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Honors Thesis

The Autistic Character in Modern Film and the Conflict between the Individual and the Social Self

Mental illness in the context of fiction generally expresses certain preoccupations of our society, particularly our fears: fear of the unknown, fear of corruption of the mind and consequently the self, fear of disability, and fear of the mentally ill themselves. Mental illness is a trope endemic to genres such as horror and the police procedural, particularly iterations of mental illness like dissociative personality disorder and antisocial personality disorder, where insanity is the motivation of the villain as well as the villain itself. Mental illness is also a primary characteristic of a certain kind of hero, the heroic savant, if one will, a deeply dysfunctional individual whose genius and whose disability are inexorably linked, a warning as to the price of brilliance. However, mental illness is likewise used to express core aspects of human nature, questions raised by the human condition, even beyond questions of sanity and insanity, through the nature of mental illness: the absence of traits considered essential to the nature of the human animal, or, conversely, the exaggeration of such traits unto the point of dysfunction.

In the decades since the autism spectrum[1] was first isolated and defined as a psychological condition outside of the normal, alternately called a disorder or a variation, depending on the politics and perspective of the individual or institution in question, and in particular the last several years, there has been a notable rise in literature and other fictional works using the condition to comment on the nature of human empathy and interpersonal connection and the human desire for companionship and understanding. Many such works contain strong thematic links in addition to their mutual focus on autistic individuals. The foundation of the autistic character in modern fiction and consequently in the popular consciousness came in the 1980s with perhaps what is still the most famous of such depictions, the 1988 film *Rain Man*. While not the first film to depict a character with autism or indeed the first to focus on the condition, it is the depiction which has had the strongest and most lasting influence on the dominant perception of autism in the realm of fiction as well as in society at large (Treffert, n.d.).[2]

The works given closer examination below were selected for their focus on the emotional lives and personal psychology of autistic characters, unfortunately leading to a predominance of depictions of moderate to high-functioning autistics. Works depicting low-functioning and non-verbal autistics tended to focus on the reactions of neurotypical relatives to having an autistic member in their family and the emotional lives of said neurotypical family members, using the autistic character more so as a plot device, a catalyst for the character development of neurotypical parents and siblings, with a

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[1] Autism is not a single condition with a predictable set of symptoms, but rather a broad spectrum encompassing a huge variety of different behaviours and level of functioning (meaning relative ability and capacity for independence). All iterations of autism involve delayed development of social and communication skills as well as limited patterns of behaviour and interest, but not all involve additional cognitive delays. Often there is a great range in terms of level of disability, where some affected individuals struggle with basic self-care in the absence of a nurse while others are entirely capable of living independently.

[2] One of the major criticisms of *Rain Man* from the autistic community has been that such a depiction stereotypes them, a criticism which should not be taken as a condemnation of the film *Rain Man* specifically, but of the lack of a broad spectrum of accurate representations when it comes to a condition as complex as autism, which naturally leads to misunderstanding and stereotyping, as is the case with other underrepresented and misrepresented groups such as women and ethnic minorities.

general theme of the horror of disability and the "loss" of a child.[3] I will discuss one such work with *Rain Man*, but the erasure of the perspectives of low-functioning autistics even in narratives ostensibly about them must be noted. The works are largely films, with the inclusion of one television series as well as one fictionalized biographical work. The chosen works likewise feature adults for much the same reason as the above. These works also largely feature male autistic characters, a reflection of a disparity that exists among those diagnosed with autism (American Psychiatric Association 1994), a ratio (4:1 approximately) which is roughly consistent with the sex ratio of autistics' fictional counterparts.[4] Autistic culture, the norms and values that autistics create when communicating amongst themselves, is largely absent in mainstream cultural depiction; instead, most works primarily show neurotypical/autistic interaction.

On the nature of Autism

A useful working definition for disability is the absence or impairment of an ability considered normal in a given population, an ability that one requires to function as an effective member of that

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[3] In these cases, the character is usually, but not always, a child. Most fictional depictions of autism feature children, usually pre-adolescents, despite the fact that autism is a lifelong condition. More recent depictions are more likely to include adults with the condition, but the primary focus of both fictional and non-fictional depictions of the condition tends to be children.

[4] The ethnic origin of these characters, however, was extremely disproportionate, with the vast majority depicted as ethnically white western Europeans. There is a significant difference in rates of ASD diagnosis found in different ethnic populations within the United States, with a prevalence of 12/1000 among the children of non-Hispanic whites, 10.2/1000 among the children of non-Hispanic blacks, and 7.9/1000 among the children of Hispanics, according to the Center for Disease Control (Baio, 2012.) which may or may not have access to higher level medical care as a confounding factor. There is nonetheless a discrepancy between these numbers and the fact that Autism Spectrum Disorders are presented near-exclusively as white disorders, ignoring the intersection between racial minority status and developmental disability. Confounding factors to this discrepancy such as issues of under representation and limited roles available to people of colour may be more important in explaining the ethnic representation of autistics. The highest profile instance of an officially autistic character (unofficially, one might also speak of Abed Nadir of the television series "Community") is the protagonist of "My Name is Khan" a 2010 film of Indian production, which highlights the further issue of the dominance of American film. The most common source of non-white characters with autism remains countries where the ethnicity in question dominates, and the United States, for all its diversity, remains nonetheless a majority white nation. English-language films on the topic remain highly homogenized in terms of ethnicity.

Much as is the case with gender, it is difficult to discern whether this is a discrepancy born of genetic and environmental differences between these ethnic groups or whether this is a difference of socialization and of faulty diagnostic standards, which have unintentionally included a confounding and occluding cultural variable. There is likewise the potential problem of overdiagnosis and underdiagnosis in regards to access to mental health resources, as the statistics cited above are not taken from a random sample of the population, but from diagnostic statistics which do not necessarily describe the true incidence of the condition, but rather the incidence of its diagnosis.

society and to interact with other members of that society.[5] Disability is the inability to walk in a society that is primarily nomadic or the inability to hear in a society that primarily uses audible language to communicate. A useful working definition for mental illness is any disorder, disability or condition whose symptoms are primarily psychological, with the caveat that the condition in question must be of significant distress to the individual, pose significant danger to either the affected individual or others, or significantly interfere with the affected individual's ability to engage with society and that its behavioural symptoms must not fall under what is considered normal behaviour according to the norms of the affected individual's culture or specific social context.[6] Conditions such as depression and obsessive compulsive disorder, while in general no danger to any but the affected, both involve mild to severe distress or loss of well-being for the affected individual and can involve a reduced ability to function in society. Both involve mental states and behaviours considered abnormal and depression in particular can pose a threat to the health and safety of the affected individual when it leads to suicidal ideation and actions. On the other hand, a case of antisocial personality disorder does not necessarily distress the affected individual, but it can lead to harm to others through the affected individual's actions, which can also lead to a higher level of interaction with law enforcement and the criminal

[5] If those people who have what is ostensibly a disability, such as nearsightedness, can easily correct this condition, in this case with an easily applied prosthetic, that is, spectacles fitted with corrective lenses, that corrects any difficulty they had navigating society, are they still disabled? According to this definition, I believe the answer would be no, and furthermore, that most citizens of western society would not describe easily correctable conditions like nearsightedness to be a disability despite the fact that such a condition would operate as a potentially serious impediment in another, less affluent society, or the poorer parts of affluent societies, where such corrective measures might be prohibitively expensive or entirely unavailable. (Myopia would also not likely be considered a disability in many societies due to its high rate of occurrence). Indeed, under this definition, a nearsighted individual with glasses would no longer be significantly hampered by their condition as to be disabled; however, they would still be nearsighted. Similarly, deaf individuals in a primarily deaf society with full use of communication skills like sign language would not be disabled because they are more than capable of navigating the society in which they find themselves. Again, they would still be deaf.

If, through behavioural, medical, and environmental changes, an autistic person could be brought to the point where they could navigate society with ease, they would no longer be disabled, but nonetheless, they would still be autistic - only in the instance where essentially all signs of autistic mentality were erased, would a person cease to be autistic. Disability need not be inherent to autism; indeed, though a person might go from being diagnosed with autism to functioning at a subclinical level, where they no longer meet the diagnostic criteria in terms of severity, they would still have autistic traits, albeit in a form no longer considered disabling.

[6] For instance, an intense belief that human sacrifice is necessary to continue the cycle of life and death might be considered a sign of insanity in the context of suburban Edmonton, particularly if the affected acted upon such a belief, but not in the context of pre-contact Tenochtitlan.

justice system, actions that significantly deviate from societal norms (American Psychiatric Association 1994).[7]

By these two definitions, autism is certainly a disability and a mental illness, though some might be reluctant to take on the heavy stigma that comes with these terms, as it is a difference that presents in primarily mental and behavioural symptoms and results in difficulty functioning in society. The vast majority of academic writing, as well as the dominant social conversation surrounding autism, focuses on autism in the context of medicine and psychology/psychiatry. While the primary symptoms of the broad spectrum of autism are primarily behavioural, autism falls under the biomedical model, as a neurodevelopmental disorder, a distinct difference in the formation of the brain. Nevertheless, diagnosis and treatment are largely the purview of the psychologist and the behaviourist, as effective treatment (symptom management) is often limited to cognitive behavioural intervention. The initial cause of autism is as of yet unknown, though twin studies would indicate a strong genetic component with a possible prenatal environmental component[8] as well (Bailey et al. 1995). Part of the confusion of course, is that the autistic spectrum contains within its definition a broad range of behaviour and ability, from the severely disabled to the mildly eccentric, linked primarily by common traits and themes rather than a confirmed common cause which could mean that two developmentally divergent individuals,

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[7] The last caveat, the requirement that symptoms deviate significantly from societal norms, is an important qualification, perhaps the most important qualification, but the previous caveats are likewise essential, lest we fall into the trap of the pathologization of abnormality. Abnormality, in and of itself, cannot be considered a disorder if the individual is to function freely within society.

[8] A theory commonly referred to as "Extreme Male Brain" proposes that the difference in the prenatal environment that causes autism is a comparatively high level of testosterone, resulting in an exaggeration of male neurological traits, more specifically, a style of thinking that emphasizes "systemizing" over empathizing, a thinking style here associated with the female brain (Baron-Cohen, 2002). There are a few issues with this, primarily that there are many potential confounding factors as to why these differences in thinking style develop beyond that of a sex difference, if indeed this is a difference of sex and not gender, a difference of nature rather than nurture, which has not been fully substantiated and which is an important distinction seeing as autism has shown to have high heritability. The way that such a distinction closely follows the assumptions of a traditional conceptualization of sex and gender should be met with some skepticism, but not outright dismissal. That there are general sex differences in the brain is well-established, and it must be emphasized that hypermasculinity in the common meaning of an exaggerated male gender presentation is not what is being suggested. There may be an attempt here to explain the strong sex difference in those affected by the autistic condition, which does primarily affect males.

who have both been placed beneath the same diagnostic umbrella due to the similarities of their behavioural presentation may have had a very different cause, a different set of genes or a different prenatal environment, as the genesis of that behaviour. What we now know as autism could, in fact, be someday divided into many different disorders, rather than the current distinctions of classic autism, high-functioning autism, and PDD-NOS, the last a broad catch-all for all that is developmentally autistic, which does not match the diagnostic criteria of the previous two. This should give some idea of the scope of the phenomenon that medical professionals are attempting to quantify: a complex, multifaceted issue with many potential confounding factors.

The characteristic traits of autism according to diagnostic criteria are as follows: abnormal social functioning; abnormal communication skills; and repetitive or limited interests and behaviour. These are the traits relevant to diagnosis, but this does not explain how and why these traits and behaviours occur. The common understanding of abnormal social functioning in the context of autism is what is called a "theory of mind" deficit. Theory of mind empathy refers to the ability to construct an accurate mental model of another individual's mental and emotional state, an ability that human beings, alongside highly developed animals such as great apes and whales, use to predict the motivations, emotions, and knowledge of our fellow creatures and to thereby predict their behaviour. The neurotypical (in this case, non-autistic) individual does this through a brain hard-wired to process the full spectrum of human communication: a tidal wave of information that includes individual elements such as relationship status, body language, facial expression, vocal tone, and the complex interplay of connotation and denotation found in the semantics of verbal language, as well as cultural elements that include the veritable encyclopedia of norms and assumptions based on everything from race and socioeconomic status to gender and regional origin which provide context for all of the former. The neurotypical brain processes this ocean of information with extreme speed—so quickly, that the individual in question is often unaware of the processes at work, unaware of how and why they come to

conclusions, though they may be able to reverse engineer or rationalize their reasoning if asked, because it is a process that occurs automatically, rather than a Sherlockian process of conscious inductive reasoning. The average neurotypical person does not think: "That person's shoulders are slumped, their eyes downcast, and their vocal tone flat, perhaps they are upset." The average neurotypical person thinks, "That person seems upset." The previous steps of data collection and processing are excluded from conscious perception unless brought to the individual's attention, much in the way of other involuntary processes of the body and brain, such as breathing, which may be consciously controlled, at least to a point, but continues unaided, without using any of the conscious mind's resources, when that mind is preoccupied with other tasks. This rapid processing of social information allows the neurotypical, non-autistic individual to transmit, receive, and process large amounts of information in a short space of time, far more than could be communicated through denotative language alone, the better to quickly react to changes in a social partner's emotional or mental states and to act in an appropriate manner within the silent boundaries and cultural norms that regulate social interaction, a manner that does not risk social exclusion. The differences in the structures and the wiring of the autistic brain mean that the ability to rapidly process social cues taken for granted in the neurotypical population is distorted or obstructed, either because the brain is not processing this information quickly enough or because it is taking in too much information for it to process,[9] possibly indicating that unlike the neurotypical brain, the autistic brain is less likely to simplify and generalize data, less likely to process the world holistically, which has the potential to explain the common autistic ability to focus detail and minutia compared to most neurotypicals (American Psychiatric Association 1994). The impediment of the brain's ability to process massive amounts of social information means that autistic individuals are operating on a paucity of information

[9] Is the autistic brain failing to process the same degree of social information because there is too much information or is it failing to process the same degree of social information because the amount that the brain can process is lower? Here we have a dilemma of causality, but not nearly enough data to solve it.

in every social situation in which they find themselves, resulting in a tendency to act inappropriately, to misjudge what is and what is not socially acceptable, to misunderstand the emotions and behaviours of others, or to simply become overwhelmed. Many higher-functioning autistics report difficulty "keeping up" with the flow of conversation, particularly when such a conversation involves more than two speakers. They likewise report difficulty distinguishing between emotions and detecting sarcasm, such as instances where they mistake a peer's laughter for crying or cruelty at their expense for sincerity. The autistic individual is operating in a social scenario which is moving too quickly for them to take their bearings: they experience a situation which is to their neurotypical peers a calm and winding stream as a rushing torrent, pulling them along too swiftly for them to control their orientation in relation to the situation. This is the source of autism's characteristic social awkwardness.

However, awkwardness is not the final ripple of this neurological difference. Simply because the autistic brain finds comparative difficulty in processing this social information does not mean that it does not receive this information, and the unfortunate reality of a circuit that has exceeded its capacity is an overload. Autistic individuals encounter a great deal of stress due to a mismatch between processing capacity and cognitive load, and the more stimulus like loud noises, unpleasant sensations, personal emotional duress, and the complex information and cues provided by social situations, the more likely the individual will lose control and fall into an emotional meltdown.[10] Many of the secondary characteristics found in autism are a reaction to this tendency to overload; behaviours that either relieve stress such as stimming[11] or that evade unpleasant, stressful, or overwhelming stimuli,

[10] Not quite as explosive as the literal meltdown that gives it metaphorical weight, and far less likely to irradiate local wildlife.

[11] Self-stimulatory behaviour, usually repetitive vocal expressions and motor movements that calm the individual and release excess emotions. Attempting to stop stimming in autistic individuals, while intended to make such individuals appear more socially acceptable by hiding the most visible signs of their disability, is most likely misguided, considering the role such behaviours have in releasing stress and anxiety, primary causes of avoidant behaviour in autism, a far more damaging impediment to the autistic individual's social functioning.

such as avoidance of social interaction, avoidance of eye-contact, and maintaining a rigid schedule so as to reduce uncertainty and therefore cognitive load.[12]

Beyond the conceptualization of autism as a medical matter, there is the question of the autistic personality. While with autism all things vary, both in nature and extent, there are certain common traits that autistic individuals tend to share quite outside what one would call disability. Being a condition that differs primarily in how and when development occurs, autistic individuals will appear alternately hyper-mature and immature in comparison to their age group, as well as presenting great peaks and valleys in skills (American Psychiatric Association 1994), such as individuals who can perform calculus at a level far beyond their peers but struggle with tasks that said peers developed at a much earlier developmental stage such as shoe-tying. Relatedly, age-atypical interests and a preference for social connection with individuals outside of that age group is common in autistics of any age (American Psychiatric Association 1994). In many ways, young autistics operate on a very different wavelength from their peers, constantly out of sync with the interests and preoccupations that dominate their age group, either precocious or late-blooming and sometimes both at once in different areas of their lives. The second factor in autistic empathy, after the difficulty in predicting mental states due to a

[12] It is notable in the above that while the neurological mechanism of autism is inherent and congenital, present from birth, many of the symptomatic behaviours are not inherent. They are not native nor necessary to the autistic being. They are not hard-wired, rather, they are learned behaviours, reactions to the environment, the result of nature, the alternative wiring of the autistic brain, meeting nurture, the social and cultural context which shapes all members of society. One might use the example of the deaf community: deafness is often mechanical, often inherent as opposed to acquired, but, in general, poor language acquisition in the context of deafness, as was common in the days before widespread therapeutic intervention in the communication skills of born-deaf children, most certainly is not. Historically, it is the result of an individual who lacks the proper tools to facilitate communication, despite possible mechanical means, such as writing or sign language, and thus never develops the ability to use such tools by default. As with deafness, much that is characteristic of autism is malleable and reactive to changes in the social environment, and one may therefore assume that such things are at least partially learned. This is an aspect which is vital to remember when discussing ability and disability in society: the suffering and disability found in a condition are not necessarily inherent, not necessarily inevitable. While the differences in wiring and structure and consequent sensory issues and tendency towards overloading are inseparable from the condition of autism, the high anxiety, the social isolation, the paucity of self-help skills—those are not. They can be altered, particularly the first two, which are exacerbated by the behaviour of the autistic individual's community, their social peers, specifically by the rejection of the autistic individual in reaction to the perceived strangeness and awkwardness of that individual. The behaviour of the disabled individual does not exist in a vacuum, and the culpability for the suffering of the disabled individual cannot be placed entirely at the feet of their condition.

comparatively lower ability to process social information, is the simple fact that autistic individuals think very differently from their peers, and that they are preoccupied with very different subjects to an often extreme degree (American Psychiatric Association 1994). Another aspect of empathy in conflict with the autistic mind is that it is easier to bridge the gap between two minds that are alike: the more alike two minds are, the more similarly they function.

In addition to being unusual in nature, the interests of autistic individuals are generally highly intense and enduring (American Psychiatric Association 1994). The object of interest can vary wildly, from batteries to baseball, from linguistics to law, as can the intensity and duration of the interest, from a brief, but strong preoccupation which lasts anywhere from hours to days, to weeks or even months, but which eventually fades, to a lifelong obsession that is fundamental to the individual's identity. This can exaggerate the peaks in the "peaks and valleys" of skill development mentioned previously, resulting in "splinter skills," exceptional ability in one or a few areas (American Psychiatric Association 1994), which when paired with an individual who is delayed in most other areas is often a cause for curiosity. These savant skills are often prominent in popular depictions of autism despite the fact that autistic savants compose a minority of the autistic population.

Autistics are generally less social than their neurotypical peers, in no small part due to the common preference for non-social stimuli and aversion to social stimuli, but it is important to note that a tendency towards self-isolation and a preference for solitary activities does not exclude a desire for social connection. A combination of weak social and communication skills and social rejection results in feelings of alienation and detachment. Some respond with anger and resentment, and others, particularly among the high-functioning end of the autistic population, engage in passing behaviour,[13]

[13] "Passing," that is, performing socially as a neurotypical, is highly encouraged by interventional therapies such as ABA as well as educators, but can result in higher levels of stress for the autistic individual. Nevertheless, it is often a necessity for social success. Some autistics advocate behaving openly autistic in order to normalize autistic behaviours, particularly stimming and other stress-reduction strategies (Schaber, A., 2014).

suppressing outward signs of their autism and consciously imitating normal social behaviour in order to achieve acceptance. The problem, however, is that the automatic social processing of the autistic individual is still very different from the neurotypical population which composes the majority, and attempting to replicate consciously, manually, what the neurotypical brain does automatically, results in the same problem of cognitive load discussed earlier. The level of mimicry required to pass perfectly for neurotypical is only possible in very high-functioning individuals, and for those individuals, passing at a high level is stressful and tiring to the degree that the façade is difficult to maintain over extended periods of time or is otherwise flawed (Schaber 2014).

In the most marginal of cases, those autistic individuals who rest at the border of the clinical definition as well as subclinical individuals who show autistic traits without notable impairment, or at least without impairment to the degree required to necessitate diagnosis, appear simply eccentric. Subclinical, and even many clinical individuals, achieve a degree of social acceptance by skills developed through the extreme specialization that autistic interests and attention span encourage. Eccentricity and otherwise unusual social behaviour often receive greater accommodation when they co-occur with exploitable skills. Undiagnosed individuals who do not have these economically useful skills, regardless of whether they are largely or entirely harmless, are faced with rejection and discrimination.[14] The autistic difficulty with understanding the emotions of others, both in recognizing

[14] The assumption that ability cannot exist alongside disability, the false dichotomy that exists between these two groups, works in two ways: one assumes that the disabled have nothing to contribute and that the abled cannot have disability, cannot be marred with weakness or imperfection, cannot belong to the previous group, the disabled, which one has already dismissed as a burden. When mainstream cultural consciousness recognizes a disabled individual as possessing ability, this is generally framed as a novelty, a curiosity in the grand circus that is life, thereby undermining the possibility that such individuals could act as evidence against the dominant paradigm, evidence that ability and disability exist on a fluid spectrum. By framing such individuals, individuals who contain both ability and disability within one being, as exceptions, this diminishes the perceived threat that these individuals pose to the dominant social conversation that allows the devaluation of the disabled and the subversion of their agency. There is the further concern that, if indeed such a system of abled dominance allows the devaluation and abuse of disabled individuals, we should note that the modern emphasis on meritocracy, specifically capitalist meritocracy where merit is defined by skills of value to the capitalist system (e.g. a system where stock brokers and plastic surgeons have higher prestige than teachers and waste management workers regardless of the balance of social utility) emphasizes not only social elevation of skilled individuals, but also, potentially, the devaluation and dehumanization of groups perceived less capable of economic contribution or consumption, groups

and replicating the signals of these emotions, means that the altered autistic ability to mimic changes not only their outward behaviour/emotive expression and social interaction, but also the development of their internal emotional lives, which are more likely to show divergent development from their peers, as well as showing more similarities to the emotional lives of neurotypical introverts as opposed to neurotypical extraverts (Jones et al 2001).

The most important thing to remember when discussing autism and autistics is that the traits that characterize autism are not alien, they are not inhuman. Rather, they are extremes of normal human traits. All of us[15] have different levels of comfort with social situations and desire to interact and all of us have different levels of empathic ability, and just as there is no hard line that divides the introvert from the extravert, there is no such line between the abled and the disabled, the autistic and the neurotypical. It is in this way that we use the autistic condition to explore questions that we all face.

Rain Man: Autism from the Outside

The eponymous autistic character of the film *Rain Man* is Raymond Babbit, the brother of the protagonist and viewpoint character, Charlie Babbit, who begins the narrative unaware that he is not an only child. Their relationship is discovered shortly after the death of Charlie's estranged father, when Charlie, slighted by his father's will, follows his father's finances back to the will's primary benefactor: Raymond, whose share of their father's estate is held in trust by the institution where he has spent the greater part of his life, after an incident where Raymond accidentally hurt Charlie when they were both children. Charlie, angry at this perceived slight as well as facing extreme financial difficulties in

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such as the elderly, the homeless, the destitute, and, of course, the mentally-ill and the disabled, not to mention the many places and people in which these groups intersect.

This is not to argue against meritocracy as a form of social organization, particularly in the context of the division of labour. Socially positive actions and the development of socially positive skills should be encouraged by the structure and values of society, but if one values the safety and well-being of disabled individuals, it is imperative that one recognize that, in the absence of a moral structure that attributes intrinsic value to human/self-aware beings, merit, especially economic merit, as the primary or only metric for human worth will result in abuse of members of society whose voices are already diminished and silenced.

[15] I assume that I am speaking primarily to other members of the human species here. If you reading this, and you are not in fact human, then you have my sincerest apologies.

regards to his personal business, essentially kidnaps Raymond from the institution and holds him as hostage in a bid to obtain the money. During his time with Raymond, who is verbal, but highly restricted in terms of social reciprocity, ability to communicate, and spontaneous, original behaviour, the self-centered Charlie learns to recognize the needs of others beyond himself and to appreciate his brother, no matter how unusual and dependent. Charlie attempts to acquire custody of Raymond, but the institution is deemed a better guardian, and Raymond returns to his home there (Levinson, 1988.)

Rain Man is a film of some quality, one that does much to portray a sympathetic view of autism and autistics, but not one that does much to humanize and normalize the condition. While the autistic Raymond and his condition are one of the most notable aspects of the film, in many ways, the film is not about Raymond, not about autistics and their emotions and affairs, but about Charlie, the self-involved neurotypical. Raymond, while an accurate portrayal of autism as a condition, does not receive much development, but rather remains a largely static character whose neurological condition and characterization are largely synonymous. Outside of his rigid particularities in terms of entertainment, food, and schedule, the film provides little insight into Raymond's preferences, beliefs, or desires. One may extrapolate to an extent that he fears flying, prefers familiarity, has at least some passing interest in dancing and the opposite sex, and has some residual regret/trauma for the childhood incident where he injured his brother, but the why of these preferences is largely untouched. Most likely for thematic reasons, Raymond's psychological state is inaccessible to the presumably neurotypical intended audience. Raymond's self-expression is not the purpose of the character or of the film; rather, Raymond's emotionally closed, dependent nature exists as a foil to Charlie's selfish, demanding behaviour, as well as to provide a warped and strange funhouse reflection of human (non-autistic) nature for the sake of said neurotypical audience.

Raymond is an inaccessible, othered character who serves to highlight the importance of altruistic social behaviour and the folly of self-involvement to the point of alienating and rejecting

one's family and social ties, a cautionary tale. The narrative pities Raymond's autistic inability to connect and to forward his own interests due to his hampered ability to communicate and to respond emotionally, and at the same moment, uses Raymond to condemn Charlie's far more neurotypical expression of the same qualities. His purpose fulfilled, Raymond returns to the institution where he has spent most of his life, and the generic autistic character, having fulfilled its role in the grand work written by neurotypicals as contrast to help the neurotypical, mentally-able, majority to define itself, returns to the wings of the collective consciousness. *Rain Man* is not a commentary of the state of the not-so-common autistic, but a commentary on the state of neurotypicals, defining the neurotypical ideal as cooperative, altruistic, and capable in contrast with autistics as separate, self-involved, and incapable—a common theme throughout fiction that features autistic characters.

Temple Grandin: The Value of a Different Perspective

A primary difference between *Temple Grandin*, a 2010 biopic on the subject of the non-fictional Temple Grandin, a real-life American intellectual specializing in the study of domestic animals who was diagnosed with autism at an early age, and the other works discussed herein is that it is based on a specific person, whereas the others, all fictional accounts, are based on the condition. While one shall focus on the fictionalized account of Grandin's life, it is important to note that the character is explicitly based on a specific person, while characters intended to represent autism as an idea will show common, homogenized features of autism, closer to the description found in the diagnostic criteria; actual individuals with autism, as is their wont as real human beings, may stray far from what is "typical." Further, that the character is female is worth some mention, as autism is a gendered disorder, with far more male individuals diagnosed as opposed to females.[16] That being said,

[16] It is broadly thought that a genetic cause is the source of the gender disparity found in those diagnosed with autism, but it is not clear to what degree the way in which children of different genders are socialized or the way autism itself is defined and therefore diagnosed, perhaps including more masculine autistic behaviours while ignoring their feminine equivalents, may act as confounding factors.

autistic behaviour may differ significantly based on sex and gender, so it would be remiss to exclude women from a study of the condition.

The story begins with Grandin as a young woman spending the summer at her aunt's ranch shortly before attending college for the first time, a period that functions within the story as an introduction to what one might consider the thesis of the film: that ability exists alongside disability, that the disabled have value to larger society, and that collaboration and accommodation—rather than institutionalization or segregation—between society and the disabled is necessary and beneficial for all parties. To quote the film, disabled individuals are "different, not less." During her time at the ranch, Grandin finds calm and personal satisfaction interacting with horses and cattle, and using her skills and her understanding of mechanics to help her aunt as well as developing coping mechanisms to deal with stress, namely, climbing into a cattle squeeze chute to apply pressure to her body, which has a similar calming effect to a hug, but without the additional stimuli and stress that comes from a more traditional hug from a human being—the inspiration for Grandin's "hug machine," now commonly used to calm hypersensitive autistics.

The film moves back and forth through time, visiting several periods in Grandin's life, from a young girl who does not speak to an anxious and awkward but brilliant young woman struggling with her condition and with the prejudice and ignorance of the world around her to a mature adult, confident in her ability and comfortable with her nature. That there are those who misunderstand and mock Grandin for the way that she is is a constant, but there are also those who see potential in her and nurture her abilities rather than dismiss her based on her idiosyncrasies: her mother, who refuses to institutionalize her daughter and teaches her to talk despite a profound lack of support from the psychiatric community, which sees the younger Grandin as a lost cause and a waste of time and

resources, further blaming her mother for her condition;[17] her high-school science teacher, who sees a brilliant young woman with an alien but able mind that understands the world from an entirely different perspective and encourages Grandin to pursue science in college; and her aunt, who allows Grandin to find her own solutions to the problems which arise when one is an autistic person living in a neurotypical world, even when those solutions seem disturbing and bizarre from the outside. It is these facilitators, alongside Gandin's own intelligence and drive, which allow her to achieve her position of success as an adult (Grandin 2010).

Temple Grandin, released in 2010, is interesting in contrast to *Rain Man*, released in 1988, first in that it portrays a far more optimistic view of the autistic condition and of the place of autistics in society. Raymond Babbit of *Rain Man*, while possessing prodigious ability of memory and mathematics, is nevertheless intrinsically unable to learn the basic self-help skills that would allow him to live independently or to apply those abilities in a productive manner in the context of larger society. Charlie's attempts to teach him show some effect, but in the end, Raymond is simply incapable of attaining the level of functioning necessary for semi-autonomous life outside of the institution where he has lived since childhood. The eponymous protagonist of *Temple Grandin*, on the other hand, begins life as a non-verbal child dismissed by society and her story is a continuous, if difficult arc towards independence and social recognition. Grandin is never shown to "conquer" her condition, her story framed not as a struggle against autism insomuch as a struggle for understanding and acceptance, but independence and social success are seen as realistic goals for her, particularly by the end of the film.

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[17] Historically, mothers were indeed blamed for their children's autism. According to the Refrigerator Mother theory of Childhood Schizophrenia (Autism,) the cause of the condition was a lack of maternal warmth, causing the child to first fail to bond properly with its primary caregiver and for that initial failure to bond to result in a later inability to generalize to bonding with others. This theory was widely accepted by the Western medical community until the mid-1960s and is to this day still found in some isolated pockets of academia and psychiatry. Nevertheless, the modern consensus is that of a primarily genetic beginning to the condition and that blaming mothers for their children's developmental condition was and is unfair and misguided (Sousa, A. 2011.)

These two disparate depictions of the same disorder are indicative both of the wide range of ability and disability encompassed by the autism spectrum, which includes individuals who spend their lives under constant care and supervision as well as many who live semi-autonomously with some assistance and others who achieve independence to a degree comparable to their neurotypical peers, and of the changing views on autism within the last few decades. The idea of autistics who have careers and families and lives independent of a caretaker is a relatively recent addition to the popular conception of the condition.

Another important difference between the two films is that while *Rain Man* takes an outside, neurotypical perspective on autism, *Temple Grandin* tells its story primarily from the perspective of Grandin herself, using visual graphics overlain atop the literal world and altered sound to represent both Grandin's unusual way of thinking—her extremely visual mind—and her sensory sensitivity and literal-mindedness, as a way of translating those aspects of Grandin's existence as an autistic person on a more intuitive level than simple description may provide to the presumably neurotypical audience. The camera takes on an "autistic gaze," the cinematography empathizing with Grandin's internal psychological state and rendering the world with her subjectivity—not only through scrawling her thoughts like graffiti upon the air through the previously mentioned graphic representations, but likewise through its choice of perspective. The cinematography becomes confusing, disorienting as it shakes and rapidly cuts from image to image when Grandin experiences distress and imitates her heightened empathy with animals by taking on their physical and emotional perspective—even at one point viewing the world through the eye of a horse as Grandin explains the way in which such animals see their surroundings. The literal, mechanical world and the simple, animal world become straightforward and comforting as the social, neurotypical world becomes confusing, over-complex, foreboding, and fraught with ambiguity. The autistic eye holds equal prominence, though not necessarily equal power, to that of the neurotypical.

It is rare to find fiction on autism from this perspective. More often, the purpose of the fictional autistic is a tool to explore the neurotypical mind, not something which contains value in and of itself. The autistic presence is instrumental, a means to an end, and any value the autistic perspective has is in relation to its utility in revealing nuances to typical psychology. *Temple Grandin* challenges this perspective, not only through questioning preconceptions about autistics and the disabled, but by insisting on disabled individuals' value to society. Temple Grandin is not useful *despite* her condition, but rather *through* and *because* of her condition and the insight it gives her into the emotional state and rational calculus of prey animals. Grandin's social utility outweighs her social burden, justifying her place in society and the investment of her relatives and mentors.

This argument reveals a key divide in the autistic and broader disability community in that, while it is an argument for the acceptance of autistics and the disabled, it is not an argument for the acceptance of all autistics and all disabled people. Rather, it is an argument for the acceptance of high-functioning autistics and the mildly disabled, particularly those who live in the superficially contradictory intersection of disability and giftedness. The argument that disabled individuals' social utility outweighs their associated burden simply does not hold true for many disabled persons, particularly the most severely disabled. The argument does not question that the main justification for discrimination against the disabled, is that they are a burden on their families and on society, but rather questions that this is the case for high-functioning individuals such as Grandin, thereby buying into and reinforcing an ableist conception of social organization. In order to oppose discrimination against all disabled people and all autistics, one would need to question the idea that one's relative economic value is and should be the primary and most valid measure of one's worth.

Mary and Max: Autistic People in a Neurotypical World

Mary and Max is first and foremost a film that does not shy from the petty imperfections of quotidian existence. The use of clay figures and stop motion animation, the cheerful soundtrack, and a

narrative style that shares many elements with children's stories acts as a foil for the often grotesque nature of its themes, such as child abuse and depression, and its characters, the eponymous Mary and Max being a young child suffering from neglect and an obese disabled man. The animation visually expresses this grotesqueness through cutesy depictions of dead and deformed animals and childhood (and childlike) naivety of sexuality, criminality, racism, and alcoholism, among other -ities and -isms, as well as the twisted, tortured expressions of those inanimate objects that happen to possess faces such as lawn gnomes, stylized mailboxes, and taxidermied birds. The two major locations, the city of New York and Mount Waverly, a suburb of Melbourne, are respectively represented in grayscale and sepia, a world composed of black and white for the autistic Max and a world composed of various shades of brown for the stifled and neglected Mary, with patches of red the only vibrant color in either's world.

The consistent use of bathos and irony found within *Mary and Max* highlights the central theme of social awkwardness and unwilling social isolation. Mary Dinkle, isolated by her impoverished, abusive conditions as well as her lack of confidence and her physical appearance that makes her a target of bullying, is an introspective, friendless child, in whom neither Mr. nor Mrs. Dinkle, a distant workaholic and an alcoholic kleptomaniac respectively, take little to no interest. Mary finds relief from her loneliness and a true companion for the first time when, after selecting his name randomly from a post-office phone book, she sends Max a letter, asking him about life in America. Max Horowitz lives an equally isolated existence, a friendless life where he is well outside of what is acceptable, even in a community as eclectic and eccentric as New York City. Despite already having reached middle age, Max is equally unequipped when it comes to engaging with the social world. He has never performed what are widely considered necessary and inevitable rites of passage into adulthood such as making friends, developing sexually and romantically, and maturing in terms of tastes in both food and entertainment. Max aspires to have a friend, is distressed and confused by expressions of sexuality—particularly when directed towards himself, prefers a diet of chocolate bars in hotdog buns, and has a

thriving obsession with the Noblets, a television program that operates as an in-world equivalent to the Smurfs. These two characters, separated by culture, neurology, and thousands of miles, are connected by a mutual alienation from the rest of society—an alienation from which they find relief in each other.

That being said, their friendship does not solve the problems of each other's lives, the conflict between the nature of both and the expectations and values of a neurotypical society. While Max's presence and guidance provide some comfort for Mary and his condition inspires her to study psychology, her family life continues to be negligent and abusive until the death of her parents and she remains awkward and prone to paying more attention to her own fantasies than the emotions of others around her, a major factor in the dissolution of her marriage after her husband, unable to cope with her spiraling depression as she follows in the footsteps of her alcoholic mother, leaves her for a New Zealand sheep-herder. In Max's case, his relationship with Mary is an active detriment to his mental health, the stress caused by her letters even leading to an extended period of hospitalization, their shared love of chocolate and sweets only further exacerbates his own poor eating habits and morbid obesity, and this one friendship, found so late in life, does not foster within him the general skills to create and maintain similar relationships—Mary becomes and remains the only friend Max ever has. On a practical level, his only friend—his sole significant human connection—brings him nothing but stress and inconvenience, and it is difficult to read whether his interactions with her are driven by affection or by a sense of obligation due to his blunted emotional affect. The first undeniable proof that Max holds strong positive emotions towards Mary is his strong anger and betrayal when, after many years of friendship, she sends him a copy of her book on autism, stating a hope to one day cure his disability, with the assumption that a search for a cure to the condition (meaning here elimination of said condition), which he has come to embrace as a significant, meaningful part of himself, is the natural goal of studying it. The second comes after his death, when Mary finds that Max has carefully preserved each of her missives—a mural to their relationship, stretching back years and years. In the

end, it is clear that Max reciprocates Mary's feelings, no matter the distress such feelings bring (Elliot 2009).

Let us unpack this. On an objective level, it is certainly the case that alliances such as friendships and other amicable relationships developed as a survival strategy: they allow a greater level of trust between two or more autonomous creatures with common interests and aid in survival and thus in reproductive fitness, resulting in populations whose response to environmental pressures is to develop traits which better facilitate such relationships, such as empathy and compassion towards friendly individuals. However, on a subjective level, we do not generally form these relationships with survival or reproductive fitness in mind. One may, of course, associate with someone for the purpose of economic advancement or protection, but to foster a platonic relationship of any closeness with these as one's primary motive would be considered falseness—a perverse misunderstanding of what friendship is and should be, where something that should be a connection of mutual affection is cheapened by the alternative motives of status and material gain.

The ideal friendship does involve a gain, but not one necessarily of a material kind. The gains found in the ideal friendship are those of companionship, mutual self-improvement, reciprocal affection and loyalty, and entertainment: things of great value, but not directly material value. Gift-giving, the most common form of material exchange between friends, is generally reciprocal and largely symbolic. The purpose of the gift is not to give material remuneration in payment for companionship, rather, it is to express affection that the giver has for the receiver and to represent the giver's willingness to support the receiver with their resources should the need ever arise, without need of compensation and usually with the trust, but not the insistence, that the receiver would do the same, should positions be reversed. The difference between this transaction and, for example, a business deal, is that between business associates the relationship is far more finite, with stated expectations as to services and goods exchanged on both sides that are limited in nature, while between friends the relationship is far more

open and malleable, and there is no expectation that either friend ever perform services or transfer goods implicitly offered until the, entirely hypothetical, time that they are needed, at which point the nature and extent of assistance is entirely up to the giver's discretion.

The difference is a matter of grammatical mood: that which will be done versus that which would be done—future and conditional. The business deal is a relationship which is maintained for the sake of an exchange. The giving of gifts among friends is an exchange which is made for the sake of maintaining a relationship, one that is valuable in and of itself, even if it should never bear material fruit. The friendship is a relationship of continued mutual support where resources both mental and material are shared as needed and to the degree warranted by depth of feeling and level of closeness.

Friendship, regardless of its genesis in our struggle for survival, has become an end in itself, so ingrained it is in our nature that it is necessary for the mental health of the individual. Isolated, the neurotypical individual endures distress, depression, and loneliness. Autistics, who tend to be asocial, do not express the same desire for interpersonal contact and connection as neurotypicals; however, it is prudent to ask whether this a matter of degree between autistics and non-autistics rather than a matter of absence within the nature of autistics and a presence within the nature of neurotypicals. Max, much like many of his non-fictional counterparts, does not seek out social interactions, does not seek out friendship, but that does not necessarily mean that he does not desire connection or that he does not try to understand the social landscape of the world around him. Much in the way that Mary finds companionship in Ethel, a rooster that fell off of the back of a truck, Max has his own collection of animals to provide him with company—a one-eyed cat, a half-bald parrot, a parade of short-lived gold-fish all named Henry—all much simpler than the people who are his options for more equal social contact, all less disruptive and less likely to illogically violate the rules he applies rigorously to the world. As a way of re-establishing contact after a serious argument with Mary, he gives her his prized Noblet collection—a gift of substantial emotional and financial significance. Even if he never

approached another human being with the purpose of establishing a friendship, Max's behaviour demonstrates that he does seek connection with fellow creatures and that he does value what connection with other humans he does have. When he no longer speaks to Mary, he misses her and accepts her apology despite his own rigid understanding of etiquette and behaviour and the deep anger her betrayal causes (Elliot 2009).

The nature of loneliness is much like that of hunger and that of thirst: it is the result of a need unmet. Just as a person deprived of food begins to hunger, a person deprived of social contact becomes lonely. One rejects socialization for the same reason that one rejects food: because one is not hungry/lonely or because the cost of obtaining sustenance/socialization is higher on balance than the detrimental effects caused by hunger/loneliness. The origin of autistic aversion to socialization may be twofold: both a lower desire for social contact, resulting in a lesser degree of loneliness than a more extroverted individual in similar circumstances, as the difference between needs and the resources to address those needs is lesser, as well as a greater amount of stress when engaging socially, meaning that the autistic individual may avoid distress by foregoing socializing for as long as possible, particularly if the degree of distress that is the result of isolation never exceeds that which is the result of social engagement. When the risk of rejection becomes greater than the gain of companionship, the individual's rational self-interest is self-isolation. This does not mean that such isolation is the ideal situation, but rather that the individual lacks the resources to successfully gain friendship and is likely to face rejection due to that lack: therefore, social isolation is a compromise, a conservative, avoidant approach which accepts loneliness rather than risk either the stress of socializing or the pain of rejection.

While the majority of autistics are more similar to introverts than extraverts in terms of their social needs, it is nevertheless the case that they generally prefer to have friends and are happier and more fulfilled with them than without them. One sees in Max an individual who, while isolated by a

combination of inability and disinterest, nevertheless finds meaning in a solitary connection with a lonely girl a world away. Friendship does not solve everything, does not banish the struggles of our lives, but it makes those struggles more meaningful, if only subjectively.

Hannibal: a Contrast between Autistic and Antisocial Empathy

Empathy is a term which describes a swath of similar phenomena related to emotion. More specifically, theory of mind empathy, as mentioned earlier, the particular form of empathy found disrupted in the context of autism, is the capacity to recognize the mental states of others: thoughts, opinions, emotions, knowledge, etc. Such a capacity is of utmost importance to social creatures, which rely on one another for safety, companionship and survival, and this is no doubt why the ability to intuit the perspective of another developed. However, such empathy often has limitations. Like many traits, the ability to empathize exists on a spectrum with some individuals more capable than others. There exist many psychological and neurological conditions which involve decreased or unusual manifestations of empathy, but in the case of autism, one speaks very specifically about a disruption of this theory of mind empathy. Furthermore, empathy is not an ability which operates outside or separate of the culture and experiences of a given individual; rather, empathy is enhanced among individuals of a similar history and social context, leading one to the conclusion that empathy is, to no small extent, dependent on similarity of perspective. In this way, theory of mind empathy is limited, as in order to experience complete empathy, one must inhabit the perspective of the other. The result of confronting a significantly different perspective is often cognitive dissonance, and the ability to hold two perspectives at once may require high levels of intellectual sophistication or, in fact, may be structurally impossible in its most complete form.

This brings us to the character of Will Graham, protagonist of Thomas Harris' novel *Red Dragon*, published 1981, as well it's two film adaptations, *Manhunter* in 1986 and a later picture that retained the title of the novel in 2002, and more pertinent to this essay, the most recent television

adaption of Harris' work, *Hannibal*, an ongoing series that first aired in 2013, the producers of which have made significant changes both in terms of plot and characterization as well as theme. Graham works as a profiler with the FBI, as a unique asset in the investigation of serial homicide and bizarre killings through his ability to recreate the motivations of the most strange and most warped of murderers that comes not solely from training in investigation and forensic psychology, but from a form of unusual empathy. Graham's work combined with his unique ability to connect with the minds of others results in emotional perturbation due to the distress of empathizing with the motivations and desires of such deeply disturbed individuals, which conflict with his own beliefs and morals, with his own ability to clearly delineate himself as an individual, to separate who he is and what he believes from the identities and motivations of those he profiles. In the words of the novel, "there were no effective partitions in his mind. What he saw and learned touched everything else he knew. Some of the combinations were hard to live with. But could not anticipate them, could not block and repress [...] in the bone arena of his skull there were no forts for what he loved" (Harris 1981, 20). This is not to say that he is capable only of empathizing with murderers and sadists, rather, he is capable of taking on any perspective, any point of view (Fuller 2013).

Will Graham is not autistic. He is, in fact, quite the opposite, though in terms of behaviour and characterization he is thematically similar: he is isolated, and becomes more so through the first season, he is uncomfortable with social interaction and is himself socially awkward due to his disordered empathy, and he avoids social situations not from preference, but from these interpersonal difficulties and the distress that comes from processing so much information, from taking in the feelings and perspectives of others to the point that his own are subsumed. In his introduction scene in *Hannibal*, when Jack Crawford asks Graham, "Where [he is] on the spectrum,"[18] he refers to himself as "closer to

[18] The "spectrum" mentioned here is not the autism spectrum, but rather the Baron-Cohen scale of empathy, which places conditions like autism alongside other low-empathy conditions like antisocial personality disorder and narcissistic

Asperger's and autistics than narcissists and sociopaths" (Fuller 2013). The original novel never makes reference to the parallel between autism and Graham's condition; however, many of the autistic-like traits found in the television series are faithfully adapted from his characterization in the novel. He often prefers the companionship of dogs, less complex and less demanding companions compared to humans, a preference shared by some autistics, but nevertheless exhibits a desire for emotional connection, for friendship and romantic relationships. He is even notably uncomfortable and avoidant when it comes to eye contact, a noted autistic trait, most likely for reasons very similar to real-life autistic counterparts, the distress of overwhelming amounts of data, data that Graham finds disturbing, even when dealing with people with whom he shares relative closeness, such as his direct superior at the FBI, Jack Crawford, his friend and potential love-interest Alana Bloom, and his psychiatrist, Hannibal Lecter.[19] This tendency to avoid social stimulus provided by facial cues is particularly marked when Graham experiences distress or discomfort in a social situation, due to Graham's coping strategy of hiding behind the frame of his glasses to better avoid direct eye contact (Fuller 2013).[20] The form of exaggerated empathy found in Graham's character is in fact the diametric opposite of the issue found in autism, that of an inability to process all of the information provided by the situation and thereby a difficulty in constructing complete models of the mental states of others, in that he is capable of processing an extreme amount of that same information and thereby of creating hyper-accurate models of the mental states of those he profiles, to the point where he endures a great deal of emotional distress; nevertheless, Graham displays the same problems navigating social terrain because of his

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personality disorder, despite the quite obvious difference in the type of empathy involved. A poor awareness of one's own emotions and the emotions of others, resulting in a lack of emotional reciprocity, as is the case in autism, should not be mistaken for a lack of emotions and emotional reactivity, resulting in a lack of remorse, as is found in antisocial personality disorder.

[19] Yes, that Hannibal Lecter.

[20] In the same introductory scene mentioned earlier between Crawford and Graham, Crawford notes that Graham uses his glasses to avoid connecting with him, and moves the frame of the glasses so as to force eye contact, setting up a confrontational relationship where Crawford is disrespectful of the boundaries and emotional needs of Graham, which are very different from Crawford's neurotypical subordinates, an attitude which is well-meaning, but nevertheless destructive to the strength of the relationship, further isolating Graham (Fuller 2013).

excessive empathy as autistics do due to their difficulties with the same function. Other psychological symptoms such as audio-visual hallucinations and lost time are largely attributable to emotional trauma and progressive encephalitis,[21] yet conversely, encephalitis does not explain the traits listed above, which are better explained by a neurological variant similar in mechanism to autism. Graham is not autistic, but acts as an autistic analog, a photo negative of the autistic condition that likely does not exist in our own non-fictional reality, yet provides insight into the nature of the condition and the frameworks we use to understand both autism and ourselves.

In the same way that Will Graham is not autistic, the second primary character, the main antagonist and, one could argue, the second protagonist, Hannibal Lecter, esteemed psychiatrist and intellectual, passionate art-lover and oenophile, clandestine cannibal and serial killer, is not a sociopath.[22] In most respects, in terms of behaviour and in terms of personality, the character resembles a high-functioning sociopath—in the first episode, in the first scene where the audience is introduced to Lecter's grislier hobbies, with a fresh corpse mounted artistically upon a stag's head in the middle of a field sans two vital pulmonary organs, gleefully interrupted with images of Lecter preparing lung au vin in his kitchen; Graham even refers to the killer, known to the audience as Lecter, as "an intelligent psychopath… a sadist". In the third episode, Graham again speaks of the killer, dubbed the Copycat, once more saying, "He is an intelligent psychopath. He is a sadist" (Fuller 2013).

While outwardly the model of a well-adjusted and dutiful citizen, perhaps even the ideal of a cultured intellectual, privately, Lecter is cold, violent, and manipulative with a clear disregard for

[21] And psychiatric practices of questionable ethics.

[22] The word sociopath is no longer a diagnosis recognized by the field of psychology; rather, a diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder would be applied to individuals who previously would have received a diagnosis of sociopathy or psychopathy. Nevertheless, sociopathy and psychopathy are still common synonyms for antisocial personality disorder and are the terms used both by the television series "Hannibal" and the novels by Thomas Harris that serves as its inspiration.

serious social taboos against murder and cannibalism.[23] He repeatedly commits acts strongly condemned by wider society, and he does not appear to see these acts as wrong. He has moral standards, particularly surrounding politeness and etiquette, but those standards, those moral rules are so alien as to be entirely outside of the common understanding of right and wrong. As part of his therapy of multiple patients, including Graham, Lecter encourages them to accept their violent impulses, to open the door unto what Lecter views as their true nature, thereby freeing themselves. As well, Lecter selects his victims, those whom he kills and cannibalizes as part of his more casual, less goal-based killings, which are interpreted as the work of a serial killer called the Chesapeake Ripper by law enforcement and the media, not according to age or race or gender, common axes along which killers choose their victims, but by rudeness, by disgraceful behaviour. The trait that links Lecter's victims is piggishness, if one will. In the words of Graham: "the Ripper eats his victims because they're no better to him than pigs" (Fuller 2013).

There is a clear narcissism to Lecter's behaviour, where he values people first and foremost for how well they fit into his own moral view, how well they fit the world he wishes to have. However, Lecter is shown to be capable of engaging in normal affective relationships with others; he empathizes with people, cares about them, even if he manipulates them, even if he kills them. He has strong personal relationships with both Abigail Hobbs, an adoptive daughter of sorts, and Will Graham, who Lecter views as a friend, and he expresses regret when he frames the latter for the murder[24] of the former. Nevertheless, his regret appears not to be for his own actions, a necessity if he is to maintain

[23] Despite the common depiction, most psychopaths and sociopaths are not serial killers. Part of the diagnostic criteria is a tendency towards criminal behaviour, alongside an impulsiveness that brings their activities to the notice of law enforcement, but that does not always include murder, certainly not murder of the kind found in the most horrific and memorable of serial killings, which is lucky, as those with antisocial personality disorder aren't that uncommon, appearing in approximately 2% of the general population (American Psychiatric Association, 1994.) While antisocial personality disorder is fairly common, the high-functioning, highly intelligent, sociopathic serial killer along the lines of those routinely depicted by the legion of police procedurals that flood contemporary television is much rarer, fortunately for the rest of the populous. The pervasiveness of such depictions has more to do with our collective fascination with the gruesome crimes of serial killers than the true prevalence of these individuals.

[24] Her apparent murder, at least. Never trust a fictional death until you see a body, and maybe not even then.

his freedom, but for no longer having full access to these individuals. He apologizes to Hobbs, not for the fact that he is going to kill her[25] but for the fact that he "couldn't protect [her] in this life," blaming the situation for forcing his hand rather than admit that he is the direct cause of her death.[26] Lecter even implicitly compares Graham, and by extension himself, to God, saying, "killing must feel good to God too. He does it all the time" (Fuller).

From the beginning, Graham and Lecter are framed as equal opposites, friends and rivals along the line of prosocial and asocial, in a complex game in which they are each the most pertinent threat to the other. Both with their own sense of justice, both with their own morals, but only one with a full understanding of the nature of their relationship: Lecter, who attempts to manipulate Graham into accepting his own view of reality. Both have an advanced understanding of human nature, of the nature of the human monster, but they come to that answer through very different means. Lecter and Graham both have a high ability to empathize with their fellow man, as well as a high ability to understand one another. The foundation of their amiable relationship, when every other relationship that Graham has, friendly or otherwise, is marred by tension and his friends' and coworkers' mistrust of his abilities and his strange behaviour, is that they understand one another.

Part of Graham's extreme isolation is his own preference, his difficulty in dealing with people and his consequent rejection of them, but it is partially due to the fact that the people in his life do not understand him. Despite his strong morals, despite how distressed he is by his ability to empathize with the motives of the most horrific of crimes, despite how others use his empathic abilities for their own ends, it is clear that they do not trust him, something which allows Lecter to shift blame away from himself when the investigation gets too close to the truth. However, the nature of their ability to

[25] Apparently.
[26] Apparently.

empathize is clearly very different, particularly when the two characters are placed alongside each other.

While both autism and antisocial personality disorder have “lack of empathy” as a characteristic, the nature of autistic empathy and the nature of antisocial empathy are not the same. Empathy is not a single thing, cannot be reduced to a single mechanism, and to view empathy as a monolith is to fundamentally misunderstand the complex ways in which we send and receive nonverbal communication. Empathy, the ability to understand the mind of another, is not a purely emotional thing; rather, it can be divided into two broad categories of ability: cognitive empathy, the ability to know what another thinks, and affective empathy, the ability to feel as another feels. In the case of autism, cognitive empathy is affected, though not necessarily entirely, because of both the interrupted ability to process social data and how different the autistic mind is from the neurotypical mind, but outside of a comorbid condition that affects other forms of empathic ability, there should be no effect on affective empathy, the ability to react sympathetically to another’s emotions. While autistics are known on occasion not to react emotionally—or at least not to react outwardly—to react inappropriately, or not to reciprocate the emotions of others, this is primarily due to a poor reading of the social situation or of the emotions of the people in question. Autistics often express distress and remorse when they realize that they have harmed another unintentionally, a sign that, while they may not naturally intuit what another is feeling, they nevertheless care what that person is feeling. Once another’s pain is realized, that pain is echoed, reciprocated, and the autistic individual experiences strong emotion. The behaviour of an antisocial individual, however, is quite different.

Individuals with antisocial personality disorder do not usually have difficulty understanding what another person is feeling. They do however, tend not to attribute importance to that other person's feelings, and therefore disregard those feelings, a trait that we would call callousness (American Psychiatric Association 1994). While both groups are capable of antisocial behaviours such violence

and deception, autistics are often very uncomfortable with lying and causing pain, and will create stringent rules for their own behaviour, not only to help themselves navigate a world created by neurotypicals for neurotypicals, but to avoid unintentionally hurting others. Psychopaths, on the other hand, are often aware of the emotions of others, but because they do not have an affective reaction to those emotions in the way that neurotypicals and autistics do, and without the negative feedback to another's pain, they are therefore far more comfortable using the emotions of others as weapons. This is the reason why a disproportionate segment of the prison population would fall under the diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder. Autistics are unperceptive. Psychopaths are callous. Graham, our autism analog, has strong affective empathy. He doesn't just know what the serial killers he analyzes feel: he feels what they feel. He experiences their emotions from their perspective. Lecter, our antisocial analog, knows what the people he manipulates feel, but he never attributes the same importance to their emotions as he does to his own.

Throughout the first season of *Hannibal*, we see similar themes to those found in the previous works discussed: isolation and alienation, the search for belonging and interpersonal connection, and the failings of empathy and understanding. Graham and Lecter are both isolated by their separate differences and search for belonging with one another, the empathy and understanding of others having failed to bridge the gap between themselves and the mundane mind. In a strange way, if one ignores the intrigue, the manipulation, the multiple homicides, the cheekily implied cannibalism, the first season of *Hannibal* is a tragic tale of friendship soured, foreign in form but familiar in theme. It is two people in a hostile world searching for someone, anyone who understands, someone to soothe the pain of isolation, to "breach [their] individual separateness" (Fuller 2013), two people who find in one another that understanding only to be separated by the forces of a hostile world and their own unretractable differences.

Hannibal does, however, add another theme not found so clearly, so bluntly in the previous works, that of the limits of empathy, yes, but more so the conflict between the individual as an individual and that individual as a part of a greater whole, as a part of society. The second episode of the first season, "Amuse-Bouche," features a serial killer by the name of Eldon Stammets, a pharmacist who fertilizes his personal mushroom garden with the comatose bodies of a diabetic patients whose medicine he has replaced with an ineffective or actively detrimental substitute, thereby inducing their comatose state, in order to serve his obsession with the interconnective abilities of mushrooms, which, according to Lecter, parallel the neurological connections of the human brain, except, of course, that human neurology does not allow connection on such a fundamental level. "[Stammets] admires their ability to connect the way human minds can't" (Fuller 2013). We do not have full, true access into each other's minds, and no amount of empathy can change that. Despite that we are among the most social of animals,[27] alongside pack-living canines, other primates, cetaceans, among many others, outstripped only by a tier of eusocial[28] animals,[29] despite that we are driven by our common psychology to find safety and meaning with one another, despite that we are driven to connect and to empathize with one another by our very nature, we can never fully connect, never fully understand. Our meanings are forever filtered, forever altered and skewed, first by our own frameworks and schemata of reality, then through the imperfect medium of tone, body language, and the spoken word, and finally through the frameworks and schemata of those with whom we would communicate, which we cannot assume to be identical, or even similar, to our own conceptions. Even when sharing broad cultural schemata, the

[27] Outside of the odd hermit.

[28] Eusociality usually features colony-living animals, primarily insects like ants, wasps, and bees, which divide labor within their complex insect societies to the extent that members of the society lose the ability to generalize. One could consider them "hypersocial," meaning that the collective subsumes individuality to such an extent that individuals cannot survive independently of its fellows.

[29] I realize that here I talk near-exclusively about vertebrate and invertebrate animal socialization, so my apologies to any disappointed botany fans. I also haven't talked about the behaviour of microscopic and single-celled beings, but if a paramecium has a social life, it is one so removed from this definition as to be a nonsensical inclusion.

nature of separate beings is divergent development. In fact, our inability to connect completely, to empathize completely, is what allows us to operate as individuals, to live and develop as separate entities. Which brings us to Graham's unusual empathic ability.

Graham's ability to empathize operates at a level far beyond what is normal, resulting not only in an extreme ability to understand the motivations of others, but a measure of distress. The ability to sympathize is one closely linked with that of empathy, and experiencing empathy for the culprit of a vicious murder can likewise lead to experiencing a degree of sympathy. To understand the emotion of a killer on a cognitive level is one thing, but to experience that emotion on an affective level is another. This however, is not the only cause of Will Graham's distress. More than Graham finds distress in empathizing affectively with serial killers, his sense of self is threatened by the intrusion of the thoughts and feelings of others. It is not simply that he finds these thoughts and feelings abhorrent, but that he experiences a dissonance between what he thinks and feels and who he considers himself to be. Lecter uses this empathy, along with the effects of Graham's encephalitis and the technique of psychic driving, a form of brainwashing that could, in theory, be used not only to change the subject's behaviour, but to undermine their sense of self and even overwrite their personality to a degree, to break down the walls that Graham uses to segregate his self from the emotions and experiences of others.

This theme of the erosion of the self is paralleled elsewhere in *Hannibal*, most strongly in the case of Abel Gideon, a patient at the Baltimore Hospital for the Criminally Insane, who, after subjected to similar psychic driving techniques, believes himself to be the Chesapeake Ripper, actually Lecter, and begins acting out his crimes experiencing a confusion between his own identity and the one forced upon him by his psychiatrist, from the outside. "Somebody got inside his head and moved all the furniture around." As Hannibal Lecter tells Gideon, "[a] terrible thing, to have your identity taken from you" (Fuller 2013).

Certainly, identity is formed in no small part by the pressures and forces of outside influences, the norms and values of the community, the collective, but, at the same time, the collective is the creation, the sum of its constituent parts, all the individuals who act as the cells of this greater body. The human animal contains a duality, a contradiction, where it is neither entirely an individual, purely self-formed and purely self-determined, nor entirely a member of the collective, fully integrated and fully subsumed by the needs of the many. Humanity, both by nurture and by nature, strives both to connect and to be independent and distinct, despite that these goals are in contradiction, despite that the nature of individuality is alienation and the nature of connection is dependence. In the search for identity we serve two contrary masters, their demands not only in contradiction, but mutually incompatible in their purest form. If one is truly to understand another in their entirety, one must become that other, and the distinct self is lost. However, if one is truly to be individual, unique, one must reject outside influence, outside thought, to develop in an independent manner, which, with sufficient divergent development, will eventually render communication and therefore connection unintelligible.

With all of the previous works there is a notable preoccupation with the nature of connection which uses the individual apart, the autistic, to express the pain of isolation, but with “Hannibal,” this idea is reversed, and the paradoxical nature of the desire to be connected and the desire to be independent is revealed. Beyond the purely philosophical, neither of these goals is possible in their most complete form. A human being separated from all outside influence would fail to develop into anything, lacking the necessary programing to form coherent thought, independent or otherwise, much as a feral child, separated from the rest of humanity at a young age, would never develop the traits we see as necessary to humanity, never become acculturated to a human way of living, instead adopting the ways of animals in their environment. Connection to the point of complete understanding is currently impossible, filtered as our understanding is and limited as our empathy is, but we might

approach such an extreme connection with the use of cybernetic alterations to the human brain. Currently, this is a thing of science fiction, but it is not outside the limits of the theoretically possible. Nevertheless, if one values the human mind's capacity for divergence and individuality, one must approach this form of alteration with some caution.

To Conclude

The theme of premier importance found in all of the previous works is that of the individual in conflict with society, the autistic in a neurotypical world. While they are highly sympathetic to the autistic condition, autism and autistics are depicted as an alien element, ill-fitting and awkward, with more in common with explicitly alien and nonhuman characters such as Star Trek's Spock and Data than they do with their neurotypical counterparts. Each of these characters exists as an isolated, disconnected figure in opposition to the easy collaboration and connection of the rest of humanity, whether triumphantly or tragically. Autistic characters are relentlessly individual, singular, alone, not by choice but by nature. To return to an earlier concept, if our cultural production uses divergent mental conditions to better explore aspects of human nature, then it uses autism specifically to explore individuality, specifically, individuality in dysfunction.

In contrast to dominant western ideas about individualism and collectivism, *Rain Man* does not present Raymond Babbit's extreme deviation from acceptable social norms and rejection of externally imposed regulation of his behaviour as a sign of independence and individuality, but rather as a maladaptive form of immaturity leading to dependence. This is paralleled with the neurotypical Charlie Babbit's extreme selfishness and the way that it weakens his social ties and places him in a position of vulnerability until he learns to change. *Temple Grandin*, on the other hand, ties itself more closely to those western ideas of individualism, with the argument that even when the degree of difference and divergence results in harm to the individual and their immediate social connections, society at large benefits from the inclusion of atypical perspectives. Both present a model for accommodation: one

through isolation to an artificial environment constructed for the individual, the other through alteration of the resistant social environment and the likewise resistant individual. These strategies are incomplete, incapable of fully reconciling the nature of the autistic with the nature of neurotypical dominated society.

Mary and Max and *Hannibal*, rather than attempting to find a place for the autistic character within society, confront the contradiction of fitting an individual with a condition characterized by an inability to communicate into a system, society, which depends on it. *Mary and Max* follows a similarly disabled man who acts as catalyst for the personal growth for a neurotypical with analogous interpersonal issues, but, in opposition to *Rain Man*, Mary's interpersonal dysfunction is not so easy to solve. Nor, for that matter, is Max's. As is the case for many of his flesh-and-blood counterparts, Max lacks the resources to isolate himself. He lives alone in an apartment and removes himself from the stresses of social life as much as is possible, but there is no real-world equivalent to the theoretical isolated system, entirely shielded from outside intrusion, just systems that are to a degree closed and to a degree open. The institutionalization of Raymond Babbit is an easy answer to a complex question that sidesteps the deeper reality of more severe forms of autism, which is that the problem of an inability to communicate and express autonomy continues, that the institution is still a form of society, merely a simplified one. Neither of the strategies employed to mitigate the situations of Raymond Babbit and Temple Grandin are accessible to Max Horowitz, who exists in an unresolved state of conflict, resistant to assimilation into the neurotypical majority, until his death.

Hannibal's Will Graham provides a dark mirror to the eponymous Temple Grandin. Where the perverse advantages to Grandin's condition are her key to accessing acceptance within neurotypical society, Graham's abilities are a source of further conflict and isolation. Being able to see the world in a way that others do not and being to do what others cannot is undeniably useful, but likewise it creates a distance, a gap in understanding. Graham is appreciated for his utility, but that usefulness does not

translate into acceptance. Graham is still different, still odd and rude and unable to conform. He understands others, but only through his own fashion, and that is uncomfortable and unintelligible to those with whom he would connect. If one cannot communicate on the same level as others, then usefulness is largely immaterial to deeper connection, resulting in a situation where one is tolerated rather than loved. This fails to fulfill the primary emotional needs of the isolated individual.

In each narrative, the primary conflict is between the autistic individual and neurotypical society. This conflict, that between the individual and the collective, is a theme expressed throughout the majority of fiction featuring autistic characters. The extreme individual, the autistic, different, divergent, and isolated, nevertheless seeks to be useful, to be loved, to be part of the grand collective, just as the neurotypical does, hampered yet preserved in their discrete being by the limits of their understanding, because the nature of difference, of individuality, is alienation.

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