving the autism conversation into a social rather than medical model framework.

Cleverly, the film begins with a test of our viewing perspective. We are thrown into perspectival relief by viewing Claire Danes inside what appears to be a shoebox rendering of a room. On one side of the space, Danes appears quite large, while on the other side, she is an appropriate height for her surroundings. This image is an early reminder that not everyone processes space and time the same way. Danes starts the film by saying inside this box of optical illusions, “My name is Temple Grandin. I’m not like other people. I think in pictures, and I connect them.”³ We learn later in the film that this rendering—or miniature model—is the product of a Physics project. After numerous attempts to construct this model under certain spatial and depth constrictions, Grandin’s high school mentor, Dr. Carlock (played by David Strathairn) advises her to pay more attention to what all surfaces do in such an altered space, and at last she is the only student who constructs an accurate model. The film pulls this interaction and

success from Grandin's autobiographical writings, and foregrounds this event as the one that opened the first of many doors for this autistic woman.

In the 2010 film,⁴ the director, Mick Jackson, makes use of this physicalized metaphor several times. The first of these transitions occurs and fails when Grandin stays at her Aunt Ann's home and ranch in Arizona (in 1966). She needs to mark the guest room as her room after asking, "How do I know this is my room?" Her aunt (played by Catherine O'Hara) responds to this question with the statement, "Because we say so. This is your room," and she writes Temple's name on a piece of paper. One day, the housekeeper has cleaned Grandin's room and accidentally knocks this name sign off the door. It lies face up on the floor in the hallway outside Grandin's room, and Claire Danes displays a thoroughly believable distress in response to this new positioning of the sign. With tears in her eyes and labored breathing, she runs out of the house and places herself inside the squeeze machine that Grandin's aunt and uncle use on their farm to calm livestock during inoculations. Her aunt sees her panicked flight from the house and follows in an attempt to appease whatever "set her off." Danes says pleadingly, "Close it on me; close it on me! Please! Close the sides, please! Harder, more!" Once Grandin's aunt secures the gates in a closed position, Danes breathes more freely and relaxes out of her character's panicked state.

Routine placement of events and objects, bodies in space, and ordered time sequences are all incredibly important to those on the autism spectrum. Without this sense of routine and order, it is almost as if all existential parameters have disappeared. As the Grandin character explains toward the end of the film at a 1981 autism convention, "Being held by another person is scary, but rolling or being held by surfaces reproduces the calming effect that ordinary children get from a hug." Without the name sign on her

borrowed door, it is as if Danes (as Grandin) cannot place herself in her aunt's home. Without a clearly designated space, this character has insurmountable relational difficulties.

Danes recovers from this initial disorientation only to encounter similar hurdles at Grandin's college. Using a scientifically proven set of experiments, the Grandin character constructs her own squeeze machine and employs it on a control group of fellow students in order to obtain enough plausible statistics to enable her to keep the machine for her own personal use. For Grandin, the machine she creates for herself, based on the cattle entrapments used to administer vaccines, is the tool that allows for the possibility of communication, participation, and relationship. It serves as a kind of down time accompanied by a squeezing action that holds the sense of overstimulation at bay while Grandin collects herself. She runs back to this machine after every traumatizing experience at college and emerges from its embrace with the peace and calm one might gain from the embrace of a loved one, family member, or friend. Since Grandin's boundary issues prevent her from seeking these human sources of embrace, her machine is the invention that acts as a replacement and accommodation in these scenarios, and the film documents her reliance on this apparatus beyond college through her graduate studies.

Danes (as Grandin) has another panic attack in her attempts to exit from a local grocery store through doors that spin her mind in an associative storm of execution devices that mimic the sliding motion of these automatic closing glass doors. The noise that these doors create, added to the guillotine-like motion of the glass, presents a major hurdle for this character. She must suspend her mind's perseverating actions that trace all other associations with this combined sound and physical motion. Emily and

James Savarese wonder along these lines why we don't "...pursue the claims of sensory processing, proprioception, and movement problems that appear consistently in these [autistic] autobiographical works." They ask, "Why not begin to connect the anxiety that is so much a part of autism with these bodily differences, reading perseveration and withdrawal not as signs of an innate aversion to the social but as coping strategies, strategies that then contribute to a growing lack of social experience in an already inhospitable and stigmatizing world?"⁵ When we view our Grandin scene here as a sequence of coping strategies in an inhospitable environment rather than as antisocial withdrawal, we make room for the very social interaction that these two characters proceed to have.

As Danes pauses, unable to go through these doors, a friendly shopper compliments her western attire. This shopper interacts with Danes, not knowing that she is midstream in a panic attack that stalls her movement. Danes tries to explain that she is autistic and is having difficulty with the space: "I have trouble with automatic doors; sometimes I'm nervous. I'm autistic." In a major moment of malapropism, this fellow shopper, Betty Goscowicz (played by Stephanie Faracy) remarks, "Oh, my son is artistic, and he's got the same thing with airplanes!" and continues to babble her way through small talk that revolves around artistic sensibilities. She finally recognizes that the Grandin character is trapped by an inability to traverse through these sliding doors and offers to hold them open while Danes steps out.

While this particular example from the film explains the Grandin character's need for new coping strategies to deal with a social world that does not in any way cater to her perceptual fears, it also demonstrates Grandin's perfectly adequate social interaction with the new acquaintance

that helps her through the doors. Danes says with relief, “A door opened and I went through it!” to which character Betty responds with a broad smile, “Yes, you did, and I held it.” The notion of who is socially awkward shifts easily in this scene to one that echoes Lady Malaprop and veers away from an accusation of social inadequacy on Grandin’s part. The scene is brilliant in this respect—conflating “autistic” with “artistic”—and opens into a subsequent exchange between two characters that catapults Grandin’s career. In effect, her career started on the day she could not travel through the sliding doors alone.

Two other documentary films worth mentioning are Gerardine Wurzburg’s 2005 *Autism is a World*, and Tricia Regan’s 2008 *Autism: the Musical*. The first of these is one made with CNN that focuses on the life and diagnosis of autistic adult Sue Rubin, as narrated by actor Julianna Margulies. Rubin is one of any number of individuals on the autism spectrum who is largely non-verbal. Her parents, who appear with Rubin in the film, assumed from medical assessments of their daughter prior to age thirteen that she had some form of severe retardation. Through the use of assisted technology and a reassessment of Rubin around the time of puberty, her parents understood their daughter to be a person of high intelligence who had taken a longer amount of time to emerge as gifted rather than retarded. This film traces Rubin’s journey through years when she was thought to be a low-functioning member of the autistic community with a retrospective narrative that gives voice to Rubin’s own conceptualization of these early years. We see an adult Rubin after this explanation of her younger self who appears competent and yet still dependent on a series of routines and repetitive behaviors that lie outside the parameters of normative adult behavior.

Just as *Rain Man*'s Raymond relied on a very scheduled daily routine and the guarantee that every object reside in its proper place, the actual person Sue Rubin depends on repetitive activities that calm her anxiety. These include holding spoons under running water, bringing several of them to her tutoring sessions, and letting her assistant count to three in order to facilitate Rubin's entry into a classroom setting through a doorframe that gives her pause. Similar to Grandin's need for a literalization of the door metaphor for passages into new sections of her life, Rubin needs a literal count spoken by her assistant in order to pass through any unfamiliar or less-traveled threshold. We witness Rubin attending a community college environment and meet with advisors and teachers using both her personal assistant as an educational aid as well as facilitated communication technology that allows her to type thoughts, notes, or questions that are then vocalized by a computer program, reversing a technology where those who speak can digitally record their speech. Rubin's device lets her type her thoughts and hear her recorded thoughts spoken aloud. At times this technology guesses incorrectly for her and she needs to re-type her questions or notes, so even this relatively new technology needs a certain amount of its own assistance. Aside from these occasional glitches, Rubin uses technological aids as her major means of communication with others, and it has enabled her to give public presentations about autistic advocacy for others on the spectrum in need of encouragement and support. As a principally non-verbal communicator, Rubin defies the medical assumption that those on the spectrum who do not speak are low functioning.

In Tricia Regan's *Autism: the Musical*, Los Angeles artist and activist Elaine Hall details her adoption of a Russian son with autism. The film documents Hall's first encounter with her son, Neal, and continues with a

narrative about how she began a collaborative devised theatre company, The Miracle Project, in order to connect with other autistic children and their parents. Regan essentially chronicles Hall's process in her first collaborative effort with a group of kids and parents in the L.A. area who have recognizable fears about taking part in a stage production. Hall's whole approach to working with these children is a mix of therapy and a localized show business. She works with an extreme patience to choreograph all of these performers for early meetings, later rehearsals, and the triumph of a final production. Using the natural talents of instrumentalists, singers, and perseverators who delight in the extended art of monologue, Hall builds and delivers a musical all about the experiences of children on the autism spectrum. We learn at the film's end that a number of these performers went on to an integrated education in public schools, found their voices in the use of facilitation technologies, and struggled to conquer their communication difficulties.

For most of the footage, Hall engages her performers in the sorts of theatrical exercises that proved most useful with her son, Neal as concrete means of social interaction and a physical, if not verbal, dialogue. The children she works with in this production range from Neal's non-verbal status to those who talk without pause about highly specialized interests. Toward the end of the film, Hall appears in a recording of Neal's first attempts at facilitated communication with an occupational therapist and a piece of technology that allows him to type his thoughts. When Hall asks Neal what he needs most from her, he types the phrase, "Listen to me."⁶ This phrase is so telling, given that Hall's personality overflows all spaces and interactions in this film to the extent that her nervous energy fills in every silence Neal and the others present. Neal's call for an audience from his

adoptive mother is one that doubtless echoes throughout an entire generation of those on the spectrum whose emergence (to borrow Grandin's term) happened only when assistive technology gave them an artificial voice with which to communicate. Neal's request to his mother signals both a strong desire on his part to be heard when he communicates and perhaps also a need for others to hear him differently; as autistic author Dawn Prince reminds us, "...what people often forget is that listening is the superior half of speaking."⁷

If we consider where film began, as a series of static images flipped from one to another in sequence on a reel-to-reel projector, we might choose to understand each of these movies as pictures, frozen moments in time that record where and how the world positions autism at the times and in the contexts they were made. It is in our listening that new cultural messages are absorbed. Let us rise to Dawn Prince's challenge and become better listeners.

¹ Scott Robertson, "Neurodiversity, Quality of Life, and Autistic Adults: Shifting Research and Professional Focuses onto Real-Life Challenges," *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol 30, No 1 (2010), p. 2 of 27.

² "Autism Functions/The Function of Autism," *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol 30, No 1 (2010), p. 12 of 25.

³ Transcription of *Temple Grandin*, 2010. All subsequent script quotations from this film come from this same 2010 personal transcription of the DVD.

⁴ *Temple Grandin*, 2010, screenplay by Christopher Monger and William Merritt Johnson. Monger says in the supplementary material on the *Temple Grandin* DVD that this was a dream project for him. He "couldn't think of a person whose story is better told in cinema because [Grandin] thinks in pictures and cinema is pictures...."

⁵ Emily Savarese and Ralph Savarese, "'The Superior Half of Speaking': An Introduction," *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol 30, No 1 (2010), 16 of 27.

⁶ *Autism: the Musical*, 2008. Personal 2010 transcription of Neal's computerized message.

⁷ Dawn Prince, "Cultural Commentary: The Silence Between: An Autoethnographic Examination of the Language Prejudice and its Impact on the Assessment of Autistic and Animal Intelligence," *DSQ*, Vol 30, No 1 (2010), p. 7 of 7.