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Scripted Realities: Representations of Autism in Hollywood and Their Effect on Public Discourse

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**Scripted Realities: Representations of Autism in Hollywood and Their Effect on Public
Discourse**



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American Studies Thesis
Advisor: Professor Diana Paulin
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Introduction

Friday December 16th, 1988 was a seemingly typical day in the United States. It was within the confines of ‘normal,’ with the exception of the debut of a film that would shake the United States cultural landscape and serve it with a story that would illuminate a concept that had been neglected, unexplored, and overlooked for many years. American made Hollywood film, *Rain Man*, burst onto the scene as the first film of its kind to hit the silver screen. “Its kind” refers to a big-budget film that was the first to feature a person with Autism Spectrum Disorder as its main character. In its first weekend in public in theaters, it was the second highest grossing film, raking in just over \$7 million.¹ It was not long before it would reach the number 1 spot just a few weeks later, become the highest-grossing U.S. film of 1988, earning over \$172 million overall, and also receiving an unprecedented response, as no film like this one had ever been made.² It is also important to note that despite the *Rain Man*’s atypical storyline, it maintained certain characteristics that rendered it palatable for mainstream audience members, and enabled it to achieve the success that it did.

The American entertainment industry as a whole is not simply comprised of the finished media masterpieces that audiences see on screen when they go to the theater, or what they mindlessly watch while sitting on their sofa from the comfort of their homes. It is a composite of the technological and commercial institutions of filmmaking, informed by historical societal norms, and current U.S. culture. Often referred to as ‘Hollywood,’ the American entertainment industry is the oldest in the world, holds the largest film industry revenue, and has historically nurtured an intimate relationship with dominant U.S. culture, norms, and ideals.

The Birth of a Nation

The industry fully emerged in the mid 1910s with D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. When it opened on February 8th, 1915 it sent a ripple of emotion through the country, and there was a constant flood of crowds lining up at the Atlanta Theater to view the production. The response was so great after the film's opening weekend, that its run in the theater was extended by two weeks, with a closing night on Christmas.³ Originally entitled *The Clansman*, based on Thomas Dixon's novel and play "The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan," *The Birth of a Nation* is consistently referred to as "the most controversial film ever made in the United States."⁴ This silent film is a landmark in film history, and is explicitly representative of much larger societal implications. The film displays African Americans, played by white actors in blackface, and presents them as unintelligent and sexually aggressive towards white women. The film also presents the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) as a heroic force that nobly preserves American values and a white supremacist social order. Naturally, this film was not received particularly well by *all* Americans, despite the fanfare with which it was surrounded. And though it found a great deal of success in Boston, MA specifically, there was an effort in April of 1915 in which thousands of black Bostonian leaders attempted to have the film banned on the basis that it "inflamed racial tensions and could incite violence."⁵ Similarly, The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) spearheaded a campaign to ban the film as well.⁶ What did these efforts have in common? They, along with every other attempt across the nation, were unsuccessful in having the film banned. Despite its divisiveness, *The Birth of a Nation* was a huge commercial success and profoundly influenced both the future of the film industry and of U.S. culture. It is imperative to ask ourselves, if this film was so highly problematic, blatantly racist, and clearly instigated racial violence, why was it so difficult to ban or censor, and why was it so widely successful and historic?

The Birth of a Nation's creator and writer, Thomas Dixon, led a life that was rooted in seething racism, which was expressed quite publicly, especially through the film. But the story was not solely representative of his individual, unpopular sentiments. The late 19th through the early 20th century was a time of radical transformation in the political and legal status of African Americans, as they were freed from slavery and began to enjoy greater rights as citizens, but despite these dramatic developments, more broad American racial sentiments were not all that different from what they had been in the mid-1800s. Many white Americans viewed African Americans as inferior, and held a great deal of resentment racial equality from the Reconstruction Era.⁷ Racism was still quite rampant by the time *The Birth of a Nation* was created, and in many ways was a reflection of the undertones of white supremacy that were ingrained both in the country's founding, and American culture at the time. This blatant racism indicates that many of the most powerful and influential people in the country at the time maintained similar ideas about race, which thus enabled the perpetuation of racist practices and ideas. When hoping to turn his text into a film, Dixon sought funding from various film industry studios, and D. W. Griffith, a prominent feature-length film pioneer and proud white-supremacist, agreed to pay Thomas Dixon \$10,000⁸ (equivalent to over \$260,400 in 2021).⁹ This transaction is indicative of the much larger function money and power play in the U.S entertainment industry, which is still prevalent today. *The Birth of a Nation's* success exemplifies the way in which money and power influence entertainment production and, more specifically, the concepts and ideals that are glorified in various works. This particular film in many ways set the stage for those who maintain dominant personal characteristics, specifically regarding race, to be able to position their privilege in a way that can assert specific cultural ideals through film. This has also led to a concentration of control in the ways in which

marginalized group's stories are confronted in the public entertainment sphere. And when those specific cultural ideals are harmful, what we see on the silver screen can be enormously damaging.

Present Day

Although 29 years had passed since Friday December 16th, 1988, on an equally typical Friday in August of 2017, Netflix released the first season of what would quickly become one of the most popular television series in the country. Although *Atypical* was created and produced nearly 3 decades after *Rain Man*'s original public release, the works maintain quite a few distinct similarities. After much public buildup for what audiences expected to be the new television version of the beloved *Rain Man*, *Atypical* was also well received by the majority of viewers. An audience member asserted that *Atypical* is "absolutely brilliant," and although "some might be offended at times and say that autism is not a laughing matter...Be happy. It's raising awareness!,"¹⁰ while the renowned *Forbes Magazine* described it as being "The Best Show Netflix Has Ever Made."¹¹ The show was even nominated for "Outstanding Achievement in Casting" by The Casting Society of America, and "Best Television Series" by The Satellite Awards.¹² But the people who gave these reviews were white, neurotypical men, who have not been affected by autism, and unlike marginalized communities, their lives would not be damaged by the problematically stereotyped representations in this show. Moreover, further examination reveals the ways that *Atypical*, like *Rain Man*, maintains certain characteristics that lack proper or accurate representation, which also render the show palatable for audience members, and prevent the characters from coming across as *too* atypical. Still, it is striking to see so many similarities between the two representations, when so much more is now known about autism in the U.S. Additionally, with societal shifts in thinking about autism and neurodiversity, one has to

ask why contemporary depictions of autism on film and television have not changed, and continue to reinforce the many stereotypes popularized by *Rain Man*.

Since the release of *Rain Man*, the U.S. saw some of the most defining moments in the history of disability rights movement. After years of struggle, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law on July 26, 1990; This legislation prohibits discrimination and legally protects the rights of people with disabilities to access the same opportunities as everyone else in order to participate in mainstream of American life.¹³ Prior to the ADA, it was legal and socially acceptable to treat disabled people as sub-human. Restaurants could refuse to serve a disabled person, grocery stores could prevent a disabled person from buying their goods, any place of employment could refuse to hire a person because of their disability; it was also legal to pay disabled people lower salaries, despite the job or how much their counterparts were being paid.¹⁴ Not only did this lack of legal accountability allow for explicit discrimination, it also perpetuated a similar broader idea that anyone and everyone had the right to think of and treat disabled people as “others” throughout American society. Since its passage, the ADA has guided a nationwide effort to place inclusivity and accessibility at the center of American Civil Rights policy, emphasizing disability rights as a human right. This legislation drastically impacted the every-day lives of people affected by disability in the United States. It changed much of the culture surrounding how people with disabilities were perceived, but evidently did not change autism’s representation itself. This shift in history represents the legal advancements for disabled people, including those who are autistic, but screen representations are still undergirded by prejudices that lag way behind any legislative advances.

When it comes to characterizing those who are perceived as being ‘different,’ there are certain distinguishing features that have become stereotyped for people with autism. Thoughts of

being out of touch with reality. Extraordinary intelligence. Inability to pick up on social cues. These are all characteristics that were fundamental to Autism Spectrum Disorder's initial identification by Leo Kanner in 1943. Not only were these qualities, among many others, crucial identifiers of the disorder throughout the 20th century, but they have also become key characteristics in association with what it means to have Autism. Donald Triplett, an American man known for being the first person diagnosed with autism, exhibited all of the above characteristics. He was initially diagnosed by Leo Kanner, and labeled as "Case 1," setting up the medical model for the disorder.¹⁵ Since this time, the medical model, which defines an illness or disability as the result of a physical condition, has evolved right alongside other medical and technological advances; however, the social model of ASD, which asserts that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference has remained stagnant. So, although ASD is formally understood as a developmental disorder that is characterized by difficulty in social interaction and communication and by restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior, there are many other factors that inform our understanding of ASD in U.S. society. These other factors, the widely and publicly accepted understandings of Autism, do not simply stand alone. They are perpetuated, like many other ideas, by the media, especially through Hollywood productions. High-budget, widely distributed movies and television shows, simultaneously present curated representations of autistic people in an effort to make their stories more easily digestible for viewers, act as residual signifiers of greater American frameworks, giving preference to certain members of the majority both on and off screen, and perpetuate pre-existing practices prejudice against minority groups.

White. Male. Socio-economically privileged. These are all characteristics that are fundamental to the representations of Autism Spectrum Disorder in Hollywood, and therefore to

the general American public as well. The practices of production and storytelling in Hollywood are the vehicles that drive the determination of what American society ingests, and therefore how we perceive certain concepts like autism, race, and their intersection. These are controlling factors of what versions of reality the public is fed through the media. The big business facet of Hollywood also perpetuates the institutionalized biases that we hold as a society. This includes our understanding of certain minority groups, as the high concentration of power at the top of the U.S. entertainment industry is controlled by white men who have simply never experienced prejudice on the basis of neuro-ability or race. It is, however, also important to recognize that although autistic people are continuously othered by our society, and in many ways ostracized for their departure from what has been deemed typical or ‘normal,’ their representations in Hollywood also reinforce narrowly defined and, to some extent, privileged depictions of autism; more often than not, we are presented with a ‘sanitized’ version of what it can *sometimes* look like to be autistic.

In confronting these concepts, I will challenge Hollywood’s representations of autism, how they contribute to stereotypes concerning those affected by disabilities and delve deeper into questions of how these stereotypes are intertwined with other institutionalized American societal systems. Why is it that we see trends and similarities across entertainment platforms as they relate to people with autism? How do historical and institutionalized factors, such as racial inequality, power, and access to opportunity, influence these common representations? These questions, examined through American cultural context, are imperative to gaining a greater understanding of our society, especially as it relates to the more specific minority of people affected by autism.

Institutionalized frameworks of race, gender, and socio-economic status are facets of our society that continue to perpetuate historical systems of oppression. Presentations of bodies of color, women, and people who lack socio-economic privilege, who are also on the autism spectrum, leave a lot to be desired, in the sense that they exist minimally in widely promoted and distributed films. This is not to say that these narratives and accounts do not exist, but those that do, very clearly lack the funding, promotion, and overall opportunity to be shared, in comparison to the dominant representations that we see in Hollywood. I want to be clear that I will never know the exact experiences of any of these marginalized groups, but I do however hope to expose the medical and social barriers that have been set and perpetuated when it comes to the way in which these groups are represented, and thus widely understood. The cinematic sphere can serve as a powerful tool, but in order to successfully utilize it and break through the low glass ceilings that have been set in place for people with autism historically, we must bring progressively democratic and intersectional representation to the table. With this, I begin with a direct challenge to Hollywood's portrayals of autism, and the ways in which these portrayals explicitly detract from the lived experiences those within marginalized U.S. society.

Literature Review:

The discourse with which this thesis engages brings together the major scholarly fields of disability studies, and film and television studies, in conjunction with the broader concept of intersectional American culture. Disability theory examines the meaning, nature, and consequences of disability. The conversation about being disabled also more specifically encompasses Autism Spectrum Disorder, which focuses on the convergence of three broad areas: the facts of scientific research and ideas surrounding neuroscience; the history of the condition as it has developed since its medical and social inception; and the fictional and media narratives

through which it is expressed.¹⁶ All of these factors influence understanding, and thus representation. Works such as *Autism* by Stuart Murray thoroughly outline these approaches within a broader analytical framework. The significant body of scholarship that has emerged here, requires a rigorous deconstruction of the single category of autism, and is central to my assessment of its representation in film and television.

Similarly, another body of scholarship worthy of discussion is film and television studies, and its dealings with various theoretical, historical, and critical approaches to the production of stories. Placing this larger conversation within the context of a film and a television show that respectively position autism at the forefront of the narrative, allows for the further analysis and exploration of what it means to represent autism in the U.S., and the factors that contribute to these widely ingested representations. *Rain Man*,¹⁷ directed by Barry Marrow, and *Atypical*¹⁸ created by Robia Rashid, ground my conversation through their exemplifications of Hollywood representation of autism, both past and present.

Intersectional culture more broadly encompasses the conceptualization of various facets of society, as affected by a number of discriminations and disadvantages, while also taking into account people's overlapping identities and experiences to understand the complexity of the prejudices they face. However, this work rarely deploys an analysis that engages with entertainment media and autism. For example, being black and neurodivergent shapes one's personhood differently than being identified as white and neurotypical. There is a growing body of work that discusses this paradox, including "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History" by Douglas Baynton, *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions* by Christopher Bell, *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* by James Charlton, and *Disability Theory* by Tobin Siebers. I will work to

bring together a more complete intersectional analysis of these concepts, within a broader framework, uniquely contributing to existing related scholarship.

Utilizing the sources above, I employ an intersectional analysis of representations of autism in entertainment media, both film and television, to traverse the constantly changing terrain of disability's societal perception. Historically, there have been very linear presentations of what it means to live in the United States with a disability, and thus there has been very little discourse that has engaged with all of these facets in conjunction with one another. Despite there being a marginal increase in autistic bodies in the entertainment industry, there is still a gaping hole in academia surrounding disability representation. This thesis converses with scholarly sources in each field of study respectively, and in juxtaposition, seeks to fill that void.

Methodology

Guided by an intersectional and historical framework, I utilize prominent Hollywood media productions as the foundation for my methodology. I use primary entertainment media sources, consisting of one film and one television series, both of which were created in two different centuries, in an attempt to represent past and present approaches to representing autism. My chosen film, *Rain Man*, and television series, *Atypical*, serve as the backbone of this greater scholarly discussion, enabling me to discern and thus exemplify the relationships between U.S. cultural production, institutionalized prejudice, and Hollywood representation. The conversation surrounding these works is amplified by the voices of those who have been affected by autism and are directly impacted by the effects of this media. These primary sources speak within the gap of silenced autistic people through the Hollywood representation with which I engage. I work to examine the evolution of the Hollywood blockbuster and its relationship with

marginalized groups, while still situating the broader conversation within the experiences and opinions of members of the autistic community.

Secondary sources include scholarship surrounding race and disability theory, 20th and 21st century cultural production, and the American powerhouse entertainment industry. I will also rely on the history of race and disability relations in the U.S. to further contextualize the conversation, and to understand what has contributed to the representations that we see today. Furthermore, I will employ secondary scholarship that focuses on intersections of race and autism in the media more specifically, to support this intersectional framework. These materials give me the appropriate context and help me to extract meaning from Hollywood productions over the last century.

This thesis offers a contemporary analysis of representations of autism in Hollywood film and television production, their intersection with race, their evolution, and how they both reflect and fuel U.S. cultural production. My research highlights the immense power of the American entertainment industry and both continuous evolution, and contested meaning of autistic representation. I intend for this to bring awareness to the specific capacity of Hollywood, while shedding a light on marginalized groups that have been affected by its productions. It is imperative that we remain aware that Hollywood is still shaped by the pre-existing hierarchies of race and normative ability that plague society. Hollywood may not be the sole influencing factor in inequity and inequality in the United States, but for a change in representation to be made, the conversation must be situated, and thus understood, within the complexities of an intersectional cultural context.

Chapter One: Autism's Flood into 20th Century Cinema

Rain Man

With the idyllic pink Los Angeles skyline in the background, as a cherry red sports car is lowered to the ground. The camera pans to Charlie Babbitt who stares at his reflection in this shiny new Lamborghini. This opening scene introduces Charlie's sumptuous lifestyle to viewers, as the title credits of *Rain Man* roll down the screen. Charlie, an L.A. car dealer in his mid-twenties, is in the middle of importing lavish Italian sports cars for resale. The deal is being threatened by the Environmental Protection Agency, and if he cannot meet its requirements for pollution control, he will lose a very significant amount of money. It is apparent almost immediately, that money and lavish lifestyle are the most important things in Charlie's life; it is also quite clear that close to nothing can change his mind as he yells at his employees to make deals happen, no matter what it takes. This wheeler-dealer lifestyle is rudely interrupted by the news that his estranged father has passed away. After traveling from tinsel town Los Angeles, CA to his humble hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio to settle the estate, Charlie learns of an undisclosed trustee that is set to inherit \$3 million on behalf of an unnamed beneficiary. Eventually, he learns that the money is being directed to a place called "Walbrook," a mental institution which is the home of his older brother, Raymond (of whom's existence Charlie was previously unaware). The fact that Charlie has a brother serves as a tremendous surprise, but the even larger shock is that Raymond is autistic.

In 1988 the American road comedy-drama film, *Rain Man*, hit theaters. Directed by the highly respected filmmaker Barry Levinson, known best for the success of his mid-budget comedy-dramas, and written by established screenwriters, Barry Morrow and Ronald Bass, the film was bound for success; it attained just that — it was a blockbuster, the highest-grossing film

of the year. The story's protagonist, the abrasive, and selfish character, Charlie Babbitt, is played by budding actor at the time, Tom Cruise, alongside his autistic sidekick brother, Raymond, who is played by both then and now renowned actor, Dustin Hoffman. The film highlights the trials and tribulations of siblinghood, and the complexities of family dynamics, but the dramatic arc in the story is constructed around Raymond's autism diagnosis, and the film's staging of personhood that accompanies this label.

Made evident rather immediately to viewers, Raymond adheres to strict routines and maintains a very regimented lifestyle. Before it is even explicitly stated, Raymond's uncompromising schedule for things, such as meals and watching specific television shows, his unparalleled recall abilities which are initially demonstrated by his impressive ability to repeat the American comedy skit, "Who's on First," word for word, and his limited capacity to express his emotions, are all stylistically asserted in the film.¹⁹ The production team's artistic choices spotlight these day-to-day practices in a way that frames them as "abnormal." These distinct decisions therefore reinforce mainstream beliefs and create a narrative through which these behaviors are spectacularized, in contrast to what is considered to be 'normal,' or what audiences would ordinarily see on screen. This intentionality is heightened because viewers do not learn more about Raymond's actual diagnosis until after they are already introduced to his character. First when his primary caregiver at Wallbrook (who is also the only non-white character in the film), Vern, explains to Charlie why Raymond behaves in the way that he does, and then much later in the film when a doctor presents a rather textbook definition of what autism is in response to Charlie's interrogation in which he asks without really listening to the response: "What's wrong with him? Is he retarded?"²⁰ The structure through which neurodivergence, and more specifically autism, is presented, is carefully crafted by the executive, creative, and production

teams behind the project, who were tasked with determining the best strategy through which to present the concept of autism in a way that is realistic or at least seems to be, from the vantage point of the viewers. At the same time, there was still a need to leverage certain aspects of neurodivergence to create an interesting and dynamic storyline that leaves room for classic three-arc structure that most American films employ to keep viewers interested and engaged.²¹ So, although *Rain Man* was the first film to truly address autism in a public cinematic way, it must also be examined more critically, as it is evident that there are certainly additional factors in relation to broader U.S. society that influence the specific way in which the film maneuvers a fictionalized presentation of autism.

In this first chapter, I examine *Rain Man* and the ways in which it exhibits U.S. cultural norms and history, and establishes a framework for future film and television shows that wish to address autism through main character portrayals. I begin with a historical stroll through the initial establishment and development of Hollywood, the mid-century American conservative agenda, and the establishment of autism as a recognized diagnosis, before further exploring the ways in which this cultural context informs the film. I argue that what we see on-screen in Hollywood productions echoes American cultural norms, as well as the prejudices that they hold. The representation of autism in film can be better understood through an intersectional lens that also includes other marginalized groups, such as racial minorities, indicating that merely representing a marginalized group does not mean that the depiction is necessarily positive nor nuanced. In fact, when representation displays institutionalized ideals, it can also perpetuate damaging stereotypes that silence the groups that are at stake, including the autistic community.

The Meaning of Hollywood

Although, at face value, *Rain Man* sheds light on the topic of autism by creating a new meaning for representation in media, it also highlights ideas of difference between someone who is affected by autism and someone who is neurotypical, in ways that are not solely intended to give the autistic community a voice. In film more generally, there are factors that come into play in the process of creating a movie that can skew the underlying pedagogical imperative behind the story. One of these factors is money. Not only is financial positioning a central theme in the film itself, but it also carries a great deal of weight behind the scenes. For a story to reach a vast number of people, far more than it would likely reach if it was made independently, it needs the funding and influence of a large film studio. Since the start of the 20th century, American film's success has been closely correlated with the financial dominance and overall powerful influence of Hollywood, allowing for monetary leverage to become an ingrained part of success in the global film industry.

Balmy weather, mountainous skylines adorned with palm trees, and ample opportunity to attain the idealized American dream, the Hollywood neighborhood of Los Angeles, California, makes the perfect place for what was once known as the “dream factory.”²² Hollywood has grown to become more commonly synonymous with the U.S. film industry, as some of the country's most prominent and influential film studios were founded in that specific neighborhood. Throughout the 20th century both film and Hollywood grew, beginning in the 1920s when Hollywood became the 5th largest industry in the nation.²³ By the 1930s Hollywood film studios were fully vertically integrated, as all film production, distribution, and exhibition was controlled by a select number of film studios, thus creating a concentration in the types of films being made and the way in which they were created.²⁴ Vertical integration was fundamental to the development of the influence that Hollywood had during the studio era, and

its remnants can still be seen today. Simply understood, vertical integration is the process through which one film company maintains ownership of the means of production, distribution and exhibition of the film, and therefore receives all the profit. Not to be confused with horizontal integration, in which a production company expands into other areas of one industry, vertical integration enables the power that fuels the entire film industry to lie in a few select hands. Just after vertical integration began, 95% of all American film production was concentrated within only eight studios, all of which were run by white men.²⁵ Hollywood in the 1930s became an exemplification of the ways in which larger American ideals were reflected and thus perpetuated by film. The inequality and prejudice that was prevalent in America during the early 20th century was certainly represented by the wealthy white men who single-handedly controlled the film industry overall, in addition to determining the more specific subject matter that audiences were seeing on the big screen. Naturally, this type of national influence lends itself to problematic hegemony in cinema, in addition to a general lack of diverse representation in mass media. Although Hollywood, along with these practices, was established many years before productions such as *Rain Man* came onto the scene, there are certainly larger effects to be examined in the tracing of subsequently made films and shows, and this universalized perspective must be unpacked in order to identify how these standardized conventions impacted later films and shows in a more nuanced way.

The powerful concept of Hollywood was no longer simply a place in which Californian families settled into their version of the white picket fence American dream. It was now the heartbeat of a new cinematic American dream, but this version, similar to the idealized model, did not provide freedom and equal opportunity for prosperity and success. The primary developments in American filmmaking throughout the mid 20th century came from the film

industry itself, with the height of the studio system, which encompassed a method of filmmaking itself wherein the production and distribution of films is dominated by a small number of large movie studios. This monopoly also included films being created primarily by their own company-hired creative personnel under often long-term contracts. U.S. filmmakers who had previously worked independently, had now become part of the new studio system; In doing so, they were subject to the broader motives and requests of the studio heads who maintained the power, not just in each respective film project, but in Hollywood in general. Because the studios held all the power, since they were the ones who were largely funding the production, they held a distinct influence over the way in which films told their stories, regardless of the initial intention of the script or storyline. *The Birth of a Nation* serves as an initial representation of the ways in which overarching American values can be represented in film through the vehicle of money and its power. However, though this representation might specifically at the dawn of American cinema, it is certainly not the last film to reflect this system. And, although the formal functions of the Hollywood studio system ended in 1948 with the U.S. Supreme Court decision *United States v. Paramount*, which banned ‘block booking’ and ordered the studios to divest themselves of all theater holdings, the remnants of power, money, and influence in major American film studios is still prevalent today.²⁶

In present day Hollywood, it is no secret that the industry is still dominated by white neurotypical men. According to the University of California, Los Angeles’ (UCLA) 2020 Hollywood Diversity Report, the heads at the eleven most major and mid-major film studios are 91% white, 82% male, and 100% non-autistic.²⁷ But what does this mean for the entertainment media that is being produced? In a country such as the United States, in which there is an institutionalized history of prejudice on the basis of identities such as race and neuro-ability,

placing white men who have never experienced bias against them (nor are they necessarily aware of their own inherent bias), in charge of the majority of mass distributed film and television, and paying them large salaries to do so, inevitably means that the content that is produced will, in some way, reflect this limited perspective. Underrepresentation leads to underrepresentation. So, if you do not include marginalized groups and represented diverse experiences in the making of these productions, you will not see those same groups being represented on screen either. For example, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) is, both historically and in present day, recognized as being one of the most dominant film studios and media companies in the world. Involved primarily in the production and distribution of feature films and television programs, MGM has maintained its prominent position in Hollywood and across the U.S. since its 1924 Golden Age founding, all while being led by elite white men.²⁸ Unsurprisingly, by the 1980s white neurotypical men were still dominating the American film scene, including at MGM, thus influencing the films that were being produced, including *Rain Man*.

The Conservative Agenda

For many citizens, the late 1970s were a troubled and troubling time, as the radical and countercultural movements of the 1960s and early 1970s had undermined mainstream America's confidence in their fellow citizens and in their government. The idealistic American dream seemed to be significantly less attainable and, in response, many Americans embraced a new conservatism in social, economic and political life during the 1980s. Despite all this doubt, about the attainability of material wealth, this period in U.S. history is also characterized by its heightened focus on materialism and consumerism, as the decade also saw the rise of the "yuppie," an explosion of blockbuster movies.²⁹ This newfound appreciation for big-budget, attention grabbing films certainly did not prove to be a detriment to the massive film studios that

had still consistently dominated Hollywood, despite the official legal end of the studio system in the 40s. With this new platform and audience desire, studios began to seek films that would quench the nation's thirst for new and exciting content. There was only one condition- it must fit neatly within the confines of the American ideals that were present during the late 20th century.

The American ideals that were present during the latter half of the 20th century, though influenced by the cultural and political climate of the prior decades, did not stray all that far from those that have always been present throughout the nation's history. Certainly, the country had experienced significant changes in its cultural climate, demonstrated in the civil rights movement, and disability rights movement, both of which took place throughout the mid 20th century, but most Americans still believed in the conservative agenda in the 1980s. This agenda rejuvenated American Republican ideology and emphasized concepts of deregulation, policies of rolling back communism, and appeals to conservative Judeo-Christian morality, while also opposing many of the concepts that were fundamental to the movements for the advancement of marginalized groups, especially racial minorities and the disabled population.³⁰

The 1980s were also marked by quite a few American trends, including white political and economic conservatism; and the increasingly negative economic and demographic status of those who were perceived as being 'different'-- meaning people of color and people with disabilities. Traditional white attitudes were based on the consistency of white supremacy and self-interest, resulting in alliances between white working class citizens, business elites, and social conservatives.³¹ Correspondingly, Ronald Reagan, one of the most highly influential voices of modern conservatism, served as President of the United States from 1981 to 1989, and when he left office, he had the highest approval rating of any president since Franklin Roosevelt.³² The correlation between conservatism and its influence in Hollywood is notable

during Regan's presidency, especially given the not so coincidental fact that prior to gaining his political footing, Reagan was a famed Hollywood actor

Beginning his career as a prominent Democrat in Hollywood, Ronald Reagan moved to the right-wing in the 1950s, becoming a registered Republican in 1962, and emerging as a leading conservative spokesman.³³ He led rallies that were rooted in American conservative paragons, speaking with a strong ideological dimension that was heard and accepted quite widely by constituents of the entertainment industry. These ideas were rooted in the othering of minority groups, and very much emphasized dominant ideals regarding concepts of race and disability. Both Hollywood and the greater American public grew to love and respect the opinions of Reagan, so much so, that he was elected to the Board of Directors of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) in 1941, serving as an alternate member, and holding a great deal of influence over the union that has historically represented the most prominent people and projects in the entertainment industry. After he completed his work behind the scenes in Hollywood, determining what movies and shows would be accepted by the union and thus what audiences would view on screen, Reagan was then hired by General Electric (GE) in 1954 to host the General Electric Theater, and spread his beliefs publicly, in front of the camera.³⁴ A widely successful weekly TV drama series, the show was broadcast on CBS radio and television, reaching millions of Americans and simultaneously spreading the conservative agenda that Reagan preached. In conjunction with the series, he also traveled across the country to give motivational speeches to over 200,000 GE employees.³⁵ Written by Reagan himself, the addresses were non-partisan but carried a conservative, pro-business message, that also supported discriminatory ideas on the basis of the criminalization and othering of minority groups.³⁶ This agenda exemplified through his "War On Drugs" campaign tactic, which

deliberately produced profoundly unequal outcomes across racial groups, manifested through racial discrimination by law enforcement and disproportionate drug war trauma suffered by communities of color.³⁷ Similarly, Reagan's 1981 ordering of the Social Security Administration (SSA) to tighten up enforcement of the Disability Amendments Act of 1980, resulted in more than a million disability beneficiaries losing their benefits.³⁸ In many ways Ronald Reagan exemplified the ways in which political and social agendas can influence Hollywood, and although there were spaces for new types of films to be made, mainstream conservative rhetoric still influenced film production significantly.

Ronald Reagan was one of the most politically prominent people in the latter portion of the 20th century, but also one of the most influential people in Hollywood. This neurotypical white male, which was clearly reflected in his ideas and opinions, was able to single-handedly perpetuate discriminatory American culture, while also influencing Hollywood film and television. In many respects, the popular culture of the 1980s reflected the era's political conservatism, as exemplified by Reagan. This dominance resulted in the glorification of white male privilege and the rejection, or at least sanitization, of anything that strayed from the social construct of 'normal,' which *Rain Man* undoubtedly represents.

A Pervasive Developmental Disorder

Before autism was represented in film, autistic representation existed simply through real-life experiences and cultural hearsay. Autism was originally understood, according to ancient beliefs, as a manifestation of some sort of bodily possession by evil spirits, aligning autistic-like conditions with ideas of harm and inexplicable foreignness. With the dawn of the 20th century, the condition was classified as being a form of childhood schizophrenia and was thought to be the result of 'cold parenting.'³⁹ After that notion was challenged, autism was

subsequently considered to be a set of related developmental disorders.⁴⁰ And eventually, it became further understood as a spectrum condition with wide-ranging degrees of impairment in the latter portion of the 20th century. It is important to note, before proceeding to explore the ways in which these stages of understanding impacted social, cultural, and political histories, that each and every one of them were informed and proclaimed by those who had no direct personal experience with the condition, nor any full comprehension of how their scientific development of the medical model would impact the lives of others. Illuminating the problematic impact of the medical model on people with autism spectrum disorders, Professor of Medical Humanities and author, Stuart Murray, asserts that “it is in thinking through the consequences of this for the person with autism that we might most profitably understand the way in which the condition has become characterized by science and medicine,” rather than related to personhood and representation.⁴¹

Along with these shifting views, autism’s diagnostic criteria have changed as well. The history of autism and its cultural influencers and influence is the subject of Stuart Murray’s study, entitled *Autism*. He traces early formulations of autism, such as when the word autism took its first form in 1938. Hans Asperger, of the Vienna University Hospital, first adopted psychiatrist, Eugene Bleuler's terminology, “autistic psychopaths,” in a lecture about child psychology.⁴² Asperger was investigating an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) now known as Asperger Syndrome, but it was not widely recognized as a separate diagnosis until 1981. Leo Kanner of the Johns Hopkins Hospital first referred to autism when he introduced the label “early infantile autism” in a 1943 report of 11 children with “striking behavioral similarities.”⁴³ Almost all of the characteristics described in Kanner's first paper on the subject of autism, are still regarded as typical of the autistic spectrum of disorder. Thinking of the autistic brain

through this specific medical lens “arguably serves to perpetuate a number of the common stereotypes of people with autism.” Many of these diagnostic criteria are highlighted and capitalized on through the depiction of Raymond’s characteristics in *Rain Man*.⁴⁴

The Medical Model

Murray argues that “understanding why it was possible for a cultural representation like Levinson’s film to achieve such prominence is, in part, another example of ‘what we don’t know’ about autism. In the mid-1980s, at the time of *Rain Man*’s conception, scientific opinion on autism was still sufficiently divided so fiction was able to fill the vacuum created by the lack of consensus.”⁴⁵ During this time, the newly established medical model of disability was the only view of autism that was widely recognized and accepted, and that is what viewers see in *Rain Man*.

Many of the previous understandings and assumptions about autism “center on the idea of brain difference and what is sometimes termed ‘atypical brain structure.’”⁴⁶ This medical approach to understanding autism is rooted in a perception of disability that links conditions, including autism, to an individual’s physical body, with medical intervention at its forefront. Donald Gray Triplett, born September 8, 1933, is an American man known for being the first person diagnosed with autism; in many ways, he embodies this classical model. His qualities and characteristics have contributed to the societally ingrained initial model of autism- a white, middle class male- that permeated American culture for subsequent decades. Triplett was first diagnosed by Leo Kanner, and was labeled as “Case 1,” particularly noted for his savant abilities.⁴⁷ Generally speaking, savantism has historically been categorized amongst skills related to memory, which have been known to include abilities, such as rapid calculation, artistry, map making, or musical ability.⁴⁸ Much of Kanner’s work and research was rooted, not only in

identifying and assessing patterns in people whom he deemed to be autistic, but also in reorienting overall child psychiatric methodology to focus on the cause of the ‘problem,’ rather than attempting to understand difference. But in this work, Kanner also focused on a very specific group of individuals, thus creating further marginalization in the analysis of the results.

The invisibility of racial differences and disability has a long history in the American medical establishment, and there are distinct reasons. In 1943, Leo Kanner conducted a study at Johns Hopkins University, in which he examined behavior in children, in an attempt to determine the cause of autism. Not one of the 11 children that he described in the subsequent paper, were of color. Each and every one of them were not only white, but also upper-middle class. It is particularly important to note that both the location of this specific hospital, and the majority of people that Kanner saw throughout his career at this facility, were low-income patients of color.⁴⁹ This discrepancy led Kanner, and the rest of the country, to believe that autism disproportionately affected high achieving, upper-middle-class white families. As a result of his biased findings, children of color were virtually absent from autism research literature for decades, not only further perpetuating the disproportionate medical neglect of people of color, but also foreshadowing the continuation of the ways in which non-white, non-male, non-upper middle class neurodivergent diverse citizens would be silenced (and remain invisible), regardless of the medical and social strides being made towards disability inclusion.

Refrigerator Mothers

The censoring of certain versions of autism, and the silencing of autistic stories and experiences of autistics of color can also be seen as stemming from ideas concerning causes of autism. Maternal deprivation was one of the first ways in which doctors and scientists were able to understand neurological difference. Medically asserted as a leading cause of autism,

"refrigerator mothers," further complicated American racial and gender biases of the 20th century.⁵⁰ The refrigerator mother theory maintains that autism is caused by a lack of maternal warmth.⁵¹ The term was coined around 1950, labeling and placing blame on mothers of children diagnosed with autism or schizophrenia, in addition to providing people with an explanation for their children's atypical behavior.⁵² In a 1949 paper, Kanner suggested that autism may be related to a "genuine lack of maternal warmth," and observed that children were exposed from "the beginning to parental coldness, obsessiveness, and a mechanical type of attention to material needs only.... They were left neatly in refrigerators which did not defrost. Their withdrawal seems to be an act of turning away from such a situation to seek comfort in solitude."⁵³ Thus parents, more specifically mothers, were being blamed for their children's atypical behavior. This theory ridiculed and belittled mothers for their roles in their children's unconventional cognitive development. The associated ideology, that was widely maintained throughout the mid 20th century, explicitly asserts that there was a direct correlation between children affected by autism, and mothers who were not attentive and loving enough. As with many other dominant beliefs during the mid-20th century, this idea represented a study focused on white upper middle-class citizens. But if these white women could be scapegoated or blamed, even while they could be classified as part of the privileged majority in more ways than one, what was to be said about the roles and expectations of mothers of children of color who were being underdiagnosed?

The 2003 film, *Refrigerator Mothers*, gives a voice to mothers of autistic children, as they share their stories and experiences of being ostracized because of their children.⁵⁴ One of these mothers is Dorothy Groomer. In the film, she candidly and emotionally tells the story of the process through which she and her son discovered that he had autism, and were immediately rejected from the autistic community, solely because they were African American. Along with

Dorothy's story, this made-for-television documentary also shares the stories of other autistic bodies of color. Unlike *Rain Man*, it was not created through the Hollywood film system, and therefore was not privy to the production budget and audience reach that Hollywood film studio-selected movies enjoy. She begins her story by explaining that when she was at the library, the librarian asked if she would like to read any of their books on autism. After scoffing at the remark, in addition to a subsequent analysis of the book, she realized that many characteristics that this book mentions, seemed to also relate to her son Steven, including Kanner's officially identified rigidity and repetitiveness. She immediately took Steven to the doctor's office, begging the question of whether or not the doctor thought that Steven could be autistic. After meeting with an entire team of doctors from the University of Illinois, they said "no." Instead, they all chalked it up to being an "emotional disturbance," but it could not possibly be autism. But why is it that although Steven fit many of the identified criteria for the diagnosis of autism, it was ruled out as not even being a possibility? The answer, according to Groomer, was that "we did not fit the mold. We did not fit the classic mold for autism, which is white, upper-middle class, and very very bright."⁵⁵ This remark is particularly compelling, as it indicates that there is in fact an institutionalized caste system in America that awards exclusive privileges to majority groups, and ostracizes minority groups, whether it is in regard to race, neuro-ability, or both.

Regardless of Kanner's determination that autism was directly correlated to a mother's lack of warmth, whatever conclusion he was to draw, it was sure to neglect the bodies of color and their families, who were affected by comparable indicators. Groomer reinforces this notion by asserting that "It was really not a negotiable issue. According to my doctors, my son could not be autistic. I was not white, and it was assumed that I was not educated, and therefore he was labeled emotionally disturbed," as Dorothy stated.⁵⁶ So, while the refrigerator mother theory was

disproved in the 1970s, the implications of this cultural bias continue to resonate — and to cause real problems – in more ways than simply the process of diagnosis. The explicit blaming of mothers for not caring enough for their children and thus causing autism, along with the rejecting of the mothers of colors who are demonstrating their investment in their child’s lives and development, does not fail to demonstrate institutionalized inequality in the United States. The intersection between race and autism can be clearly seen through the development of the medical model of disability. This is also the same model that is used to present autism to the mainstream public for the first time in the film *Rain Man*, thus setting the stage for the perpetuation of inaccurate and incomplete representation and implicit bias, fueled by influencing factors that align with privileged majority ideals, such as white supremacy and affluence.

Kim Peek

American film producer, Roger Birnbaum, who happened to work for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (and eventually become the CEO and Chairman of the company), was the first studio executive to give the story of *Rain Man* the green light. He did so immediately after screenwriter Barry Morrow, overviewed the plot, as Birnbaum thought that the story had potential, and that it could be marketable and thus profitable if it was developed by the right people. Morrow established the film at MGM, one of the biggest most powerful, broad-reaching film studios of all time. When director Barry Levinson and producer Mark Johnson arrived at the project, *Rain Man* was on the hunt for something that would make it “flashier.”⁵⁷ Making Raymond not only autistic, but also an autistic savant, was the key needed to unlock viewership for those who were not part of the autistic community. The majority of people who would eventually see *Rain Man* would never have actually met anyone with autism, and now they were going to see a depiction of what the condition was like, so the effect had to be particularly powerful. With this

understanding, “Levinson and Morrow created Raymond as a savant, whose special skills create wonder and awe in all those who meet him,” and all they had to do was convincingly generate wonderment in audience members as well.⁵⁸

Before there was *Rain Man*, there was Kim Peek. An American savant known as a "mega savant," Peek had an exceptional memory.⁵⁹ Barry Morrow created the character of Raymond after meeting Kim Peek in an airport, and the character was based primarily on his limited interaction with Peek.⁶⁰ Despite the responsible nature of the filmmakers in their efforts to accurately portray what life is like when affected by autism accurately, such a broad spectrum condition's representation was based on one individual, which evidently leads to the misrepresentation of other individuals on the spectrum.

Kim Peek was, born in 1951 as Laurence Kim Peek; he was diagnosed, with macrocephaly, damage to the cerebellum, and agenesis of the corpus callosum, a condition in which the bundle of nerves that connects the two hemispheres of the brain is missing.⁶¹ Peek's genius level savantism was deemed so extraordinary that a Hollywood film was made about it; theories suggest that his abilities are, in large part, due to the fact that his neurons made unusual connections due to the absence of a corpus callosum, therefore resulting in an increased memory capacity.⁶² Peek maintained his memorization ability beginning at the age of just over a year old. He could speed through a book in simply an hour and remember almost everything he had read, recalling extensive amounts of information about subjects ranging from history and literature, geography and numbers to sports, music and dates. By scanning the left page with his left eye, then the right page with his right eye, he was able to recall the contents of at least 12,000 books accurately.⁶³ Despite this unusually advanced cognitive function, Peek lacked in everyday motor skills. He did not walk until he was four years old and was unable to complete everyday tasks

such as buttoning his own shirt.⁶⁴ However, when writer Barry Morrow met Peek in 1984, the Peek family was urged to “share Kim with the world,” as Morrow knew it would make for a riveting movie character, at the expense of Peek’s personhood, of course.⁶⁵

Prior to the film, Kim had lived a relatively sheltered life, but he and his father agreed that the best way to spread their message of acceptance was through speaking to and interacting with other individuals and groups directly. Never before had the world seen someone with a developmental disability represented on the silver screen, and Morrow believed that Kim Peek was the perfect first. For such a new concept to the world, a middle-class white male made the perfect person to introduce autism to the public entertainment sphere, as it was more palatable to mainstream audiences. Dustin Hoffman was chosen to portray Raymond in the film, due in large part to the fact that Hoffman was a beloved and nonthreatening famed actor. The simple standardization of identity factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomics alone were enough to make the notion of autism more easily digestible to audiences, and enough to cause Roger Birnbaum, of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, to support the film’s production, immediately after Barry Morrow pitched the story.

Making it Rain

Historically and currently, much of the success of Hollywood productions is determined by marketing strategies, and the same holds true for films such as *Rain Man*. Prior to even going to a movie theater or turning on the television, viewers are fed very fixed narratives through press releases, advertising campaigns, merchandising, franchising, and media interviews with the key people involved in the production process of the film. At the end of the day, Hollywood is a business and, as is the case with all business, financial risk must be taken into consideration; therefore, it is imperative that these films also ensure that they will not rock the societal boat too

much, and will appeal to audience members who comprise the majority in society, not the minority.⁶⁶ Many viewers watch films for the stories, the emotions they evoke, or even to see their favorite actor on the big screen, thinking very little about the big business aspect of Hollywood, while major film studios bestow marketing budgets that are equivalent to nearly half of the amount of money given to create the movie. For *Rain Man*, this strategy resulted in \$12.5 million being set aside to invest in expensive marketing campaigns.⁶⁷ This money, while intended to maximize revenue early in the release cycle, and appeal to specific demographics, enticing them to watch, also helps to create a certain lens through which viewers understand the story, thus influencing the overarching themes and concepts that they absorb and take away. Although this practice is not inherently designed to exclude certain groups of people on its surface, its explicit intention to represent a highly curated image of life, acts as a reflection of broader prejudices entrenched in American society.

A significant factor in the creation of a film like *Rain Man* is the constant consideration of the way in which the film will be digested by audiences, when it confronts experiences that are not inherently relatable to the majority, such as autism, for the first. The struggle to produce modestly budgeted pictures in today's landscape boils down to marketing dollars. A movie may cost only \$30 million, but it takes another \$30 million to promote it effectively, and the studios employed the same budgeting model in 1988 when marketing *Rain Man*. It is estimated that with marketing costs, *Rain Man* was likely a \$50 million investment.⁶⁸ When speaking about the film's unfamiliar subject, a story that its story is rooted in the life of an autistic person, Levenson stated that "I'm not sure you would even get distribution. And if you had distribution, they would put a toe in the water and hope they got some money back. Break even and call it a day. It's the nature of the business today."⁶⁹ It is with this understanding that the creative team behind the

film proceeded with caution in both the making, marketing, and distribution of their idealized version of what autism looks like, ensuring that audiences were in for a riveting storyline that differed from those that they had previously seen on the silver screen, while still offering a safe and predictable arc of a comedy-drama film.

Conveyors of the Story

Before delving further into what makes *Rain Man* a distinct cultural artifact as well as a template for future representations of autism, the characters in this rendering must be established.

Charlie Babbitt: The first character that audiences meet. Charlie is an abrasive, selfish young wheeler-dealer played by Tom Cruise, whose life is turned upside down by the realization that his brother is autistic. In an effort to obtain the inheritance that his deceased father left to his brother, Raymond, Charlie spirits him out of his mental institution, and they set out on a cross-country road trip together. Their journey results in Charlie learning more about Raymond and autism, while also using him to better himself in the process.

Raymond Babbitt: The objectified autistic main character, Raymond, played by Dustin Hoffman, is the brother that Charlie never wanted. After being removed from his institution by his brother, Raymond joins Charlie in his journey to find himself, simultaneously represented to audiences as a problem for Charlie because he insists on sticking to his routines or shows signs of extreme distress in uncomfortable situations; at the same time, his savant abilities distinguish him from other people with autism and increase his value in Charlie's eyes because he seems to be a math genius.

Vern: Played by Michael D. Roberts, Vern is the only other prominent character in the film. A caregiver at the institution where Raymond lives, Vern seems to be his primary support person, or his "main man," as Raymond calls him. Although he does not play a particularly large

role in the film, it is clear that he has a close relationship with Raymond and plays a vital role in his everyday life at Wallbrook. In the context of the film's narrative as a whole, Vern disappeared once he offers some insight about Raymond to Charlie and after he has performed his role as the token character of color whose only job is to assist the main, white character.⁷⁰

The characters in *Rain Man* vary in their roles and identities, but each of them is placed in the story to support the construction around Raymond's autism. Despite the seemingly insignificant interactions that they have with him throughout the film, they each carry a significant amount of weight in the broader concepts that *Rain Man* is both reflecting and signaling. Though maybe not specifically apparent to audiences at first glance, a closer examination of specific exchanges more closely, reveals the cultural, social, and historical implications that are embedded in the hit road drama.

A Deeper Look

Numbed from learning that not only does he have a brother, but also a brother with autism to whom their father's inheritance was bequeathed, Charlie decides to kidnap Raymond - who has always been a voluntary resident - from the Wallbrook Mental Institution. This selfish act sets the stage for the two main characters in *Rain Man*, Charlie and Raymond, to begin their journey both to physically travel across the country (by car, since it is made very clear that because of Raymond's autism, he has an intense fear of planes that makes him unable to fly), and also symbolically to learn about themselves and each other. It is imperative that this film, much like other depictions of disability, be examined critically, and considered within the context of greater American history and culture. The film not only reflects of many years of U.S. history and cultural production, it has also become "the template for many subsequent representations

of the condition [autism], depictions that seeped into public consciousness to create ideas about the condition [autism and its connection to savantism] that still exist today.”⁷¹

Main Man

“Is he crazy?” asks Charlie. “So, he’s not crazy, he’s not retarded, but he’s here?”⁷² Shortly after audience members are introduced to Charlie and Raymond, they are met with the first, of numerous conversations that address what makes Raymond ‘different.’ As Charlie paces up and down the hallway of Wallbrook, he grapples with the idea that his brother is what we now refer to as ‘neurodivergent.’ In response to Charlie’s interrogation, Raymond’s doctor explains to both Charlie, and to the viewers, that Raymond is an “autistic savant,” meaning that “there is a disability that impairs the sensory input and how it is processed,” or simply put, “Raymond has a problem communicating and learning. He can’t even express himself, or probably even understand his emotions in a traditional way.”⁷³ Both the delivery and timing of this scene are poignant and deliberate, as it takes place almost immediately at the commencement of the film and asserts the distinct medical model of disability that was prevalent in U.S. understandings of autism and disability at the time. It is subsequently stated that “there are dangers everywhere for Raymond. He has routines, rituals. It’s all he must protect himself.... it’s the way he...acts,” all while Raymond’s eyes remain glued to the television, feeding his fixation with baseball, and more specially the “Who’s on First” skit. Both the direct mention of the stereotypical repetition, and topical fixation, are experienced by many autistic people but also are historically associated with fictionalized characteristics of autism. It is plainly evident that these intentional choices in the creation of Raymond, and the storyline of the film, that were placed strategically to spectacularize this version of autism, and captivate viewers with characteristics that are not typically associated with neurotypical people.

As this introductory scene continues, Vern, Raymond's caregiver, goes on to explain to Charlie why Raymond acts in the way he does, by further unpacking his fixation with "Who's on First," as it is "his way of dealing with you touching his things." As he stands there, Vern presents the fact that Raymond not only uses the skit as a sort of coping mechanism when he becomes upset, but also delivers the first example of Raymond's savant abilities, asserting how impressive it is that he has the entire skit memorized. While everyone in the scene is standing around in awe, discussing Raymond's ability, he becomes increasingly upset by the fact that Charlie is touching all his books, despite Charlie just being informed moments earlier that it upsets Raymond when people touch his belongings. Vern is the only person who can calm him down as Charlie continues to badger Raymond. After peppering him with questions to test his true savant abilities, Raymond eventually screams for help, and appeals to his source of support and familiarity, his "main man Vern."⁷⁴ This portion of the scene shifts audience member's attention to the pageantry that exemplifies Raymond's savant abilities, but under further examination, there is also something to be said about Vern's role in the conversation. Both historically in society and in film, people of color have been swept to the side to make room for people who fit into the racial majority, being forced into sidekick roles that are put in place to assist white people or characters. This very dynamic can be seen in the relationship between Vern and Raymond. Although his role is quite small, Vern serves the film, storyline, and main characters, simply with support, both literally, as it is his job to care for Raymond, and symbolically, as he aids in propelling the storyline, contextualizing Raymond's autism for viewers, and more broadly supporting the character development of Raymond and Charlie during their first interaction as brothers. This minutely featured relationship between Vern and Raymond reflects historic U.S. race relations as well. It also foreshadows the ways in which

Raymond serves as the vehicle through which Charlie develops into a more sympathetic and likeable character. Raymond, who occupies a marginalized role in society, is his sidekick.

Uh Oh

In his fast-paced manner, Charlie whisks Raymond off to the airport in order to return to his business in L.A. as quickly as possible. People are whizzing by as Raymond sits distractedly watching, before Charlie snaps his fingers at him like an owner summoning their dog. As they walk down the terminal of an airport, almost ready to board their plane, Raymond steals a look outside a window. Much to his surprise, he sees airplanes. Frantically remarking “uh oh, uh oh,” Raymond begins to realize that they are about to board a plane, even though he believes that “airplane travel is very dangerous.”⁷⁵ Based on his anxious behavior, it quickly becomes clear that Raymond is fearful of air travel, despite Charlie attempting to convince him that it will be an enjoyable experience (for his own volition, of course, as he is attempting to fly cross-country to save himself and his business from financial ruin). Charlie, who has yet to take the time to truly consider what he needs to know and do in order to take care of Raymond, becomes increasingly frustrated rather quickly, and begins to yell at Raymond quite publicly. As tensions rise, Raymond begins to recite detailed facts about planes that have crashed in previous years, including airline, flight number, the year of the crash, and the exact number of people who died. Charlie continues to yell, and Raymond becomes increasingly upset. Eventually, Raymond is so overwhelmed, he begins to scream, and hits himself in the head (which is known as Self-Injurious Behavior, or SIB, and is known to be one of most devastating behaviors exhibited by people with developmental disabilities⁷⁶). So, although this scene also makes a spectacle of Raymond’s autism, it builds on the spectacle that was constructed in the previously discussed scene in which Raymond is reciting baseball facts. This time, in addition to featuring Raymond’s

savant abilities in his delivering of historic plane crash facts, the scene also spectacularizes Raymond's genuine fear and his physical resistance to the idea of boarding an airplane involuntarily. Both in this scene and throughout the film, Raymond "effectively performs the skills associated with his condition, even if he is only behaving normally in terms of his own self."⁷⁷ The coupling of autism and its history of display, and the idea that someone with autism behaves in a way that differs from the norm, "contains a desire to *watch* such an event, to see something that appears to be beyond logic or the rational. With film, autism became fascinating," and *Rain Man* certainly contributes to this compelling display of difference.⁷⁸

Las Vegas

Flashing forward to Charlie's next exhibition of Raymond's savant abilities, viewers are transported to the sensory overload of a large casino. Two men descend the escalator in matching tan suits, as a suspenseful upbeat track plays in the background. As the camera pans up, Charlie and Raymond are revealed. The entire climax of the film is rooted in Charlie's journey to devise a way to get close enough to Raymond to become his legal charge so he can access Raymond's multi-million-dollar inheritance from their father; his scheme fits perfectly into his meticulously created money-hungry character. Of course, the narrative logic suggests that he would not allow himself to become close to his brother for any reason other than capital gain. Charlie realizes that he will not be able to directly use Raymond for his money in the way that he intended, which was to cozy up to him, and lure him into a false sense of security that would enable him to relinquish access to his money. Naturally, he finds another way to exploit Raymond, but this time, he directly uses Raymond's savant abilities directly in an attempt to get what he wants. The shift in the film's energy is remarkably noticeable, as it transitions into a multi-minute, no dialogue montage of Raymond and Charlie in Las Vegas. Hans Zimmer, a German film score

composer best known for integrating electronic music with traditional orchestral arrangements, and whose music appears in almost every action adventure movie of the 20th and 21st centuries, even makes an appearance, through the music that plays during this scene.⁷⁹ It is an almost comical scene, as Raymond and Charlie strut through a casino, all while Hans Zimmer's action-adventure style "Las Vegas" plays in the background (which later won an Academy Award for Best Film Score).⁸⁰ So comical was this Las Vegas scene in which Charlie objectifies Raymond and his autistic abilities, that the 2009 American comedy film, and the first installment of a later widely successful trilogy, *The Hangover*, made numerous references to *Rain Man*, specially the Las Vegas scenes. *The Hangover* features its own great casino scene, after the main characters find themselves in dire need of extra cash. The intentionally created socially awkward Alan, played by Zach Galifianakis, reveals that he has read a book on card counting and can help the group become rich, even making an explicit reference to *Rain Man*. When one of his friends informs him that "you've gotta be super smart to count cards," Alan, without missing a beat, responds by asserting that "maybe we should tell that to Rain Man because he practically bankrupts a casino, and he was a retard."⁸¹ Further, the next scene in *The Hangover* includes an indistinguishably similar montage of Alan and the film's pseudo Tom Cruise/ Charlie character, Bradley Cooper's "Phil." The two friends ride down the escalator in an identical fashion to the scene in *Rain Man* equivalent, before Alan sits down at the cards table. Going "full savant" as various math equations encircle his head while he accumulates chips, he makes a complete mockery of *Rain Man* as a film in addition to the abilities that Raymond possesses due to his autism.⁸² Twenty-one years after its release, *Rain Man* is still being referenced. Because of the comedic way that *The Hangover* presents disability, autism and, in this case, savantism, it has

now created a space in the modern era to still make fun of people on the autism spectrum, in the name of mass entertainment.

Although the scene in *Rain Man*, and *The Hangover* for that matter, makes for a light-hearted moment amidst the suspense of the film's climax, it is also quite problematic. It makes a mockery of autistic abilities, at Raymond's personhood's expense. As we know, when Charlie realizes that his brother is actually somewhat of a human calculator, he exploits this rare trait to earn some money to get himself out of a jam. But let us not forget that, despite being comedic, Raymond is exploited for his abilities, and also forced to use them to break the law. Counting cards is illegal, but it does not matter, since Raymond is valued only for his savant abilities that benefit Charlie. The film shows a very specific type of person with autism, and also suggests that other people who aren't savants but who still have autism, are not valuable. Additionally, the fact that *The Hangover*, a film made decades later, also mocked this scene in a comedic way, further exemplifies just how easily these presentations of autism can permeate society and its perceptions and representations of autism for years to come. This popular reference to savantism only further reiterates that mass produced and widely distributed content, especially that highlights stories of people with autism, truly does permeate mainstream culture and perception of disability. If society is being told, through film, that people with autism and disabilities can be made fun of and placed at the root of jokes, imagine what it says to our society when already marginalized peoples, who are also affected by disability, are actively excluded from our mainstream media narratives. Along with other marginalized people, such as people of color, or women, or people who do not come from economic privilege, who are also disabled, their representation as comic, inferior, and invaluable, reinforces the mainstream belief that their lives are easily transformed into entertaining stereotypes.

Critical Acclaim

These scenes and their place within the greater storyline of *Rain Man* served the film quite well, as it was in fact the highest-grossing film of 1988. The film went on to win 4 Oscars at the 61st Academy Awards (March 1989), including Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, Best Director, and Best Actor in a Leading Role for Hoffman, but “in the wake of its release and considerable success....it was the representation of autism, rather than the orthodox sentimental narrative of individual growth, that commanded most attention.”⁸³ *Rain Man* effortlessly achieved four-quadrant — the industry term for demographically universal — success, despite mixed reviews, as a film that was made for everyone, with no specific demographic in mind. However, it certainly did not affect all viewers in the same way, both at the time of its release, and in the years following.

Although *Rain Man* received a great deal of critical acclaim and praise, it came predominantly from those who are outside of the autistic community, or who have never been directly impacted by the experiences of those who are part of it. “Many say that *Rain Man* is now damaging to autism awareness,” says the autism advocate Chris Bonnelo of Autistic Not Weird, who has Asperger’s syndrome.⁸⁴ The film, he believes, “should be regarded as a piece of history,” as it in many ways represents perceptions of autism at the time, but still does not serve as a raw representation that is not overshadowed by big-business decisions of Hollywood.⁸⁵ Another individual on the autism spectrum stated that “despite not being malicious in its portrayal, it’s still a poor representation and a stereotype,” which becomes increasingly evident when more closely examined within an intersectional historic context.⁸⁶ Naturally, the creators of the film feel firmly grounded in their reasoning for producing the piece, and Barry Morrow asserts that “*Rain Man* was, as far as I know, the first film to portray a lead character with either

autism or savant syndrome,” and “perhaps it’s become a stereotype in the eyes of some, but it didn’t start there.”⁸⁷ He argues further, that the film more accurately lies in the fact that “no representation of autism is ever going to satisfy everyone, because it’s such a wide spectrum and the people within it are so enormously different to each other, including in how their autism affects them,” but yet the people who are actually being represented, feel differently.⁸⁸ Ali Vaux, who is “a late diagnosed autistic who happens to actually be a savant,” says she feels unwelcome in the autism community “largely because of the stigma with this movie;” so, despite how the creators feel, the cultural reverberations that resulted from this film have real consequences on members of the autistic community.⁸⁹

Rain Man has consistently remained Hollywood’s primary runaway success with an autistic main character, which has allowed it to attain a unique kind of cultural staying power. Media is immensely powerful, and films penetrate our cultural consciousness more potently than any other art form.⁹⁰ In one attempt, *Rain Man* achieved almost overnight the kind of representation that members of the autistic community had been working towards for years. But as the dominant depiction of autism on screen, it also merits scrutiny, as the autistic community is more than Raymond Babbitt. So, which is it, a positive contribution to the effort to generate more broad autistic representation in Hollywood, or a historic artifact that represents past prejudice, while creating damaging stereotypes at the intersection of minority identity?

The Best Thing to Happen to Autism, or Damaging Stereotype?

“*Rain Man* was the best thing that ever happened to autism,” says psychiatrist Dr. Darold Treffert.⁹¹ The end of *Rain Man* conveniently ties the movie up in a big bow after seemingly addressing, and therefore solving, stereotypes and inequality in relation to people with autism. So although Treffert maintains that “no gigantic public education or PR effort could have produced

the sensational awareness that *Rain Man* brought to the national and international radar screen,” the film also created a very specific, linear, and in many ways dangerous image of what it means to be a person with autism spectrum disorder.⁹² Following the film’s release, “television programs debated whether such skills were fact or fiction; some even hosted people with autism who were made to answer complicated memory or math questions, in effect performing for the cameras,” as “Charlie’s awe was matched by that of a curious watching public, which had never seen a portrayal of such abilities in a major commercial feature film.”⁹³ For many, the “the ‘accuracy’ of the depiction created a version of autism that was taken by many as being factual, even if this was far from the case,” because of the power of this singular representation of autism, that was specifically constructed to be appealing to mainstream audiences, subordinated attempts to present an accurate and complex version of autism in subordination.⁹⁴

In questioning who should be responsible for the impacts of a film such as this, which tackles highly specific lived experiences, the burden does not necessarily fall on one person, or even one group of people, and *Rain Man*’s influence cannot be blamed entirely on the film itself. The blame lies with the wider entertainment industry. Instead of becoming a cultural beginning for autistic characters on screen, *Rain Man* was a singular event, an end point. “It would be unfair to say that the filmmakers should shoulder the responsibility for all these consequences; the desire on the part of the production staff was *not* to misrepresent the condition was clear,” and *Rain Man* did create somewhat of a market for autism in film that did not previously exist.⁹⁵ But, the fact that this market was based upon public fascination and the objectification of autistic people, supported by the othering of racial minorities, also must be considered. Although it was not long before other Hollywood films and television series began to feature autistic characters, they also began to dissolve into the linear, sanitized mold of autism that *Rain Man* created. These

suggestive ideas that can be deduced from *Rain Man*'s representation "should not be underestimated; they form a kind of 'history' as meaningful as any discussed here," because *Rain Man* continues to affect autistic lives, whether we like it or not.⁹⁶

Lasting Legacy

Rain Man's explosion into Hollywood and onto the American film scene established a new standard for the representation of autism. After its release, which was shortly after the official medical recognition of Autism Spectrum Disorder, the whole country and world knew what "autistic savant" meant. The film's influence on how autism is thought of culturally is immeasurable, but that influence, however benign or well-intentioned, has also created a suffocating lens through which people affected by autism are seen. By putting a face to this previously widely unknown identity, especially one as beloved as Dustin Hoffman's, *Rain Man* simultaneously provided ASD with significant social visibility within American culture, while also further perpetuating a sense of invisibility for more specific minority groups within the autism community.

While it is lovely that the film ties the relationship of these fictional characters into a nice little bow at the end of the movie, and Charlie grows to love, care about, and, one may argue, value Raymond, his transformation does not do much for people with autism in the real world. Let me not be misunderstood, the release of *Rain Man* was monumental for the disabled community around the globe, but we, as viewers and citizens, must not let the film's praise take away from the other implications that the film presents. *Rain Man* focuses on only one manifestation of autism — the autistic savant — a form of autism that is quite rare and doesn't truly reflect autism for the majority of people, and sets the stage for future films and television shows that haven't chosen to tackle autistic representation in the Hollywood sphere.

Chapter 2: *Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions* *Atypical*

Intensely plucking a rubber band between his fingers as a man's voice asserts, "I'm a weirdo. That's what everyone says."⁹⁷ Sam Gardner, an 18-year-old boy living in an affluent Connecticut suburb, sits in front of his therapist reviewing all of the things that make him "a weirdo," and, according to him, prevents him from dating girls. After receiving some inspiring advice from his therapist about how to date when one is on the autism spectrum, Sam sets out to find his match. His father, Doug, has struggled to connect with his son and is thrilled when Sam approaches him for advice. His mother, Elsa, has always had difficulty finding a life outside of her role as his guardian, and fears her son's increasing desire for independence. Viewers later learn that Doug had previously abandoned the entire Gardner family for a short period of time after Sam's autism diagnosis. Similarly, it is revealed that Elsa has been having an affair with a man who is certainly not her husband, as a coping mechanism for the stress of overseeing the challenges that come along with Sam's autistic life. Meanwhile, as the personal lives of the people around him are suffering due to their self-inflicted onboarding of the growing pains of his atypical life, Sam determines that his true love is actually Julia, his 26-year-old therapist. Eventually Sam comes around to the fact that he needs a "practice girlfriend," as he puts it, and with the help of his friends and family, begins to learn the social nuances of dating, socializing, and overall young adult life that are impacted by his autism. *Atypical* provides audiences with a heartfelt comedic storyline that emphasizes themes of family, love, and friendship, but despite the commonality of all of these concepts found in most light-hearted Hollywood productions, at the root of this story is the fact that the main character is autistic.

In many ways, *Atypical* has been received as a modern *Rain Man*. This coming-of-age series was first released to the world in 2017 through the subscription-based streaming service,

Netflix, and is written and created by the highly successful American television writer-producer and showrunner, Robia Rashid. Similar to the eyes that were immediately fixated on *Rain Man* leading up to its release due to Dustin Hoffman's notoriety, instant interest surrounded *Atypical*, as Robia Rashid was also behind the beloved television series, *How I Met Your Mother*. Additionally, the show was created specifically for Netflix, and began to experience buzz surrounding its proposed plot, before even going into production. In a press release issued by Netflix itself on October 17th, 2016, it is stated that:

Netflix, the world's leading Internet TV network, today announced *Atypical*, a new series from Robia Rashid (*The Goldbergs*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Will & Grace*) and Academy Award winning producer Seth Gordon (*Baywatch*, *The Goldbergs*, *Horrible Bosses*, *The King of Kong*), starring Academy Award nominee Jennifer Jason Leigh (*Hateful Eight*, *Margot at the Wedding*, *Georgia*), Keir Gilchrist (*It's Kind of a Funny Story*, *The United States of Tara*) and Michael Rapaport (*Justified*). The series from Sony Pictures Television will begin production in Los Angeles later this year.⁹⁸

The press release very strategically begins with an assertion of the notable and successful people behind the project, indicating to the public that this television series is one that is likely to be just as appealing to audiences and equally successful as the other projects that were produced by industry experts such as those mentioned above. The press release goes on to provide an overview of the intended series' plot, indicating that:

The coming-of-age story follows Sam (played by Gilchrist), an 18-year-old on the autistic spectrum on his search for love and independence. His funny yet painful journey of self-discovery upends his entire family, forcing them all to grapple with change in their own lives as they all struggle with the central theme: what does it really mean to be

normal? Jennifer Jason Leigh stars as his mother, Elsa, who is on her own journey of self-discovery, and Michael Rapaport plays his father, Doug. Brigette Lundy-Paine (*Margot vs Lily, The Glass Castle*) will play Sam's sister Casey and Amy Okuda (*How to Get Away with Murder*) portrays his therapist, Julia.⁹⁹

The latter portion of the release, though brief, summarizes what will later become an entire season of a television series. Even in its brevity, it highlights the main character, Sam's autism in the first sentence. The purpose of a press release, specifically in Hollywood, is to grab attention, make news, and generate publicity; thus, there must be a key component included that will do all of those things alongside the general information about the project. In the case of *Atypical*, the plot's rootedness in the main character's autistic trials and tribulations is that 'thing.' Although both the press release and the television series as a whole go on to highlight other themes, concepts, and storylines, the sheer fact that Sam has autism is very clearly something that is emphasized strategically and used as a selling point, whether in the press release or during the very first scene of the show. The show's press release's emphasis on the plot point of autism asserts it as something spectacular before the show even went into production. "With many youths diagnosed with autism on the cusp of adulthood, series creator Robia Rashid figured a story told from the teen's point of view, a first for a TV comedy, would be a great way to explore dating and other rituals connected with growing up," and so she did.¹⁰⁰ There certainly isn't anything inherently wrong with attempting to shed light on the lived experiences of those with autism, but it is also imperative that as viewers we examine the specific ways in which the story is told, and the perpetuating factors that influence those determinations.

With all eyes on this television series that was being crafted by some of Hollywood's biggest names, produced by one of Hollywood's biggest film studios, and distributed by the

world's largest media streaming platform, *Atypical* had some very high expectations to meet. In addition to the general public anticipating the show's release, it was also being created almost 3 decades after *Rain Man* hit theaters, and therefore had some rather large shoes to fill when it comes to Hollywood productions that feature an autistic person as its main character. Before even examining the actual way in which autism is presented at face value in the show, it is also imperative to consider the choices that were made before the show was released to the public, who was making those choices, and why they were being made.

In this chapter I place *Atypical* at the forefront of my analysis of autism representation in Hollywood. Differing from *Rain Man* in that it is a television series, rather than a movie, and that it was made in the 21st century rather than in the 20th, the show provides this discussion with unique insight into the close correlation between U.S. culture and entertainment industry media that continues to prioritize profit even if the end result damages the lives of those they represent. Viewed through the lens of race and disability's intersection, commonalities and trends can be traced from the first chapter, and I argue that while *Rain Man* acted as a direct reflection of American society leading up to the first major autistic character in Hollywood, *Atypical* follows suit in its framework of representation, despite changes in culture and norms. This stasis indicates that much of what we see in Hollywood-produced media is a reflection, not of changing American culture, but, rather, of institutionalized ideals, that contribute to the perpetuation of damaging stereotypes for the autistic community.

Autism Accommodation

In an attempt to present a more accurate portrayal of life with autism, Robia Rashid consulted Michelle Dean, a California State University professor who worked at UCLA's Center for Autism Research and Treatment. Although the Center for Autism Research and Treatment is

one of the most prominent interdisciplinary research and education institutes devoted to understanding the causes and consequences of neuropsychiatric disorders,¹⁰¹ and Dean has significant experience in special education, and working with young autistic people,¹⁰² neither of these entities was going to be able to simply replace the insight that a person who actually has autism would be able to contribute. This omission of first-person perspectives is important to note, as representation can come in many forms. It is not always simply about the general portrayal of autism on the big screen, but also about the way autistic people are represented in the other facets of any given project as well.

Much of the backlash that *Rain Man* received was not simply because of its portrayal of autism on screen, but also due to the lack of autistic representation and inclusion behind the scenes. When *Rain Man* was being created, autism had only recently been officially medically recognized, as we know. So not only was America not seeing many autistic characters on screen, it also was not seeing people with autism working in Hollywood nor were they participating in what should and should not be presented to viewers. Since the 1980s, there has been a significant push in for inclusion both on and off screen, and there is certainly something to be said for the fact that there were steps being taken in the making of *Atypical* to ensure the most accurate portrayal of the spectrum disorder as possible. But why do these measures still not include people who actually have autism? The 1990 civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on disability, The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), also includes a section that addresses people with disabilities in the workplace. Under Title I of the Act,

The ADA requires reasonable accommodations as they relate to three aspects of employment: 1) ensuring equal opportunity in the application process; 2) enabling a qualified individual with a disability to perform the essential functions of a job; and 3)

making it possible for an employee with a disability to enjoy equal benefits and privileges of employment.¹⁰³

This portion of the Act means that these modifications enable an individual with a disability to have an equal opportunity not only to get a job, but also to support the successful performance of their job; therefore there is no reason that autistic voices and perspectives should be excluded from the conversation about representing autism in Hollywood.

Exceptional Minds

Despite seemingly slow progress, the Americans with Disabilities Act did inspire a great deal of change when it comes to the general production of media and the roles that autistic people play both on screen and behind the scenes. Around the same time that decisions were being made regarding *Atypical* and its production that included little to no autistic people, many other lesser-known production entities were working hard to make a seat for autistic people at the table. Established in 2011, the first American computer animation studio and non-profit digital arts school for young adults on the autism spectrum, Exceptional Minds, worked to employ its students in Hollywood.¹⁰⁴ Centered around post-production visual arts in film, the small grassroots company began to gain a significant amount of traction when its students began working on major Hollywood projects. The studio is now an approved vendor for Disney, Fox, HBO, Marvel Studios, Netflix, Paramount, Universal, and Warner Bros, while the Studio's credits already include the Special Olympics, *Sesame Street*, and blockbuster films such as *Black Panther* and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*.¹⁰⁵ Exceptional Minds' emphasis lies on recognizing the talents of young adults with autism and helping them identify and develop their skills and passions through employment opportunities in Hollywood. This could be understood as a version of autistic representation, as the company's efforts are enabling the work of autistic people to be

utilized and valued alongside that of neurotypical people. Although, the great lengths to which this company, among others, have gone to ensure that there are places in Hollywood that work for autistic people is considerable, when it comes to the projects that address autism and disability, there is no excuse for excluding autistic and other disabled participation.

The founders of Exceptional Minds believe that “young adults on the autism spectrum have an edge when it comes to work like this,” since “people with autism may have difficulty with communication and social interaction, they also tend to be very detail-oriented and rule-governed — valuable traits for the extremely tedious work of visual effects.”¹⁰⁶ This company’s leading role in the identifying and increasing efforts to accommodate autistic people in the workplace, specifically in Hollywood, shows progress; it should also be noted that the company is doing so by catering to pre-existing skills and abilities, funneling people with autism directly into specific roles in Hollywood that highlight the perspectives and creative minds of individuals on the autism spectrum. In contrast, during the time that *Rain Man* was being made, there were simply no people with autism working in Hollywood, much less working on the actual production or post-production of major movies and television series. But this lack of visibility and inclusion still does not explain why the space that has been created in Hollywood for people with autism is small, and unvarying. It takes hiring people with autism in more than one niche facet of a 720-billion-dollar U.S. industry, to establish legitimate representation.¹⁰⁷

Legitimate Representation

It has been noted time and time again that one of the most fatal flaws of *Rain Man* is that the main character, Raymond, was not actually played by someone who is autistic. All things considered, given the social and political climate during the 1980s, it is not surprising that they did not choose a person with autism to play one of the first autistic characters to grace the silver

screen. But this does not mean that we as viewers should not view the film critically, decades later, within the current cultural climate. And although Dustin Hoffman received great praise for his portrayal of a person with autism, even reaching the highest Hollywood honor of an Academy Award for his performance, it is important to consider the work that has been done both in Hollywood and broader American society, since the creation and release of *Rain Man*. Similar to the work that has been done through companies such as Exceptional Minds, in an attempt to create space for autistic people in the entertainment industry in general, there has also been a push for autistic actors to be given the opportunity to not only act in Hollywood films and television shows, but also to actually be the ones to portray autistic characters. It can be easily assumed that a general societal shift towards inclusion, in addition to motivators such as the disability rights movement, the ADA, and accommodation in the workplace, could easily translate into there being more autistic representation in the form of autistic actors on screen. Because if the American cultural atmosphere was shifting towards increasing autistic inclusivity, in many forms, why wouldn't that also be reflected in the decisions made by those in positions of influence in Hollywood? After all, have we not learned anything from *Rain Man*? According to *Atypical*, apparently not.

Autism Rights Movement

Throughout the 20th century, it was safe for Hollywood, and the entertainment industry as whole, to assume that presenting the world with autistic characters was a sufficient form of representation. But the sore point of neurotypical actors playing autistic characters has persisted. Author and disability theorist, Tobin Siebers, terms this “disability drag,” using Dustin Hoffman’s *Rain Man* performance itself to exemplify this concept.¹⁰⁸ “That was the problem from the start,” says Anita Hollander, who is an actor, disability advocate, and now the National

Chair of the SAG-AFTRA Performers with Disabilities Committee. “In 1980, the industry thought we were just saying, ‘You need to represent us more’ meaning, Oh, sure, we’ll tell all your stories, and we’ll have our [able-bodied] box-office stars play those roles.”¹⁰⁹ The push for this to change began was greatly supported and fueled by the Autism Rights Movement. As the broader Disability Rights Movement took its initial form in the 1960s, around 3 decades before the ADA was actually passed, the Autism Rights Movement did not pick up steam until the early 21st century. Although it was certainly within the context of disability rights, this new movement introduced concepts that were quite foreign to society, and even more so, to the entertainment industry.

Not officially coined until 1998 by sociologist Judy Singer, the Autism Rights Movement emphasizes a concept called “neurodiversity,” which refers to “variation in the human brain regarding sociability, learning, attention, mood and other mental functions in a non-pathological sense.”¹¹⁰ The introduction of this contemporary term and concept reoriented public perception of autism and neurological difference, as the movement views the autism spectrum as the result of natural variations in the human brain rather than as a disorder to be cured.¹¹¹ This was a pivotal shift in perspective, as the more broad acceptance of people with autism was creating a space in which they were not being publicly thought of as needing to be “fixed.” It is also important to note that this movement emphasized acceptance of neurodiverse people who do *not* have exceptional abilities such as savant skills. It is evident through *Rain Man* that there was previously a certain spectacularizing of autistic bodies that maintained somewhat superhuman abilities, and those were really the only neurodivergent people who held little, if any, value in the eyes of mainstream American society.

Despite a great deal of progress being made through this movement, it primarily confronted only the medical model of autism. Although this is the model that has historically perpetuated negative public perceptions of people with autism and contributed to the devaluing of people who present as neurologically different, it has done little to address the subsequent social model that became increasingly prominent throughout the 21st century. Originally seen as being a model of medical deficiency or abnormality, resulting in the social ostracization of neurodivergent people, autism was now being seen through a social model as an ingrained difference, thus resulting in the identification of a new type of discrimination in an inaccessible society. Although all this medical jargon and socially historical context may be quite interesting on its own, how does it relate to entertainment and the Hollywood movies and tv shows that are being made? The problem that has arisen in the 21st century, despite the progress made since *Rain Man* regarding autism representation, is not that there is now no theoretical space for autistic people in Hollywood. The issue lies within the fact that despite the subsequent rise in the social model of autism, which fundamentally concerns equality, the powers that be in the entertainment industry persist in their refusal to create equal opportunity in the representation of autistic people in Hollywood.

The Social Model

Actual autistic representation cannot be achieved solely by autistic people. A great deal of the responsibility falls upon those in positions of influence and power. Because the 21st century brought with it a shift towards broader neurodiversity inclusion, acts of change do not simply happen on their own. There are clearly many factors that influence how the autistic community is presented to a society dominated by the perspectives of neurotypical people. A fundamental aspect of the creation of equality, or rather the institutionalized lack thereof, is the

willingness of those in positions of power to allow autistic people to be part of the change-making decisions. Equal opportunity for autistic people in Hollywood specifically, means being offered a seat at the table alongside everyone else who has always been included in the entertainment industry's decision-making process, especially when it comes to the fictionalization of their lived experiences. So, with the entire world's eyes on it, its executive team, and the powerhouse Hollywood industry that was behind it, *Atypical* had a lot to prove. However, did it live up to the most minor demands of both the autistic and national community over the last 3 decades since the release of *Rain Man*, and the subsequent autism-adjacent societal developments?

Tellers of the History

Before we dive into the complexities of the ways in which *Atypical* bears the burden of the historically institutionalized biases in American society, despite the advancements made on the front of inclusivity and representation in Hollywood productions since the groundbreaking release of *Rain Man*... let us first ensure that we understand the players on this metaphorical stage.

Sam Gardner: An 18-year-old male-identifying teen who is on the autism spectrum. Naturally, for Hollywood's purposes of really hammering home that he is autistic, the stereotyped autistic trait of having a heightened fixation on one specific topic that was chosen for Sam, is that he is obsessed with Antarctica and penguins. Despite the distinct efforts to assert that his autism is what makes him different, idiosyncratic, and interesting to audiences, Keir Gilchrist, the neurotypical actor behind the character, asserts that he is just "a very specific character."¹¹²

Elsa Gardner: Sam's obsessively overprotective mother. Played by Jennifer Jason Leigh, Elsa whole-heartedly takes on the emotional burdens of having an autistic son. In fact, she is just so empathetic, that the weight of dealing with her son's autistic reality leads her to cheat on her husband with another man, which effortlessly thickens the plot for viewers, while simultaneously reinforcing the notion that other people's autistic personhood poses a problem for everyone else.

Doug Gardner: Sam's perfectly contrasting additional parental figure. Seamlessly stepping into the ever so slightly emotionally detached father role, Michael Rapaport executes Doug's storyline; his role similarly plays into the idea that autism is an inconvenience for those who are not on the spectrum, as he, of course, briefly but predictably abandons the entire Gardner family after Sam's diagnosis.

Julia Sasaki: Sam's dedicated therapist. As Amy Okuda's portal of Julia guides Sam through his trials and tribulations of being autistic, the character certainly does not shy away from Hollywood's typecasting of actors of color in roles that exist only to assist the main, white, character.

Zahid Raja: Sam's best, and some might say token, friend of color. One of only a handful of characters of color throughout the entire series, Nik Dodani steps into the foul-mouthed role of the Indian sidekick, reaffirming to audiences that characters of color really are in fact strategically placed in Hollywood productions to simply support the main character's journey while providing comedic relief as needed.

Each and every one of these characters, in one way or another, is placed to assist in the more broad development of Sam's character. Some characters, however, certainly do this in ways that differ from others. And despite the ways in which these characters are written into this story of an autistic teenage boy who just can't seem to fit in, they carry with them much larger

societally and historically informed implications that can be seen in many scenes throughout the first season of *Atypical* in its entirety.

A Closer View: I'm a Weirdo

“I’m a weirdo. That’s what everyone says.”¹¹³ The entire series of *Atypical* begins with this statement. To no surprise, as the opening scene begins, it is revealed that Sam is in fact the one who is asserting this notion. For viewers who might be unfamiliar with the show’s plot, or unclear about the fact that the main character is on the autism spectrum, it is made quite clear right off the bat. The opening scene transitions into the highlighting of what exactly makes this, yet to be defined main character, different. As viewers are listening to his voiceover recording describing the reasons why he is just so ‘weird,’ the only visual that is provided is a close-up view of, presumably, his hands that are incessantly fidgeting with a rubber band. This is also important to note, as stimming, short for self-stimulatory behavior, is a quite common, often stereotyped, behavior in autistic people.¹¹⁴ It is immediately made quite clear that the choice to emphasize this character’s difference from others is strategic. The choice to begin, stylistically I might add, with the entire series with the topic of difference, more specifically autism, indicates that the plot point of autism is going to be one that is central to, and capitalized upon in the show. It also suggests in a way, that it is being spectacularized, as it is clearly going to be what carries the rest of the series in its entirety.

Then the camera pans to the character’s face, as he continues to describe what exactly makes him a ‘weirdo,’ including the noting of things that he could never do, presumably because of his differences. He asserts that he could never “research penguins in Antarctica or have a girlfriend.”¹¹⁵ This alludes to the notion that not only is this character somewhat different, but that he is also just inherently differently abled. As the camera turns to reveal an Asian female-

presenting woman, who we will later learn is Julia, it is made clear that the male is in fact providing a long-winded answer to a question asked during his therapy session. Before she even has a chance to speak, the dynamic that is set up between these two characters defends the perception that this female character of color is woven into the storyline to provide assistance to the main character. Of course, before this opening scene can conclude, Sam must make an awkward, situationally inappropriate comment about being able to see the therapist's bra. Clearly inserted as a point of humor, this uncomfortable comment is one that subtly makes a mockery of Sam's uneasy navigation of intimate social interaction, such as misreading social cues. If it wasn't already made abundantly clear to viewers in the first 45 seconds of the series, this comment and the therapist's response, which changes the subject just enough to assert that "people on the spectrum date, you know," certainly solidify the fact that Sam is in fact, in the words of the show, 'atypical.'¹¹⁶ Now that it has officially been confirmed for viewers that Sam is on the autism spectrum, it makes the implications of the show's stylistic and creative choices, all the more weighty.

Antarctica

The first scene of the series makes such distinct efforts to assert very specific themes and concepts to viewers, why stop there? The second scene transitions into a bit more of an introduction to Sam as a character and as an autistic person. As he is shown on a public bus, Sam states, with no context other than the fact that he is seen sitting on a bus, that "buses are okay, but I don't like the feeling of it on my back so I sit like this."¹¹⁷ Here the camera shows Sam sitting uncomfortably, so as not to have his back touch the seat, while background actors surrounding him are sitting comfortably against their seats. As Sam thinks, which we know since his voiceover provides viewers with his internal dialogue, he ponders "a type of Antarctic cod

that has a special protein in its blood that stops it from freezing,” before chuckling internally about “antifreeze in fish!” subsequently laughing out loud for the rest of the bus to hear. When he receives perplexed expressions from those around him, he asserts that he was simply laughing because he was thinking about “Antarctic cod,” before the scene concludes with Sam reciting impressively specific facts and figures about Antarctica and penguins.¹¹⁸ The entire time that this is unfolding, there is light-hearted, subtle music playing, indicating that this scene is not one to take too seriously. Once again, the scene in its entirety, makes an attempt to present the challenges and the less-than-ideal social situations that can come with being autistic and surrounded by neurotypical people, through a comedic lens. Instead, it further makes a mockery of less-than-ideal social situations that autistic people often encounter. Simultaneously, while it is not indicated that Sam has any savant abilities, the creators of the show are sure to capitalize on the fact that Sam does in fact have one of the stereotyped topical fixations, by having him spew the Antarctica facts. So, similar to *Rain Man*, the character was specifically written to have the historically spectacularized superhero-like abilities that simply not every person with autism poses. And although every person with autism is in fact different, and it is a spectrum disorder, it is quite convenient that this particular characteristic was chosen for Sam, which is clearly capitalized upon to make him seemingly just a bit more fascinating and entertaining for audience members.

Sex

As Sam’s mother wizzes by in the middle of simultaneously telling a story that is seemingly going nowhere and making dinner for her entire family, the scene after the bus interaction introduces Elsa and Doug Gardner, Sam’s parents, in addition to his sister, Casey. Once, at the dinner table, the familial roles are made evident, when overprotective Elsa

immediately tells Sam that he is not allowed to donate his brain to science, after he brings up his consideration of the after-death practice, and Doug completely ignores the conversation about his own son's idea, simply complementing the seasoning on the chicken that Elsa made for dinner. When asked how therapy had gone earlier that day, which viewers watched unfold, Sam, with a straight face and without hesitating, states that "Julia thinks that I should put myself out there and find someone to have sex with...well, she didn't say the sex part. I added that."¹¹⁹ While everyone at the table laughs, Sam simply sits there, clearly not even recognizing that what he said might not be appropriate to share with your entire family at the dinner table. For that same comedic purpose that makes this comment laughable for viewers, despite how awkward it is to watch, the scene ends before anyone around Sam can say anything, and the title sequence begins. Additionally, although viewers do not learn just yet about the true interpersonal dynamics of his family, and the ways in which Sam's parents onboard and ultimately handle the stress of his autistic existence, their personalities are still made quite clear. This dynamic scene that introduces many of the familial characters that will be present throughout the remainder of the story, not only reiterates to audiences at the very beginning of the show, that it is ok to laugh at autistic people for their differences, but also establishes that the problems and maladjusted personalities of Sam's family members are a result of him and the stress that his inherent being inflicts.

Brown Sugar

Flashing forward to after the title sequence, Sam can be seen sitting behind the "Tech Desk" of a computer shop, as an Indian-presenting male approach him, stating that he "banged a veterinarian I met online last night. She had a pet parrot that repeated everything she said. 'Do me, Brown Sugar! Do me, Brown Sugar!'" before coming to the realization that "oh shit, I think

she's racist."¹²⁰ Considering this is the audience's very first introduction to Zahid, who we later learn is one of Sam's closest friends and co-workers, this is certainly quite bold and sets a very lewd tone. His work-inappropriate comments immediately indicate that he is not to be taken seriously, and much of the stylistic comedic effort surrounding his character is rooted in making his race one of the primary laughing stocks of the show. This is all before Sam begins to question Zahid about dating, making it safe to assume that the only other character of color is also going to be an integral player in Sam's journey to find himself, specifically within the realm of dating. Much like every other introductory scene in the show, this conversation between Sam and Zahid not only gives viewers a short look into what is likely representative of their dynamic throughout the rest of the series. It also makes much larger cultural statements that might not inherently be noticeable or even problematic if it weren't made abundantly clear that it was explicitly decided to play into the stereotypes of each of these character's minority identities for stylistic justification.

The primary intention of the first few introductory scenes is to do just that, introduce. In the first scenes of the series all of the primary characters are introduced, and it is immediately made clear what they will unproblematically add to the storyline, in addition to what concepts, themes, and stereotypes they will problematically contribute throughout the rest of the episode and series.

Rain Man and Atypical: The Same but Different but the Same?

In many ways, the dynamics overviewed above are quite parallel to those that are presented in *Rain Man*, despite the time gap in creation. For example, Raymond and Sam are quite different, as all autistic people are, but there are certainly some similarities in the way in which their autistic personhood is fictionalized and presented to audiences. In both the film and

the series, it is immediately asserted, upon the introduction of each work's respective protagonists, that a story is being told about difference. This is more specifically highlighted through the emphasis of stereotyped qualities that are written into each character's fictional personhood. It is clear that certain introductory scenes are written into both stories, to thoroughly and successfully convey to audience members that the characters are autistic. Similarly, it is clear that Raymond has savant abilities, enabling him to possess skills most neurotypical people do not have, let alone other autistic people. And although Sam does not necessarily boast savantism, he does have a keen interest in one specific topic, about which he has the unparalleled ability to memorize, recall, and recite facts. So, there may be differences in the actual abilities of each character, but both Raymond and Sam are made into somewhat of a spectacle, in an effort to engage audience members, as if simply being autistic with no extraordinary skill is just not quite interesting enough.

In addition to the spectacularization of both Raymond and Sam's autistic personhood, there is also a more specific comedizing that also takes place in each story in similar ways. In both *Rain Man* and *Atypical*, there are scenes after scenes that present an awkward, uncomfortable, or just plain embarrassing moment that is experienced solely because of the social difficulties that can be a result of living as an autistic person in a world full of neurotypical people who employ imprecise language and vague social cues. These social situations that may be intended to represent the very real complexities of autistic lived experiences, are presented in a way that is very clearly intended to amuse viewers. Whether it is while Raymond is talking to a female sex worker, or Sam is talking about his desired sex life, these situations occur again and again in both productions. Not to mention the fact that both Raymond and Sam's autism is used to convey annoyance and inconvenience for their family members, while their secondary

sidekicks of color help them navigate the world. Although these creative decisions have been justified by the idea that using comedy to present the complexities of autism that are often foreign to neurotypical viewers, makes it digestible and is thus the best way to successfully contribute to wide-reaching autistic media representation, these choices are actually quite damaging. There is no doubt that making the discomfort of the foreignness of autism more palatable through comedy and supporting characters is successful in satisfying audience members' satisfied in their desire for a new and uncommon viewing experience, in addition to filling the pockets of Hollywood studios. However, the choice to do so also simultaneously reiterates to society as a whole, that autistic people are atypical due to their neurodivergent differences and that it is ok to mock neurodivergence, completely negating the broad shift towards the social model of disability.

Although both *Rain Man* and *Atypical* are quite clearly rooted in the fact that each respective work's protagonist is autistic, there are also similarities in the ways in which the character's autism affects those around them. Autism's strain on family is a prominent and common theme to be explored, both in the relationship between Raymond and Charlie, and the choices that Sam's parents make that directly affect his home life. It is no secret that the driving force of *Rain Man*'s plot is the conflict that comes from Raymond's autism and the way in which it complicates his brother's life. *Atypical*, because the entire plot surrounds Sam's autism, makes a similar suggestion that the hardship that family members face, is highly influenced by or even a result of the fact that Sam is autistic.

In the first episode Sam's parents, Elsa and Doug, have a heartfelt conversation that gives a glimpse into the very real emotional toll that having a child with autism can take on parents. Elsa expresses the constant anxiety that she has as a mother when the phone rings,

worrying that “he’s crossed the street again with his eyes closed, or he had a freak-out in a store, or he’s hit a police officer. Every time the phone rings.”¹²¹ This worry actually provides insight into the true realities and complexities of a neurotypical-parent, autistic-child dynamic that is experienced by so many families. Alone, this has been said to be quite beneficial in the efforts of autistic representation, but *Atypical* takes it a step further. Rather than simply presenting examples that represent the ways in which autism commonly affects more than simply those who are diagnosed, the show creates an entire subplot rooted in the idea that autism is just so stressful for Sam’s parents, that they are unable to fulfil their roles as parents and spouses. It is true that the stresses of having an autistic child have led to a higher rate of divorce among parents of children with ASD.¹²² However, the dramatization of this reality as it surrounds the show’s focus on Sam’s autism is what makes it problematic. By shifting the stress felt by Sam’s parents, which is similarly experienced by many real parents of autistic children, towards building the climax of the series, the burden is placed on Sam’s autistic personhood; this narrative structure conveys to audiences that it is Sam’s fault that his parents struggle in their relationship, and make destructive life choices. After it is revealed that Doug left the family for 8 months back in 2004 because he couldn't accept Sam's autism, in the final scene of the final episode of season 1, viewers are inundated with the information, that is being presented dramatically as somewhat of a demise of the entire Gardner family. The episode ends with Sam’s sister revealing that she knows her mother, Elsa, has been having an affair. She announces her disdain by leaving her mom a note demanding that she “stop banging the bartender.”¹²³

Connection to American Society

Contextually speaking, the mere setup of both *Rain Man* and *Atypical* are similar. Raymond is a white male, who comes from economic privilege, and lives in a nice, ‘normal’

suburban Ohio town in which there is no significant plague of poverty, violence, or crime. Sam is a white male, who comes from economic privilege, and lives in a nice, 'normal' suburban Connecticut town in which there is no significant plague of poverty, violence, or crime. In almost every way, each of these men fit into the ideal privileged American role. The only true factor that prevents them from aspiring to obtain the idealized American dream, is that they are both autistic. The alignment of the facets between each character's identity is not a coincidence. As we know, in American society our identities hold a great deal of power and influence over how we experience the world around us. The historic social and political underpinnings of this country have been institutionally established to authorize and promote those who are in fact white, male, and of a heightened socio-economic privilege. The disconnect in identity and experience between white male Americans of economic privilege and those of non-majority backgrounds is deeply intertwined in our most difficult challenges and inequalities, but not according to the Hollywood dramatizations of autism's challenges.

White as Non-threatening

“Hollywood functions as a sort of prism, refracting the colors we see on cinematic screens by separating them from whiteness. Misrepresenting what-ever is seen through it, Hollywood attempts to segregate whiteness from color in ways that make the former invisible and the latter isolated and stereotypical,”¹²⁴ and much like the broader concept of autistic representation, the racial facet of representation is also a direct reflection of society. In *the Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, Daniel Bernardi asserts that whiteness is a fact everywhere in life, and therefore everywhere in “contemporary Hollywood cinema, crossing audiences, authors, genres, studios and styles.”¹²⁵ If whiteness remains the dominant race, both in the statistical makeup of the country and in institutionalized

agency and influence, it will thus also dominate on-screen representation. Interestingly, “due to changing social and cultural practices across American history, the articulation of race in contemporary film is distinct from the articulation of race in early and classical film...from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s to the neoconservative movement of the Bush administrations, from the Cold War to the never-ending war on terrorism, from Vietnam to Iraq, the last fifty plus years have seen dramatic and traumatic change,” but why is it that despite this racialized cultural change, we are still seeing racial majority groups dominating the silver screen?¹²⁶

“The racial formation is directional, adjusting to socio political movements, but its benefactors, those who pass as white, focus like a laser beam on maintaining the status of their power and privilege.”¹²⁷ Despite all of the racial justice progress that had been made socially, politically, and culturally throughout the mid-20th before the creation of *Rain Man*, and the subsequent equalizing representation opportunities in Hollywood, *Atypical* still made the explicit choice to utilize a white family to convey the television series’ plot. This in and of itself is not problematic, but also must be contextualized. According to media monitoring organization, GLAAD, “among the 879 regular characters expected on broadcast programming during the 2019-2020 season, 3.1 percent — or 27 characters — have disabilities.”¹²⁸ It is clear that this percentage, relative to the greater number of characters that are being produced in Hollywood, is quite low. Not only has it been determined that disabled characters are less marketable to mass audiences, but when they are utilized to create a spectacle of a storyline, they are most easily digested when they are as unthreatening as possible. And in America what could be less threatening than a white male born into economic privilege? The show’s racial representation becomes questionable when its primary white characters are examined in conjunction with other

forms of representation. *Atypical's* Gardner family being white while featuring a minority through their autistic son is a concerted way to make autism more easily digestible to identity-majority audience members, similarly, seen in the creation of *Rain Man*. This, in conjunction with the way in which the show's supporting characters of color are written and presented, rejects anyone who does not fit into majority characteristics, and thus "fractures the representations and stories of other colors."¹²⁹The similarities in character racial makeup, in addition to the distinct ways in which they are presented to audiences in both *Rain Man* and *Atypical* have changed very little across time. So, although society itself has seemingly changed, this is indicative of a much larger issue in American society. The racial similarities between *Rain Man* and *Atypical's* main characters reiterate the notion that Hollywood's entertainment industry is continuously perpetuated by the powerhouses that are reflective of much larger institutionalized issues.

Sidekicks of Color

Television has become the nation's primary storyteller, serving as a reflection of American ideals, while also influencing viewer's perceptions of the various groups that are being represented. This is certainly true for racial minorities in Hollywood productions. In *Rain Man* we saw this in Raymond's caretaker, Vern, as he was a black man acting in a supporting character role, who was placed in the film specifically to aid in the life and character development of Raymond. This racial minority sidekick stereotype that was exemplified in *Rain Man* was clearly representative of the fact that during the 1980s, despite increasing racial diversity acceptance, people of color were still being represented in a way that was very different from those who were part of the racial majority. However, that was then. Since then, there have been even more significant societal shifts towards racial equity and equality, resulting in an

increase in more general racial minority representation in mass media. However, although we are seeing more racial minorities on screen, we are simply seeing them more frequently in roles that are quite similar to those that they were pigeonholed in the previous decade. For example, in *Rain Man*, Vern is the minority sidekick who helps Raymond literally in his day-to-day life, and figuratively, assisting in moving the story of Raymond and his autistic personhood along for the sake of the film's plot. In *Atypical*, Zahid is the racial minority sidekick who helps Sam literally in learning to navigate the dating scene, and figuratively, also assisting in moving the story of Sam and his autistic personhood along for the sake of the show's plot. The distinct similarities between these two characters and the roles that they play in their respective stories are, much like the context that makes the main character's racial makeup significant, are not coincidental, and must be examined as both a reflection and a reflector of more broad American society.

Cultural Creation

As we know, Hollywood is a business, and therefore it must cater to what audiences want to see. Attracting viewers and selling tickets is rooted in intriguing and satisfying viewers. This strategy includes presenting concepts and plotlines that are conceptually familiar while still being engagingly captivating. This requires an effort to not make audience members unformattable, even when introducing underrepresented subjects. The simplest way to do this. Cater to the majority, in every way possible. There are many reasons that make the examination of how racial minorities are portrayed in the media, both valuable and crucial to the broader analysis of autistic representation. First, documenting the way in which minorities have been depicted over time can provide us with a unique perspective of American society and institutionalized racial ideals. Racially, Caucasian people have consistently been both the majority and most favorable peoples in America. This fact alone creates reason enough for

Hollywood studios who set out to make movies for profit, to feature cast white actors in main character roles. Correspondingly, it is comfortable to place racial minorities of color in ‘sidekick’ roles that assist the development of the main, white characters, since that is the role that they have played in the history of America as well. Because of the big-business aspect of Hollywood and the highly funded entertainment industry, there is seemingly an economic need to place an emphasis on white characters in the most outward facing roles, which inherently stems from the institutionalized way in which the country discerns racial majorities from minorities. However, this is only further exacerbated by the relatively new practice of placing stories of autism and disability theatrically on display. Autism as a lived experience and as a concept, does not affect the majority of the U.S. population. Therefore, stories that are rooted in the subject of autism are naturally considered to be somewhat foreign in concept to the vast majority of audience members. In the shift towards broader autistic representation, and the demand for more autistic stories to be shared in mass media, has come a tasking of Hollywood studios to present these conceptually unfamiliar stories in a non-offensive way, that will still attract viewers and thus generate revenue. The evidently determined solution to this quandary has been to present autistic stories in Hollywood through the vehicle of capitalizing on preexisting, standardized racial roles. While it is true that there are many other highly successful Hollywood productions that challenge historically established practices, respectively feature both racial minorities in empowering lead roles, and creating entire works around the subject autism, highly funded for-profit films and series fall short when it comes to featuring autistic stories that also have minority main characters. It is though this that it is made evidently clear that the practices in place to represent autism are a direct reflection of American racial capacities.

Ideals

The examination of the way in which racial minorities are presented in Hollywood mass media also serves as a sort of cultural artifact. Significantly funded, widely distributed Hollywood productions are designed to reach wide audiences and are thus able to perpetuate the racial societal norms that have been historically set in stone. Film and television “continuously feed mainstream views over a period of time,” so much so that the images that they present “inform public opinions about the social world.”¹³⁰ In *The Journal of Social Issues*, “Documenting Portrayals of Race/Ethnicity on Primetime Television over a 20-Year Span and Their Association with National-Level Racial/Ethnic Attitudes” asserts this notion, suggesting that that certain images, particularly those that stand out to the viewing audience, may be more important in shaping racial attitudes than the mere number of minorities characters shown. This means that Hollywood productions are quite culturally significant, in that they have the ability to contribute to the American cultural climate. Because Hollywood as an institution is so established, maintaining the resources to reach more people than other professionally produced films and shows, it is also therefore able to maintain a significant amount of influence over viewers and American citizens alike. It has been established that in America power and money hold a direct correlation with influence, and that principle is directly transferable to Hollywood as well. Boasting the most prominent amount of money and power in the U.S. entertainment industry, the big-budget film studios that comprise Hollywood therefore also hold a great deal of influence. With this influence, if here is a racial norm that has been set within broad American society across time, auspicious or negative, the creative decisions behind these big-budget productions and the power that they hold, have the opportunity to either conform to or reject them as the stories to be produced are being meticulously crafted. Consequently, exemplified through both *Rain Man* and *Atypical*, Hollywood productions have made the district choice to

preserve the institutional racial hierarchy of America, placing white people in the most prominent positions, and people of color in subordination. This practice is not only a reflection of hegemonic racial societal standings, but also continues to signal to broader society the ways in which race should be categorized and represented.

No Autistic Actors

Given the social and political climate throughout the 20th century, it may not come as a surprise that the first major Hollywood film about autism did not also feature a person of color as the main character, but as we know, a great deal of progress has been made, both in regard to autism rights and representation, and racial justice and representation. But despite this context, there is very little reflection of this change in *Atypical*. Have we learned nothing from *Rain Man*? Certainly, it was the first major movie of its kind to even present the concept of autism through a main character, but quite a bit has changed since the making of the film. By the time the mid 21st century rolls around, autistic people are finally working in Hollywood as exemplified by the young adults who were making major strides in post-production animation. *And* society is finally understanding the importance of representation as a broader concept. So, it is safe to assume that autistic actors are finally being considered to play autistic characters in films and television shows, right? Wrong.

It was made quite clear in the critical response of *Rain Man*, that there is something quite problematic about allowing neurotypical actors to portray autistic characters, given both the push for accommodation in the workplace and the abundance of highly capable and talented autistic actors. Despite the backlash after the initial release of the film, and all the critical analyses that have been published throughout the subsequent years, the decision was still made for non-autistic actor Keir Gilchrist to play autistic character Sam in *Atypical*. Gilchrist bolstered his career in the

entertainment industry with his role playing Sam, even though he is not autistic; he's merely pretending to be autistic for the purposes of the show. But why does it matter? When TV shows feature a character with a disability played by an able-bodied, or in this case neurotypical, actor rather than an actor with a disability, it does in fact make a difference, both to the real-life autism community, and to audience members. But the problem, it seems, is even much broader than the choice of actors. It extends to the entire way in which people with disabilities are represented on screen, or not. For people not living with a disability, it is often hard to identify, but for those who have been directly affected by autism, it can leave their community feeling largely invisible.¹³¹

Rashid's Reasoning

Naturally, there has been a significant amount of conversation surrounding the decision to once again have a neurotypical actor play an autistic character. When asked about the process, creator, Robia Rashid, admits that she auditioned a number of actors with autism for the role of Sam before Gilchrist was cast. "The decision to go with Keir over someone on the spectrum was not one we took lightly," and "Keir ultimately felt like the right choice and the right fit because he did such a wonderful job."¹³² This decision makes the discussion all the more astonishing, as there was actually a distinct decision to not hire a person who is inherently best suited to portray an autistic character. Additionally, Rashid asserted that Sam being the main character provides a voice for teens who are growing up and exploring the things that come with that more generally, and that his autism diagnosis only further amplifies those difficulties. And although "the show can't reflect the situation of every person with autism. 'We're telling the story of this one kid on the spectrum, and that's his life. It's a very specific story of this family.'"¹³³ But if she, through the show, is simply attempting to create a coming-of-age story for teens to relate to, why must a

person with autism serve as the vehicle through which the message is relayed? Rashid argues that the show tells “a broader story about growing up by focusing on 18-year-old Sam, his family and, by extension, everyone, whether or not they have experience with autism. ‘The theme is: No one’s normal.’”¹³⁴ It might be true that everyone is different, and that normalcy is socially constructed, but that does not mean that everyone experiences abnormality in the same way. Jennifer Jason Leigh, known as Elsa in the show, greatly appreciated “how it used (Sam) being on the spectrum as a metaphor for what every family goes through,”¹³⁵ but there is simply no reason to equate the lived experiences of those with and affected by autism, with others. In fact, while for some people it is considered to be quirky to be different, for others being medically and socially categorized as being ‘abnormal,’ means ostracization and prejudice. This is the distinction that must be made.

Who Is to Blame?

When considering the process of creating autistic representation, it is also important to consider the influencing characters, both big and small. Rashid actually acknowledges a responsibility to get Sam's and his family's story right, which is why she made the effort to consult with a California State University professor, but that clearly is not enough.¹³⁶ Certainly a great deal of on-screen autistic representation in Hollywood has a close correlation to those in the decision-making roles, much like Rashid as creator, but are they totally to blame? How much of this burden must also be beared by the actors, who ultimately make the choice to knowingly portray these characters, despite not being autistic? In this, I am also not necessarily questioning Gilchrist, or any other actor's ability to act, and am unable to pass any judgements on the specifics of his portrayal, but I am questioning the reasons behind the decisions not to hire disabled actors to play these parts. When asked about his character and his decision to portray

him, Gilchrist actually gives a great deal of praise to the creators and “experts”, therefore shifting any moral responsibility away from himself. In discussing the process, he states that he does in fact

give most of that credit to Robia. She wrote the script. We talked a ton, and I did research and I watched movies and I read books. She gave me a really helpful book called *The Journal of Best Practices*, which is actually featured on the show. I know Robia used it a lot when writing because it really helps you get into the mind of who is on the autism spectrum. It’s a great book. We also had experts. At no point was this, “Do whatever you want.” I was never willing to just rush into something — if I was unsure, then I wanted to get Robia’s advice. And if we were both unsure then we would call up the experts. We really tried to make sure we never got ahead of ourselves and rushed into something without thinking about whether that was right for Sam, specifically, because Sam is not representative of everybody on the autism spectrum. He’s one person that is on the autism spectrum. He’s a very specific character.¹³⁷

In this discussion, it is quite interesting to note that Gilchrist clearly takes his role in portraying an autistic character, seriously, as he utilized numerous resources that would assist in a more accurate representation, but he does not touch at all upon any people who actually are autistic or there being any relation to the real-life autistic community. He notes that “experts” were consulted, but it is still reported that in the first season of *Atypical*, there were no people with autism involved in the production, whether it was on screen or behind the scenes.

In an attempt to get the point of view of an autistic person just right, the creative team took part in “listening to podcasts, reading books and blogs written by individuals on the spectrum and collecting stories from those touched by the disorder. In addition to hiring a

consultant for the series who ‘read every script, read every outline and watch[ed] every cut,’ she leaned on input from those on the cast and crew who also had personal experience with autism.”¹³⁸ To some, this may seem like a noble effort to truly portray the vastly diverse autistic community accurately, but in actuality, it is an effort to utilize just about every resource available that does not involve hiring or even consulting an autistic person. We know that those in positions of power and influence are integral in the process of change. In this case, that would include executives and creators such as Rashid who make creative decisions and wield significant power, in addition to actors such as Gilchrist who develop a following of fans who are easily influenced by celebrity actions. In this, lies a responsibility on both parts to take responsibility for the way in which autistic people are being represented in Hollywood. Because a change in representation is certainly not going to take place when the people being represented are inherently silenced by being left out of the creative process, and the people who are left in charge of decision making also chose not to onboard the responsibility of ensuring the representation is honorably executed. This is because even more broadly, the discussion of who will be involved in autistic representation is one that is about more than simply what is fair or unfair, but also ethics and morals. It is quite evident across time and autism focused productions, that there are systemic racial issues that are prevalent in both *Rain Man* and *Atypical*, but the outright ableism is even more apparent. Officially being defined as “discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities,” there is no denying that ableism is systemically present in Hollywood and American society alike.¹³⁹

Why be upset?

Once released to the public, the first season of *Atypical* actually received mostly positive reviews from viewers. But while *Rain Man* received consistent praise and accolades, *Atypical*

has been faced with a significant amount of backlash for the progress that it failed to make since *Rain Man*. For context, it is important to remember that in the majority are people who do not have or have not been affected by autism, and therefore see the show as a lighthearted romantic comedy about a boy who is autistic. When it comes to the criticism that the show did receive, it is quite clear that there has been displeasure from those who were looking to this show to be a modern-day, better executed version of *Rain Man*, while also of course simply adding to the short list of Hollywood films and television series that even represented autism on the big screen in general. In more ways than one, *Atypical* falls short in these pursuits.

It cannot be denied that there is a place in entertainment for a show such as *Atypical* as, if nothing else, it is entertaining. Although bearing a significant number of additional responsibilities, especially with the subject matter that it chooses to engage with at its core, the series does what any television show is designed to do, and that is to positively stimulate and engage viewers. That being said, there are also other receptions of the show that must be considered as well, because at the end of the day, even if it is entertaining broad audiences, a show about autism must also consider how it is affecting the autistic community. Op-ed writer and autistic actor, Mickey Rowe, hoped *Atypical* would be able to offer a glimmer of accurate representation, but it instead resulted in immense disappointment.

The first autistic actor to play Christopher Boone in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and one of the first autistic actors to play any autistic character ever, Rowe maintains significant understanding when it comes to autistic representation in the entertainment industry. He shares that “having a conversation about autism with someone who isn’t a medical or disability professional is nearly impossible. Why? Because our media loves stories about autistic white men, but hates using actual autistic adults when creating these stories.”¹⁴⁰ Though

the show aims to bring the topic of autism to the forefront of entertainment, and thus creating a great deal of exposure for the topic of autism, Rowe argues that if the creative team does not have leadership from within the autistic community itself, there will inevitably be misrepresentation. Fittingly, he urges readers and viewers of the show to consider the motto ‘Nothing About us Without Us.’ More specifically, Rowe also notes that *Atypical* plays significantly into stereotypes that he himself has experienced firsthand as an autistic person. Stereotypes that could have easily been avoided if there were not such a significant presence of damaging information about autistic people that is perpetuated through fictionalized autistic stories. These detrimental stereotypes are directly correlated to autistic representation both on and off screen, because much of what the world is learning about autism is from non-autistic people.¹⁴¹ Rowe provides a personal example of this in relation to the first episode of the show. He acknowledges that “I often wear headphones or earbuds. A lot of autistic people do, as they often have sensory processing disorder, too. *Atypical*’s first episode features an entire scene devoted to Sam’s headphones in a restaurant, but the audience is conditioned to laugh at him for it. How horrible if young autistic people watch this and feel ashamed for doing something that helps them to think and function in the world.”¹⁴² This is a very important sentiment that is rooted in the larger issue of difference, and the way society is taught to receive it. Often, that way is through humor. Damagingly using autistic characters in its pursuit, there is no doubt that Hollywood productions present the concept of autism in a lighthearted way, but simply making fun of what makes autistic people different. This signals to society that autistic people are to be made fun of for their difference, and can be seen both in *Rain Man* and consistently throughout *Atypical* as well.

Alongside many other themes to be seen throughout the critical analyses of *Atypical*, the show seemingly making fun of difference and thus autism, is one that is quite prevalent. While Mickey Rowe felt as though the show made Sam the butt of the joke, and therefore “the audience is supposed to laugh at how weird and different Sam is. This is the crux of *Atypical*’s comedy, but there’s nothing that funny about turning someone’s disability into a punchline.”¹⁴³ But Row is not the only one who feels as though *Atypical* is teaching viewers, and thus broader society, to laugh at people’s differences- and not in a good way. It is certainly clear that there was an intention somewhere in the creative process, to prove that Sam’s issues are actually what make him similar to everyone else, as everyone has felt awkward as a teenager or struggled in a romantic relationship, but the way in which the storyline executes this message through comedy does not provide all that much room for those intended connections to be made. Gilchrist actually addresses this, expressing his concern that

if it’s labeled “comedy” too much, people will think that we are making a straight comedy. That isn’t the case at all. This is a really thought-through, heartfelt drama. I definitely hope that that’s the case. I can only hope people find something in Sam and the story that is inspiring and helps them. I hope for people on the spectrum it’ll be cool to see a main character on a show [who’s autistic]. Hopefully they can relate to a lot of Sam’s experiences, obviously not all of [them], because everyone’s different. In general people need to be better represented on TV, and it’s happening on all ends of it.¹⁴⁴

But he is missing the point. The point of storytelling is to connect us with people we otherwise wouldn’t come in contact with, to bring us life experiences we don’t already have, without doing it in a way that pokes fun. “That is why diversity in the arts and media matters. Inclusion in the

media matters because it leads to inclusion in life. If even a show about autism can't include autistic people thoroughly and directly, we have some good work still to be done."¹⁴⁵

Similarly, reporter Leslie Felperin, asserts that the show still falls victim to a certain inauthenticity, following in the footsteps of so many other films and TV shows.¹⁴⁶ While *Atypical* is clearly well-meant and likely illuminating for those who don't know much about autism, the show in and of itself is not bad, making it difficult not to applaud both the intention and the effort.¹⁴⁷ For example, the show does exhibit a Sam being successfully employed at a computer electronics store. It is not at all uncommon for autistic people to be discriminated against in the workplace, or to not have the opportunity to work any job, so this type of representation is received positively.¹⁴⁸ Conversely, what enables Sam to have this job, is that he is a stereotypical higher functioning autistic character. Sam is the perfect stereotype in every way. In his race, in his gender, in his socioeconomic status, and even in the way that he falls on the autism spectrum. Of course, there is nothing wrong with embodying any of these characteristics, but the distinct choice to weave them into Sam's personhood, is damaging to autistic people, their families, and their friends. "Instead of helping us, the show hurts us by falsely portraying us as creepy, insensitive, and just really awkward."¹⁴⁹ At the root of these criticisms, among many others, is an issue of representation. Autistic people cannot be properly fictionally represented if they are not properly realistically represented. Despite their efforts, Netflix and the show's creator Robia Rashid will face some scrutiny about whether or not they got the situation right.¹⁵⁰ We know that she, along with other members of the creative process, spoke with parents of autistic children she knew from both work and life to better portray the disorder, though they were not official consultants on the show, but yet this is not the same as talking to an autistic person about how they view the world and giving them the platform to

present their point of view. Especially considering that this is an opportunity that is so rarely granted to members of the autistic community.

Counter Arguments

Many counter arguments against the involvement of autistic people in the filmmaking process, are rooted in the assumption that they are just simply not smart or capable enough to contribute in any meaningful way. “On the matter of autistic intelligence, Kanner spoke of an array of mental skills, ‘islets of ability’ — vocabulary, memory, and problem-solving that ‘bespeak good intelligence...’ Yet over the years, those islets attracted scientific interest only when they were amazing — savant-level capabilities in areas such as music, mathematics, and drawing. For the millions of people with autism who weren't savants, the general view was that their condition was tragic, their brain power lacking.”¹⁵¹ Furthermore, peer-reviewed journal *Psychological Science* published a study titled "The Level and Nature of Autistic Intelligence" in which author, Michelle Dawson, argues that autistic smarts have been underestimated because the tools for assessing intelligence depend on techniques ill-suited to autistic people.¹⁵² In short, there is absolutely no reason for autistic people to not be properly represented in the making of Hollywood productions, which would thus lead to proper representation on screen as well, on the grounds that they are incapable of the work required to have a seat at the table so to say.

To properly represent Autism Spectrum Disorder and the lived experiences of autistic people, it is crucial that you have members of that community involved in every aspect of the creation process. *Rain Man* was able begin a widely reaching conversation about autism in concept, making the first towards broader acceptance through the vehicle of Hollywood include and celebrity names. But now that the discussion has begun, it is crucial that autistic be given a voice, rather than allowing them to be further silenced through a lack of holistic representation.

Despite all of the seemingly coincidental similarities between these works and their characters, these qualities also lead to the damaging commonality, despite the near 30 years between each release, and the massive strides towards equity and inclusion for the autism community that evolved during that time. *Atypical*, much like *Rain Man*, only represents the same very specific group of autistic bodies. The white, upper-middle class, male with autism, who both Charlie Babbitt and Sam Gardner embody. The characters that are carefully crafted, mindfully cast, and consciously placed on the big screen have the potential to create powerful stories that can remove some of the stigma around people living with a disability. Having diversity on screen benefits the authenticity of a production and the chances of a positive response from audiences. The autism community is certainly not a one-size-fits-all society and is truly a spectrum that includes people who are all different from one another and are diverse, and that should be represented and celebrated in what we see on screen.

Authentic representation matters and when creators, writers and the TV networks get these stories wrong, it distorts how society views people with a disability. So, although representing autism in mass media is generally a very positive effort, is it really as beneficial as intended, if it results in further silencing? We need greater opportunities for disabled writers to share their personal experience of living with a disability and the many challenges that they face in today's society. And we need these stories to be authentic by having disabled people tell them. From the executives, there needs to be a greater level of comfort and confidence around incorporating diversity and disability into scripts for TV shows and movies. Diversity has the potential to generate connection and empathy and can also help shift perceptions of "otherness" within the disability community. Even more broadly, movie and television content alike, have the capacity to create emotional connections, educate and highlight important views and

opinions. It reflects our sense of who we are as a society and who we might be. We now need it to become a place which allows disabled people the chance to tell their stories and for our voices to be heard.

Epilogue: Proactive Interventions in the Real World

The representations that I have explored, display the past and the present, and what has informed them, but it is also important to consider the future, and what they further inform. Much of what has led to the representations that we have seen in Hollywood films and shows is a direct product of who in U.S. society holds power, decides whose stories can be told, how they will be told, and who will tell them. There have always been a diverse array of autistic experiences and stories to be told, from many races, genders, and socioeconomic status, that simply lack the platform upon which to be shared, as they do not fit within the confines of the sanitized version of autism that fuel our capitalistic society. But what about a world in which we do not need the permission of those who maintain the concentration of power and influence? A world that allows any and all autistic voices to be heard and stories to be told and shared by those to whom they belong. All autistic “histories are unfinished in the sense that ongoing research revises what we know about the body and mind,” and really, we as a society still have the opportunity to inform and mold how the autism is understood and represented.¹⁵³ While those fictionalized stories in *Rain Man* and *Atypical* end, there is really life that continues, and there are still stories to be told. So as our society and its entertainment shift, whether it is from film to television, or from television to digital scholarship, it is imperative that we continue to work to make a space for autistic stories and voices.

For many years, Hollywood was the dominant path upon which the vehicle of storytelling traveled. This meant that whoever held the dominant positions in the highly concentrated entertainment industry, determined what we, the public, ingested. But that is the past. With the dawn of the digital age, we have entered a period in which technology and digital scholarship now dominate public discourse, providing the easy and rapid transfer of information at the

fingertips of users. The digital age signals a new dawn for autistic representation. Not only will diverse media platforms continue to increase visibility, but they will also continue to amplify autistic voices that have been silenced through entertainment for far too long. *Rain Man*, and *Atypical*, in almost every way, were cultural products of U.S. society, and therefore perpetuated many institutionalized ideas and perceptions. As a perpetrator of culture, the film informed the creation of *Atypical*, which reestablished pre-existing ideals, choosing not to follow societal shifts, for the sake of the big business of Hollywood. However, change has not been made because of the Hollywood systems of power, that lend themselves to the perpetuation of very specific versions of autistic recreation. But what happens when you put that power into the hands of others? Give the power to create and tell autistic stories to those who know autistic personhood better than anyone- the members of the autistic community, enabling them to break away from paternalistic power of the mainstream entertainment industry. In recent years, there has been a shift towards the digital media, which has thus resulted in the evolution of independent creation platforms. This alternative space has allowed creators and storytellers alike to share experiences and narratives that would ordinarily be rejected by Hollywood studios and executives, as they do not fit into the painfully narrow confines of autistic stories that are deemed palatable for audiences. Through constantly evolving and growing digital media platforms, autistic voices can be widely heard at the touch of viewer's fingertips.

The Chronicles of Jessica Wu

About a young girl on the autism spectrum who becomes a hero in Los Angeles by taking down some of the most ruthless villains with her mastery in martial arts, *The Chronicles of Jessica Wu* is an independently made television series, that tells the story of an autistic girl of color, without utilizing the Hollywood system. Initially gaining viewers and fans on the user-

based online video platform, YouTube, the show has reached millions of audience members, contributing to the evolution of what it means to represent autism in entertainment media. Created by Zane Hubbard, who's autistic daughter inspires the main character, Jessica, this television series is just one small example of the future of media, and how it can also serve the world with a reorientation in understanding both of what it means to be autistic, and what autism looks like when used to entertain audiences as well.

As a neurotypical person, before doing this research and work to understand the silenced voices of the members of the autistic community, I could not say that I was even remotely aware of the way in which some of my favorite forms of entertainment contribute to the damaging of other's lives. Throughout this process I have grown to learn and understand that it requires viewers to maintain a critical analysis of films and television series, not simply accepting them at face value. We must not continue to blindly conform to what the niche systems of power within Hollywood tells us, as viewers, to believe is fact. Instead, we must proactively engage with the new digital age, and not shy away from representations of autism that may differ from the linear, highly censored, mainstream media presentations. So, as we look towards the future, let us acknowledge the past, and how it has informed the present, but work towards creating a more inclusive society in which autism acceptance is evident in entertainment media, both Hollywood-made and independently, and continue to work to amplify the stories of those who have been silenced since the dawn of this country.

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