To İpek…

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS:

A CLOSE-READING OF FOUR INDEPENDENT FILMS

The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences

of

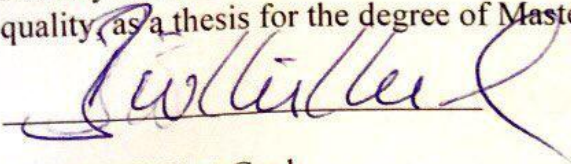İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University

by

AHOU MOSTOWFI

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN MEDIA AND VISUAL STUDIES

THE DEPARTMENT OF

COMMUNICATION AND DESIGN

İHSAN DOĞRAMACI BİLKENT ÜNİVERSİTY

ANKARA

December, 2018

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Media and Visual Studies.
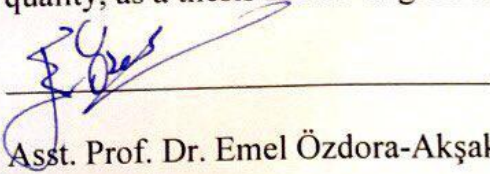
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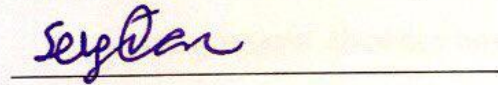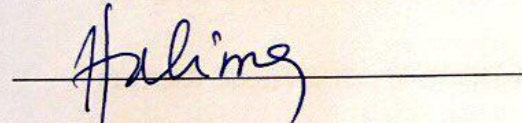Asst. Prof. Dr. Emel Özdora-Akşak

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ABSTRACT

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS:

A CLOSE-READING OF FOUR INDEPENDENT FILMS

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December, 2018

Both Hollywood and independent productions have been interested in depicting Autism Spectrum Disorders in the last thirty years. Within this period, diagnostic criteria of this developmental disorder have made dramatically progress by involving in different conditions and understandings. In parallel with this progress, it can be assumed that contemporary film and tv productions have offered diverse representations of ASD. Yet, to make such assumption, several progresses in different factors (diagnosis of ASD, representations of ASD, production models of the films) should be investigated. The current thesis aims to examine the tendency of using stereotypical representations of ASD in the contemporary independent productions. In this respect, the examination will be made through the close-readings of the following four films, *Temple Grandin* (2010), *Life, Animated* (2016), *Snow Cake* (2006) and *Mozart and the Whale* (2005).

Keywords: Autism, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Disability, Film, Representation

ÖZET

OTİZM SPEKTRUM BOZUKLUĞU:
DÖRT BAĞIMSIZ FİLME DAİR OKUMA

Mostowfi, Ahou

Yüksek Lisans, İletişim ve Tasarım Bölümü

Tez Danışmanı: Prof. Dr. Bülent Çaplı

Aralık, 2018

Son 30 yıldır Hollywood ve bağımsız yapımların Otizm Spektrum Bozukluğu konusunu ele aldığı görülmektedir. Bu dönem içinde farklı koşul ve anlayışlar doğrultusunda söz konusu gelişim bozukluğunun teşhisinde çarpıcı biçimde gelişim görülmektedir. Bu gelişime paralel olarak, film ve televizyon yapımlarının Otizm Spektrum Bozukluğu temsilinde çeşitlilik sunduğu varsayılabilir. Yalnız, böyle bir varsayım yapmak için, farklı etmenlerdeki gelişimler (Otizm Spektrum Bozukluğu teşhisi, Otizm Spektrum Bozukluğu temsilleri, filmlerin yapım modelleri) de irdelenmelidir. Bu tez çalışması, güncel bağımsız yapımların Otizm Spektrum Bozukluğu hakkındaki kalıpyargı temsilleri kullanma yönelimlerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu doğrultuda söz konusu inceleme, yakın okuma yöntemiyle *Temple Grandin* (2010), *Life, Animated* (2016), *Snow Cake* (2006) ve *Mozart and the Whale* (2005) filmleri üzerinden yapılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Engelli Çalışmaları, Film, Otizm, Otizm Spektrum Bozukluğu, Temsil

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In examination of the representations of a certain group or class of people in the media,

one can frequently come across inaccurate depictions that appear more interesting to the

public rather than more representative. It is common to encounter a subdivision of the

group being depicted as the stereotypical and dramatized exemplar of the whole group

leaving the majority of the people in the group under/misrepresented; or an

extraordinary specific type of character as the persistent model for portrayal of the

majority of people in the group, thus oversimplifying the characteristics and individual

differences of the represented people.

This issue becomes more problematic when the media product is about a minority group

or people in the margins of society, as most of the audience may not interact with these

people on a daily basis, therefore, the audience's main knowledge source on

the represented people is limited to the media's portrayal of them.

In order to understand the significance of media's role in reinforcing and perpetuating a given perception toward autism, two major theories can be referenced: the cultivation theory by George Gerbner and the social learning theory by Albert Bandura. According to Gerbner's theory, relentless exposure to media images and messages follows acceptation of those messages by the audiences due to the effect of reiteration. This theory suggests that people's perceptions can be influenced and altered by consistent exposure to the information in media (Gerbner et al, 2002).

The social learning theory suggests that learning can take place through observation, imitation and modeling. Bandura (1989; as cited in Stout et al, 2004). emphasizes on the role of motivation and remarks the importance of reward and punishment in learning. Media sources are considered as important databases for learning through observation and modeling.

Considering these two theories, we can better understand media's impact on shaping the stereotypic picture of autistic people and/or teaching behavioral codes on how to interact with autistic people.

Regarding these theories, it is arguable that the recurrent, stereotypic images presented in the media influence public's beliefs about autism; when media continuously cover certain narratives of autistic condition and left the others uncovered, an oversimplified, narrow and stereotypic image of people with ASD is shaped in the society, and autistics

without these attributes can be considered as fraud and not 'genuinely autistic' and this further stigmatized and marginalized them.

As a person who throughout her life has been struggling with Asperger syndrome, a type of autism which is considered as the high-functioning and more 'normal' looking condition on Autism Spectrum Disorders, I have experienced how the conventional and stereotypic images of people with Asperger, which constantly is being imposed by the media, give people the wrong impressions about the condition. The perpetuated image of an Aspie as a white geek male in the media has been such influential and powerful that, despite having a clinical diagnosis, I have been frequently interrogated by people around me on whether I seriously have the condition since apparently my symptoms do not fit the image of an Aspie that they typically see in the films and TV series.

If the mainstream media persistently include and accentuate a certain type of autistic characteristics, the general audience may consider these depictions as the standard features attributable to all Autistics. Taking into account that autism is defined as a broad spectrum of developmental conditions which hinder daily communication, more often than not people who have the condition need acknowledgement, support and understanding of the social communities and institutions to thrive in their life.
Thus, public's interpretation of autism, its challenges and burdens, and the alternatives for compensating them have critical importance for empowerment and inclusion of autistics in the social milieu as well as the improvement of the quality of life of autistics and their families. That being said, and because media contents have significant impact

on the attitudes of their audience toward the represented content, the importance and impact of the media representations of autism in autistics' daily life is undeniable.

Starting the recognition of autism as being a distinctive developmental disorder in 1980, it has increasingly been the topic of many media products, specially fiction films and documentaries, which have been considered as products that present autism spectrum disorders and raise awareness about it. Since raising awareness requires that the media content reach and inform the people with little or no knowledge about autism with realistic, positive and inclusive narratives, and not the stereotypic, exaggerated exceptional cases, in can be argued that, many of these representations, have failed in this purpose because of their continuous use of certain, often negative stereotypes. Regardless of how many autistic characters have been depicted in these products and how central the autistic' role has been in them, these negative yet prevailed serotypes can shape misconceptions and negative attitudes in society toward the people with ASD and have critical impacts on the social and political life of the majority of people on the autism spectrum.

The questions on the ethics of inclusion of minority people in cultural products and the consequences of distorted or partly-accurate representations become more significant when we evaluate the growing number of fiction and documentary films which include characters who are on the autism spectrum. The media's recent 'fascination with autism' and increasing presence of characters with ASD's in the series and films may have several social, cultural and economic reasons. It can be argued that these portrayals give the uninformed audience a basic idea about what autism is and how individuals and

families are dealing with the condition, therefore, have a positive social consequence on autistics' life in terms of acknowledgement and empowerment. However, it is also debatable that the economic concerns in the competitive film industry together with the urge to get greater revenue have been the two strongest motives that trigger this growing inclusion of autistics in films and autism has been a profitable spectacle for industry to amuse people and amaze them.

Since the media, and in this thesis' framework, films, are being produced to gain financial profit, they are bound to be cast according to whether they would be successful in box-office or not, and these financial considerations bring about many complications on the way of production of films that would depict a more realistic as well as unexplored face of autism that raise awareness about the condition. It is because that usually the films that address extraordinary talented people and exaggerated circumstances are attracting substantial attention while others that are portraying characters with ASD without exaggeration are not as successful financially. It is not surprising that investors usually are not willing to finance a film centering around more realistic aspects of autistic life because it lacks potential for attracting and maintaining the audience's attention. Nonetheless, when people from minority groups, who are more susceptible to emotional and physical harms caused by society's misjudgments toward them, are depicted in an influential media product such as Hollywood films, critical analysis of these representations become critical since the medium outpowers autistic people's platforms in terms of reachability, prominence and impact.

It is arguable that some films have depicted a more inclusive and empathetic picture of autism to the audience and have avoided the historic stereotypic myths of autism, but these films usually are not seen on the list of the best-sellers. It is also presumable that since the blockbusters are mainly market-oriented products, their producers are more prone to depict stereotypical and overly dramatized characters if that result in excitement and enthrallment of the audience and success of the film in the box-office. Independent productions do not have equal screening and advertising opportunities as the market-oriented films, and their restricted budget limits the number of superstar actors and the skillful crew taking part in the project. For that reason, it is presumable that many films with more realistic and distinctive stories about people with ASD cannot reach broad audience.

This study aims to find out if with the changes in conceptualizing autism from medical and tragic model toward the social one, the recent films have been more effective in terms of raising awareness and giving a realistic and inclusive image of ASD. The four selected films for this study are; *Temple Grandin* (2010), *Life, Animated* (2016), *Snow Cake* (2006) and *Mozart and the Whale* (2005).

The selection of these films was firstly taking into account the contemporary productions in the U.S. emerging from blurriness of the separation between mainstream and independent production models. Another criterion for the films is being included and discussed in the web organizations that are known with their advocacy on autism such as Wrong Planet (an online community formed for people on the spectrum, their families and the professionals in the field of autism studies), Interacting with Autism (a

video-based online platform aiming to provide authentic information on ASD) and Autism Speaks (a US-based organization which works toward raising awareness on autism and providing support for individuals and families who live with the condition). The third criterion in selection of the films was my status as being a person with Asperger. I was more confident to do the analysis if the characters in the films where on the more high-functioning range of the spectrum which correlate with my condition; in order to recognize the inconsistencies and exaggerations in the narrative more accurately. I tried my best to select the films that the portrayed characters in these films correspond with me as a person who is more or less is in the same degree of disability.

Since autism spectrum consists of a broad range of conditions which differ in the degree of severity and present with varying symptoms, I tried to focus on the part of the spectrum that I am familiar with from personal experiences. As last criterion, these films carried the expectation of being four of the most impactful non-mainstream examples due to their well-known casts and their acknowledgment in the film festivals and film-competitions.

Temple Grandin (2010) is starred by Claire Danes and has been reviewed positively by film-critics and won several awards. It was accessible because it was aired on TV and its distribution on the internet came after rapidly; considering that it was produced by HBO, the film may be accepted even as mainstream. *Life, Animated* (2016) was nominated to an Academy Award and featured at many festivals; *Snow Cake* (2006) which is starred by Alan Rickman and Sigourney Weaver, has had numerous festival presence and lastly *Mozart and the Whale* (2005) which is an adaptation by Ronald Bass, the screenwriter of

Rain *Man* (1988), from the life of Gerald David Newport, a writer and public speaker with Asperger Syndrome and features humane Josh Hartnett. Before the close-reading it would also be beneficial to make an indirect estimation on their reach to the audience based on their reviews and ratings as being variable having influence on demand creation and sales (Gemser et al., 2006; Forman et al. 2008). In this respect, IMDb user rating votes and reviews and external reviews are included for the selected films. In order to understand their reach better, the same metrics for the prominent and best-known productions are taken as a reference point.

Chapter II primarily addresses conceptualization of autism and autism spectrum disorders by taking into account of relevant definitions, characteristics, its prevalence. Later, the chapter briefly refers to other psychological aspects, such as stereotyping and stigmatization. As a result of using these concepts while addressing social life of people with autism or autism spectrum disorder, they are also useful for discussing any issues related to the representation of the disorder. Lastly, a political movement called neurodiversity will be introduced concisely in order to inform about contemporary attempts to cope with the stigmatization.

In Chapter III the influence of media on shaping the beliefs and attitudes of audience will be explained with an emphasis on learning through observation described in the social learning theory. The stereotypes implemented in representation of disability in the media, from literature to newspapers, films and TV series will be chronicled. Then, after a brief description of savant syndrome, savant stereotype, which has been used in the media representation as the synonymous of ASD, will be analyzed. The last part of the

chapter is pertained to review of representation of ASD in the media. The media's attitude toward ASD and the stereotypes associated with representation of autism will be explored.

Chapter IV refers to the classifications of films based on their production models. In this respect, the conceptualization of mainstream and independent production models will be introduced. Regarding the dominance of the U.S. in the world's production and distribution, the progress in the understanding of independent film and its different understandings will be briefly mentioned to have an idea about the recent film and tv productions.

Chapter V consists of the close-readings of the selected films *Mozart and the Whale* (2005), *Snow Cake* (2006), *Temple Grandin* (2010) and *Life, Animated* (2016). Prior to these readings, the selection criteria and their estimated reach based on ratings and reviews will be covered.

Lastly, Chapter VI sums up the intention of the current thesis with its outcomes, limitations and suggestions for the further studies.

CHAPTER II

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF AUTISM AND OTHER RELATED PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

In this chapter the general description of autism spectrum disorders will be briefly mentioned. After reviewing the history of autism and how it has been recognized as a developmental disorder, the common characteristics of autism spectrum disorders will be introduced. The views on the causes of autism and options proposed to treat the condition will also be explored. The goal here is to underline that the condition is relatively widespread and having the fact-based information on the symptoms that lead to early diagnosis and intervention can make huge difference in lives of people who have the condition. Therefore, it is justifiable that media's recurrent stereotypical representations of the condition need to be critically analyzed and replaced or compensated with more factual and in-depth depictions.

Instead of suddenly exposing people who do not have any prior information on the topic, to any dramatic narration of an ASD case, they should be given the chance to know what autism or an ASD actually is.

This information not only useful in enlightening the public about a developmental condition which is increasingly becomes more prevalent among children, but also is helpful for people with ASD to reflect on themselves and their essential needs in order to seek support and care they deserve and to prevent spending long years in desperation and confusion before being too late for the diagnosis and compensation of neglections in care, support and education as well self-advocacy.

2.1.   Historical and Current Conceptualizations of Autism Spectrum Disorders

The first usage of the word autism to refer to a medical condition dates back to 1912 when the Swiss therapist Eugen Bleuler in an article in the *American Journal of Insanity* used the word "autistic" to refer to social disengagement observed in some of his schizophrenic patients. Although his recognition of the relation between schizophrenia and autism proved false later, his account of these patients is compatible with characteristics of individuals who today defined as autistic (Syriopoulou-Deli, 2010).

However, in 1943 the child psychologist Leo Kanner published his comprehensive description of "early infantile autism" as a specific disorder in the journal *The Nervous*

Child. In his paper, named *"Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact"* Kanner (1943) identified a set of similar features observed in a group consisting of eleven children. Each of these children demonstrated strong cognitive capacity with grave difficulty in social interactions, extreme sensitivity to stimuli, problem in adaptation to a new environment, restricted behavior, difficulty in spontaneity, sharp rote memory and inclination to parrot-like repetition. Kanner in his later publications stated that the main characteristics of autism are extreme isolation and inclination to repetitive and unchanging activities with difficulty in adaptation to even the smallest changes in habits.

Kanner was the first to suggest that autism does not strike all the afflicted persons in the same way and is not a rigid and homogenous condition. He used the word spectrum to describe autistic conditions from mild to severe (Happé, 1995). Overall, Kanner's work was very effective in observing and reporting the symptoms of the disorder.

In 1944 an Austrian pediatrician, Hans Asperger, published his study on four boys and identified their symptoms as autistic psychopathy. These symptoms included difficulty in motor skills, severe absorption in one's inner world, inability in holding constructive conversations and difficulty in forming friendships. Asperger's work had not widely known until its translation into English in 1997 (Syriopoulou-Deli, 2010). However, in 1981, Lorna Wing used the term Asperger's Syndrome for describing children who were showing sign of autism but they daily functions were not as severely suffered by the disorder as other autistics (Martin, 2012).

In 1956, the time's well-known child psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim announced his theory the "refrigerator mother". In this theory, he suggests autism develops in children

who have been raised in a cold and inattentive environment. He especially emphasized on the role of unloving mothers in the emergence of signs of autism in the children. He defined autism as a psychological issue which in order to be cured needs psychological therapy for both mother and child. Bettelheim was accentuating on the role of mother to that extent sometimes mother and child were separated from each other with the explanation the mother's behaviors could aggravate the child's condition (Martin, 2012). This theory was widely accepted at the time, owing to its historical context; during World War II, many women in the United States got integrated into job market in result of lack of men work-forces in the war-time; with the end of the war and return of men to the country, conservative groups in country wanted women to get back home and housekeeping stuff, in such an atmosphere Bettelheim's theory was highly celebrated.

Although the refrigerator mother theory disproved in later years, its reverberations are still observable in today's society. For example, in the documentary *Refrigerator Mothers* (2002) the story of mothers who have an autistic child in 1950s and 1960s is narrated. We learn from these mothers' stories how burdensome and exhausting was to raise an autistic child when the entire society was blaming the mother for her child's developmental disorder. Unfortunately, this dehumanizing shadow is still upon many mothers who have autistic children. In *The Wall* (Sophie Robert, 2011) the director interviews several therapists, physicians and psychologists in France about the causes of autism, and they relate autism to a type of psychosis originated from the mother-child relationship. This controversial documentary reminds us that the ideas of Bettelheim still prevalent in some milieus.

Undoubtedly, in 1990s one of the most contentious theories about autism was the claim that combined measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine can cause or deteriorate autism. The story began when the medical Journal *the Lancet* published a paper by the fraudulent doctor Andrew Wakefield. In this paper Wakefield claims that he and his team have found a new syndrome which they named autistic enterocolitis. He related this syndrome and bowel diseases to MMR vaccines. Although other researchers could not find consistency in the data Wakefield has provided in his paper and consequently disproved his hypothesis and accordingly his paper removed from the journal's database, Wakefield's claim has caused great controversies over the role of governmental Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the growth in the rate of children who inflicted by autism in the United States. These controversies reflected in media and public opinion influenced by it profoundly.

Several documentary films have been made which were propagating Wakefield's hypotheses about a link between autism and vaccines. *Autism: Made in the U.S.A* (2009) starts with heartbreaking scenes from lives of families affected by autism, and the film continues with discussions of medical professionals and doctors who believe autism is linked with MMR. *The Greater Good* (2011) is a controversial documentary which follows the conspiracy theories about the unspoken link between vaccines and many mental and physical diseases including autism. In 2016, Wakefield himself directed *Vaxxed: From Cover-Up to Catastrophe* which follows the same narrative. Although it is possible that these documentaries have been made with intention of uncovering the truth about autism, unfortunately, do not contain scientific facts and documents and many critics consider them as propaganda products.

At the present day, all disorders on the spectrum of autism are considered to be common developmental disorders and referred as autism spectrum disorders, or ASD for short. Szatmari (2003) explains this situation as follows:

"Our understanding of the clinical picture of autism has changed dramatically over the past decade thanks to a much greater appreciation of the possible range of behaviors seen at different ages and degrees of functioning. Another key change has been the appreciation that several closely related "disorders" exist that share these same essential features but differ on specific symptoms, age of onset, or natural history. These disorders, which include Asperger syndrome, atypical autism, and disintegrative disorder are often conceptualized as lying on a spectrum with autism (hence the popularity of the term "autism spectrum disorders")." (2003, para.1)

Autism, more specifically autism spectrum disorders, is being defined as a developmental disorder by the 5th edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-V) published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013). All the conditions considered as ASD show the characteristics of problematic communication in daily social interaction along with the restricted and repetitive behaviors.

2.2.   Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorders

According to the 5th edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-V) published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), the diagnostic factors for an ASD are:
1. A persistent difficulty in the social use of verbal and nonverbal communication manifested by deficits in using communication for social purposes, impairment of the ability to exchange ideas and communication in a way that matches the context or the requirements of the listener, difficulties in following rules for conversation and

storytelling, difficulties in understanding what is not explicitly stated and non-literal or ambiguous meanings of language. The deficits result in functional limitations in effective communication, social participation, social relationships, academic achievement, or occupational performance, individually or in combination;

2. The onset of the symptoms should occur in the early developmental period;

3.The symptoms are not attributable to another medical or neurological condition or to low abilities in the domains of word structure and grammar, and are not better explained by disorders other than ASD, meaning that conditions like intellectual disabilities (intellectual developmental disorder), global developmental delays, or another mental disorders should be ruled out before the diagnosis of autism (2013).

According to APA the new diagnostic criteria can bring homogeneity and consistency to the realm of autism diagnosis because before the present criteria cases could be diagnosed with several separate disorders such as autism disorder, Asperger disorder and childhood disintegrative disorder; additionally, the diagnostic standards were too ambivalent that if same people went to different clinics could receive different diagnosis.

Bringing forth the umbrella term of autism spectrum gives more accuracy and reduces the inconsistencies of the diagnosis. The term 'spectrum' also accounts for the great difference often observed in the severity of the symptoms of people who diagnosed with ASD and justifies why despite that the criteria mentioning that the symptoms should be present before the age of three, some people get their diagnosis much later in their adult life. Despite these improvement in the description and diagnosis of autism and ASD related to it, the fact these conditions are relatively newly-introduced in medical field,

and consequently the professional standards and frameworks for studying autism have been changed drastically in the recent decades, together with the qualitative essence of the criteria of autism diagnosis have brought many incongruity to the definition of autism in social and cultural contexts, resulted in creation of different glamorized or stigmatized narratives on it.

2.3.   Causes of Autistic Spectrum Disorders

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, from early 20th century on, there have been varying perspectives on what is autism and what causes it. In contemporary medicine the cause of autism is still ambiguous. However, several theories have been put forward to describe the symptoms of the condition. Landrigan (2010) explains autism as a biologically based disorder of brain development, with causal factors of genetic components such as mutations, deletions, and copy number variants. However, he continues his argument by pointing out that in some cases a pure genetic explanation may not be enough. Therefore, some environmental exposures that take part in causation of the disorder may exist and are yet to be identified.

Many studies have pointed out some differences in various part of the brain of autistic people in comparison with control group, but these studies have not consistency in their findings (Schultz, 2005; Kennedy & Adolphs, 2012; Dinstein et al, 2008). Mitochondrial dysfunction also suggested as one of the risk factors for the condition (Hass et al, 2007), however, the clinical data have not been satisfactory to demonstrate a strong link

between any cellular abnormality and autism (Rossignol & Frye, 2012). There are hypotheses on the relationship of low vitamin D levels in the early childhood and autism (Mazahery et al, 2016). Moreover, some have linked development of autism to use of anti-depressants by pregnant mother (Gentile, 2015). Still, regardless of these differing theories, there is a consensus in scientific milieu on that instead of looking for a single cause of autism to interpret it as a complex disorder caused by intricate interactions among genetic, cognitive, social and environmental factors (Happé & Ronald, 2006; 2008).

Yet, since there is not a plausible and definitive answer to question of what causes autism in the medical milieu the alternative narratives emerge every day. Willingham (2008) remarked that although media is getting more and more filled with news and reports about autism, and that every year a growing number of children are diagnosed with it, autism still remains as one of the big mysteries of medicine. Kalb & Springen (2008) chose the title "*Mysteries and Complications*" to refer to our times' uncertainty about what autism really is. In an article in the Guardian, Cohen (2017) comments that despite all contrasting news about what is autism and what causes it, we still cannot say that we are in a 'post-truth' age regarding autism because there has never been an age of truth for it.

As already pointed, the inconsistency in opinions and evidences in the medical field and the accessibility of medical research to general public in the internet era create a context in which information can seem credible and usable by everyone even without any medical background, because there is not any solid authentic argument to negate it.

2.4.   Prevalence of Autistic Spectrum Disorders

According to the findings of WHO, worldwide, 1 in 160 people have been found to be diagnosed with an ASD (World Health Organization, 2013). The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently reported that 1 in 59 children in the US have been diagnosed with an ASD, in comparison with 1 in the every 150 children in 2000.This means that the rates of autism diagnosis are rising and there are lots of people in need of being acknowledged and understood by the community in which they live in; because in conditions like ASD, in which oftentimes the disabilities are physically invisible, acknowledgement, support and adequate care are critical to maintain a healthy and fulfilling life but, usually hardly attainable.

The reason of this negligence can be attributed to that although the DSM endeavors for making the diagnostic criteria more precise and accurate, it does not define necessary treatments and approaches to deal with the diagnosed condition.

Kogan and his colleagues (2009) point that studies they conducted around 1960s and 1980s, show the prevalence of ASD was reported to be around 2 to 5 in 10.000 while the studies conducted in 2000s show the prevalence to be 30 to 60 in 10.000. However, it is noteworthy that these numbers do not necessarily point to an autism epidemic rather than a shift in perspective of conceptualizing ASD in medical and social milieus. The

diagnostic criteria for Autistic Disorder in early 1980s were more restrictive than the criteria of the diagnosis of ASD today.

King & Bearman (2009) state that the changes in the application of diagnostic criteria can be the main accountable factor for increase in the rate of prevalence of ASD, as it can be seen in one-quarter of the cases diagnosed with ASD in their study's cohort. Moreover, as Liu and her colleagues (2010) indicate in their research, the distribution of information plays a strong role the seeking an ASD diagnosis, as the children who have been in contact with children who have been already diagnosed with ASD are more likely to later receive an ASD diagnosis.

Hansen and his colleagues (2015) have conducted a research in Danish cohort of children and according to their results the increase in reporting is the man factor that has contributed to increased rate of ASD diagnosis in Denmark. These studies all highlight that the social factors, independent of the symptoms presented in person with ASD, play a crucial role in receiving an ASD diagnosis.

 Although the public awareness on autism is rising and parents are more vigilant in picking up the early symptoms in their children, It is often left unnoticed that ASD are chronic conditions and apart from the importance of the diagnosis and giving the label of autistic to someone, it is important to prepare an environment in which the growing number of people with ASD can live and thrive. Unfortunately, autism is commonly known as a condition specific to children, and our data on the future of these children and the challenges they face in their adult life is limited.

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From my personal experience, after receiving the diagnosis as a child, people with ASD struggle to gain proper support, acceptance and attention throughout their young-adulthood and adult life because the contemporary social context is imbued with myths and misunderstandings about the capabilities and inabilities of people with ASD as well as the proper options for communicating with them and supporting them throughout their life.

2.5.   Stereotyping and Stigmatization

In order to understand what stereotyping actually is, first, it would be useful to look at the widely known definition of stereotype itself. Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines stereotype as "a set of ideas that people have about what someone or something is like, especially an idea that is wrong." These set of ideas are the collective information, of what an individual experiences, or learns through their lives, and create a way for them to give meaning to their world.

In this respect, stereotyping can briefly refer to a type of knowledge about the social world (Macrae et al. 1996). In order to understand the formation of such knowledge, social psychology literature suggest a wider range of explanation on the matter. Still, the concept has shared three main foundations. Based on these foundations, stereotypes are aids to explanation, energy-saving devices and shared group beliefs (McGarty et al., 2002).

The root of such foundations is the cognitive process called categorization which is formed by the acts of detection and emphasis. By linking several supportive theories, taking stereotypes as the component of cresting sense-making and knowledge is highly common among social psychologists. While this tendency is named by the first foundation that serves for explanation, limited capacities of individuals on information processing bring out the second foundation by emphasizing the importance of saving time and effort throughout the sense making and knowledge creation. As a consequence, the detailed and diverse aspect of processed information can be ignored.

Correspondingly, the assistance of stereotypes as being rigid and distorted mental structures can be sometimes created misunderstandings (McGarty et al., 2002.para. 15). Therefore, the validity of stereotypes causes a tension and demonstrate the flawed, irrational nature of the way human thinking. To rationalize such tendencies, scholars can discuss the terms as being context-dependent (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996; cited in McGarty et al., 2002). Still, stereotypes that are shared by large-scale group can be seen useful for sense-making. In fact, differences between groups is one of the common components used for the stereotype formation. Self-enhancement and maintaining the status quo are some other rationales for the motivation on stereotypes.

Without extending the matter, it would also be noteworthy to mention the negative consequences derived from stereotyping. Macrae and his colleagues (1996) explain situation in which stereotypes lead to discrimination by giving the example of a white employer not giving a job to a black man because he thinks blacks are lazy and ignorant or a Northern Irish person whose admission is being denied because of his religion. In

such examples, these kind of stereotyping becomes powerful bases for intolerance and discrimination, and reminding the idea that the generalization of an inaccurate idea can damage people's lives. At this point, it will be more beneficial to discuss such instances based on the term of stigmatization which represents the negative consequences of stereotyping, for instance, social exclusion.

Twenge and Baumeister (2005) argue that social exclusion leads to negative outcomes, indicating it increases aggression and self-defeating behavior while reduces intelligent thought and prosocial behavior.

Cambridge Dictionary defines the stigmatization as "to treat someone or something unfairly by disapproving of him, her, or it." (n.d.). This definition may mean secluding an individual from the society because people think these individuals are different from the majority of the society.

Kurzban and Leary (2001) point to the subject as follows:

> "People who feel socially alienated or rejected are susceptible to a host of behavioral, emotional, and physical problems, suggesting that human beings may possess a fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Despite people's best efforts to be accepted, however, social rejection is a pervasive feature of social life. Of course, many rejections result from idiosyncratic preferences, inclinations, and goals of one individual vis-a-vis another. However, other instances of social rejection appear to be based on the shared values or preferences of groups of individuals. Through the process of Stigmatization, certain individuals are systematically excluded from particular sorts of social interactions because they possess a particular characteristic or are a member of a particular group."(Kurzban & Larry, 2001; para.1)

It is also indicated that the groups being at risk of the social exclusion, are the mentally ill, mentally retarded persons, obese people, homosexuals, psoriasis patients, epileptics,

HIV/AIDS patients, cancer patients, as well as members of a variety of racial, ethnic, and religious groups.

Speaking of social exclusion and people with autism spectrum disorders, a recent field study conducted with individuals with ASD and their families can be addressed. As part of the study, they respond to several questions. Upon the question of "Have you ever experienced an exclusion from your social environment towards you or your autistic child?", in majority of cases, parents responded they have encountered numerous situations where they were labeled or excluded because of some characteristics of ASD and generally as a result of people's attitudes and beliefs about the characteristics of children with ASD. The cases in the study also explains the experience of being stigmatized because of some characteristics of children with ASD such as stereotyped movements or not responding to the questions directed to them, and have been exposed to reactions like calling names and labelling. The researchers also include some cases in that these marginalizing responds from neurotypical families have forced families with autistic child to avoid places because they were insulted or excluded and verbally abused because of the lack of understanding within the social circle (Çopuroğlu & Mengi, 2014).

These two concepts, particularly stereotyping, will be useful to discuss the representation of disabilities and people with autism spectrum disorders in films in the following chapter.

2.6.   Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorders Through Normalcy and Disability

Perspectives

As the definition of ASD and the criteria of diagnosis of them have been changing in the

recent decades, some have argued that the ASD diagnosis is strongly subjective. It seems

as the diagnosis is made not much based on the factual deficits in the individual, but

merely on the degree that the person deviates from the social concept of 'normalcy'.

According to Waltz (2013) most of our ideas on autism is shaped upon the binary of

normal and abnormal as well as a continuous comparison between the behaviors which

are commonly accepted and the ones that are not quite prevalent in the social context.

Waltz concludes that this way of conceptualizing autism and its related disorders

enforces pressure on the people who are on the autism Spectrum and contributes to

formation of an autism industry in which the concepts of alienation and abnormality is

constantly driving the people with ASD to fit themselves into the social standards of

normalcy which in itself make them feel more desperate, lost and unhappy.

In a similar argument, Fernie-Clarke (2010) claims that there is an ideological construct

as the 'autistic other' that steadily promotes that there are certain well-defined norms

that are connected to the accepted rules in the society and people with autism have to

consistently attempt to conform to them despite their apparent failure in this endeavor.

Broderick & Ne'eman (2008) also strongly criticize the current conceptual framework of

ASD contending that the current viewpoint on autism is a metaphoric perspective which

stigmatizes autism and this view is shaped and reinforced by the political power of neurotypicals. One noticeable point regarding the stigmatization of ASD is how for many families, receiving a diagnosis of ASD can resemble a tragedy.

Russell and Norwich (2012) have examined several studies to see the attitudes of parents towards the diagnosis of ASD in their child. Their findings show that parents can sometimes be an obstacle to the process of diagnosis. Educational professionals report the tension of the parents when they are made aware of their child's special educational needs. This situation probably stems from the predicament of suffering from the potential drawbacks of receiving an ASD diagnosis for their child. The parents often appear to be worried about stigma, devaluation, rejection and the risk of losing resources or opportunities which may be provided by the formal identification. Interestingly, the parents seem to be more involved in trying to reduce stigmatization of ASD once their child is diagnosed with an ASD. Even in some cases parents come across as advocates who push other parents to take action for getting a diagnosis, making it more likely for other parents to find the courage to pursue proper support for their child. Rapp & Ginsburg (2011) accentuate that the kinship imageries, the personal narratives of families whose children are diagnosed with ASD and other non-normative situations, contribute greatly to moving toward a new understanding of the concept of neurodiversity.

Nonetheless, contrary to the arguments of ASD as a socially-mediated phenomenon, some researchers have a medical model for rationalization of ASD that stresses upon the

impairments in the communication in people with ASD and suggest that ASD are conditions which need to get diagnosed and cured.

Szatmari (2003) explains autism to be a developmental disability with onset in infancy, which means early childhood period is especially important for the diagnosis of the disorder and proper interventions. Sigman and colleagues (2004) suggest that with early detection, diagnosis can be made even in 18 months of age, rather than at 24–30 months. The proponents of medical view on ASD argue that early detection of ASD is important because diagnosis of the disorder leads to an early start of screenings and parent trainings, thus, eventually gives better developmental results. Al-Qabandi and colleagues (2011) refer to the screening process as

> "… a public health service intended to detect a specific medical condition in people who do not necessarily perceive that they are at risk of or already affected by that condition or its complications. A screening questionnaire or test is meant to help identify affected people who are more likely to be helped than harmed by further diagnostic tests or treatment."(Al-Qabandi et al, 2011, para.5)

According to Fernell and colleagues (2013), although there is limited evidence on that early intervention programs have a long-term outcome, Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI) seems to be a functional program for children with ASD. It is evident in the arguments of advocates of the medical view of ASD that despite lack of any solid data on the extent of efficacy of early intervention in ASD, they formulize ASD as conditions that need to be detected and normalized.

For a better understanding of the source of the binary in approaches toward ASD, a brief overview of the models of disability is required. Models of disability are

constructed tools for specifying impairment and providing a ground on which government and society can identify the disabled people and plan strategies for fulfilling their needs (Forlin & West, 2015).

Although there are controversies on whether these models are reflecting the real world or not, they are useful tools to acquire knowledge on disability issues as well as the viewpoints of authorities who generate and apply these models. Generally, these models are created by one dominant group and applied to the another one. Therefore, they can present the opinions, conceptions, and prejudices of the former toward the latter. Models display the basis on which society provides or limits access to opportunities for a given groups of people.

Overall, models of disability are formed from two different perspectives: the one which considers disabled people as relying on the society's help for getting cured as well as for providing for their needs; this view ends in segregation, discrimination, and paternalism; and the second view, which regards disabled people as citizens who have agency to demand, expect, and shape what society has to offer to them; this view results in equality and integration. The models of disability are functional tools and one should not be regarded as more accurate than the others (Nikora & Karapu, 2004), having said that, the study of causes of evolvement and prevalence of each model can provide information about the dominant political and ideological power in the given social context.

2.6.1. Religious/Moral Model of Disability

The moral model of disability is historically the oldest one and is not accepted these days. This model identifies disability as a curse or punishment imposed on the disabled person in the result of a misdemeanor or sin committed by the disabled person or one of his/her family members. In cases like schizophrenia, or any change in the behavior, the presence of 'evil spirits' is discerned in the body of the subject. Birth defects are explained by sins committed in the person's previous incarnations (Dymaneke, 2013).

Acts of exorcism and sacrifice may be committed to ward off the evil forces in the body of inflicted person, in some situations the inflicted person can be persecuted and shut out of the society and in extreme situations, condemned to death (Amponsah-Bediako, 2013). This model involves a regressive conception of disability, which can be seen in any society where disability is approached with fear, ignorance, and prejudice.
In another explanation, the roots of the moral model of disability are traced in Biblical references, the ideologies of Christian church toward the body and their residues in enlightenment thought. The embodied situations of difference were seen as results of black magic, evil spirits, and God's anger. On the other hand, the embodied differences sometimes were recognized as images of 'suffering Christ' and were perceived as an angelic/mystical status or as a protection for dispelling dark forces away from other people (Phiri, 2013; Van Kampen, 2008).

Historically, themes which contain the ideas of sin and sanctity, impurity and wholeness, undesirability and weakness, care and compassion, healing and burden have constituted

the foundations of western conceptualization of 'different' bodies and behaviors

(Clapton & Fitzgerald, 1997).

In pre-industrialization societies with a cyclic notion of time, people who were not able to respond to the minimum requirements of productivity were ostracized and treated like monsters and were not considered as humans. In religious communities some of these people were helped in several ways: the members of the community tried to cure the disabled person with acts of exorcism, purging and other rituals prevalent in the community. providing a shelter and sustenance for these people were considered as conforming to 'Christian duty' of having mercy toward 'needy strangers'. with the arrival of the modern era and development of the notions of enlightenment, the religious/moral model of disability challenged by proponents of rationality (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 1997).

2.6.2 Medical Model of Disability

With the advancement of science and medical knowledge, scientists and physicians took the place of priests and healers of pre-industrialized age as inspectors of rehabilitating processes and guardians of social values. The notion of cyclic time replaced with the linear one and labor became commoditized. The human value was related to the ability of production and profitability. The emerging nation-states began to dictate the lifestyles and habits of workers.

Universality replaced individuality, reason outpowered obscurity, and knowledge and state of the mind substituted the lived experience of the body (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 1997).

The 'normal' citizen was defined as male, white, able-bodied and productive. with these establishments, the crippled and mad people were completely disappeared from the face of the society. these people were placed in medical institutions where had two main objectives: one to cure the disabled and normalize them to be able to conform to the rules of productivity; and other to nurse them in case they are not curable so they family member be able to work and produce profit for society. In this institutions care for disabled person rationalized and professionalized and the relation between able-bodied and disabled persons cut out.

Disability has been considered as a burden, hopeless situation and tragedy. The only solution for this tragic situation has been curing the disabled person who was exempt from all obligations of productivity in the price of losing the right of citizenship. In this framework, the authority was given to medical professionals as representatives of rationality to identify the limitations and impairments of the disabled people (Pelka, 2012). The relationship between doctor and the disabled person was one of a fixer and fixee kind. And the client had no choice but to comply with the doctors' prescriptions. With the promotion of Darwinism, this belief strengthened that disability largely results from the person's mental or physical limitations and was not relevant to person's social or geographical environment (Amponsah-Bediako, 2013).

In the contemporary context, the medical model of defining disability is discernible in

The World Health Organization's (WHO) descriptions published in 1980 created and

applied by doctors:

> "Impairment: any lack or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function. Disability: any constraint on or loss (in the result of an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for an individual. Handicap: a limitation for an individual, resulting from an impairment or a disability, that limits or prevents the fulfillment of a role that is normal (depending on age, sex, and social and cultural factors) for that individual" (WHO, 1980; cited in Jones, 2001).

Evidently, in these descriptions, the disabled person is perceived as someone

'abnormal', 'incomplete' and 'not enough' . This model of defining disability had been

the leading model for years until the last decades of the twentieth century when

disability rights activists challenged it. The problem of labeling someone as lacking and

deficient is that these labels influence person's both self and public image; the medical

condition implies that the person is vulnerable and has the potential to deteriorate and

fail to conform to his/her social roles. These implications complicate the disabled people

social and professional lives. The limitations of the medical model of disability result in

the formation of social model of disability which has been advocated by the disabled

community. The social model of defining disability challenges functions and limits of

the medical model.

2.6.3 Social Model of Disability

This model has roots in US civil rights movements and political arguments of the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in the United Kingdom in the 1970s. This model is further elaborated in the works of Finkelstein (1980) and Olivier (1990) and since then has been known as the main principle of many of the self-organized disability movement around the world (Shakespeare & Watson, 1997). The proponents of the social model have built their arguments on series of dichotomies:

1. Impairment is different from disability. The former is personal and undisclosed, the latter is constructed and public. Although physicians try to cure impairment, the primary issue here is to resolve disability. Disability, similar to gender, is a historically, culturally and environmentally constructed experience and does not have a specific and international essence.

2. The social model defines disability as constructed during the correspondence between the person with impairment and the disabling society; in contrast with the medical model which considers disability as a personal deficiency. Oliver (2004) defines models as methods of translating thoughts into practice and then complains that the medical-individual model treats disability like a personal tragedy. Alternatively, the social model sees disability as externally foisted limitations.

3. The disabled people in the social model are considered as an oppressed group, while the medical institutions and charities are seen as forces which impose that oppression.

Social model activists promote the help and service organizations which are run by disabled people themselves. Additionally, they support researches and scholarly works on disability and disabled people conducted by disabled people themselves (Shakespeare, 2006).

Although in 1990s, with recognition of disability movement and establishment of disability studies as an academic field, many disability scholars have questioned the sufficiency of social model for communicating all the experiences related to disability (Morris, 1991; French, 1993; Crow, 1996; Hughes & Paterson, 1997; Terzi, 2004) and have suggested the involvement of personal experiences and embodied impairment in the disability discourse, all of these criticisms have been responded by Finkelstein (1996; cited in Shakespeare & Watson, 1997) who argued inclusion of the personal narratives of disability in the disability argument weakens the power of the social model.

The social model has been proposed to take away obstacles in order to give the disabled people the same opportunities as able-bodied persons to control their lives (Sudesh, 2008). All in all, the social model has radically transformed the way of recognition of disability in society and has had a great influence on anti-discriminatory lawmaking. The social model has changed the direction of blame from the disabled person to society and consequently, created a capacity for disabled persons to act more freely and influentially toward creating a society which responds to their demands and expectations.

Historically, the social model has formed by physically disabled people for explaining the roots of disability as the social, and not physical deficits. However, it is arguable that

the radical social model of disability regards all the disabilities as social constructs and ignores the importance of the biology of disability and therefore the advocates of social models have often gone too far in their advocacy that have forgotten that the social model is a political tool rather than an ontological model (Dwyer, 2018).

In 1990s the neurodiversity concept has emerged under the influence of the social model of physical disability to explain the different ways of human brain's function and processes and since then has become the paradigm of many ASD rights movements.

2.7.   Neurodiversity

The term neurodiversity was first used by Judy Singer, the Australian sociologist who has Asperger, in 1996. As Singer (2016) argues, autism has the potential to create a new political category based on the neurological diversity. According to her, neurological difference can be considered as a new component to other categories of difference such as race, class and gender. Singer adopts the social model of disability but altered it to fit her ideology on neurologic difference. She criticizes the social model for its radical structuralism and avoidance to accept the inherent differences of the bodies and minds(singer, 2016). While sympathizing with the objections of the social models proponents to the language which victimize the disabled and perpetuates suffering, Singer (2016) believes that the attribution of the all sufferings of the disabled to the societal factors is not justifiable.

The neurodiversity concept became popular when the journalist Harvey Blume (1998) published an essay in *The Atlantic* titled *Neurodiversity: on the neurological Underpinnings of Geekdom*. In that essay, Blume contends that just like the biodiversity, neurodiversity is essential for the continuity of the human race (Blume, 1998). The proponents of the concept of neurodiversity argue that ASD and other mental conditions such as ADHD, dyslexia, developmental communication disorders etc. should be considered as natural variants of human brain. As Jaarsma & Welin (2011) cite, the discourse of neurodiversity can be divided to two main branches. The ontological one that contemplate on conditions like ASD as neurological differences that exist among human thus should not be regarded as defective and pathological.

The political aspect of neurodiversity pertains to the social and political rights of the people whose brain-wiring differs from the majority. The political and ontological perspectives of neurodiversity often align together as we see in the neurodiversity movement which is an online movement formed by a group of autistic people in 1990s.

The neurodiversity movement, which is also known as autism rights movement, is a campaign that embrace autism by seeing it as part of the identity that is inseparable (Kapp, 2013). Some proponents of neurodiversity have argued that people with ASD should come under the legislative protection of the minority groups rather than being considered as disabled (Loftis, 2015).

Under the influence of the neurodiversity discourse, autistics have found the voice to discuss their condition from the point of view of themselves rather than the medical

specialists. The personal narratives of autistics like Temple Grandin and Jim Sinclair heralded a new era of the autism awareness (Jaarsma & Welin, 2011). Unprecedented arguments regarding the autistic terminology have emerged. For example, some claimed the use of the term 'person with autism' should be avoided because it gives the impression that a normal person has trapped behind the bars of a prison like autism and the person can be set apart from the autistic condition. In this regard, the autistics rights activist Temple Grandin states if she could choose between being autistic or not, she does not prefer to be a neurotypical because autism is intertwined with her whole identity. Jim Sinclair (1999) also expresses autism as an intrinsic feature of his brain and states that he cannot separate himself from how his brain functions.

On the other hand, the autistic writer Donna Williams has a different viewpoint, she regards her autism as a prison that herself trapped in it and what people see are the replicas of her imprisoned self (Jaarsma & Welin, 2011). At all, the autistic rights movement create a space in which a polyphony of autistic voices can be heard.

The neurodiversity movement supports the idea that in conditions which are harmless but atypical, like repetitive behaviors in ASD, a cure or prevention is not needed and the real needs of the autism community are the recognition and acceptance.

Baron-Cohen and colleagues (2009) acknowledge the stigmatizing potential of the ASD label, and call for the term 'disorders' to be replaced with 'conditions'. Thus ASD becomes ASC, 'autism spectrum conditions' in the literature of their studies.

Kapp (2013) remarks in his study that though previous researches showed that parents seem to support the medical model which seeks preventions or cures for autism rather than a ways for accepting it, the neurodiversity movement also supported by the parents of individuals with ASD.

Despite the positive perspective of the neurodiversity movement toward people who neurologically do not fit into the society's understanding of the normal brain, the concept of neurodiversity have been subjected to several criticisms. Jaarsma and Welin (2011) assert that the pervasive difficulties in communication in ASD cannot simply solved by acceptance and need proper support as well as intervention. They also state that when autism simplified from a disorder to a specific culture of living it hazards the status of the autistics who need serious support because their essential needs will be regarded as a different, yet natural way of existing in the world (Jaarsma & Welin, 2011).

In a similar argument, Sue Rubin (n.d), an autistic writer who uses assistive devices for communication, reveals that she prefers a cure for her condition and notes that the majority of people who struggle with more severe symptoms of autism do not support the neurodiversity movement's anti-cure approach. Jonathan Mitchell (n.d.), an autistic writer and blogger who is one of the well-known pro-cure autism activists hold that the reason of acceptance of the neurodiversity movement's anti-cure approach is that many autistics who want a cure do not have a voice to iterate their need.

Although the ontological aspect of the neurodiversity movement has had many critics, it is undeniable that the discourse of neurodiversity has brought a new vigor into the discussions around the disability and approaches for theorizing it. It has been influential in reducing the stigma and anxiety of receiving an ASD diagnosis. Furthermore, it provides the ASD advocates with a theoretical framework to challenge the tragic and pathologic portrayal of autism in the society. The tragic and medical models of representing ASD have been gradually replaced with a social perspective and autistics have acquired the courage to speak about their condition as well as their expectations from the society.

CHAPTER III

REPRESENTATION OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS IN MEDIA

This chapter is pertained to the study of the media's attitudes in representing the disabled in general, and people with ASD in particular. The reason of importance of the media representation of disability will be discussed with regard to the previous studies on the subject. The main stereotypes implemented in representation of disability in the media will be presented. ASD, similar to other disabilities, have been portrayed in the media through specific stereotypes. The representation of ASD in the media and the stereotypes of the representation will be presented and explored through giving some examples from films and TV series.

The influence of media in shaping perspectives on disabilities has been the subject of numerous studies. Since the use of media has been increasing as well as the means for accessing to it, most information related to people with disabilities find its way to the different branches of media, specially the social platforms on the internet. The films and TV series are not exempted from this condition.

Given the broadness of the scope of reachability of the media nowadays, raising awareness through depicting empathetic and inclusive narratives of disability on the media can be considered as one of the most effective and accelerated ways. In order to do so, the outcomes of the media products in which disabilities, in general and ASD as the subject of this theses, have been portrayed should be taken into consideration. The performance of the media in terms of creation of a realistic and empathetic image of individuals with ASD and consequences of perpetuation of the established stereotypes in representation of ASD are subjects that are intended to be examined throughout the chapter.

3.1. Influence of Media Representations in Knowledge Creation and Attributes

Human beings acquire an extensive amount of their knowledge through direct experiences in their primary environment. Direct experiences and personal engagement influence people's beliefs and attitudes (Arnett,1995;cited in Orta, 2016). Stalker and Conners (2004; cited in Orta, 2016) reveal that people who have a sibling with disability report the positive impact of their direct experience in the formation of their attitudes toward the disabled people.

Liebert (1975; as cited in Elliot & Byrd, 1982) defines attitudes as one's general orientations toward oneself as well as other individuals. Attitudes consist of three basic components: cognitive, effective and behavioral (Bandura, 1986; Liebert, 1975; as cited in Elliot & Byrd, 1982). Therefore, one's attitudes toward a subject can be described as

what the person thinks about the subject; what feeling are induced in person in relation to the subject and what actions the person takes regarding the subject (Orta, 2016).

In addition to experiential learning, observational learning through the social modeling has an extensive role in the shaping human knowledge and attitudes. According to Bandura (1986) observation create a model in the person's mind and the reinforcement of this model shapes person's feeling and behavior toward the observed subject. Media as sources of symbolic knowledge have substantial contribution to people's learning through observation. Media representations influence audience's attitudes and biases toward the represented group. Gerbner's (1976) cultivation theory provides insights on how the narratives of the media affect our perception about the social reality. Gerbner and colleagues in a research on the TV's representation of violence and crime report that people who are more exposed to the symbolic content of the media on violence form a perception of prevalence of violence that is conflict with the objective reality (1978; cited in Jamieson & Romer, 2014).

Although the cultivation theory was originally proposed to explain the influences of the portrayal of the violence, over times it has been applied to varying subject such as health, disability and minorities (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999; cited in Lorenz, 2016). According to Gerbner (1976; cited in M.Berryessa, 2014) the negative media representations of the mental illness induce fear in the viewers toward the mentally ill people and form the perception that committing violence is related to one's diagnosis of mental illness. Therefore, it is arguable that inclusion of positive and realistic narratives

about the disabled on the media such as TV and films can produce positive attitudes in the viewers about people with disability (Slater & Janin,, 2011; cited in Orta, 2016).

According to Elliot & Byrd (1982) societal negative attitudes toward people with disability are the main damper on the integration of them to society and changing these attitudes have positive impacts on rehabilitation of the disabled, their personality development and inclusion in the society.

Orta (2016) points out that although the rates of diagnosis of ASD have been increased in recent years, there is a shortage of scholarship regarding the relationship between the observation of media contents and the attitudes toward ASD.

It is worthy to note that for cultivation of positive attitudes toward people with disability, realistic and comprehensive narratives should be included in the media. This cannot be achieved but through the inclusion of the people with disability in the production process of the media content. Therefore, one of the major issues in representation of disability in the media is the lack of participation of disabled people in the content production on disabilities. Joanne Smith (n.d.) reports that when she asked about the rates of the employment of people with disability from the media producers, many of them told her that they prefer not to hire people with disability because they slow the production process or their image can make the viewer uncomfortable. If we are to correct the stigmatized portrayal of the disability in the media as well as the negative attitudes of society toward the disabled, these discriminations need to be addressed urgently.

3.2.   Disabilities in Media

As already discussed, generally, attitudes toward any given subject are shaped by learning through observation and multiple modeling and the media products are influential in providing information and formation of attitudes (Elliot & Byrd, 1982). Therefore, this section is concerned with some of the standard and repetitive stereotypes which feed the public opinion.

According to Elliot and Byrd (1982), the representation of disability in the contemporary media have been influenced from the printed media, especially classical and modern literature. Disabled people for long have been depicted in literature as either hero or evil and not in between. This dichotomy in the portrayal is based of two Christian beliefs; one that bearing pain makes man more precious and the second that the physical flaws are the consequences of wrongdoings (remind the growing nose of Pinocchio when he lies) (Thompson; 1980, cited in Elliot & Byrd, 1982).

The portrayal of disabled with extreme characteristics can also be interpreted as a way of adding attraction to the story, since the characters simultaneously absorb and hold off the audience. As Byrd (1981; cited in Elliot & Byrd, 1982) points out, newspapers and magazines are imbued with mortifying and humiliating stories about the disabled people which serve the purpose of giving the able-bodied audience a sense of relief and gratefulness for not being disabled.

Keller and colleagues (1990) in a study that they conducted for a year analyzed the contents of 12 American newspapers regarding the news about the disabled and concluded that nearly in the all cases disabled people were portrayed as tragic victims or dangerous people who threaten the wellbeing of society.

Ciot and Hove (2010) conducted a similar research in Romania which concluded that the articles in the newspapers depict disabled people as desperate individuals who cannot look after themselves. This also asserted by Weinberg and Santana (1978; cited in Elliot and Byrd, 1982) that when disabled people are portrayed harmless, the attitude toward their benign behavior is that they are bound to be good because they do not have the ability to act otherwise. Ciot and Hove (2010) have examined the articles of the Romanian journals for four years and figured that disabled people are portrayed as people who are constantly subject to mistreatment and prejudice.

According to Byrd (1980; cited in Elliot & Byrd, 1982) the portrayal of disability on the media is not trustworthy and accurate from the perspective of the disabled people and the motive of gaining more attention and rating prevail over the obligation of providing realistic representations. The depiction of disabled people with exaggerated symptoms and as threatening and unpredictable result in the sense inferiority and exclusion from the society and further sever the bonds between able-bodied and disabled individuals. Moreover, when disabled people are exposed to their exaggerated image in the media, this repetitive portrayal of exaggerated behaviors can impact their self-image and behavior as well.

Byrd (1980; cited in Elliot & Byrd, 1982) suggests that the negative consequences of stereotypical and exaggerated portrayal of disability for the relationships between disabled and non-disabled is as substantial that it should outweigh the financial gain of the media industry. Liebert (1975; cited in Elliot and Byrd, 1982) asserts that television [and other visual outlets] are the most influential media for observational learning on the attitudes toward disability; the constant exposition to negative stereotypes of disabled people affect the perspective and feelings of the audience and this induce negative behaviors in audience toward the disabled people.

 Norden (1994) remarks that the representation of the disabled in the media is aligned with the representation of other minority groups such as ethnic and racial minorities. The stereotypic representation of disabled people is the consequence of the able-bodied domination over the production and distribution of media outlets. Lidubwi (2017) cites that the content on the disabled people are usually mis/underrepresented in the news because the journalists are uneducated and insensitive about the disabled and there are biases against the recruitment of the disabled in the newsrooms.

Nelson (1999; cited in Young, 2012) examines six major stereotypes that are frequently employed in the representation of people with disability in the film and TV products. According to him, disabled people usually portrayed as a victim or threat, or the ones that would not be able to survive, or who are dependent on others to live, or people who cannot fit into society or as a hero.

Barnes (1991) in his book *Disabling imagery and the media* refers to Paul Hunt's categorization of the images of the disability in the media and gives examples for each of the categories by referencing to media productions such as news, TV dramas, advertisements, films, etc. Hunt (1985; cited in Barnes, 1991) identifies ten stereotypes in media representation of the disabled; disabled people are portrayed as: 1. pitiable/pathetic, 2. objects of cruelty and harassment, 3. ominous and malevolent 4. the super crip(ple), 5. objects to create atmosphere, 6. Hilarious and a spectacle for amusement, 7. the worst enemy of themselves, 8. a troublesome creature, 9. an asexual person, 10. unable to take role in daily life.

Leonard has conduct a thorough research on the disability representation in prime time TV products which concludes that disabled people are stigmatized in the TV programs; as most of the products portray the disabled as single or without any significant family role or a job, as children or people who are taken care of in the institutions, or as person who are being subjected to insult and mistreatment and are pitiable (1975; cited in Elliot & Byrd, 1982).

Smith (1999; cited in Young, 2012) claims that mentally disabled people are portrayed as misfits in the media. She traces the representation of mentally disabled as freaks back to the literature where the mental illnesses have been subjects of the horror and bizarre themes. Similarly, Byrd (1981; cited in Elliot and Byrd, 1982) points that the mental disabilities are more favored to portray by the media specially in documentaries and policers. He speculated that is because the mental illness is a suitable subject to attract the attention of the audience as well as entertain them.

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It is important to note that while the physical disability has been relatively present in the films throughout the history of filmmaking, the case of mental disability was a little different. In 1934, the Hollywood's policymakers prohibited the representation of insanity as the main topic of the films (Roffman &Purdy, 1981). However, this code had abolished in 1968 and mental illness became visible on silver screen (Winick, 1978). Norden (1994) in his study on images of disability in the films recognizes three different periods: from the beginning of cinema to the late 1930s, from the WWII till 1970s and from 1970s until the last decade of the twentieth century.

He notes that the first era's films portrayed disability with humor and as a source of amusement, disabled were portrayed as evil, hilarious or pitiable characters. The second era's film tended to portray disabled persons as people who struggle enormously to endure their lives' or depicted them as heroes/supercrips. Norden believes the images from the last period (1970-2000) have been more realistic and exploratory. This can be attributable to the activities of the members of the disability rights movement and the emergence of the academic field of disability studies and changes in the ways of conceptualizing the disability from religious and medical models to the social model.

To give an example of the change in the attitudes toward disability in the last decades, the story that Murray (2008) narrates in his book, *Representing Autism,* is worthy of mention. He has once witnessed a radio show promotion that implemented the mental conditions of its DJs: one with OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) and one with ADD (Attention-Deficit Disorder). As Murray (2008) notes, the naming of the show

hints that both mental conditions are seen as positive features; "badges as personality" as he likes to call. The conditions have been represented as advantages instead of anomalies. In addition, since the medical labels were clearly referenced as advertorial content, the target audience of the show get acquainted with these two conditions inevitably but through the people who have the condition and not the medical specialists. Moreover, the show and these two promoted medical conditions appear to be positively acknowledged in the popular culture. What once used to be called as a 'mental retardation' now is normalized and called a 'cognitive condition' because the discourse of neurodiversity that these conditions are differences rather than impairments have been gradually established. These changes, undoubtedly, would not be possible without implementing the potentials of the new media and their rapidly expanding reach to spread the viewpoint of the people who are racially, ethnically, sexually or neurologically in the minority.

Still, a major concern about the impact of the media in shaping positive attitudes and raising awareness on disabilities stems from the broader scope and easier accessibility of the mainstream media in which the primary logic of production is the supply and demand. As mentioned before, the contents included in the media generally depend on the responses they receive from the audience and conventionally, the heads of media companies put their financial interests first and frame their products on the account of profitability. So, it appears that taste of the uninformed audience on one hand and the economic profitability of presentation of victimized image of the disabled on the other shape a vicious cycle that perpetuates the negative stereotypes regarding the disability.

It is supportable that the mainstream media does not air or publish a product for the long time without examining whether people consume and respond positively to it; similar to the representation of people of color in the past, when people were interested in watching a narrow and negative stereotypical image of them and the media were responding to this interest and the perpetuation of the represented image reinforced and intensified the stigmatization.

Despite the substantial improvement in acknowledgment and inclusion of the disabled in the social and political milieus, which mostly is the result of the advocacies of the disabled people since 1970s, the negative stereotypes of the disabled are still relatively present in the contemporary media. That is because what the audience wants to see is more definitive in the entertainment media industry rather than the veracity of the media products.

It is also understandable that this stands as a serious concern in terms of the rights of the disabled people, since how people with disabilities are portrayed on the media is shaping the beliefs and emotions of the public who consume these media products and the negative and baseless ideas on the disabled people that media propagated have a tangible impact in the disabled people's daily life. Apart from negative stereotyping, constant portrayal of similar and specific character types as representatives of the whole minority group cause the misconception that all people belonging to the group necessarily have the portrayed characteristics. This limited portrayal has been done by the media repetitively in the past in case of various types of groups and have resulted in the establishment of inaccurate beliefs and attitudes toward the people who belong to that

groups. It is now accepted that not only films, but also all media outlets, can have serious influences in the lives of individuals with disabilities (Hyler et al., 1985).

Stereotyping disabled people as victims, for instance, or ascribing negative attitudes to them, is likely to cause social prejudice (Zola, 1985) and do exactly the opposite of raising awareness on the subject. As Belcher and Maich (2014) point out, the role of the media is actually educating the audience through implementation of stereotypes. Wahl (1995; cited in Sarrett, 2011) supports this idea stating that the public opinion about different people is hugely affected by their portrayals in media.

Diefenbach (1997) conducted a study on the portrayal of mentally ill characters on network TV programs. He observed 184 programs for three months and came up with the fact that most of the mentally ill characters are portrayed as violent and with a low quality of life. As we can see in, all the mentioned studies, there are certain qualities that have been attributed to the disabled people throughout the history of representation of the disability, and most of these stereotypes are negative, excluding and problematic yet they have been repeated so many times without questioning their validity or consequences.

Signorelli (1989), focusing on television viewers, studied how this stereotyping of mental illnesses affects the ideas of audience regarding the mentally ill people and points out that even the well-informed viewers would end up with negative attitudes toward the mentally ill by observing the depictions of the mental illness on the TV.

Bogdan et al. (1982) presented their findings of how negative stereotyping in films affects the public opinion on individuals with disabilities. Portraying people with disabilities as dangerous people can cause people to be scared of interacting with the disabled people. It can be affirmed when we analyze the history of the films with characters with disability, whether mental or physical, films such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931) focusing on physical differences and causing a certain fear toward disability and the disabled , or *Identity* (2003) focusing on dissociative identity disorder and again, causing fear toward people who live with the condition. In both films, the characters are portrayed as dangerous people, simply because of their disabilities and differences.

In one of the major theories about representation, Tessa Perkins (1997) suggests that stereotypes are actually selective descriptions of specific areas, usually significant or problematic. Therefore, Perkins considers them as exaggerations in any case, simply because they are about extremes.

A generally accepted theory in the disability scholarship, also suggested by Safran (1998) and Draaisma (2009), is that when people with disabilities are included in media outlets, television and cinema in this case, they are usually exaggerated or bent in a way it would be captivating to the audience so the production company, network or the investors would be able to gain profit by publishing it. Murray (2008) highlights that point by giving the example of the savants; savants excite the audience, especially when they showcase their extraordinary talents and eccentricity, their unusualness attracts more attention than the detailed depiction of a disabled individual's regular life and

struggles which if be portrayed can challenge the viewer's established perceptions and cause anxiety and uncomfortableness in them.

As Byrd (1989) mentions, in examining any portrayal of the disabled three details needed to be considered: if the focus of the narrative is the disabled person as a human being or the disability as a spectacle for absorbing the audience. If the disabled character represented in the media product is depicted as an accepted part of the society or portrayed as an external treat. And the last, whether the disabled character is depicted as someone who is approachable and communicable.

3.3. Savantism Tendency in Media

The term Savant is usually used to refer to someone who despite having a mental disability presents extraordinary skills which are usually related to memory and calculation (Treffert, 2009). The condition originally described as idiot savant (learned idiot in French) by John Longdon Down, the person who is famous for his identification of Down syndrome, in 1887 (Treffert, 2009).

Down introduced ten people with extraordinary abilities who were under his examination; one of these persons had the ability to memorize a whole book and read it from backward to the forth (Treffert, 2009). The common feature in all of Down's patients was the combination of exceptional memory and remarkable skills in specific areas despite the significant mental disability in general (Treffert, 2009). Savant syndrome is strongly associated with ASD and according to the reports about half of

who have savant skills are on autism spectrum; in these cases, the person is generally described as autistic savant (Treffert, 2009). Savant syndrome is a condition of an unknown cause that is not classified as a disorder in DSM and is extremely rare. Statistics have shown that around 1 in every 10 to 200 persons with ASD presents with savant syndrome (Treffert, 2009).

However, because of the association of the condition with ASD and its appeal and curiosity, it is known as the most well-known of the stereotypes in representation of autism. Although savants by definition do not have high intelligence score, but a one area of skill, these stereotype throughout the history of autism narration have been changed and mirrored in the geek stereotype, a person who have normal or above normal intelligence obsessions and mastery in one or more specific subjects.

The prevalence of these two stereotypes in the media have been so influential that most people who are familiar with ASD vicariously perceive that all people on AS have to have some sorts of exceptional abilities or professional interests.   Murray (2008) emphasizes that savant skills, are extraordinary and exceed the powers of regular people, and because of these features considered as exceptional and usually attract attention. the potential of inducing excitement in viewers is one of the main reasons that media favors to represent so many savant and geek autistics.

Bednarek (2012; cited in West, 2016) explores nerds on television and found out they were showcased as intelligent, obsessive compulsive or with Asperger-like behaviors and socially awkward. This remarks that not only media outlets trying to tell a story with

an autistic person in it choose to show savant and geeks, but also the other way around;

when media portray an overly intelligent character, sometimes obsessive and socially

awkward; either an autistic or a person with OCD comes to mind.

Murray (2008) in his book *Representing Autism* indicates the reason and the result of

repetitive depiction of savantism in the media:

> "Savantism is undoubtedly the element of autism that appears most fascinating. Indeed, when seen through the contemporary lens of popular representation, autism and savantism appear to have become almost synonymous, to the point where it could be asked whether it is possible to be a savant without also having autism, or equally whether it might be supposed that all those who are autistic possess savant abilities."(Murray, 2008:65)

At first glance this may not seem as a crucial problem compared to media's more

negative attitudes toward other disabilities, however, when considering that savant's

features are not very among population with ASD and the high intelligence is not a

characteristic that is relevant to ASD, the direct experience with the real people on

autism spectrum often do not match the expectations that media constantly reinforce.

Therefore, it is arguable that this misrepresentation have negative outcomes for majority

of autistics because they are ultimately seen as fake or lesser than their nerd, intelligent

and weird representations.

Young (2010) in her study of the accuracy of autism representation in films, names two

of the most important Hollywood films about autism as *Rain Man* (1988) and *Mercury*

Rising (1998). She claims that the significance of these two films stem from the high

domestic revenue of their opening weekend (Young, 2010). According to young, this

criterion is useful because it showcases the audience's immediate response and interest in films with characters on ASD (Young, 2010). Both of the films represent autistic characters with characteristics which are compatible with savant stereotype. So, giving the fact both films have been successful worldwide in attracting the audience, it can be concluded that the misconception that all autistic people have savant skills is an idea that absorbs and fascinates the audience. Thus, the perpetuation of this concept in a supply and demand system such as cinema has been inevitable. In this regard, Murray (2008) states that the media, instead of trying to reflect what autism really is, try to create its own idea of autism by constantly portraying extraordinary people.

Although *Rain Man* has been widely accepted as an accurate representation of an autistic person (Safran, 1998), it also brings out the misconception that autistic people are actually hidden geniuses. The similar is also true for *Mercury Rising* (1998). These hidden geniuses that are widely acknowledged as media representation of autism in the films, represent a minor percentage of people with ASD. However *Rain Man* films portrays the life of an autistic person in a care institution and also hints to the humiliating behaviors of able-bodied toward people with disability (Young, 2010) . Therefore, although *Rain Man* showcases a reasonably accurate autistic person with savant syndrome, the film represents a very small population in the autistic community. However, whenever the term of autism and its media representation come around *Rain Man* is the first name that comes to the mind of the majority. *Rain Man* actually serves as a pioneer to the autistic stereotypes in media while it is also celebrated as one of the best and memorable representations of autism.

Another successful film in the popular culture with the representation of autism is the 1998 film *Mercury Rising*. The film focuses on a 9-year old autistic boy and how he is in need of protection because he has almost supernatural pattern-recognition skills that help him solve even some of the hardest cryptographic codes. The film falls in the hands of savantism and ends up reinforcing one of the most popular autism stereotypes. The film even goes further to exaggerate the boy's savant characteristic to supernatural levels, completely straying from the path of authentically portraying autism.

Probably the main problem in autism representation stems from that the exaggerated and unusual characteristics of savants and geeks amuse the audience the most and therefore entertainment industry is continuously presents autistics with some weird and extraordinary characteristics that are not necessarily associated with the ASD. As mentioned only 10% of all autistic people are considered savants. Moreover, regarding the geek stereotype and autism, although people who have Asperger syndrome or other high-functioning types of autism have normal or above normal intelligence, this does not mean that all of them are nerds or geeks.

Although these groups of autistics exist and their representation should not be regarded totally misleading, imbuing the media with images of savants and nerds as autistics result in negligence toward other types of ASD, specially the more low-functioning people on the spectrum. Savantism, as a strong and absorbing stereotype in representing autism, strays audience from acquiring a realistic knowledge on ASD. Even though none of the media contents that present savants and geeks directly claim that all people with ASD are geniuses like the hero of their story, the extraordinary abilities interest audience

and seeing only those kinds of autistic people in media creates a misleading perception in general.

Considering the films with huge success such as *Rain Man* (1989) and *Mercury Rising* (1998) together with the contemporary tv series such as *The Big Bang Theory* (2007) and *Touch* (2012), which their audience may perceive the related characters as having autism spectrum disorder based on their savant or geeky portraits. The association of ASD with savants and geeks still remain a popular subject in the media representation of ASD.

For example, *The Big Bang Theory*, being about a group of geniuses, somehow had to include a geek when creating an autistic main character; so even though it reinforces some certain stereotypes, it might be excused due to the genre and the storyline of the show. It also shows, along with everything stereotypical; how a person on AS might go through a daily fulfilling life in the modern world when s/he is situated in a warm and accepting environment. However, this also can be attributed to the story of the show that is about how intelligent and socially awkward men operate in life. So although it might be considered authentic, it also ends up promoting the geek stereotype, one of the biggest stereotypical traps in the autism representations. Nonetheless, the show won a Golden Globe (Golden Globe Awards for 'Big Bang Theory, The'), and gained a huge audience as well as 609.000 votes on IMDb so it can be accepted as a huge influencer on how public view autistic people.

Still, savantism/geekdom are not the only tendency for the productions touching on autism spectrum disorders. The following section of this chapter will examine the other stereotypes which are often associated with ASD representation in Films and TV series.

3.4.   Representation of Autism in Films and Television

Nowadays, people on AS are more and more represented in the cultural products specially as the characters in film and TV series. However, as Brooks (2018) notes, still some of the media scholars evaluate these representations' accuracy by comparing the represented characteristics with standards of the DSM. For example, Draaisma (2009; cited in Brooks, 2018) analyses autism representation in films and memoirs with regard to Asperger's description of autistic boys in 1940s; Similarly, Dowdy (2013) examines autism representation in TV with the standards of scientific definitions of autism depicted in the DSM. Likewise, Nordahl-Hansen and colleagues (2017) follow a psychiatric approach to analyze the portrayal of ASD in films and TV taking the DSM as the standard of the study. In all of these studies, the priority of the medical model in the examination can be criticized, because the principle of the research is the external description of the neurotypical and not the lived experiences of people on the spectrum.

Young (2010) studies autism representation in films and TV series comparing them with the five of the fifteen characteristics that are published as myths of autism by Autism Research Institute. These myths are cited as: 1. lack of eye contact in people on ASD; 2.inability in verbal communication; 3. Inability to respond to feelings; 4. Inability to smile; and 5. inability to understand hints and cues expressed by other individuals

(Young, 2010). However, Young's (2010) study emphasizes on the urgent need to represent Autism accurately and with regard to her study's standard, it gives the reader the impression that representing ASD accurately is achievable simply by avoiding the constructed myths about Autism. Nevertheless, some of the 'myths' expressed in the study actually applicable to some people on the spectrum. So the statement that 'Autism can be accurately represented to people through media instruments' is an ambitious claim that need to be challenged because in many cases what is called accuracy is the compatibility with the criteria of the DSM and as already mentioned, this model of frameworking ASD perpetuates the medical model while ignores the perspective of people who live with the condition.

It is arguable that in contemporary era, people are surrounded by outputs from different perspectives and numerous means of communication such as cinema, television, literature, advertisements and social media platforms, thus different narratives of ASD are already present in the media scope. However, in sensitive issues regarding the disabled, marginalized and vulnerable people, inaccurate and defective information transmitted by the mainstream media outpowers the alternatives narratives and shapes scores of incorrect assumptions, attitudes and misjudgments that have serious negative legal, social, and physiological consequences for the misrepresented group. So, inclusion of people on AS in the production process of images of ASD is a serious necessity that should be demanded from directors of the film and TV industries.

Sonya Freeman Loftis (2015 as cited in Mangat, 2015)), who herself is on the spectrum, in her book *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum studies* the

stereotypes connected to Autism in public imagination. She takes on a constructivist approach to ASD and declared that ASD should always be studied with regard to the cultural mores and attitudes (Loftis, 2015; cited in Mangat, 2015). Loftis refers to shootings at an elementary in 2012 that was spread on the media with promotion of the assaulter's Autism label to remark the riskiness of stereotypes (Loftis, 2015; cited in Mangat, 2015).

Loftis (2015) endeavors to examine the interconnection of Autism representation in the literature and culture with autistic identity politics. Loftis, as an autistic argues that the disability scholarship has fallen short in examining the roots if the stereotypes of autism that surround our contemporary culture (Loftis, 2015). Loftis' book is one of the first studies on the representation of autism in the literature and its scope encompasses both the contemporary era and the time before the naming of autism (Mangat, 2015). Loftis (2015:19) identifies autism in the contemporary culture as 'a shifting symbol of differentiation. Each chapter of the book is pertained to a specific stereotypes and its samples in the literature. The categories Loftis recognize are savant, detective, victim, gothic, child narrator (Loftis, 2015). In the last chapter of the book named *the autistic label* Loftis analyses some of the characters in the literature, that have not been widely known as autistic, through her autistic eyes and remarks the autistic characteristics of them (Loftis, 2015). In the first chapter of the book, Loftis (2015:23) analyzes the autistic detective type with an emphasis on the character of Sherlock Holmes, she traces the already discussed medical model of disability in the depiction of the character of Holmes because his characteristics are always narrated through the eyes of his neurotypical associate Watson.

Even though not directly labeled in the series or films, we all remember the genius detective characters who solve the cases in policiers. They are usually being represented as detail-obsessed, anti-social and high-functioning people, as in the cases of Sherlock Holmes in the tv series *Sherlock* (2010), Dr. Brennan from the TV show *Bones* (2005-2017), and Spencer Reid from the show *Criminal Minds* (2005). These characters are used as tropes that add in more mystery or heroism to the narrative and make the show more thrilling and watchable.

In the second chapter of her book, Loftis (2015:47) examines the savant stereotype and selects George Bernard Shaw and the characters of his plays, specially *Saint Joan* as the case study. She explores that how the characteristics of Shaw's Joan fit with the contemporary standards of Asperger syndrome because of Joan's eccentricity and inattentiveness to the social norms that makes her incompatible with her society (Loftis, 2015:51). She also notes the fascination of autism community with analyzing the famous characters from the past (as George Bernard Shaw) and diagnosing them with autism and reminds that although the habit of retrospectively diagnosing the famous people with ASD is practiced by people on the spectrum to spread a positive image of ASD, but in fact perpetuates the old stereotype of savant.

The third chapter of Loftis' book pertains to the victim stereotype, she examines the character of Lennie from *of Mice and Men* and Charlie from *Flowers for Algernon* on how the characters' definitions correlate with the general stereotypes of mental and physical disability. As Lennie is represented as bulky and savage and without rational

faculties and Charlie is represented as unempathetic and self-absorbed (Loftis, 2015:61; Mangat, 2015).

The autistic gothic is the forth stereotype that Loftis examines with regard to *the Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. The gothic stereotype is defined as a character who is isolated and unable to communicate. According to Loftis (2015) this stereotype portray autism as an abnormality or malformation that either unites the family or destroys it.

In the Fifth chapter, Loftis (2015:108) criticizes the autistic children's portrayal in the contexts' of two novels *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *the Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night* because of the negative metaphoric purpose they serve. As in the first autism can be interpreted as a metaphor for the 9/11 and in the latter case as the metaphor of the anxieties of the contemporary society (Loftis, 2015:112; Mangat, 2015). Loftis (2015) uses literary analysis as a different method to diagnose autism and experiments the potentials of literary criticism to pave a new way in approaching to disability and specially ASD.

With a similar emphasis on metaphors as Loftis, Broderick and Ne'eman (2008) refer to primary cultural narratives that have been shaped on autism. Referring to Foucault's arguments on the relation between the power/knowledge and discourse, as well as the power and Truth, Broderick and Ne'eman (2008) try to explain what the prevalent metaphors of autism which are prevalent in the daily language are implying. They point to the intertwine of the metaphors of autism and mental retardation remarking that most

of the language we use to name autistic conditions (such as high and low-functioning) suggests that autism is a defect, or an inferiority in varying severities (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008).

In examining the metaphors surrounding autism, Broderick and Ne'eman classify the metaphoric reference to autism as a foreign space to which a child embarks when receives a diagnosis of autism or as a remote geographical space which autistics have come from, as autistics often state that they feel as they are living in a wrong planet or as the name of the book of Jasmine Lee O'Neil, the autistic writer, is *Through the Eyes of Aliens* (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008). Another metaphor that implies the remoteness of autism is the metaphor of 'being trapped in a shell'; as the autistic children are often described as trapped in their own head without any way to get out (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008). This can be recognized also in the theory of refrigerator mothers by Bettelheim; the child has been trapped because the key is lost, if the key (the cure) would be find, the child would be released. The influence of medical model in these metaphors is apparent. According to Broderick & Ne'eman (2008) the counter-narrative of neurodiversity have been shaped from within the AS community to banish the binary of normal and abnormal, the disease and the cure.

Fernie-Clarke (2010) criticizes the conceptual perspective of narrative in the TV film *The Autistic Me* (2009) for implementing the binary of normal/abnormal in representing characters with autism. According to her, this image serves the purpose of declaration of the normal social relations through repetition of certain themes as: the mythical idea of

normalcy, disability as a tragedy or curse, the culpability of parents for the condition,

and the expertise of the normal narrator in describing the ASD (Fernie-Clarke, 2010).

Fernie-Clarke (2010) notes that in order to have a realistic depiction of people with ASD

the ideological narrative should be aligned with the visual narrative, in other words, the

narration of the representation has to be under the control of and aligned with the wills

and intentions of those who are being depicted, in this case, the people with ASD.

Pronchow (2014) have analyzed some of the most well-known films with characters on

autism spectrum. Her list of study consists of the films *Rain Man* (1988), *Mozart and the*

Whale (2005), *Martian Child* (2007), *Adam* (2009), *Temple Grandin* (2010), *Touch*

(2012). and two documentaries *George* (2000), and *Normal People Scare Me* (2006).

According to her, the primary hypothesis of her study was that the characteristics of

people with ASD are negatively portrayed in the media products. Interestingly, after

analyzing the films, she concludes that the media is 'too positive' in representing the

people with ASD because media is bound to be politically correct toward the people

with disability (Pronchow, 2014).

Pronchow (2014) recognizes four patterns in representation of autism in the selected

films: the magical savant: a stereotype that represent people with ASD with magical

abilities and supernatural capabilities. The examples of this stereotype are the *Rain Man*

and *Thouch*; the different or quirky stereotype, such as the representations of the Mozart

and the Whale; the undiagnosed/ unlabeled stereotype, which is the representation of

characters who are likely to be autistic but there is no mention of autism in the film, such

as the Martian Child; and the last stereotype, the realistic one; which match the standard definitions of the DSM criteria of ASD; she considers the remaining films as examples of realistic representation of ASD (Pronchow, 2014).

Although the categorization Pronchow (2014) has suggested has been referred to and used in some of the studies on the representation of ASD (Kizer, 2016; Poe & Moseley, 2016) the categorization she offers is strongly under the influence of the medical model of conceptualization of disability; furthermore, from the tone of her study it is discernible that she has not met many autistic people in her daily life, and in the study of the cases she fails to show any empathy or inclusive attitudes toward the characters depicted in the films, she solely examines the extent they are compatible with the criteria of the DSM, the tone of her statements, especially when she refers to intelligent and emotional capabilities of people with ASD, gets degrading.

Pronchow (2014) also claims that documentaries show the most realistic representation of the people with ASD; since the essential factor of documentary form is to show the real life stories as realistically as possible. Still, the genre of documentaries and the ideologic system in which they are produced and published have pivotal influence on which reality/whose reality they are representing.

To elucidate more on the issue of documentary representation of ASD and accuracy, the models of conceptualizing disability can be referred. The attitude of the product toward the autistics and the reality that the documentary represents are determined by the model of conceptualizing disability that the show is promoting. For example, some

documentaries like *Autism: Made in the USA* (2009), *The Greater Good* (2011), *Living with Autism* (2014), *The Wall* (2011), *The Brain That Sings/* 2013) آنشوده العقل) and *Vaxxed: From Cover-Up to Catastrophe* (2016) have portrayed autism like a medical problem which needs to be identified and cured. The personal character of autistic people in these films is not the point of attention the main locus is the autism as a medical situation. This attitude reflects the principles of the medical model of understanding the disability.

On the other hand, in some of the documentaries attention is pertained to autistic people as humans who have agency, desire and perspective. Documentaries such as *Autism Is a World* (2004), *Autism: The Musical* (2008), *Normal People Scare Me* (2006), *Wretches and Jabberers* (2010), *How to dance in Ohio* (2015), *Her Name is Sabine* (2007), *The United States of Autism* (2013), *Life, Animated* (2016), *Asperger's Are Us* (2016), *Autism in Love* (2015), *Aspergers the Movie* (2014) can be considered as films which have followed the social concept of disability. Although in these films the definition of autism as a disability is explained, the main emphasis is to portray autistic person's' emotions and thoughts as humans who are active, purposeful, willing to have a role in the society and struggling to get their rights as autistic acknowledged by the society. in conclusion, the attitudes of the production site toward disability and the cultural and ideological systems within which disability, more specifically ASD is conceptualized, are the factors that determine how people with ASD are portrayed in the cultural products more significantly that the genre of the cultural products.

Biklen (2009) in reviewing Stuart Murray's (2008) book *Representing Autism* elaborates on our contemporary cultures fascination with ASD. He enumerates some of the elements of the portrayal of autism in the media as follows:

Autism is often portrayed as a condition specific to children. A ghost which seizes the child's mind and body and imprisons the child in his/her own world.

Autism, together with other mental abnormalities, hasn't received much attention from the field of disability studies, which has concentrated mainly on physical disabilities.

Autism has always portrayed as the counterpart of normalcy. In order to attract the audience to the autistic subject, exaggeration and alienation have been deployed in the majority of the representation.

An autistic person is always the "other", someone fundamentally different from us. A stranger from another planet.

Though everyone in medical and media milieus possibly admits that we don't know much about autism, there is a plethora of autism portrayal in media which claim are unveiling the truth about autism.

Autism has frequently portrayed as having a tragic impact on families. Sometimes it is implied that having a child with autism can ruin the family.

Autism shows receptivity to voyeurism. It is engaging to watch a family/person is struggling with autism. Autism is a spectacle.

Autism is marketable. We can see news about it everywhere. Sometimes the news does not even contain a fact. The purpose is just excitation of the audience.

Autism many often portrayed as a definite medical condition with a specific diagnosis, which needs to be identified and then cured.

Autism is portrayed as deviance from the norm. as a treat which causes fear and worries in the society. (Murray, 2008; cited in Biklen, 2009)

Baker (2007), as a scholar and parent of a child with ASD, censures the media's portrayal of people with ASD for that often autism is used as a vehicle to make the story captivating and autistic characters are only valuable when they have a special skill to offer; plots of the films are predictable, repetitive and strongly dependent on the savant skills of the Autistics.

Poe and Moseley (2016) with regard to Baker's (2007) 'Autism formula' of the media's representation of ASD analyze the representation of ASD in the primetime TV shows *Fringe* (2008-2013), *Alphas* (2011-2012) and *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-); The results of their study confirmed Baker's theory that autistic people are often represented as dependent to others in communication, in need of being taken care of, yet, endowed with savant skills.

Martin Halliwell (2004) points to difficulty of portraying autistic characters by addressing that films try to put on a representation of a condition that in itself defies categorization. In a way, this promotes the idea that the only people who can portray an accurate case of autism are the autistic people themselves.

Paul Heilker (2012; cited in Brooks, 2018) draws attention to the systematic underrepresentation of racial minorities with ASD in media, mentioning that all people of color are ignored when the issue of autism and its needed support and education as

well as inclusion and empowerment are discussed and calls autism 'a relentlessly white condition'.

Brooks (2018) states that infantilization is a frequent feature of the portrayal of ASD in the media. Most of the images of ASD published in the media are those of the autistic children's and the majority of research done about autism is pertained to the autistic characteristics in children (Garnbacher, 2011; cited in Brooks, 2018). According to Brooks (2018) the underrepresentation of adults with ASD leads to negligence toward issues such as sexuality and relationship of individual with ASD. Willey and colleagues (2015) with the reference to the NPR's *Autism, Grown Up* note that our understanding of autism should get matured as many children who have labeled as autistic in early autism diagnosis era now are grown up (2015, Willey et al; cited in Brooks, 2018).

 Gill (2015; cited in Brooks, 2018) also remarks that the infantilization of autistic characters stems from the paternalistic view of able-bodied people superiority over the mentally disabled people which regards autistic people as eternal children. Brooks (2018) recognizes the necessity of calling out different narratives on sexuality and autism as well as an urgent defiance against the prevailed standard of sexual ableism in the society.

As briefly reviewed, nowadays, most of the researchers on the representation of autism in media are summoning the social model of conceptualizing disability and neurodiversity to get more prevailed in media, especially in the popular TV series and

films which have broader audience, to banish the old victimizing, medicalizing and

stigmatizing attitudes toward the people with ASD.

CHAPTER IV

CLASSIFICATION OF FILMS BASED ON PRODUCTION MODELS

As stated, several film and tv productions have been made about autism spectrum disorders in the last thirty years. Apart from the scope of representation preferences for autism spectrum disorders, handling the evolution of production models within these period can be beneficial in terms of understanding the progress in the representations of autism spectrum disorders. Making such point is required regarding the high amount of related productions made in the U.S and its domination the world's film industry in terms of both production and distribution. Therefore, it would be crucial to point out the different approaches to "independent film" in American Cinema before moving to the close readings of the selected films. The course of "independent film" approaches can clarify that focusing solely on the classification of films based on their production models might not enough to make clear distinctions in terms of representation preferences for autism spectrum disorders. In this respect, this chapter refers to two types of films based on their production models, as mainstream and independent. After

their brief conceptualizations, current perspectives of independent films will be introduced.

4. 1. Types of Production Models

Starting from the interest of Hollywood in the 80s to several independent productions, autism spectrum disorders have been a vibrant and promising topic for the film and tv industries (Arendell, 2015). Within the given time, production types of the films have become apparent as a research topic all by itself, especially regarding the film industry in America and its domination of the world's film industry in terms of production and distribution (Formaini, 2001). Without deepen the topic from the perspectives of media economy, it would be noteworthy to grasp the classification of films based on their production models.

Prior to referring to production types of the films, it is noteworthy to mention the basis of the film production. As indicated by McKenzie (2009), buying or optioning a screenplay or a book for film/tv adaptation, hiring a writer for an idea or accepting the unrequested submission of a writer are all possible for the producer. In any cases, finding financial source from "a studio/distributor financier, an independent financier, private equity investors or (in some cases) from an external funding body" is the next step for the producer. Especially considering the decision steps related to financing might lead one to think that the type of production is determined at that point, as either being mainstream or independent. Yet, other factors are also influential on classifying a production either being mainstream or independent.

Firstly, it is worth to be mentioned that the term "independent" can be synonymous with "arthouse". Same relation can be seen between "mainstream" and "major". In this respect, mainstream films refer to the mass market while independent films associate with the focus on a niche market (Gemser, Van Oostrum & Leenders, 2006).

In the narrowest sense, the core of their conceptualization is shaped by the degree of production qualities as being artistic versus commercial as independent films having less budget, artistic and creative while mainstream films being larger scale and profitable (Newman, 2009). Other factors such as marketing budget, presence of film stars and special effects, screen shares, structural features (e.g. genre, content) are also addressed throughout the literature (Geer, 1998; Bagella & Becchetti, 1999; Reinstein & Snyder, 2005; Bordwell & Thomson, 2001; as cited in Gemser, Van Oostrum & Leenders, 2006).

Alexander G. Ross (2011) explains that the Hollywood studios are so market-driven that the authors cannot freely contribute to their own projects. Most of the mainstream films are merely attract audience because they appear more interesting than real life and the entertainment industry is driven by supply and demand logic so the production studios compete on how they can produce a great deal of attractive films which bring more profit for them in the long run.

While reviewing the previous discussions, it is seen that classification of production models had also influenced the characteristics of the films. For instance, Bordwell (1979; as cited in Duuren, 2008) emphasizes mainstream films as having clear narrative

form with "causally related events taking place in space and time" towards a goal. In this respect, by taking into account of realism and authorial expressivity as the basis, he conceptualizes art films regarding their higher emphasis on "loosening of the chain of cause and effect" (Duuren, 2008). When the characteristics of the films could be precisely done in that way, the production models were also seen as genre itself, specifically arthouse films. Yet, the understanding of independent or arthouse films have make significant progresses in the last thirty years that legitimacy of these classifications emerges as another discussion topic. The following subsection will address the disruptive change

4.2. Current Perspectives of Independent Films

Despite outbreak of low-budget filming rooted back in the 1960s, the concept of independent film represents several attempts and distribution strategies (Holmlund & Wyatt, 2005). Holmlund and Wyatt (2004) refer to the 1990s as having "less room for the entrepreneur or innovator in the independent film word, and much less need, due, in part, to the shifting definition independent film in that decade".

The acquisition of Miramax by Disney is a highly significant move done in the 90s. As an independent distributor being acquired by a global media conglomerate, Miramax became the dominant player in the expansion of specialty film business which facilitates the transformation of Hollywood. In this respect, Miramax was positioned as distributing niched productions that appeal to the audience from different demographic groups (p.3). In the beginning of 2000s, every major studio either founded their own division that carries similar function or made an acquisition. Concentration of powers through these

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attempts can be taken as paradoxical but such positioning, of both Miramax and other indie divisions, demonstrated its influence financially not only on the business models Hollywood but niche-oriented filmmaking (Perren, 2012, p. 6). By offering horizontal business models, the market separation between the mainstream and independent productions becomes invisible.

The relationship between Hollywood studios and its subdivisions that consist of independent productions based on product differentiation and audience segmentations can also receive criticism as being "production on the boundaries" (Hesmondhalgh, 2006; as cited in Kersten & Verboord, 2014).

Emphasis of Holmlund and Wyatt (2004) on the current understanding of independent film as being "a catchy phrase" and having adaptable parameters is compatible with the outcome of such progress. He strengthens his view by referencing to video stores, video selections of monthly gathering clubs, public awareness of film festivals and cable channels that the term of independent film currently represents all these attempts besides the conventional understanding of arthouse film.

CHAPTER V

CLOSE READINGS OF THE SELECTED FILMS

Upon the review of the representation preferences on ASD in film and tv productions

throughout history and disruptive progress in production models, this selection firstly

will explain the criteria of selected films *Mozart and the Whale* (2005), *Snow Cake*

(2006), *Temple Grandin* (2010) and *Life, Animated* (2016). Following this explanation,

each film will be examined.

For the selection of films, revenue could be the criterion to be considered, yet

considering the blurriness of separation between mainstream and independent

productions as a result of the marriage of Hollywood studios and independent

distributions or divisions, focusing primarily on the productions of such model might be

beneficial in terms of examining their representation preferences on ASD. Taking the

criterion for the films as being included and discussed in the web organizations that are

known with their advocacy on autism such as Wrong Planet (an online community

formed for people on the spectrum, their families and the professionals in the field of

Autism studies), Interacting with Autism (a video-based online platform aiming to provide authentic information on Autism Spectrum Disorders) and Autism Speak (a US-based organization which works toward raising awareness on autism and providing support for individuals and families who live with the condition) is also worthwhile. Another criterion is being careful to cover the films that depict Asperger Syndrome. As having the disorder in question, it will be better for me to do close-readings of such films. Apart from these criteria, instead of taking revenue as indicative determinant, explanatory variables can be more helpful as covering diverse elements such as budget, screen counts, reviews, ratings, advertising, awards, star power, genre and so forth (McKenzie, 2009). Therefore, beginning of the close-reading each film will be introduced regarding these variables.

Before handling them separately, it would be noteworthy to make estimation on their reach to the audience based on their reviews and ratings. In order to understand their reach in a broader way based on this criterion, it would be necessary to include the user rating votes and reviews for prominent and best-known productions with their box office successes as reference point to the assessment. Thus, the related assessment was also made for *Rain Man* (1988) and *Mercury Rising* (1998).

In this respect, the most comprehensive view can be taken from IMDb, the online film database which is known as being an alternative reference point and a comprehensive source in terms of classification, rating and reviews for the films, tv programs and other related productions.

Figure 1. shows the number of IMDb user rating votes and reviews for the selected films. Parallel with their status as being well-known productions, *Rain Man* (1988) and *Mercury Rising* (1998) have higher numbers of both user votes and reviews compared to the selected films. The course for the number of user votes and reviews do not differ for the selected films. *Temple Grandin* (2010) has the highest number of user votes and reviews among the selected films. It is followed by *Snow Cake* (2006), *Mozart and the Whale* (2005), and lastly *Life, Animated* (2016).
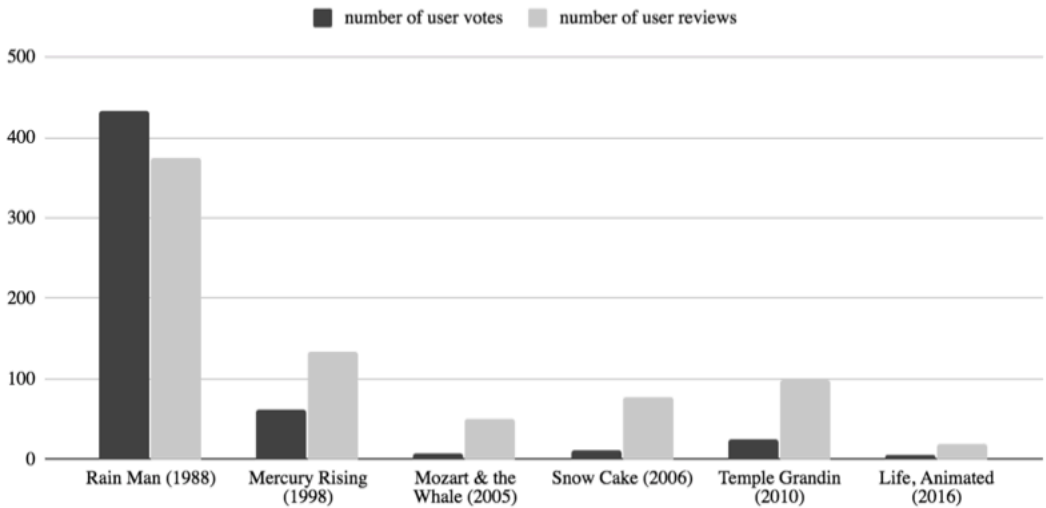
Figure 1:Number of IMDB user rating votes and reviews for the selected films

While user rating votes and reviews seem to be a valid some for grasping the reach criterion partially for these independent films, other criteria may act as complementary tool. Several studies examine the impact of film reviews on creating demand or generate sales (Gemser et al., 2006; Forman et al. 2008). These studies suggest that the In this respect, the number of external reviews done for these films, which are also available on the IMDb, can be assessed. This criterion will show the extent of these films were found

worthy to be reviewed by film critics and in other platforms. Those findings will be more indirect compared to the previous criterion. Still, the same assessment will also cover *Rain Man* (1988) and *Mercury Rising* (1998).

Figure 2. shows the number of external reviews done for the selected films. According to this figure, again *Rain Man* (1988) comes front instead of the other productions. Yet, some notable differences are observed compared to the number of IMDb user reviews. *Life, Animated* (2016) is the second production that receives most external reviews. It is followed by *Mercury Rising* (1998), *Snow Cake* (2006) and *Mozart and the Whale* (2005). In this figure, the capability of related companies on advertising, budgeting and content of the production might also be influential.
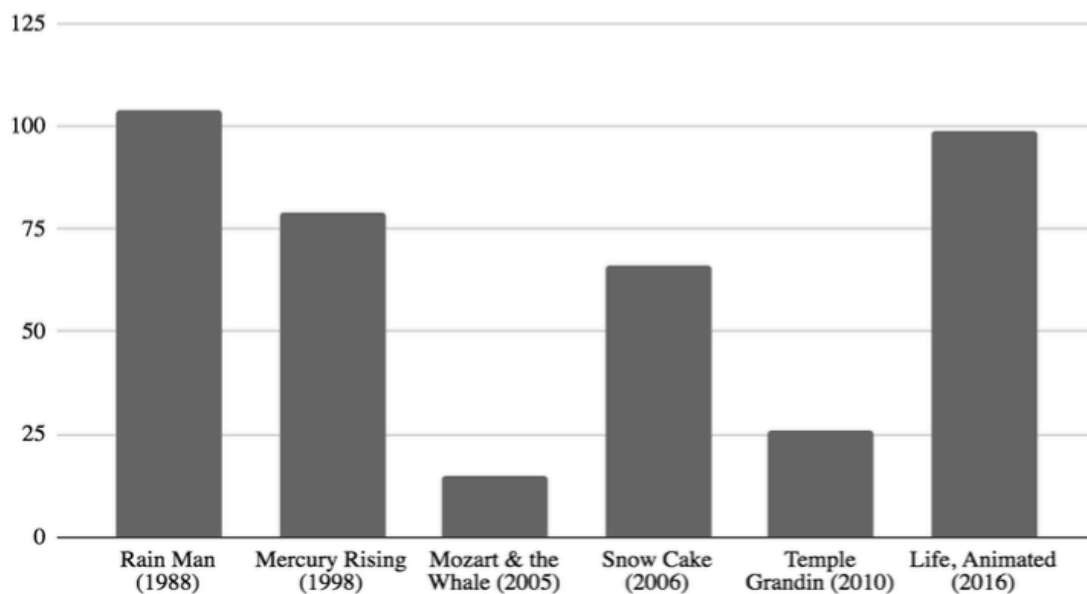

Figure 2: Number of external reviews for the selected films

5.1.   Temple Grandin

Temple Grandin is a public figure, a scientist and an autism spokesperson. According to her official website, she started talking at the age of three with the help of early speech therapies, showing the importance of early intervention and education in such cases. Probably because she was misunderstood by her peers, she was considered weird and had been teased, even bullied in high school. The only places she had friends were places in which she had similar scientific interests with others; such as horses, electronics, or model rockets. With the help of her science teacher, she has been able to focus on science. Today, she is a very important author and speaker on both autism and animal behavior, and also a professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University.(Templegrandin.com, 2018).

Her life has turned into an HBO TV film in the year 2010, called '*Temple Grandin'* being named after her. Claire Danes starred as Temple Grandin and the film was directed by Mick Jackson. The film is a biopic drama that won the Primetime Emmy Awards in many categories, including Outstanding Directing for a Miniseries/Movie/Dramatic Special and Outstanding Made for Television Movie (62nd Emmy Awards Nominees and Winners), and a Golden Globe in Best Performance by an Actress in a Miniseries/Motion Picture Made for Television (Golden Globe Awards for 'Temple Grandin').

The film directly starts off with showing how different Temple is from her peers. In the beginning of the film, before going off to college, Temple goes to the farm of her aunt

for the summer, to help out with the works. Her aunt is very understanding towards her obsessive thoughts, compulsive behaviors, her sensitivities to sounds and specific subjects that stress her and cause her tantrums. Temple sees a machine in the farm which is being used to calm the animals down, helping them not to be scared while getting their shots. Temple, once having a tantrum, decides to use this machine to calm herself down and eventually finds out that it is actually working. She helps around the farm and makes useful mechanisms for cows and farmers, for instance she designs a tool to open the doors easily.

Temple is actually highly stressful about going away for the college because her educational past is not very bright, namely because of her peers' attitudes towards her and her failure in several subjects such as French. However, in her high school years, her science teacher sees that her mind is working in a different way than the other students so directs her towards the things that she can understand in her own way.

She can memorize everything that she sees and remembers everything as a series of pictures in her head. She also realizes that she has a special talent of understanding the animals. As a major, she chooses to study of psychology in the college and to calm herself down, she builds a 'hug machine' for herself like the machine she saw at her aunt's farm. However, at school, her peers and even the teachers think this is an odd thing to do and forbid her to keep the machine. Some even mistake it for a machine used for sexual pleasure. Outraged that she cannot use the machine anymore, she insists that it is essential for her peace of mind and decides to build a study around it to show everyone that the machine works and it can be used to lower the stress levels.

After graduating from college, she decides to focus her studies on animals. She sees the circumstances of animals in slaughterhouses and begins to think of solutions to make the conditions better, both for the animals and for the people. Although nobody takes her seriously at the beginning, she does not give up because she knows in her head that her ways would work and she insists on writing her thesis on things like the sounds animals make in the cattle ranches and their movements.

Even though she faces a lot of complications in the way eventually she proves everyone that her theories work and designs a dip structure for animals to voluntarily go into the water and get cleaned. Even after her design is built she faces some difficulties but she overcomes them and persuades everyone.

Throughout the film, her struggle in understanding the concept of death is also emphasized as well as the lack of communicative skills. Even though these issues are constantly underlined in the film, the reason this film was successful is because of Temple's extraordinary skills and her persistence and commitment to her ideals that made her an important person for the society.

Leaving behind the stereotyped genius autistic image that comes into people's minds initially, the significance of the film is mainly for the emphasis film constantly puts on education and emotional support and its importance for a person on the spectrum. The education that Temple gets in early age helps her speak even though the doctors told her mother that she would not be able to. Secondly the education she got helped her evolve herself and the support she got from her mother, aunt, some of her peers and teachers

helped her improve herself making her the person she is now and the film clearly and brilliantly portrays the importance of these factors.

Another important factor about the film is that it was especially praised for Claire Danes' performance as Temple Grandin. She got both the Primetime Emmy and Golden Globe with this film; in addition, she also got the approval of autistic community. Dr. Irma Jacqueline Ozer (2009), who also is a person with ASD, recalls how accurately Danes captured the voice and mannerisms of Temple Grandin.

The film was ordered by and aired on HBO; being a drama proposed for the television, it was planned to feature the story of an extraordinary person who is also on the autism spectrum. Temple had publicly stated that she has had many problems at school which she overcame in time and became a PHD herself. Although the reason Temple Grandin is an important film in terms of the representation of autistic people in media is that it depicts how autistic people can manage to socialize with and contribute to the society they live in, it also serves the other way around: it is a humble example for autistic people how with persistence they can endure the problems, enforce themselves to the society which initially rejects them and overcome their difficulties on their way to reach their goals and ideals.

Temple Grandin (2010), was an impactful film which received many Primetime Emmy Awards, as well as a Golden Globe Award. The film also had a major star in it; Claire Danes. It has 23.747 ratings on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), which is impressive when we compare it with many other film which portray such realistic image

of an autistic person, but not even close to the 430.341 ratings of *Rain Man* (1988). It features a real life story of an extraordinarily autistic person, so it is no surprise that the project was picked up by the studio, because in this case, the prior fame of Temple as a well-known autistic advocate and researcher has raised the chances of film to be positively-responded by the audience. However, representation-wise, it is reasonable to say that the film represents autistic people more or less accurately, but still, it is not as impactful as the stereotypical films like *Rain Man* (1988).

5. 2.   Life, Animated

Life, Animated is a documentary produced by A&E IndieFilms known as being subdivision of Disney and directed by Roger Ross Williams in 2016. The film is about Owen Suskind, a person with autism and his way of dealing with life. Owen and his family explain how everything happened in their lives and what the current situation is in one on one interviews and with the footages from Owen's childhood, as well as shots from their present lives.

His family thought Owen is a neurotypical child until the age of 3. At that age, Owen started showing symptoms of autism, but his parents did not understand the situation entirely and took him to the pediatrician but no special diagnosis was made. However, being aware that something different is going on, they go to a specialist. After going through proper screenings, the diagnosis of autism is made. The doctors told his family that Owen may not be able to speak again. As an important point, the film is also focusing on the childhood of Owen and how he was for long times undiagnosed, as it is

a typical for many people with more functioning forms of ASD, which is also why it is crucial to have accurate representations of the disorder in the media. Early diagnosis of autism can make huge changes in an individual's life and, that is what raising awareness actually aims.

Owen's family was devastated after the diagnosis but much like what happened to Temple Grandin, they discovered a passion in him: the Disney Films. He was always watching animated Disney Films and having fun watching them. One day, Owen starts to say something in gibberish which turns out to be a sentence in the Disney film that he was watching. The doctors had told his parents that this does not mean anything because he is just repeating something like a parrot.

Owen's attempts to speak affects the family more and more. However, after that incident, when his parents were trying to figure out the matters going on in Owen's brother's life, Owen continues to watch the Disney films and eventually tells his parents a full sentence from the film. His parents became very excited about this when see that Owen makes sense of the world through the films he was watching. After that, his father talks to Owen through one of the puppets which is a Disney character and they have a full conversation.

Owen starts to write his own story in which he was the protector of the 'sidekicks' as in the Disney films because he was seeing himself as not the hero but the sidekick. However, he knows that sidekicks never get left behind and that makes him feel motivated.

This is one key point in most films that are praised about their accuracy in depicting the experience of growing up with autism: to find something autistics are interested in or talented at. Since it is one of the most important factors for a person with ASD as a functioning member of the society. This devotion and passion in the autistic people, which is one of their strength points, is constantly emphasized in films that seek to either be more realistic or raise awareness about the ASD.

After talking about the past and how Owen started making sense of his own world, the film starts to shift focus on the life of Suskinds at the present day. Owen is now in his 20s and is having special education and trainings. He even has a film club that he tells other people with autism and down syndrome what the scenes in the film mean and how the characters in the film feel. He has a girlfriend named Emily and they seem to get along really well.

The fact that Owen actually understands how the characters feel in the films breaks the stereotype of a person with ASD not being able to understand the feelings of others. This is a huge stereotype that will be discussed a lot, and it is one of the most important generalization that the recent films about autism manage to somehow avoid. The idea is also emphasized when we find out he has a girlfriend. This further clarifies that he can understand what other people feel and act accordingly but in his own style, and that he can manage to form and maintain a close relationship.

His parents decide that it is time for Owen to move out of the house and have an apartment on his own and also find a job. They arrange a house in which Emily and him

will be neighbors and with people helping him with his medicine, cooking etc. even though these support members not be living with him full-time. The portrayal of him as an autistic who is being able to stand on his own feet earns the film more credibility. Owen obviously does not completely stand on his two feet which makes the film even more reliable because that difficulty in independence is a big issue in conditions like autism. Of course there are other more or less accurate characters in other films that actually manage to stand on his own, such as Donald and Isabelle from *Mozart and the Whale*, who will be explained in detail later, but it is important to keep in mind that the disorder in question does not really have clear outlines, it varies from person to person. Their functionality levels in society also vary. However, showing the desire and also fear of an autistic person regarding the independence is a valuable but often ignored detail which in this film has excellently covered.

It is always important to remember the varying symptoms and differences in the degree of capability in the people with ASD. When dealing with autism representation, it is a sensitive part the debate that how all these differing images can be accurately representing the ASD. It is obviously understandable that some autistic characters in films live independently without having any problem, and on the other hand, in some cases, people with autism need additional supports throughout their educational, financial and social life. The important issue in representation of autism is that the images need to be inclusive, meaning that every type of autistic characters be covered in the media. It is highly important that people see functioning people with autism. On the other hand, it is also critical to keep in mind that it is not the entire reality of autism and

media must cover the challenges and efforts of autistics from different ranges of the spectrum.

This film manages to pass out the message in that case and further reinforces the idea by showcasing a stressed out Owen who is scared of living alone and accepting all the adulthood responsibilities. But his family talks to him and asks him about his feelings and he also shares his feelings with his family. He not only communicates, but also understands and reciprocates to their feelings. This, combining with how he manages to do the same in his relationship with Emily clearly identifies a person who lacks nothing when it comes to understanding emotions and feeling them. And also a brave disabled person who tries to move forward in his adulthood life despite the barriers, problems and the anxieties he experiences.

Finally, he moves into his apartment and starts to lead his own life trying to understand the external challenges together with his own feelings by watching scenes from the Disney films that he can relate his situation to. This is a key information when it comes to people with ASD: finding something they are interested in or good at. Since they have harder time understanding and communicating their feelings and needs, it is not hard to see why they need something else to help them deal with those. Temple Grandin had her horses, Donald had his equations, Isabelle had her animals and Owen has his Disney films.

After seeing he is doing well, his brother Warren tries to talk to Owen about his relationship with his girlfriend because they have been going out for three years and

Warren tries to see Owen's perspective on the relationships since he does not know more than just kissing tenderly. Warren worries about how to show sexual perspectives of a relationship to Owen.

Owen thinks that their relationship with Emily is going great until Emily decides to break up with him, saying that he gets into her personal space too much. Owen now has to get used to living without Emily, but he does not know how to deal with these feelings. He then continues writing his childhood story in which he was the protector of sidekicks, but, adds an evil character to the story, as a response to the major problem in his current life, his break-up. His mother helps him understand this is not going to last forever and this is life itself. He faces the truth of life even though it is very difficult for him and he tries to remain friends with Emily.

He, then, gets invited to a convention about autism in France. He prepares a speech and attends the meeting with his family. He starts working at a film theater, slowly learning to get on with his life.

The important part in the film is the depiction of process in which Owen finds a passion in his life and also a way to hold onto it, create his life around it and make sense of the world with ways he could understand. More importantly, he succeeds in his endeavor because his family supported him and was with him every step of the way; not doing everything for him but helping him to deal with life on his own.

Being a documentary, the film is rated by less people, which actually is not surprising, although the film is an Oscar nominee (Oscar Nominations 2016: View the Complete

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List of Nominees) and a winner at the Sundance Film Festival (2016 Sundance Film Festival Award Winners). It is also understandable since it features no stars but only real life characters.

It is safe to say that *Life, Animated* has had the least impact with 4,786 ratings. The film also was not produced by a huge film company, but by either documentary straight companies or indie film companies because big companies would seek for more profitable films rather than documentaries. Resulting from that, the film got less marketing and distribution opportunities than other mainstream fictional counterparts.

5.3.   Snow Cake

Snow Cake is a 2006 fiction film directed by Marc Evans and written by Angela Pell. This information is highly important because when it comes to writing about autism, one of the best sources would probably be people who have to deal with the disorder on the regular basis and, in this case, it is none other than Angela Pell, the screenwriter. It was discussed many times that Pell's son also was autistic and she wrote most of the idiosyncrasies of the autistic character in the film, Linda, with the behaviors of her son in mind, hence the film is bound to be accurate in a way.

The film tells the story of a neurotypical man who blames himself for the death of a teenage girl died in a car accident. Even though no one else thinks he is guilty of her death, Alex cannot get rid of the feeling guilty and decides to meet the dead girl's mother Linda who also happens to be an autistic. As Alex tries to make up for the fact

that he took the life of Linda's daughter, Linda tries to cope with the fact that there is no one to take the garbage out.

It is important to know at this point that apart from Angela Pell and the behaviors of her son, the film also relies partially on the fact that Sigourney Weaver, the actress who plays the autistic character Linda, has done excessive research on the subject. She was known to observe Ros Blackburn, a person with ASD who also is a public figure who helps raise awareness about the difference between ASD and high functioning autism. It is notable to be mentioned that Blackburn herself once revealed that as an autistic person, she does not really want but need people around her while a person with ASD clearly wants human connection. So the fact that the film is actually portrays a person who might be considered stereotypical stems from the reality of Blackburn, which in turn actually helps the film gain more accuracy.

Although it seems like the autistic character Linda in the film is more or less a stereotypical one; not very functional and sort of emotionally incapable. She doesn't seem to feel remorse about the death of her daughter and it is not in contrast with the stereotypes; however, it still shows what is a part of the disorder. So even though her eccentric behaviors might be considered stereotypical, it does not make it any less accurate considering it was written based on an autistic boy and portrayed based on an autistic woman.

One interesting point about the film is that it tells the story of a woman who is not a savant. She is just a regular woman apart from her emotional lacking, obsessions and

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everything, she does not have over-average intelligence or ability or strange preoccupations. This is an important factor about the reality of autism that is not often told in the media, most probably because people with regular lives are not that interesting and would probably not be as profitable in the market as the heroic epics. Another point about this film is that the autistic person is not the main character, but the neurotypical one is. The story follows how neurotypical Alex deals with the guilt and an important part of that is interacting with and maintaining a relationship with Linda, the autistic character. Showing how a disorder affects a person and their close environment is one thing and surely is an important part of autism to talk about when it comes to raising awareness about the condition, but showing how it might be like for a person who meets an autistic for the first time is another point that distinguishes this film from other ones examined in this study.

A huge difficulty of living with autism comes up when an autistic individual has to interact socially with a neurotypical person who has never dealt with an autistic person before. How Alex tries to understand and come to terms with the eccentric and extraordinary Linda's behaviors powerfully shows the real struggle people go through when they interact with people with ASD without prior knowledge about the condition as well as how to overcome these difficulties and form healthy relationships with an autistic character.

There is also one prominent scene in the film where it not only teases with films depicting stereotypical autistic characters, but also directs the attention to the audience, reminding them what you see in one film is not enough to comprehend a group of

people. When Linda acts all eccentric, Alex tries to apologize to the neighbor lady but she just says, "Oh that's alright, I know all about autism. I saw the film."

The film is starred by two major actors, Alan Rickman and Sigourney Weaver, who have high popularity at that period. The film was also featured in several highly important film festivals such as Berlin International Film Festival (Programme 2006) and Tribeca Film Festival (Tribeca Film Guide Archive), so it was bound to have coverage and impact in the media. Apart from being rated by around 11.000 people on IMDb, its nomination for the Best Film at 2006 Berlin International Film Festival making it a more or less impactful film, although the reason might easily be that it tells the story of a neurotypical person and the autistic character who showcases extreme behaviors. So, the "extraordinary sells" factor was probably highly effective when the studio decided to pick up the project.

5.4.   Mozart and the Whale

Mozart and the Whale (2005) is considered as an important film when it comes to fiction films about individuals with ASD. The main problem of films dealing with certain disorders is that they tend to talk about the common struggles people with that disorder is going through, because they all have similar symptoms. However, ASD is very different from all of the other disorders in a sense that it does not appear the same in every human, it is a 'spectrum' disorder. There is no way a spectrum disorder can be the same for every person and *Mozart and the Whale* is important because it shows two different aspects of ASD, although both in the extremes.

The film starts with a scene in which Donald, the main character, is talking about how he always gets fired from various jobs while driving a cab. As this sort of contributes to the stereotype of a dysfunctional autistic person, he later meets Isabelle and she can clearly keep her work and even be social with her co-workers. This challenges the idea that autistic people cannot form social relationships, while also emphasizing that both versions are possible.

One important aspect of the film that stands out is the support group both Donald and Isabelle are a part of, although Isabelle is new. This inclusion of a support group is particularly beneficial for the representation of ASD because it not only helps people see autistic people who are in different points of the said spectrum, but also contributes to the fact that autistic people can form personal relationships, support each other and even empathize, believing against which is a big autism myth.

The first scene where Donald and Isabelle meet, at the meeting in the park, we also see how even though very different from each other in much ways, Donald and Isabelle actually have some similarities. This is where the common features of autism come into play. Staying away from the stereotypical stories as much as possible, they discuss how hard it can be for an autistic person (or a person with ASD, but since Isabelle does not see difference, it is safe to say autistic to function in the real life with Isabelle breaking a vinyl of his father's because that is what she thought breaking a record was and how Isabelle let a man rape her just because it would make him love her. Donald also relates to this because he mentions a couple of times that he wants to be with people but he simply does not know how. These scenes are also important because they break the idea

that autistic people do not need social relationships. In fact, it is one of the main points *Mozart and the Whale* tries to focus on: the need of people with ASD to form relationships.

Also at this point, Donald confides in Isabelle and talks about his need to form mathematical equations in order to calm himself down. This is where the Hollywood factor probably gets in. Even though no one is denying there are plenty of autistic and savant people, just because it is the most widely spread stereotype, portraying it in the film probably reinforce the stereotype and seems like a badly used trope which does not any apparent help to the story.

However, this is a controversial topic because in order to accurately portray people with ASD, it is important to show every aspect of it; which would also include the savants, since there are a lot of savants in the ASD community. The reason this film actually more or less succeeds in putting out an accurate portrayal of the disorder is that it manages to show there are many different variations of people scattered all along the spectrum, which is what ASD really is.

Just as Isabelle working, Donald also starts a steady job at some point and what is important is Isabelle finds him a job that he would be helpful at, where he can use his savant skills; much like how Temple Grandin turned her interest in horses into something she would be helpful doing, it shows how important it is to find what people with ASD are into or good at and help them improve in that.

There is also one specific moment where Donald gets extremely angry about Isabelle cleaning up her space that is particularly important because although it might again be considered a bit stereotypical, but it also is a big part of most people with ASD; getting obsessive about random stuff so much like the case of Donald showing savant skills; obsessions are also both reality and stereotype.

Another powerful stereotype about individuals with ASD is that they lack empathy. This stereotype, which is not true most of the time, is also challenged in the film through the relationship of Isabelle and the girl with the cancer in the family. Because Isabelle manages to not only empathize but also form a friendship with the girl. Isabelle is clearly compassionate about the girl and she even waits with her while she waits for her parents to pick her up.

Donald also empathizes with Isabelle when her pet rabbit dies and goes to comfort her. The audience already knows their deeply interest to animals when they talk about that they cannot be taught cruelty, during their first meeting at the park. So, it is easy to see that the empathy gets Donald to Isabelle.

Apart from these points, Donald and Isabelle constantly show acts of compassion, both towards each other and towards the others. But just when Isabelle commits suicide, it is finally seen that the whole support group getting together at the hospital to see their beloved friend. This is such a magnificent moment because it is clear that not only some but actually most people with ASD are perfectly capable of caring and having compassion and empathy. Even at the end of the film, they all sit together for a

thanksgiving dinner; just like a big family emphasizing how loving people with ASD can be.

Even though the film featured one of the most popular actors of an era, the heartthrob Josh Hartnett, the film does not really appear to have much of an impact with only 8,154 ratings on IMDb and not many accolades. It was produced by a more or less independent film company, so it probably did not get much marketing either. It also explains why the story was chosen in the first place.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Within the scope of this study, I tried to give a brief yet comprehensive view of what

stereotypes are associated with representation of disability in general and Autism

Spectrum Disorders in particular , why they are repetitively implemented by the media

and how despite many insisting negative stereotypes being implemented in the portrayal

of ASD on media, the gradual shift toward a more inclusive social model of

understanding disability has provided a ground for emergence of more empathetic and

diverse narratives of ASD on the media, especially the films and tv series. As a member

of autism community, I for myself have been witnessed the many positive changes in

attitudes toward people with ASD especially in the regions of the world in which media

products include narratives of people with ASD more broadly.

When we review the history of representation of autism in media, the shift from tragic,

stigmatizing, mythical and medicalized positions of framing ASD to social and inclusive

models becomes more apparent. Regarding this, even when we take the films included in

this case study into our account, the shift in the perspective of conceptualizing and representation of ASD is evident. since 1980s and the spread of deployment of autism in the medical literature to our contemporary society in which the autistics advocates neurodiversity as a counter-argument to the medical model of framing autism, in each decade the representation of ASD in media have been gradually moving toward more personal, realistic and inclusive images. Although still there are many shortcomings in media representation of ASD, such as the lack of images of different ethnic and racial minorities with ASD as well as the gender bias in media toward representing more male characters with ASD.

In addition, many of historic negative stereotypes of ASD such as savant and alien are still being implemented in representation of ASD, especially since these stereotypes still attract attention of the audience and bring revenue for media producers. However, the ongoing and prospering scholarship of disability studies on representation of disabled people in media and rising awareness and advocacy of Autistics regarding their political and cultural specificities and needs have obliged the industry to implement the stereotypes of ASD in a more indirect and politically correct manner.

Still, nearly a decade after Murray's (2008) assertion that our contemporary culture has been fascinated by the narratives of ASD without any thorough examination of consequences of this fascination on the lives, rights and subjectivities of autistics, the negative, unrepresentative or oversimplified narratives of autism are present in significant amount in the media.

In my study, I selected four contemporary films that represent ASD after considering several criteria, such as the progress in production models by the emergence of hybrid model due to the marriage of mainstream and independent distributors, my condition as a high-functioning Asperger woman, the promotion of films by the autism advocacy organizations as well as any other possible appeal of them such as their popularity in film venues and using of the famous stars, reachability of the films, and their fairly low production budget that separate them from blockbusters that are conventionally seeking the audience immediate attention and therefore are more inclined to implement the established stereotypes of ASD. Considering these criteria for selection, four films specified, and two important features of the films examined: Whether the films empathetically and realistically portray the autistic character, and whether the films reinforce any classic problematic stereotypes associated with ASD.

It can be concluded that the more recent the examined films have been, they have been more successful in implementing the social model of disability and giving a more empathetic image of people on ASD. However, this does not mean that ASD are completely normalized and accepted in the cultural and social context. As O'hara discusses (2014) on the representation of mental illness in Hollywood films and the amount of stigma and mental illnesses, despite increasing representation of mental illness in media since 1950s forward, nowadays mental illnesses are more stigmatized and feared than back in 1950s. Nonetheless, what separates ASD from other mental and cognitive disorders is that autism community actively questions negative stereotypes and social attitudes toward ASD through the discourse of neurodiversity, thus create a space

for criticism and redefinition of paradigms that shape the representation of autism in social and cultural milieus (Thibault, 2014).

One of the big gaps in representation of people with ASD is the ambiguity that surrounds the autistic sexuality and romance, though fiction films have been used romance and autism as intriguing themes and tropes to attract viewers (as we can see in *Mozart and the Whale)*, there are not many consistent narratives of romantic life of people on autism spectrum in the media. Brooks (2018) notes that autistics are generally depicted as heterosexual and gender-normal and states that our conception of autism is strongly linked to image of a heterosexual white male who desires a girlfriend and cannot achieve it. Indeed, female voices are needed to richen the present narratives of autism in films in particular and media in general.

Another issue in representation of people with ASD is the absence of congruent and realistic representation of the challenges of adulthood and employment for autistics. Autistics often represented in films as people from the middle class of society who either have job of their own or parents who support them financially. Anyone on the Autism spectrum can understand that these portrayal is not aligned with the real challenges of being an adult with ASD in the contemporary competitive, profit-oriented and classified capitalist world.

Media favors high-functioning autism to other conditions on the autism spectrum. Autistics who are non-verbal or have more severe deficits are absent in films. This bias in representation need to be addressed by the activists of neurodiversity movement as

well as media critics. As mentioned before, neurodiversity movement declares that the pathological and mythological framing of ASD should be abolished and the viewpoint of autistics should determine what representations or narratives of autism are authentic and accurate.

Within the framework of this thesis, in alignment with the arguments of the neurodiversity theorists, forming a focus group consists of people with ASD would be more pertinent and constructive method to follow. Specially because it would give the opportunity to discuss the lived experiences of people with ASD with the narratives of the films. However, lack of the time and difficulties of planning a focus group and adhering to its schedule postponed this plan to future studies.

Other rewarding method for studying the evolution of representation of ASD in media is discourse analysis. Vakirtzi (2013) suggests a Foucauldian methodology for studying the emergence of autistic subjectivity. In *Performative acts of Autism* Lester and Paulus (2012) analyze the changing nature of autism with respect to Foucault and Butler's theories on performativity. Sirota (2010) has examined the narratives of autistic children as examples of 'technologies of the self'. These growing literature on the discursive facets of autism together with extension of the variety and number of autistic narratives in media will direct my future research path on this subject.

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