

# 11. Polysemy of *Drama*

## The Representation of Autism Spectrum Disorder<sup>1</sup>

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### ◀ ABSTRACT

Within the frame of Self Media Lab Study Center (University of Pavia) starting from open research on the theme *New digital and visual technologies in therapeutic and diagnostic protocols for patients with Autism Spectrum Disorder*, this chapter focuses on the concept of “drama”, in the sense of dramaturgic writing. It is aimed at the representation of the disease, focusing on three fields of study: how the therapeutic relationship with subjects affected by autism is represented (drama as a form of representation); how this representation is shared through social media (drama as a form of awareness); how the use of digital video technologies can elaborate therapeutic forms of storytelling (drama as a health device).

The study of autism portrayal focuses on a corpus of medical drama, starting from the analysis of *The Good Doctor* (ABC, 2017-), and including some of the most famous TV series such as *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-) and *Chicago Med* (NBC, 2015-). The aims are to investigate the stereotypical models of medical and patient figures on the one hand, and on the other hand to highlight forms of dramatization of an often-invisible disease.

### KEYWORDS

Autism Spectrum Disorder; medical drama; self-representation; visual digital technologies; *The Good Doctor*.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was discussed by both authors. Federica Villa wrote the first paragraph, Susanna Bandi wrote the second, the third and the fourth paragraphs.

## The Research Framework

In recent years, the Self Media Lab Study Centre (University of Pavia) has set up a series of projects within the framework of the Medical Humanities.<sup>2</sup> These projects are particularly interested in developing productive forms of interdisciplinary collaboration focused on the use of digital and visual technologies as devices for the construction of remote therapeutic relationships (telemedicine); and on the incidence of diagnostic images in the subjects' digital autoconfiguration practices.

Starting from ongoing research on the theme of *New digital and visual technologies in therapeutic and diagnostic protocols for patients with Autism Spectrum Disorders*, this chapter focuses on the concept of *drama*, in the sense of dramaturgic writing aimed at the representation of the disease on three fields of study:

1. how the therapeutic relationship with subjects affected by autism is represented (drama as a form of representation);
2. how this representation is shared through social media (drama as a form of awareness);
3. how digital video technologies can elaborate therapeutic forms of storytelling (drama as a health device).

The idea is to underline how the concept of medical drama can be opened up to a plurality of meanings within the framework of the disease of autism and we also think about other pathologies. We will not dwell on the first trajectory of research, as in the following part of our chapter a case study will shed light on how autism is represented in cinema and television, considering stereotypes and affordances. In fact, our research starts from an

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<sup>2</sup> Self Media Lab Study Centre (University of Pavia) was founded in 2012 and deals with forms of self-configuration through media and new technologies. It is directed by Federica Villa.

extensive mapping of the broad panorama of audiovisual narrations on this disease, composed of TV series and cinematographic productions recounting autism as a world apart, made up of otherness, genius and repetition.

However, on closer look, to make the concept of *drama* constructive, we must force ourselves towards its polysemy: we propose, alongside the representative processes, that there are at least two other trajectories of research equally rich in suggestions and heralding fields of studies for the Medical Humanities.

In the first place, it becomes essential to work on the forms of digital socialization of disease. In this sense, the second trajectory intercepts the many FB pages, Instagram profiles, blogs, etc., born to increase public awareness of the great diffusion of this disorder, and that contributed to build up parental groups of mutual help, through forms of dramatization of everyday life, which can be constantly updated.

As exemplary cases, we think about Stefano Belisari (band leader of Elio e le storie tese) and his autistic son Dante who often contribute to awareness campaigns via social networks <https://www.facebook.com/unitiperlautismo/>. Or Franco and Andrea Antonello ([www.ibambinidellefate.it](http://www.ibambinidellefate.it)) who, through the assiduity of their stories on Instagram (@franco\_e\_andrea), update us punctually on their days, on their travels and on the life of the associations they support, producing movements of awareness and acceptance. The need to put the autistic experience in a dramatic form becomes a vehicle for communicating what does not communicate, normalizing and accepting what requires effort and frustration.<sup>3</sup>

This second type of drama typical of recounting autism leads this disturb to find in images a more intimate way of restitution than those of representation: a form of familiarization of drama within a drama. It becomes even more interesting to think that this aspect of dramatization that images spontaneously offer enters the disease itself in therapeutic protocols

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<sup>3</sup> We are also dealing with influencer cases of autistic women @Autistic\_Red\_fryk\_hey, @Lunnylunnylunny and @La\_panzer, who use social media to talk about their disorder but also to fight feminist battles. By bringing different skills and qualities into play, the three influencers exploit the media of vision and create content of the highest ethical and aesthetic value, intended for both neurotypical and neurodiverse. Social networks are the necessary tools for useful and advantageous dissemination, leaving the word to those concerned – the autistic – too often excluded from official debates and reaching a wider and more heterogeneous audience.

and diagnostic pathways. This is the third trajectory along which the Self Media Lab Study Centre is planning to work, conducting research in close collaboration with the territory's Institutes of Community and Care. We are currently working with IRCSS "Eugenio Medea" to understand how the use of digital/vision technologies contributes to the construction of good remote therapeutic practices between subjects affected by autism spectrum disorders and the places and actors of care (doctors, social workers, family members, teachers).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, work includes developing and testing therapeutic protocols with the help of immersive technologies. Virtual Reality (VR) is considered a rehabilitation tool for children with autism, useful in functional behavioural training, such as interaction with unknown people or sudden and unexpected encounters (just to name an example of our work, the VR and AR are the basis of the 5A Project, or *Autonomies for Autism Through Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and conversational agents*, born from the collaboration of the Sacra Famiglia Onlus Foundation and the Our Family Association and the Polytechnic of Milan).<sup>5</sup> This last trajectory brings the dramatization into the disturb, as it is the same subjects involved – patients, healthcare professionals, caregivers – who experiment, through technology, the experience of the 'as if', staging themselves in a different context, on a technological stage, where simulation aims to rework one's sensory and cognitive capacities.

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<sup>4</sup> With the IRCSS "Eugenio Medea" (La Nostra Famiglia, Bosisio Parini LC) we are planning a therapeutic path in telemedicine, with a team of neuropsychiatrists, psychologists, and therapists with a sample of thirty families. The results of the research will be available at the end of the experimental phase.

<sup>5</sup> 5A Project aims to improve the social autonomy of medium/high functioning and high functioning autistic people aged from 16 years to adulthood. Available anywhere-anytime through smartphones, tablets and low-cost headsets, 5A applications promote the ability to generalize through transmedia elements that create a continuum between training in the virtual world and experiences in the real world. [www.deib.polimi.it/eng/research-projects/details/411](http://www.deib.polimi.it/eng/research-projects/details/411).

## Investigate Autism

Within the framework of the Ph.D. conducted at the University of Pavia, in the Self Media Lab Study Center, the project on the theme *New digital vision technologies in therapeutic and diagnostic protocols for patients with Autism Spectrum Disorder* aims to investigate the contamination between vision technologies and autism and a line of research has been identified in the representation of ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) within the TV series, and specifically in the medical drama.

It can be noted, in fact, that in medical drama there is a certain recurrence of the figure of the autistic doctor, first of all the TV series *The Good Doctor* (ABC, 2017-), entirely focused on a surgeon on the spectrum. Not only that, but also other famous medical dramas such as, for example, *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-) and *Chicago Med* (NBC, 2015-) resort to autistic doctors, or still many see Gregory House, in *House, M.D.* (Fox, 2004-2012) on the autistic spectrum. On the other hand, the autistic patient also seems to have a certain fascination with hospital representations, and we find examples in *The Good Doctor*, *Grey's Anatomy* and *House, M.D.* As we will see, representing the Autistic Spectrum Disorder, is actually a real challenge for television serialities, as it is an extremely varied disorder and, involving the brain, does not necessarily have obvious manifestations. In addition, we speak of the “broad spectrum” of autism by referring to the heterogeneity of this condition, which varies both in intensity but also in the presence of a certain aspect or not, depending on the individual. All this makes a staging that meets the criteria of belonging and recognition extremely difficult, thus relying on a highly stereotypical but identifiable panorama. However, the representation of the characters changes considerably, according to the role in which they are placed: therefore, as we will see, the peculiarities of autism that are shown and underlined are outlined as socially and economically characterized. But what is autism? To introduce this topic, we want to explain the parameters currently used to diagnose autism. Following the DSM-5 of 2013, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, a single large label “Autism Spectrum Disorder” is used, which collects within it those that before were four distinct disorders (Autistic Disorder, Asperger’s syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder and childhood disintegrative disorder), sharing the same symptoms but with different intensities and sizes. This manual identifies two criteria as necessary to make the diagnosis:

- A. Persistent deficit of social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts;
- B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities.

To these two basic indicators must be added other elements that help to make the diagnosis more specific and they are:

- With or without concomitant intellectual impairment;
- With or without language impairment;
- Associated with a known medical or genetic condition or environmental factor;
- Associated with another problem of neurodevelopment, mental or behavior.

Then, based on the presence and intensity of these factors, the following severity levels are outlined within the DSM-5:

- Level 1 – Support required
- Level 2 – Substantial support required
- Level 3 – Very substantial support required

So basically, autism is defined as a different (not wrong) condition (not a disease), substantially a way of being. It is a neurobiological disorder, that in the nervous system of the child develops according to different trajectories from those typical. In addition, autism is a chronic condition, therefore people cannot 'heal' from autism, but it is configured as a way of being, that accompanies the entire development of an individual's life. However, it is important to stress, in this regard, that there may be significant improvements in this disorder, especially where early intervention is arranged from childhood (Moore 2019). Currently, the precise causes of autism are still being studied and are not known, however, it is a disorder partly genetically based, and there is, in fact, a high heredity rate, about 90% (DSM-5:57). At the same time, in some cases, epigenetic factors (such as the advanced age of the parents or the low weight of the fetus at birth) also seem to contribute to the development of this disorder, as the DSM-5 underlines. And this condition creates some alterations in specific areas, those mentioned above, which are for example behavior, social interaction, communication, etc. Unfortunately, autism can be aggravated by comorbidity, in relation to the fact that there is a greater incidence of some pathologies such as, for example, at the neuropsychiatric level: intellectual disability, speech disorders, attention disorders, etc. but also at a medical level: metabolic disorders, allergies, epilepsy, etc. Autism, therefore, manifests itself as an extremely complex, and at the same time heterogeneous, disorder, which develops in

individuals in a different way, sometimes with lighter nuances, sometimes with more problematic repercussions.

The latest data from the Atlanta CDC, Centers of Disease Control and Prevention,<sup>6</sup> tell us that in the United States 1 person in 36 is autistic, of which about 4% is male and 1% is female, while in Italy, the figure updated to 2021, estimates 1 child in 77, with an incidence 4.4 times higher in males than in females.<sup>7</sup>

The spread of autism, in fact, is increasing progressively from year to year, certainly thanks to the improvement of diagnostic tools and medical research, but at the same time, this growth is also due to a real increase in this disorder. It is therefore a preeminent and permanent condition in our lives, and it is partly for this reason that representations of autism have progressively increased within the media, and especially in film and television. This is interesting because compared to other psychiatric disorders, there are researches that show that not so long ago ASD was less represented (Butler and Hyler 2005, Stuart 2006, Conn and Bhugra 2012, Nordahl-Hansen 2018), while probably with a growth in prevalence and attention to inclusion, the representation of autism has also increased (Conn and Bhugra 2012, Nordahl-Hansen 2018).

Although it is a rising disorder, many people do not know it and do not know how to behave. Within this framework, the medical drama, with its depiction of autism, makes itself an essential medical device, necessary for useful and advantageous dissemination, showing the peculiarities of the disorder and helping the viewer to understand it, emphasizing the medical and technical aspects. Moreover, the form of seriality, by its nature, is able to reach a wider and more heterogeneous audience than the scientific journals to which these researches are usually designed and therefore to involve a whole part of the population who would not normally receive these instructions and advice.

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<sup>6</sup> Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta Georgia. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html> (last accessed 04-07-23).

<sup>7</sup> Data taken from the Italian Ministry of Health website, on the Mental Health Section devoted to Autism. <https://www.salute.gov.it/portale/saluteMentale/dettaglioContenutiSaluteMentale.jsp?lingua=italiano&id=5613&area=salute%20mentale&menu=vuoto> (last accessed 27-06-23); Linea Guida Italiana: SNLG 21, 2011 – Il trattamento dei disturbi dello spettro autistico nei bambini e negli adolescenti per la diagnosi e trattamento dei bambini e adolescenti con disturbi dello spettro autistico.

## How is Autism Represented in Medical Dramas?

As we said, autism is a neurobiological condition and it's actually invisible on the outside. It doesn't necessarily have any obvious manifestations. Here then becomes problematic: how do you represent the invisible?

To this is added a necessary premise: autism presents itself as an extremely heterogeneous condition, precisely for this reason we speak of "broad spectrum". Every autistic, like every person, is in fact unique. Therefore, it is difficult to draw a model that is valid for everyone, and this is why representing it becomes a real challenge for those who try this and can generate a high risk of criticality.

Yet, the representation in medical TV series (and not only) seems dictated by some characteristics that resort to a highly stereotypical landscape. This situation is caused by the fact that the rules of serial and cinematographic writing, of narrative economics, teach us that the clearer is a character the easier is for the viewer to identify him. We tend to prefer 'instant' forms of reading and recognition of the characteristics of the character. As a result, it is necessary for autism to find something that identifies it, that is public knowledge or that can be recognizable by everyone. The narrative itself requires it. So, as the scholars Pomerance and Palmer ask themselves, "what features about autism can easily (quickly, cheaply, without undue study) be shown, then? And by implication, what is it that most viewers will instantly recognize (diagnose)?" (2022: 3).

The distinctive feature in the representation of ASD is identified in gestures and communication. These actions, however, such as tic or crisis for the behavior area, can be frequent in several disorders and diseases that are not only autism; therefore, again it is not enough just one of them to recognize whether the character is in the spectrum or not. It is, therefore, necessary that the person has traits that lead him back to a common imagination, and those characteristics are, as Palmer and Pomerance tell us, often presented in this way:

Dramatized, because autism need not present visible scars. Exaggerated, because the slight or only marginal extenuation of speech or gestural tic might be too small to be noticed in a richly organized shot. Awkward and easily read, because the writer wants to proceed as though the autistic is known and recognized now, not as though it is necessary to spend the

first act arranging recognition. Caricatured, at least in part, because the presentation must read at a great distance – sometimes around the world – for audiences not connected or familiar with autism at all (Palmer and Pomerance 2022: 4).

A first consideration that can be made in this regard is that these characteristics depend on social and economic position. For example, if we think about the medical-patient binomial, where the former plays a role of superiority over the latter, as it is he who must provide help and has the answers to the questions and problems of the patient, we can see that, where they are both autistic, they are characterized in very different ways. In most cases, in medical dramas, what is represented can be categorized into two broad groups. The first one is high social and economic positions: the characters are high-functioning autistics (level 1), often accompanied by Savant Syndrome;<sup>8</sup> therefore, presented as superheroes capable of solving problems that no one else could, with really clever strategies and insights. In this case, autism is presented to us as a fascinating disorder, which intrigues the viewer by impressing him with its peculiar but effective ways of acting. Examples of this category are Shaun Murphy in *The Good Doctor*, Virginia Dixon in *Grey's Anatomy*, Isidore Latham in *Chicago Med* and Gregory House in *House, M.D.*, even if not explicitly stated.

The second category is low social and economic positions: the characters, in this case, are low-functioning autistics (level 3), full of problems and completely limited by their own autism. This representation, on the other hand, provokes in the viewer a sense of pity and compassion, unlike the previous one. Therefore it is difficult to identify with these characters and we often perceive autism as something we would like to stay away from. We find examples in the autistic patient (played by the autistic actor Coby Bird) who appears in the episode *22 Steps* (01x07) of *The Good Doctor*, in *Grey's Anatomy*, from the episode *The Whole Package* (15x20) to the episode

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<sup>8</sup> The term “idiot savant” was first used by the British doctor J. Langdon Down “to describe individuals with developmental disability who demonstrate some particular skill” (Miller 1998: 73). Savant Syndrome is currently referred to a condition, often in the presence of intellectual disability, in which an individual presents exceptional quality in some areas and disciplines. The tools and criteria of screening and diagnosis are still insufficient to systematically identify this condition (Park 2023), but we know that there is a very close relationship with autism, in fact 50% of people who have this syndrome is also on the autism spectrum (Park 2023).

*Jump into the Fog* (15x25), and in the patient of the episode *Lines in the Sand* (03x04) in *House, M.D.* While the autistic adult, in the *House, M.D.* episode *Half-Wit* (03x15), is partly an exceptional case because it is still high functioning even if the episode highlights its poor autonomy compared to Gregory House.

The gap becomes even more noticeable and significant in the comparison between the doctor and autistic patient, and this is well made in *The Good Doctor*, as it is comparing a doctor and patient both with autism. In the course of the aforementioned episode, we can observe that two different points of view are brought forward: on the one hand, there are the parents of the patient who initially claim that the two, having the same disorder, have the same limits and problems (all also reiterated by the patient's question "you are like me" and the confirmation, albeit late, by Dr. Murphy). On the other hand, there is the medical team that emphasizes the skills of Shaun and the distance from the boy, as if they had two different disorders. Compared to Liam, the patient, Shaun is on another level, in many ways: he is presented as someone who has made it, who has come to terms with his autism, and who can be a model for other people.

In this regard, one of the most frequent criticisms from the autistic community and its advocates is that, in most cases, the representation stages only a very small percentage of people in the spectrum, which is that of very high-functioning genius, which also has Savant Syndrome (they are less than 10% of people with autism). This figure is congenial to the representation: doctor (moreover they are always surgeons, with the exception of Dr House) is fascinating, and if we add the charm that this disorder has, with its traits of genius, everything is explained. The purpose of this representation is what Stuart Murray (2006) and Allison Moore (2019) define as a "sentimental savant", whose autism serves to "inform and enrich the lives of his non-autistic [...] but also to reinforce compulsory neurotypicality" (Moore 2019: 2). In this direction the neurotypicals take advantage from the experience of vision and in front of disability take note of their actions and choices, drawing lessons from it. As Murray argues, representations of autism often "use the refraction narrative of paired impaired/non-impaired characters not only to explore ideas of difference but also to illuminate for majority audience's questions of individual responsibility, behavior and knowledge" (Murray 2008a: 123).

## **Autism in *The Good Doctor***

An emblematic case of representation of autism, in medical dramas, is undoubtedly *The Good Doctor*, an American television series, broadcast from 2017 to today, on ABC, created by David Shore, who is also the creator of *House, M.D.* (this explains the many similarities between the two characters). It is an adaptation of the South Korean TV series of the same name, in 2013, and tells the story of a young autistic surgeon, Shaun Murphy, played by neurotypical actor Freddie Highmore, inside the St. Bonaventure Hospital (San Jose, California).

The distinctive features of this depiction of autism emerge from the first episode of the first season, *Burnt Food*, in which we see Shaun being employed at the hospital, following the first major test he faces: saving a child's life at the airport with innovative and ingenious solutions. From the beginning of the TV series, Dr Murphy is presented to us as an ordinary person, with an attentive eye maybe a little particular. In fact, we cannot notice any distinctive feature and if they didn't tell us, on the show, that he has Autism Spectrum Disorder, we'd probably have trouble identifying his autism. Gradually, from the moment of entry into the airport, we notice that some of its peculiarities are defined, which basically already identify what will be his distinctive features throughout the TV series. These characteristics are for example difficulties in social interaction, that is, problems in communicating his intentions. We find an example in the scene with the policeman at the airport, who does not understand him and believes he is a criminal; or again, later, in the scene of the ambulance when he starts saying some words like "lower equal amplitude lower voltage" and then repeats them in hysterics. In addition to this, it is very direct and this is well seen in the conversation with Dr Melendez, when he finally asks him if being a good doctor means being arrogant like him. To these peculiarities, it is necessary to add stimming or self-stimulation, repetitive behavior, that is for example, in the first episode, the continuous repetition of the gesture of rubbing with his hands the brother's toy scalpel to feel calm and pleasure. In conclusion, he has an alteration of sensory perception, with hypersensitivity: such as when, at the airport, he has a stimulatory overload, which shows his lack of being able to filter stimuli.

At the same time, however, are already evident also the characteristics that identify Shaun as a super genius, with very high functioning and Savant syndrome: a description that, among other things, recurs several times in

words, during the first episode and throughout the entire TV series and that also characterizes the slogan of ABC to promote the series: “A young surgeon with autism and Savant syndrome uses his extraordinary gifts to save lives and challenge skepticism” (Hilsabeck 2022: 72). And how is his Savant shown? First of all, as for the communication area, we can notice that he has difficulties in social interaction, but his language is perfect, he has a wide vocabulary and knows all the technical terms. While, for what concerns the gestures and behavior area, he immediately shows his strong intelligence giving proof of his abilities. In fact, starting with the scene of the airport creates a line of superiority between his intelligence and that of the neurotypical doctor who is not prepared like him. In this regard, we can mention, again, the episode *22 steps* (01x07) in which is highlighted its diversity precisely because Savant, almost emphasizing that it is a trait inextricably linked to its value both as a doctor and as a person.

Secondly, he transmits important life lessons to his colleagues and the neurotypical public, leading us all to reflect on our behavior: for example, in moments when he is particularly direct and says his thoughts bluntly. We find an example in the aforementioned speech with Dr. Melendez when he points out that he is very arrogant and asks him if being a good doctor means being arrogant. This is from the perspective of the sentimental savant: not only Shaun will give us important lessons in medicine, surpassing his colleagues professionally, but also morally, his innocence and simplicity will lead us to reflect on our morality.

Finally, perhaps the most peculiar and emblematic feature of his Savant-autism is the representation of his thoughts through augmented reality. There is, indeed, a powerful visual dimension within the series, and probably the TV series want to play on the fact that many people with autism reason mainly by images and prefer the visual aspect to the linguistic one, as Professor Temple Grandin shows us:

I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me. I translate both spoken and written words into full-color movies, complete with sound, which run like a VCR tape in my head. When somebody speaks to me, his words are instantly translated into pictures (Grandin 2006: 23).

Shaun’s powerful memory is shown us using augmented reality, which overlaps with reality and can only be seen by him, in his mind, and by us spectators. In these scenes, where augmented reality takes place, his colleagues are perplexed and don’t understand what’s happening. It is interesting to note

how in reality the association between AR and autism is actually a recurring theme, that appears in several TV series such as *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (ENA, 2022), whose leading character is a young career lawyer with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, and it is also present in *Sherlock* (2010-2017), detective not admittedly autistic but that presents many of the characteristics of this disorder.

Obviously, in *The Good Doctor*, the purpose of this augmented reality, in addition to simplifying the progress of his memory, is also to show the viewers what is happening in the mind of the doctor. The images we see, however, are not immediately clear, and the public is called to action and try to understand the brilliant idea of the doctor. Often though, understanding comes only at a time when he also explains it to other colleagues and it is an interesting perspective because it reverses the situation: are we, the neurotypical, those who have difficulties in understanding and who seem to speak a different language?

To conclude, we would like to reflect on the debate, within the autistic and non-autistic communities, about the representation of autism that arose following the release of the series. Autism Ontario<sup>9</sup> also creates for this series a committee to judge it, which partly condemned and partly appreciated the series. In addition, the writing was supervised entirely by Doctor Melissa Reiner, neurologist and pediatrician, who participated as an autism consultant and worked closely with Highmore to help him in the interpretation of Dr Shaun. She also created a YouTube channel<sup>10</sup> where she explains the choices made for the various episodes regarding the representation of Shaun's autism.

If from an educational and popularizing point of view, it is essential that the representation of autism is included and increased, to make it easier to understand and to represent autistic people, on the other hand it is a double-edged sword, because it can be so misleading as to produce a negative effect. And *The Good Doctor*, unfortunately is not far from this view, staging another 'wonderful' autistic with his superpowers, in the wake of

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<sup>9</sup> Autism Ontario (legally incorporated as Autism Society Ontario) is a charitable organization with a history of over 49 years representing the thousands of people on the autism spectrum and their families across Ontario. <https://www.autismontario.com/about-us> (last accessed 09-07-23).

<sup>10</sup> AskMNow, Doctor Melissa Reiner's YouTube channel. <https://www.youtube.com/@AskMNow> (last accessed 09-07-23).

*Rain Man* (1988), although in the pilot of the series, they try to distance themselves from the film, as Dr. Glassman reminds us when he says “it is not Rain Man”. Surely, Murphy takes steps forward, for example showing us the weaknesses and some moments of crisis, but not in a caricatural dimension, as also Dr. Reiner pointed out in several interviews, offering hope to motivation to overcome their limitations and difficulties, both neurotypicals and neurodiverse. However, it remains a representation that fits within that imaginary and refers only to a very small part of people with autism (less than 10%) and this type of staging actually responds to specific needs, such as making the difference acceptable, showing an example of good and well-integrated autism, also underlined in the TV series by the adjective “good” in the title. Moreover, it is undoubtedly fascinating, we see a superhero, who manages to solve problems with strategies that the viewer does not even imagine. Finally, he is an exemplifier of the concept of the “sentimental savant” and “the narrative function of the ‘sentimental genius’ is to shed light on the behavior, attitudes, and relationships of the non-autistic and expose its deficits of communication, interaction and empathy” (Moore 2019: 9) and “in other words, Hollywood uses cognitive disability to set up a figure-ground relationship: neurological difference creates a space out of which the real story emerges, the personal growth of neurotypical people. This description applies pretty fully to *The Good Doctor*” (Hilsabeck 2022: 73).

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