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Creating the Autistic Subjective

Creating the Autistic Subjective via the Comic Book Genre

Adlai Brandt-Ogman

Vassar College

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Abstract

My senior project, “Glitch,” uses the comic’s medium to provide insight into the subjective side of someone with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The diagnosis is typically classified as a neurological disorder where the individual may feel over/under-stimulated, perform strict routines, have trouble reading social cues, and difficulty navigating social situations. I forego the savant and differently learned stereotypes that Draaisma (2009) highlighted from film media. Since it is irresponsible to treat a spectrum disorder as monolithic, I am offering the reader a character, Harris Hawk, as an autistic person who subverts current representations of autism. I incorporate Transportation Theory, Parasocial Relationships, and Possible Selves theory as methods for understanding Harris Hawk’s special interest, film. With the comic medium, I apply Scott McCloud’s philosophy about using images and texts as icons. With this methodology, I hope to engage the reader within Harris Hawk's autistic perspective.

Introduction

“Glitch” is an exercise about translating Autism Spectrum Disorder as a sensory and social experience. Within film media, Autism appears as two stereotypes: the savant or the differently learned. The savant refers to treating the autistic individual as a robotic being with supernatural skills in an academic interest: mathematics, medicine, or logic. Their deficits tend to focus on limited social skills. The differently-gifted also treats the Autistic individual as a magical figure by portraying their limited understanding of communication as a spotlight on the pitfalls in neuro-normative communication. The result is the non-Autistic characters seeing the Autistic individual as a voice of candid wisdom (Draaisma 2009). Although primarily film media constructions, the ubiquity of film and television helps reify this dichotomy. The result is polarizing a spectrum disorder. Film media, furthermore, has yet to show the inner working of someone with autism when they navigate social situations as opposed to dramatizing their savant attributes. Even so, fictional narratives offer an approachable gateway to gaining empathy for experiences, not our own. “Glitch” acts as a visual representation of the multi-sensory experience for someone on the spectrum. Visual iconography can stimulate the reader’s recognition of other sensory stimuli, guiding the reader to achieve an empathetic relationship with a character (McCloud 1994). My character, Harris Hawk, is the vehicle for the reader to understand how someone with ASD perceives the world. He experiences varying degrees of the aforementioned aspects of Autism, primarily manifesting in feeling overstimulated when touched, having difficulty reading social cues, and cycling through obsessive thinking patterns. Although intelligent, I stress that he has learned strategy through years of study. I also clarify that his superpower–perfection marksmanship–is not tied to his Autism. The project explores and utilizes

Transportation Theory and Possible Selves Theory to illustrate Harris' experience while also guiding the reader to empathize with the character.

In the *Good Doctor* (2017), for instance, when Dr. Murphy saves a person in an airport in Episode 1, the scene overlays medical images showing the character solving the problem. These visuals are not present when Murphy is navigating a conversation. They maintain a pseudo-documentarian perspective on him. Shows like Netflix's *Atypical* (2017) also discuss autistic sensory overload, but the show also defaults to dialogue-based explanations rather than visual storytelling (Robia et al., 2017). There is also an implied linearity with films. Comics, on the other hand, can have a more complex sequence since, although typically read like a book, the sequence of images are always present on a page; the comic collapses past and present. Through the comic's unique structure, there is greater flexibility to display how someone on the spectrum reads the world. Furthermore, the mixture of image and text can help visually explain the mechanics of an autistic perspective. I hope that my character, as a super-hero type individual, can provide an accessible route for neurotypical individuals to navigate the disorder through a familiar genre.

The Plot of "Glitch"

The story is part one of a larger narrative. It follows a high-tech thief on the Autistic Spectrum, Harris Hawk, as he attempts and fails a heist. At the start, he prepares to steal the Star of India. While walking through the Museum of Natural History, we gain insight into his social sexual frustration. There are hints of his backstory, such as the opening page showing him as an archer, but more of his story will appear in future issues. When the heist is in full swing, and he seems close to his prize, he realizes someone else beat him to the star sapphire. After a brief scuffle, she reveals herself as Abigail Mifune. Before Harris can get more answers from her,

three security guards try to capture them, but Harris tranquilizes them and leaves. He strips out of his armor and tries to grab a taxi, but Abigail catches him changing on video and blackmails him into letting her ride with him. In the cab, she informs Harris about a conspiracy from domestic terrorists to take over New York City. Harris is confused and disoriented and tries to piece together whether this strange woman is tricking him. Before Harris could decide for himself, Abigail's employer, the Reaper, strikes. Abigail tasks Harris to shoot the Reaper, which he hesitates and contemplates the morality of killing. He then shoots the Reaper but enters an emotional spiral. Pained by his action, Harris publicly hurts himself on a subway car, and Abigail tries to calm him down.

Autism

A working definition of autism is necessary. There is a fine line, however, between a clinical understanding and social understanding of Autism. Although medical definitions of Autism Spectrum Disorder are helpful when addressing behaviors, they only go so far as to label them. Since my comic is a part of neurodiversity literature, it is paramount that I focus on the experiential aspects without rabbit-holding into "curing" rhetoric (Kapp 2020 pg. 1).

Defining Autism Clinically

There are five main aspects of autistic embodiments, including: "atypical proprioception and sensory processing, over-and under-inclusion of certain elements in the apprehension of the environment, a drive to associate, a persistent sense of animism, and radical synesthesia" (Saverse 2010). Each pillar operates at different levels. How an autistic person processes the environment is unique to that individual. Temple Grandin, for instance, got over-stimulated by physical contact, such as receiving a hug. When she would not reciprocate hugging her mother, Grandin explains in her book "The Autistic Brain" that "It wasn't that I didn't want her, it was

that the sensory overload of a hug shorted out my nervous system” (Grandin 2013, 19:00).

Grandin’s description is an example of radical synesthesia. In my own experience, I often apply animism when talking to my stuffed animals or even communicating with my limbs. While fencing, I would stab or slap my forearm or leg, which disconcerted the people around me. They did not understand that I was instructing distinct parts of my body to act a certain way: slapping meant waking up, stabbing indicated control, stroking meant calming down.

There are seven factors to consider when creating a fictional autistic character. A DSM-5 study (2018) dissected nine autistic literary characters from critically acclaimed novels, including *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2004), *Rules* (2006), *London Eye Mystery* (2008), *Anything But Typical* (2009), *Marcelo in the Real World* (2009), *Mockingbird* (2010), *Waiting for No One* (2011), *Remember Dippy* (2013), and *Rain Reign* (2014). The study quantified the characteristics of these characters into two categories: social interaction symptom (S) and restrictive, repetitive patterns of behavior (R). The study defined S and R characteristics, coded by Kelly, et al. (2015), as:

“S1 description. “Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions” (APA, 2013, p. 50).

S2 description. “Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication” (APA, 2013, p. 50).

S3 description. “Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers” (APA, 2013, p. 50).

R1 description. “Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypes, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases)” (APA, 2013, p. 50).

R2 description. “Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns or verbal nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take the same route or eat the same food every day)” (APA, 2013, p. 50).

R3 description. “Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interest)” (APA, 2013, p. 50).

R4 description. “Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement)” (APA, 2013, p. 50).” (DSM-5, 2018)

The study found that R3 was the most common symptom, a 38-percent frequency amongst all the calculated autistic characteristics, followed by R4 (18%) and then S3 (12%). The least frequent descriptors, in contrast, were S1 (5%) and R2 (6%). Both S2 and R2 symptoms appeared with an 11-percent frequency, respectively. The result of this finding shows the majority of autistic fiction focuses on the “Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal

in intensity or focus.” (APA, 2013, p. 50). ASD characters that adhere to strict routines are common in autistic films such as *The Accountant* (2015) and *The Good Doctor* (2015). *The Good Doctor*, in particular, starts episode 8, “Apple,” with Shaun Murphy starting his daily routine: R2. The same applies for *Rain Man* (1988) when we see Raymond Babbitt’s room and hyper-awareness of time. Throughout the film, Babbitt adamantly adheres to watching movies at a specific time and going to bed at 11 pm (Levinson, 1988, 0:34:41).

In my comic, I focus on representing S1, S2, R1, and R3 behaviors. The clearest example of S1 attributes is on page 18 (*Fig. 2*), where Harris is having difficulty relating to Abigail. I illustrate Harris’s struggle by adding the glitch filter from Procreate onto Abigail’s words and face. I also establish Harris’s problem processing information with a frame of Charlie Chaplin from *Modern Times* attempting to fix machinery. One way I try to develop Harris’ R1 characteristic is through Harris’ repeating “get back to work,” such as on pages 4 and 5 whenever he finds himself emotionally sidetracked by thoughts of romantic rejection. I also attempt to establish his behavior to circumvent confrontation is repetitive through his musing inner monologue: “Too often I’ve wanted to be the heartthrob. To be like Gene Kelly.” I use the present perfect tense to establish that his previous exposure to cinematic idols has continuous effects on his present psyche. For Harris, his desired image of romance, as seen on page 4 panel 4, clashes with the rejection on page 4 panel 5. I hope the phrasing tells the reader that his struggles with communication are repetitive. As for R3 behavior, I choose to have film and heists be Harris’ fixed interests. Although featuring R3 characteristics may play into enforcing a stereotypical perspective on Autism, Harris Hawk internalizes his fascination with film characters, whereas *Rain Man*’s interest in numbers is very external. Knowing my autistic development, I know I had mild difficulty with social-emotional reciprocity and reading non-

verbal communication. If we want to progress our conversation about autism, we need to discuss it in social terms rather than “as a medical collection of deficits and symptoms to cure” (Kapp 2020, pg. 1). Highlighting the less-represented versions of autism, especially socially, can help readers without autism understand how to engage with autistic people.

Autistic Stereotypes

It is crucial to avoid glorifying autism. It is unfortunate, therefore, that there are two stereotypes of Autism: the savant and the differently-gifted. The Savant is the most prolific of the two and treats Autism like a superpower with social deficits; it is also the most common stereotype of Autistic characters in films: Shaun Murphy (*The Good Doctor*), Raymond Babbitt (*Rain Man*), and Christian Wolff (*The Accountant*). The Savant is an autistic character with poor social functioning skills, has a strict routine, but has a supernatural ability. In the case of Raymond Babbitt, his ability relates to mathematics. With the savant, the superpower is a fetishization of mathematical and logical functioning. Alison Bass (1997) wrote that, at the time of publishing, only 5 to 10 percent of autistics had the mathematical capabilities that Raymond Babbitt presented. Not only is this a common stereotype, but it is also a “robotic view of autistic persons...[that] may reinforce the myth of autistic persons having no true feelings” (Draaisma 2009). Unfortunately, the media’s focus on the savant influences how people perceive autistic individuals. Although featuring savant autistics “may decrease stigmatization of autism, it is unclear what the real-world repercussions of exposure might be when individuals subsequently encounter real people with ASD who may present with more severe symptoms and no savant-like abilities” (Stern & Barnes 2019). The surplus of autistic savants in film media, however, appears to reify the stereotype as the norm. *Rain Man* (1988) seems to be the patient zero of Hollywood’s infatuation with the savant stereotype. A review from *Little White Lies* (2016)



Figure 1. Page 1 from “Glitch.”

criticized *The Accountant*’s cinematic portrayal of autism derived from the *Rain Man* formula: “people on the autism spectrum have been presented along a similar pattern – socially isolated but in possession of remarkable abilities that are, as one character in *The Accountant* puts it, ‘nothing short of supernatural.’” In mainstream Hollywood, the autistic savant appears as the norm.

On page 1 (*Fig. 1*), I immediately have Harris Hawk declare that he is not a savant. He further states, “Even so, claiming I am gets me attention.” His subtextual statement is that he craves some sort of social attention. By further elaborating that he has greater difficulty making sense of the world “logically, mathematically, and socially,” I am enforcing the idea that Harris learned these traits rather than possessed them as natural gifts. The emphasis on logical and mathematical reasoning works to subvert the notion that all Autistics are rational beings. Instead,

I craft Harris as an emotionally oriented individual even when his brain attempts to think logically.

The “differently gifted” stereotype is also problematic. The differently-gifted glorifies how autistic individuals see the world, and through their naive observations, provide wisdom to non-autistic characters. Douwe Draaisma (2009) cites Mark Haddon from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) by explaining that his simplistic emotional range—happiness and sadness—allowed him to see, with confusion, how people were able to modulate their emotions. Ultimately, he functions to dissect and question social norms. Although the differently-gifted autistic does not possess the supernatural powers of the savant, at its core, the differently-gifted label is an extreme way of showing unity by saying everyone has their own quirk. In the third episode of *Atypical* (2017), the main character's mom, Julie, appears to project her insecurities and quirks onto her son when complaining to a cashier: “I’m what it's like to be on the Spectrum in a place like this: the harsh lighting, and the music that’s so loud and people like jostling by, you know?” Even though the information about Autistic sensitivities to light and sound are technically correct, the script’s subtext says she refers to her sensory wiring, not her son’s. Even though the sentiment that “sometimes autistic persons are presented as being not so different from us, after all, or, to say the same that we are all in a sense autistic” shows compassion and an attempt to include Autistic individuals in the world community and “that autism is largely co-extensive with normal, non-pathological behavior and is perhaps not even a disorder at all” (Draaisma 2009). Autistic individuals can have extreme sensory and social experiences that neurotypical individuals cannot fathom. They can also process information in ways alien to neurotypical minds. Furthermore, these two stereotypes privilege “high-functioning” Autistic individuals over their “low-functioning” counterparts. Now, I am aware

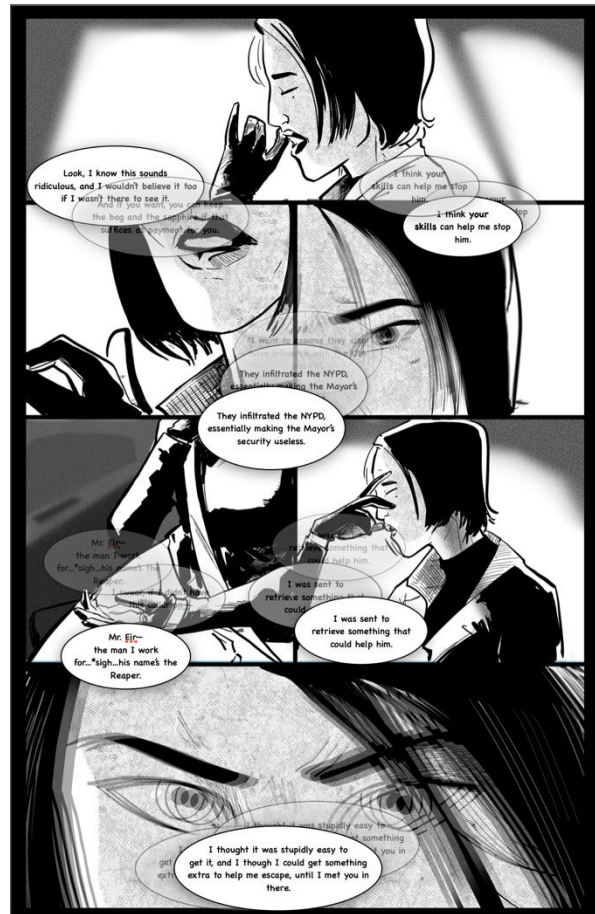


Figure 2. Page 19 from “Glitch.”

that I am a “high-functioning” autistic individual, but I plan on providing Harris with social impairments, so “lower-functioning” autistic people can identify with him.

Illustrating Autism

My goal is to avoid creating a character that is the essence of Autism and present how a person with autism may process information. Since ASD is a spectrum disorder, there, by definition, cannot be a definitive depiction. For my character, Harris Hawk, he will have a sensitivity to touch, sound, and eye contact. On page 13, panel 3 features my female lead, Abigail, touching Harris' shoulder. Her hand appears highlighted red, and her face blurred and pixelated with the Chromatic Aberration and Glitch filters from Procreate. The stark appearance of red in contrast with the black and white panel alerts the reader that the contact with the

glitching effects establishes that touch and eye contact are overwhelmingly stimulating to Harris.

How Comics Function

Comics are also versatile and, therefore, capable of illustrating sensory activity. Icons fuel the versatility. Scott McCloud (1994) writes that icons are not only the vocabulary of comics but that our society is a “symbol-oriented culture” (pg. 58). For the autistic individual, who operates on symbols seemingly foreign to “normal” people, comics offer a unified language explaining reality. Words and language are unified under comics. I can also apply McCloud’s definition of the cartoon as a means of (dis)orienting the neuro-typical reader. The cartoon is a genre of comics art that reduces the “realistic” rendering into distinct features. Cartoons have the advantage of abstracting reality and, ideally, “omit much of the ambiguity and complex characterization, which are the hallmark of modern literature, leaving them suitable only for children” (pg. 45). Ambiguity, by definition, shows a wide array of information. For autistic individuals, according to a paper by Ofer Golan (2006), “Social functioning, which requires fast integration of context-dependent information in real time, would be seriously hampered under such conditions” (pg. 9). For Harris, breaking down expressions into “cartoons” can show readers how he’s deciphering the world around him. I plan on making the art realistic to emphasize the difficulty in interpreting them. Icons like arrows or motion can also display how Harris is trying to dissect emotions, body motion, and language but at the expense of integrating every element.

The comic page also lends itself to collapsing linear reading. Comics contain panels, and within each panel supposedly includes a single moment. This is not universally true. McCloud (1994) redefines the function of time within a panel by first acknowledging that “Our eyes have



Figure 3. Page 19 from “Glitch.”

been well-trained by the photograph and by representations art to see any single continuous image as a single instant in time” (96). We are also trained to read linearly, with each panel operating in “real time.” Although the reader can finish a page from point A to point B, McCloud asks, “But is that necessary?” (106). Consider any comic page, but let’s use page 18 (*Fig. 2*) from “Glitch” as an example. The page appears fragmented like a traditional comic page, each one containing a different point of view of Abigail. The speech bubbles, however, are suspended without the tail ends pointing to a particular figure. I want this apparent discontinuity to appear disconcerting. It asks the reader to render the page in a non-linear fashion, attempting to find a sense of order. For Harris and myself, exclusively receiving verbal communication is overwhelming, especially

when asked to repeat said information without a concrete reference. All the information feels simultaneous even when someone provides it in a defined sequence.

The mode of designing comic book characters also has psychological implications on the reader. When discussing Manga, also known as Japanese comic books, Scott McCloud (1994) notes that “while most characters were designed simply, to assist in reader-identification, other characters were drawn more realistically to objectify them, emphasizing their “otherness” from the reader” (pg. 44). In essence, the more abstract the character appears, the easier it is for the reader to identify with the character; in contrast, the more specific the design, the more specimen-like they appear. With this in mind, one would think I would want to design Harris more abstractly so a wider audience can identify with him. To do so would undermine the point that every autistic person is unique. Harris is not supposed to be a universal voice for autism.

Autism is a multi-sensory experience that film and literature may not sufficiently relate. Even though the medium is visual, comics can better illustrate the multi-sensory Autistic experience. My method is most similar to Scott McCloud’s approach to understanding comic book structure. To McCloud (1994), icons are the vocabulary of comics; they include illustration and text (pg. 47). Comics are often considered an uncomfortable amalgamation of text and art. His approach sought to unify the comic’s language. Even so, McCloud’s theory prioritized the art side of comics. As an artist myself, I am comfortable with this approach. Page 20 (*Fig. 4*) of “Glitch,” for instance, is where I use typography more artfully. I repeat specific phrases and then manipulated the text layer in Procreate to create the twisting forms. I also duplicated the phrase “Can we trust her?” I changed the size of the phrase on separate layers before combining them. I then added the halftone filter twice on the larger letters. The end goal was to simulate the evanescent life-cycle of a thought. In a similar vein, I added a red half-tone shadow behind “GET

DOWN” to give the impression that it appeared suddenly from outside his mindscape. Having the red “GET OUT” on the next page provides the reader with context that these sentences came from the same speaker. In doing so, I am adopting techniques from autistic writers like Dawn Prince, author of “The Silence Between.” In her novel, she describes the world as “blended inextricably to content and memory... this melding represented the most important thing in the world,” since “everything from bathrooms to snail [...] had language” (Prince 2010). Harris interacts similarly to Prince. Film characters, posters, film scenes, and text come alive based on his emotional association with each element.

Beyond the senses, Autism is a neurological learning difference. When I feature the simulacra of film characters, I illustrate an aspect of Autism known as the “special interest.” Special interests fall in the R3 category as being “Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interest)” (APA, 2013, p. 50). For Harris Hawk, that interest is film. To understand how he thinks, the reader must realize this he views the world through a cinematic perspective.

How Media Impacts the Viewer

Transportation Theory

Harris Hawk conjures film characters. Using film media helps elaborate on the pillar of association. His interaction with films starts with Transportation Theory. Transportation Theory, which describes a person’s engagement with film, can explain this phenomenon. When a person experiences transportation:

“(a) the phenomenology of media enjoyment can be characterized as a flow-like state, (b) positive content is not a necessary condition for enjoyment, (c) the personal “safety” of a



Harris would not reference film unless he first found gratification in the medium. The films I would reference would be fictional narratives since “non-narratives do not create alternative worlds for individuals to enter, and they may be less likely to engage emotions or create mental imagery” (p. 314). In Transportation Theory, there are cases where individuals “who do not ‘think in pictures’ may prefer films, which provide this imagery for them” (Green, Brock & Kaufman 2004, pg. 313). Films essentially act as a catalogue for reification, or the process of turning something abstract into something solid. Movies motivate and inform Harris’s

perspective and engagement with the world. Using familiar characters as metaphors for Harris Hawk's thoughts also serves the audience. Green (2004) notes that techniques like "metaphor, irony, or alliteration may serve to 'defamiliarize' the world, to lead the reader to see some aspect of the human experience with fresh eyes" (p. 321). Introducing films as Harris Hawk's lens for gaging reality works to showcase how film can have a self-regulation function. Bandura (2001) notes that: "Human self-development, adaptation, and change are embedded in social systems" (p. 266). As an example of an autistic individual, Harris Hawk will have social and communicative deficiencies. Humans tend to be proactive when faced with social obstacles, both when receiving or anticipating negative feedback (Bandura 2001, p. 268). Since gaging positive and negative feedback may be difficult for Harris, he turns to film media as an educational model for dissecting social situations. The result is using his transformed experiences of film media as "conceived futures [operating] anticipatorily as motivators and regulators of current behavior" (p. 268). I also illustrate how an obsessive mindset can distort Harris' social cognitive functioning to extremes.

Harris Hawk's media consumption filters how he perceives people. Mar and Oatley (2008) argue that "the content of the narrative is far more important than the form when predicting a story's possible engagement of social processes or communication of social knowledge (pg.186). Page 20, as an example, features a swirl of repetitive and distorted text instigated by Harris' conflicting emotions about real women versus fictional women. To provide context, I establish that women, especially attractive women, tend to trigger Harris' mental shutdown, as seen on page 3, panel 5 and page 4, panel 4. The fact that the glitch effect appears only on Abigail's visage highlights his discomfort around assertive women. Harris's sexual frustration approaches its climax when I introduce the femme fatale page (*Fig. 3*). Femme fatales

are “a seductive woman who lures men into dangerous or compromising situations” (Merriam-Webster, 2021). They often use their allure—either via their own agency or at the behest of an authority figure—to destabilize the (male) protagonist. If they are acting the will of a third party, such as with Kim Novak’s Judy Barton from *Vertigo*, they usually hold less autonomy and require male aid for liberation. This anxiety follows Harris in his decision-making. Although Possible Selves Theory focuses on self-conception, I’m expanding the definition to suggest that, when faced with unsure scenarios, we project characteristics onto others to stabilize our perceived reality. Markus and Nurius (1986) pointed out that “positive possible selves can be exceedingly liberating because they foster hope that the present self is not immutable” while, in contrast, negative possible selves are constraining (p. 963). Harris, in page 20, projects negative possible selves onto Abigail in order to form his own positive self: helpful to others and a gallant knight for women in need. He, also, projects these stereotypes to protect his moderate sexual frustration. When the story Abigail says is true, however, the disappointment dissolves. Even so, Harris’s initial presumptive attitude about Abigail reflects the media he has consumed.

Illustrating how Harris tackles social hurdles is crucial for my audience to understand some elements about Autism better. At its core, Transportation Theory is about empathy. One reason Harris conjures Sherlock Holmes on page 16 of “Glitch” is because he wants to a logical mood. As a viewer of Sherlock Holmes fiction, Harris felt he had a “privileged access to the characters’ interactions, solitary activities, and innermost thoughts, feelings, and motivations,” but more importantly, saw qualities in Holmes that he found beneficial for his mood management (Green, Brock & Kaufman 2004, pg. 319). These film characters are not their purest selves. Harris appropriated them to visualize his thoughts. They are, therefore, distorted and repurposed by his biases. In reductionist forms like comics, providing readers with

recognizable simulacra of relatable social difficulties may trigger the “illusion of intimacy” (Green, Brock & Kaufman, 2004, pg. 319). Presenting familiar film characters with immediately understandable qualities can also inform the reader how Harris’ selection of film media dictates how he perceives the world. If they have a very distinct quality, like the simplicity of a cartoon, their connotations are far more apparent to the reader (McCloud, 1994, pg. 39). For Harris, he associates Holmes with logic or Selina Kyle with seduction. Since both Harris and the reader, hopefully, have familiar interests and/or understanding about the characters, the reader may feel the “illusion of intimacy” and gain a more intimate understanding of Harris’ autism.

The engagement between the reader and Harris as the Autistic lens starts with ethics and empathy. In Kate Polak’s *Ethics in the Gutter* (2017), she notes that comics do not traditionally have a clear third, first, or omniscient narrator. Instead, the narrator appears through the combination of image, word bubbles—traditionally dialogue—and narration boxes that may or may not be from the main character’s perspective (Polak 2017, pg. 14). To keep the audience engaged with Harris and his reading of the world, I wrote and illustrated the narrative to focus on his perception. Although most of the illustrations will appear from an omniscient third-person perspective—rather than from a first-person point of view—the environments and inner monologue—represented by word boxes—will keep the focus on Harris’ subjectivity. There is also a filter in the illustration app Procreate that “glitches” the image. I use the glitch filter as a visual metaphor for when Harris Hawk experiences sensory overloading. The term glitch refers to “a sudden malfunction or irregularity.” Since the colloquialisms for discussing neurological reactions revolve around computer-oriented terminologies, such as “wiring,” I think it is appropriate to use the simulacrum of glitching to visualize the moments when Harris’ brain has difficulties registering sensory information. I hope that readers will see the glitch effect and

intuitively understand Harris Hawk's overstimulation when touched or faced with confrontational eye contact, such as on page 14, panel 3, where Abigail says, "I'm not done with you." Furthermore, I want to illustrate that when Harris faces eye contact, the experience is so overwhelming that it inhibits his ability to receive information.

It is crucial to treat Harris as an individual and show how he processes emotions, whether explosive or subdued. The Savant implies treating Harris' Autism as a superpower and thereby glorifying it. Although he is a good strategist, Harris would have assistance when conducting his heists from a mechanically-savvy mentor figure. I also clarify that Harris Hawk's supernatural power—perfect aim reminiscent of Marvel Comics Bullseye and DC's Deadshot—does not come from his Autism. The comic acts as a commentary against Savant fetishization. With Possible Selves theory, I will write Harris' possible past conception as dependent on gratification because of his seemingly Savant skill, and in the process, motivating him to believe his self worth is only his superpower. I make sure to address his distaste about the Savant stereotype on page 1. He clearly states "I am not a savant. My therapist made that clear. Even so, claiming that I am gets me attention." His attitude towards his ability is a reflection and criticism on how people hyper-focus on whether or not an autistic person has savant qualities, such as in *Rain Man*. The separation of abilities is crucial in subverting the Savant stereotype, and in the process, avoid fetishizing or misrepresenting the learning difference. The superpower is more like a cosmetic item, able to be removed and returned. Autism is not something that a person can add or remove.

Film media works as a reference text for social norms. Whether they are read [from a novel] or viewed [from a cinema], having a "diversity of literary fiction over an extended period of time is likely to do more good than with respect to one's social understanding" (Mar & Oatley

2008, pg. 185-186). Furthermore, entertaining content rather than lectures also heightened a person's empathy and interest in learning about ASD (Stern and Barnes 2019). By writing a fictional narrative, I plan on engaging a reader, autistic or neurotypical, through the life of an autistic character. Because of the "safety" of entertainment media, the viewer will access a narrative alien to their own. Having a media figure experience a trial also keeps the audience's interest. It is all the more crucial that when writing my character that I make him feel as real as possible. An effectively written fictional character can create an "illusion of intimacy" where consumers feel as if they know the character (Green, Brock, & Kaufman 2004, pg. number). Of course, this is only possible if the reader has a moral response to the character. As Green, Brock, and Kaufman (2004) note, "We like and emphasize with characters who are morally good, and we root against characters who are not" (pg. 319). This could explain why the Stern and Barnes (2019) results showed recipients who watched *The Good Doctor* "demonstrated greater interest in learning more about ASD, with 44.3% of participants very interested, 53.2% moderately interested, and 2.4% not interested, compared to 28.1% very interested, 59.4% moderately interested, and 12.5% not interested in the lecture condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 143) = 7.77, p = .02$ " (pg. 2586). There was little indication, however, that the screening audience received a better understanding of autism than the lecture group. It is more important than ever that I create a subjective lens that displays Harris Hawk's thinking.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory can help in this aspect. Bandura (2001) notes that social cognitive theory explains how psychosocial functioning operates in a triadic reciprocal causation (p. 265). Bandura graphs the relations as: personal determinants, behavioral determinants, and environmental determinants. For someone on the autistic spectrum, where social skills may be a

deficit, film media can act as “a powerful tool for comprehending their environment and creating and regulating environment events that touch virtually every aspect of their lives” (Bandura 2001, p. 267). Harris self-regulates by manifesting film characters. Page 20 in *Glitch* features a conversation with himself embodied by famous cinematic femme fatales. Although he starts with Sharon Stone’s obviously villainous Catherine Tramell, he transitions to more sympathetic women of mystery with Faye Dunaway’s Evelyn Mulwray. When read in chronological order, the reader sees Harris fighting his biases. If read a frozen moment If he finds himself in an eerily uncomfortable circumstance that harkens to a point of embarrassment, he will conjure a confident voice to guide him through or out of the situation. On page 3 panel 4, I illustrate a panel from *American in Paris* where Gene Kelly’s Jerry Mulligan appears to successfully woo Leslie Caron’s Lise Bouvier. The following panel (center) shows a woman turning down Harris. That is followed by Harris screaming light Jake Gyllenhaal's Lou Bloom from *Nightcrawler* (2014). I will add a word box explaining Harris is visualizing the screaming in his head, wishing he could express himself physically. In the same situation, however, Harris’s method of being “proactive” in his regulation manifests in avoiding connection.

Parasocial Relationships

When a person feels transported by a fictional narrative, they may form a parasocial relationship with the story’s characters. Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships of perceived intimacy. Charles Aaron Lawry (2013) frames parasocial relationships in terms of social media influencers. The influencer is an opinion leader who “[is] well-informed and influential peers that mass consumers turn to in order to solicit information, advice, opinions, or ideas about specific product classes” (Nelson, 1970; Rogers & Cartano, 1962; Turnbull & Meenaghan, 1980). For Lawry (2013), the opinion leader “is comprised of two major

components: interpersonal communication and personal influence” (16). He elaborates that opinion leaders can exist in one of two product classes: the search class or experience class. A product class refers to “the group of products that are homogenous or generally substitutes for each other. The class is considered narrow or broad depending on how substitutable the various products are” (Kahn, 2005, p. 572). In the case of Harris Hawk, the products marketed to him are psychological and social rather than material. The peers in question are not people, necessarily, but film characters. By referencing characters such as Sherlock Holmes, Juror 8, Selina Kyle, and Catherine Tramell, I am implying that Harris feels he has an intimate understanding of these characters because of his exposure to their cinematic narratives. I furthermore establish Harris had an “enduring involvement” (Lawry 20) with characters like Sherlock Holmes page 16 when the character says: “Don’t you remember that fateful day in your aunt’s room, the day that sparked your fascination.” I wrote the rhetorical question of “Don’t you remember that fateful day” to inform the reader of Harris’ strong attachment to the character of Sherlock Holmes and other cinematic characters. The only reason Harris would conjure the character he does is because he feels his knowledge of them is in-depth enough that he feels comfortable using them as metaphors for his thoughts. For the reader, I hope that they feel a parasocial relationship with Harris Hawk. Through that perceived intimacy, they may gain a better understanding and appreciation of the autistic experience.

Possible Selves Theory

Through the conjuring of film figures and conventions, Harris also operates on using Possible Selves theory: a possible self “derive[s] from the representations of the self in the past and they include representations of the self in the future” (Marks & Nurius 1986, 954). A person partakes in selecting possible selves based on their sociocultural circumstances, media

consumptions, and social experiences (Marks & Nurius 1986). The selection and acceptance of film role models and tropes help solidify one's sense of self. The comic will explore how film role models act as incentives for Harris to break from his self-conception. As an autistic individual, Harris' social efficacy expectation—his “[belief] that he...is competent to perform a required behavior”—is limited. Harris' hopes by associating with a film self, he is creating a pathway to achieving a goal, the “my getting a BA,” or for Harris, “my getting a comrade” (Bandura 2001, p. 260).

Harris Hawk does judge his competency on pages 17 through 20 in “Glitch.” The pages display Harris conversing with Jeremy Brett's Sherlock Holmes, Henry Fonda's Juror 8 from *Twelve Angry Men* (1957), Ben Affleck's Bruce Wayne from *Batman v Superman* (2016), Michele Pfeiffer from *Batman Returns* (1992), Jane Fonda from *Chinatown* (1974), and Kim Novak from *Vertigo* (1958). Dialogue boxes show the characters conversing with Harris Hawk and each other. They verbalize his insecurities and mode of thinking. When Harris conjures Sherlock Holmes, for instance, he is trying to access his most logical self. In the case of the femme fatale's page, Harris is projecting a possible self onto Abigail. His presumptive conception about her traits begins with the villainous Catherine Tramell and gradually evolves to the more sympathetic Evelyn Mulwry. Not only does this page illustrate Harris' shift about Abigail's intentions, it also highlight how he orients himself when engaging with new people: by connoting them with film characters. On page 23, when he visualizes Emperor Palpatine, Thanos, and the Joker, Harris imagines himself becoming an irredeemable villain.

The superhero genre furthermore engages the reader in their own “possible self.” The superhero represents an aspirational self, one of physical perfection. The high-flying athleticism is similar to the coordinated dance routines in musicals (Bukatman 2009, pg. 119). Simulacrum

of the costume acts as a separation between the alter-ego and the superhero. We may not identify or aspire to be Peter Parker, per se, but we wish to be Spider-Man. The donning of a costume marks the character's transition from an individual to an idea; the Spider-Man, swinging above New York, represents the athletic freedoms to escape the turmoil of one's mundane life. For Harris Hawk, the suit is functional and baroque. With it, he embodies the superhero. The hands and feet can cling to walls, the hair has cameras allowing him to see at all angles, the mask has a hud similar to Iron Man. He, furthermore, plans heists akin to Ethan Hunt from *Mission: Impossible*. Transportation theory becomes physical rather than psychological.

Conclusion

The result is treating Harris Hawk's narrative as a metafiction of a person's relationship with media engagement. Metafiction is self-referential and directly refers to the reader. Every theory already mentioned can apply to readers since, ultimately, I'm writing for them. Through an intimate, subjective perspective, I hope to transport the reader into the Autistic consciousness to Harris' reconstruction and appropriation of film media would create explicit identifiers for the audience to understand not only what media he consumes but how he's using it in his interactions. The iconographic yet metaphorical use of film character, furthermore, will further help non-Autistic individuals empathize with Harris Hawk's experience. Harris Hawk, too, may serve as a role model. Although the comic only covers a fraction of a larger narrative, I wrote a complete arc. How does someone on the spectrum grapple with being forced to engage with a world he would rather avoid? What happens when the logical boundaries he forged through film logic collide with the messiness of the real world? Film is not the enemy. Harris, like anyone else, digests media and crafts a worldview based on his consumption. How his worldview changes will become more apparent as he and Abigail bond over films and she learns to

communicate to him through the cinematic medium. Equally important, Harris will learn to reciprocate communicating with Abigail based on her media interests. This is not a rejection of his autism but an evolution of his communication capabilities. I want to create a character who will be comfortable with his Autism and not necessarily need to alter it to conform to societal norms. Hopefully, when someone reads my comic, they will also find the beauty and the turmoil someone on the Spectrum experiences the world.

The quality of comics, like any other medium, is only limited by the authorship. I hope my comic has the gravitas to inform the public about an Autistic experience.

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