Changing My Shape: A Brief Introduction to an Autistic Film Canon

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by
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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Changing My Shape: A Brief Introduction to an Autistic Film Canon by Ryan McCandless, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Cinema Studies at San Francisco State University.

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This will examine the potential in creating a more subjective, fluid cinematic canon for autism as a source of empowerment for the wider community. It will begin by studying the specific forms of marginalization the community has received and how that has impacted depictions of autism in different media. This will move to a discussion of how both the self-advocate movement of recent autistic history and the queer artistic movement of the 20th century can be utilized to justify the building of a canon which is less adherent to a set of typical rules or expectations of what does or doesn’t belong in an autistic film canon. The piece will conclude by looking at the shaping of this canon in modern online film communities, and personally applying it to a number of different works; all without providing a strict guideline of what these films have to represent to be considered “autistic” by an autistic viewer creating their own version of this canon.
Preface

The following will be written in the first person and include myself in the language of my work. I will also be using examples that draw from my own experiences and tastes. I do this for two reasons. One, I myself am an autistic individual with my own lived experience of the disorder that gives me my own thoughts and opinions on the material that I can’t separate from this work. Secondly, a lot of self-advocating done by autistic writers has been ignored or viewed as unimportant either because it can’t be “objective” or because it isn’t written in the traditional “academic” style of theory. As someone within academia, I can’t deny the privilege and hypocrisy on my part of still choosing to write within a format that will still have these trappings of a more rigid, academic form. However, I can acknowledge that a lot of the traditional academic psychoanalytic writing that has historically come from outside the autistic community has largely been proven to be incorrect and for this reason, this thesis will not be interested in setting clear boundaries between the objective and the subjective. It will frequently bounce back and forth between grounded, academic research of the topic and research taken from personally studying and observing an autistic person over the course of 23 years (me).
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“Lost my shape, trying to act casual.

Can't stop, I might end up in the hospital.

I'm changing my shape, I feel like an accident.

They're back, to explain their experience”

We begin with the opening lyrics to “Crosseyed and Painless”, a 1980 track by the seminal new wave group Talking Heads. As these opening lines suggest, the song follows a man discussing his alienation from the fabric of reality; seeking new ways to “explain experience” with traditional ways of perception failing him. Throughout, the man is confounded by the presence of “facts”, daily assurances of a clear, routine world that never truly work with him. “Facts are simple and facts are straight. Facts are lazy and facts are late. Facts all come with points of view. Facts don't do what I want them to. Facts just twist the truth around. Facts are living turned inside out.”¹ Beneath the tight, complicated instrumentation and frontman David Byrne’s neurotic, anxious vocals, “Crosseyed and Painless” is a piece about the embrace of the nonsensical. It presents a situation where the accepted facts of everyday life have fallen by the wayside, unable to fully articulate the nuances of a mind. And so, the narrator must disregard

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these “facts” and find ways of expression more compatible with his real “shape” rather than the casual appearance that’s been expected of him.

This clear displacement of “common sense” is perhaps the reason the track has continued to be used as a symbol for a postmodernist landscape; a view of the world centered more around the sensory and the subjective, than the objective and easily identifiable. Theorist Gilles Deleuze references these opening lyrics in his book on painter Francis Bacon, using Byrne’s words to help explain the seemingly chaotic forms and parts Bacon uses in the art he creates; “sublime” work that can create a cohesive whole all while lacking shape or “fact” (that “feel like an accident”\(^2\) as Deleuze quotes). More understandably, the song also concludes Talking Heads’ aptly titled 1984 concert film *Stop Making Sense* (Dir. Jonathan Demme); serving as the total culmination of every piece that’s been added throughout the documentary.

The lyrics to the music of Talking Heads, frequently praised for their alien yet intimate descriptions of daily life, would gain more context in recent decades as Byrne, the main lyricist of the group, came out as being on the autistic spectrum in 2012. Knowing of Byrne’s background and the wider history of the disorder, it becomes easier to understand a potential disconnect with the world around you and the way that your “autistic” identity has already been mapped onto it without your consent. As I will elaborate on, the history of autism has largely been defined by voices outside of our community; trying to group, study, hide, cure, and explain

us. The “facts” that shaped us for generations gawked and marginalized our differences, rather than trying to empathize with or understand us. Doctors, parents, psychologists, and non-autistic artists have been allowed for ages to change our shape, or “cut a hole in us” as Byrne sings. An effect of this that this article will largely address is the lack of a cinematic identity/voice. Because so many of our stories have been built from stereotypes created from outside our community, we lack a clear cinematic canon that wouldn’t have to be built on lazy, disempowering misunderstandings of the disorder that have been perpetuated by Hollywood and other hegemonic mechanisms. Our canon cannot be centered around “factual” depictions of autism because largely, the autistic “facts” haven’t worked for us.

So instead, what I will focus on in this paper is studying the potential for an autistic film canon that shatters all previous temporality and objectivity to pieces. This canon is free flowing, multilayered, and completely void of the traditional rules of a canon (down to even requiring “canonical” depictions of autism) with one absolute goal, to allow for our voice to heard in a medium that’s often muted us in favor of a false illusion of us. As I will highlight throughout, it’s inspired as much by more postmodern definitions of genre and film canons as it is by the rising self-avocation movement that’s only expanded within the autistic community in the new millennium. This autistic film canon lingers on the intangible yet un-severable experiences connected to our individual experiences of the disorder. It can highlight movies that often have little to no connection to one another, beyond whatever established sentiment they have to the specific viewer. Highbrow and lowbrow, avant-garde and mainstream; nothing secure, nothing permanent. We can try to discuss the numerous, potential decisions a film can make to build this affection (characters, storylines, filmmaking techniques, etc.), but the rules for this canon are
ultimately boundless and wholly without shape. Or at least, a shape that is immediately recognizable.

If Talking Heads are to be believed, the facts must lose in order for us to create a collective, filmic representation of our identity. But in order to do this, we need to understand why the facts must lose, how the facts can lose, and what we can replace the facts with in the long run. Part one will begin by looking at the history of autism as a marginalized community evolving into a group of self-advocates fighting for their self-expression, with a brief look at the history of autistic representation in cinema. This will lead into a discussion in part two of the flexibility of canons as a collective terminology and the power these groupings can hold; drawing on the recently established term of neuroqueering and the communal/individual empowerment film holds in genre studies and other canons. I will bring these two sections together in my third section to showcase a canon for the autistic community that focuses on the importance of both communal and individual uplift; a queered set of works that are never conservative in both their structure and defining similarities. I will finish by using these pieces in my conclusion to argue why the aforementioned Stop Making Sense would be in my own personal autistic film canon using these newly articulated tools.

The establishment of this canon would not exist without the seemingly endless number of autistic cinephiles using online platforms like Letterboxd and Twitter to express their thoughts, as well as the rich history of autistic artists and activists (i.e. David Byrne) who came before us and allowed for the more open space many of us have today. This canon is a love letter to a community of people I’ve found to be as diverse and unpredictable in form as cinema itself. There’s a lot to elaborate on in a limited amount of time, so let begin at the origin of our label.
Part One: “I Might End Up in the Hospital”

I was recently talking about this project to a friend, when she suddenly asked me to explain what exactly autism was. And, despite it being a disorder I’ve lived with my whole life, at that moment I was unable to give her a cohesive answer. The difficulty with autism as a label is that it encompasses so many different things that it kind of loses its center; a collection of planets with nothing to orbit. I can speak to some of the aspects of myself that label me somewhere on the spectrum: difficulty with reading social cues, trouble communicating, stimming, bad at giving eye contact, problems with new routines, a reliance on long kept patterns and impulses, etc. It might be best exemplified by my lifelong struggles with establishing connections with others and being able to read the emotions of people properly. It might be the deep, compulsive cinephilia that requires me to watch movies endlessly and obsessively document, categorize, and rank everything I watch within my own personal bubble. It could be the way I develop an intense, niche interest in a media that I allow to take up my entire personality and imprint on my brain for a number of months or years (Spongebob Squarepants, Wes Anderson films, Gorillaz, Adventure Time, Steven Universe to name a few). Some people who have autism can speak with absolute cohesion and occasionally fit into “casual” spaces. Other people that have autism can’t speak and struggle with so many different parts of the disorder that they can’t create a “presentable” version of themselves for these environments. For many, it bounces back and forth between these two situations. I know I personally struggled with many of these issues much more heavily in elementary school; often getting into trouble with teachers, students, and my family because I was far more prone to intense meltdowns and extreme sensory difficulties (additional symptoms of autism) that only further isolated me from
others. As I grew older, I was able to control these meltdowns, and I’ve been able to manage the other more “autistic” aspects of my personality to avoid appearing too different from others or making my tendencies more visible to “normal” company. But, doing this also resulted in a lifelong issue with self-loathing and an intense paranoia of being perceived as different from others. I bring these additional details up because these problems are not directly connected to autism the disorder, yet they are an extremely pivotal part of my experience of the disorder that I need to make apparent in my personal definition. Which is to say, autism has been a difficult disorder to track and define throughout history because what it encompasses is so superfluous. There are a set of things I’ve listed that we can point to and create a definition (which many psychoanalysts and scientists did), but the way this definition is expressed from person to person is entirely dependent on said person and their life experience. It’s for this reason that branding a singular person as “representative” of autism has been so complicated.

In Mitzi Waltz’s *Autism: A Social and Medical History*, Waltz begins autism’s history by presenting the numerous abuses against potential autists prior to the disorder’s labeling in the early to mid-twentieth century. As is the case with many mental disorders handled in the period, the solution was less interested in the living condition of the patient, than rendering them hidden from the rest of society. Somebody deeper on the spectrum risked institutionalization where at best, they would be isolated and secluded for the rest of their life and at worst, tortured, sterilized, and in some cases killed. This was assuming they were even “fortunate” to be handed over to an institution in the first place. Waltz starts his book by recounting the recorded medical documents surrounding Ralph Sedgwick, a Victorian era child whose working-class mother and father sent him to a doctor due to his stunted development. Many of the parent’s concerns
convey symptoms which would later be used to diagnose people with autism: difficulty communicating with his parents, understanding or responding to things told to him, and seemingly existing inside his own world. The doctor didn’t know what to do to help his condition, and the boy was returned home. Although he was perfectly healthy when he was brought to the doctor, it was reported that Sedgwick died a year later; “perhaps of illness, perhaps as a result of a beating after soiling the family bed yet again or breaking an important item, perhaps because his family’s poverty meant that this least productive member received the smallest portion of their meagre meals. No specific cause of death was recorded.”

The later work of Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger pioneered an actual terminology for autism in the early 20th century. Kanner’s work differentiated autistic patients from their previous grouping with schizophrenic patients, placing their symptoms into a category that was entirely different. His recorded patients follow the basic patterns of the disorder: intense mood swings, sensory difficulties, struggles with communicating with others, and echolalia. Asperger’s work focused on patients in a different range on the spectrum; people who had symptoms of autism but were still able to perform basic functions of communication and connection with the outside world.

While having a label for this condition was no doubt beneficial in at least creating visibility, this leads to a psychoanalytic phase in autism’s history which only furthered our stigmatization. Because of our disconnect from outside groups, autistic people were often written about as lacking empathy and bordering on sociopathy; with Asperger referring to us as “autistic

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psychopaths” in his 1938 studies. Additionally, Kanner’s writings speculate that the disorder could be the result of detached, uncaring parents who spent too little time nurturing their children in the early developmental stages. Kanner would later dial this concept back and admit regret for it (even in his early work concluding that there is no real explanation for autism), but later psychoanalysts took the ball and ran with both of these concepts. Psychologists like Bruno Bettelheim popularized the “Refrigerator Mother” theory, which fully laid the blame of autism on mothers who were too cold towards their children. Bettelheim would go one step further by using his experience during the holocaust to liken autism to being a prisoner in a concentration camp, comparing their mothers to Nazi guards who the children needed to be taken from. In his book *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*, Bettelheim vilifies the disorder, suggesting autism as a kind of mental death, stating that even suicide is preferable to the current state of the children he’s studied.

“Infantile autism can indeed be viewed as a position coming as close to the extreme negative end of the continuum as meet with survival. Suicide alone seems a more extreme position, but it is not. Because suicide involves a goal-directed action that the autistic child seems even less capable of performing than the suicidal person. Infantile autism might be viewed as a position of despair where even the requisite energy to end it all is lacking.”

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Other psychoanalysts like Melanie Klein would continue these tropes by writing that the root of autism was bad parenting and something that needed to be fixed (with Klein specifically interpreting the words and stims of autistic children within Freudian concepts of repressed trauma and the Oedipal Complex)\(^6\). Although these psychoanalysts did reject the idea of shock therapy and drugs being able to fix autism, the sessions and treatment they replaced it with were largely unhelpful and have mostly vanished from modern practice. The largest impact these written descriptions did was popularize and mainstream a type of autism which advertised the aspects of the disorder which could be viewed as grotesque or upsetting to a “normal”, neurotypical culture (see Bruno Bettelheim’s appearance on *The Dick Cavett Show* in 1978). Autism was reduced to a much more simplistic, digestible image lacking nuance or specificity from person to person. In return, the autistic community received little to no actual support system or care from this technical burst in visibility; if anything, only adding to continued abuse by other systems of the institution or the household. In retrospect, it feels like many of these scientists who studied and negatively wrote about autism during these decades were less interested in their actual patients, as much as being able to use the tropes of autism to the advantage of their own work and theories (i.e. Klein and Freudian psychoanalysis). Bettelheim himself was able to use the success of his “research” to foster a successful career in academia, writing and teaching at universities like Stanford as well as therapeutic schools for children with behavioral and emotional problems like the Orthogenic School located in the University of

\(^6\) Waltz, *Autism*, 58-61
Chicago (a space where he became allegedly known for his abusive behavior towards numerous students spanning several decades⁷).

In the later portion of the twentieth century, the “Refrigerator Mother” theory fell by the wayside as scientists were able to debunk autism being the result of any sort of traumatic response. This was also thanks in large part to a rising group of parent advocate groups speaking out against the blame of their children’s disorder placed on them. The largest of these parental groups, Autism Speaks, continues to this day and remains the biggest charity foundation dedicated to autism in the United States. But while support systems for the parents of autistic children might seem like a step forward in autism’s visibility, a majority of these organizations benefitting the neurotypical families of autistic people negated the actual voices of autistic people and carried on abusive rhetoric of the past. In particular, Autism Speaks have used plenty of their resources to sell autism as a disease which destroys your child and can ruin your life, using this image to further advocate for the potential of a cure for the disorder.

“We are dedicated to funding global biomedical research into the causes, prevention, treatments, and cure for autism; to raising public awareness about autism and its effects on individuals, families, and society; and to bringing hope to all who deal with the hardships of this disorder.

We are committed to raising the funds necessary to support these goals.”⁸


Organizations like Autism Speaks use autism for their own benefit, and make their profits by providing a belief for parents that their children can be “fixed” and validating a lifestyle where they don’t have to provide respect or understanding towards their child’s disorder. By focusing entirely on parents, they also create a stunted perspective of autism where people on the spectrum remain infantilized and never progress into adulthood.

At this point, it’s worth discussing why exactly any of this has to be discussed in relation to a cinema canon. While this is not designed to be an extensive, complete overview of the history of autism, this summarized timeline is important because it gives us a deep understanding of the thing that has largely been missing from our own history up to this point: us. We are the ones who live with the disorder, and yet most of our recorded history has been centered around the scientists who studied us, the researchers who theorized on us, and the parents who’ve raised us. When studying these institutions, parents, and writers, it becomes quite easy to view autistic people not as full people, but as these props which can be used flexibly in whatever way these systems choose. We can be institutionalized, we can be negatively written about, we can be “cured”; but we never actually speak for ourselves and provide consent or acknowledgment that we are human beings.

And, most of the issues that can be found here in autism’s wider history of finding a voice can be uncovered in the art made about us. Stories, not told by autistic people, that aren’t interested as much in the experiences of actual autistic people as they are in conveying an archetypal image of autism often presented from the perspective of someone connected to the autistic character rather than the autistic person themselves. The most iconic example of this being *Rain Man* (Dir. Barry Levinson, 1988), a film highly successful upon release (winning
numerous Academy Awards including Best Picture and becoming one of the highest grossing movies of its year) that helped establish certain tropes of autism on film for decades to come. The movie follows a cocky, self-obsessed young man (played by Tom Cruise) who learns about the existence of his older brother (played by Dustin Hoffman) who happens to be autistic. The story tracks the relationship between the two brothers as they begin to bond. The autistic brother is emotionally stunted, obsessed with patterns, and prone to loud, big meltdowns; all while being presented as having genius gifts at remembering things that his brother uses to their advantage at casinos and what not. At the end of the film, the younger brother learns to be a kinder, warmer person through this experience and the autistic brother is returned to an institution with the promise that they will continue spending time together. In *Rain Man*, we see that (A) autism is not depicted from the perspective of an actual autistic person but rather through the perspective of a surrogate a neurotypical audience can see the autistic character through, (B) the autistic character is not played by an actor who has autism, nor is the film in any way shaped by anyone on the spectrum, (C) potentially “cinematic” aspects of autism are prioritized or amplified to be even more dramatic for the viewer (meltdowns, behaviors, having savant tendencies), and (D) the story ends with the elevation of the neurotypical character while the neurodivergent one returns to his institutionalized world once he no longer serves his purpose in teaching a lesson.

An autistic film canon centered solely on movies that are canonically representing autism would mostly consist of this; writing about quirky, infantilized autists who quickly solve puzzles or calculate numbers in their head like genius robots on their best days and melt down and can’t communicate with others properly on their worst days. When looking at representations of autism within mainstream cinema, as Stuart Murray goes through in his book *Representing*
Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination, most depictions fall into at least one of Rain Man’s aforementioned categories. Rarely does someone representing autism on screen take on the whole of the narrative for the sake of the audience (Silent Fall and Mercury Rising focus on people assisting the autistic person, Red Riding Hood and The Wizard focus on family members of an autistic person). Close to zero of the actors who have performed autism on screen actually have autism (Dustin Hoffman in Rain Man, Josh Hartnett in Mozart & the Whale, Sigourney Weaver in Snow Cake). Most of these films include clichés like drawn out meltdown sequences and/or moments where the autistic character is able to perform super genius abilities (the funniest example being the conclusion of The Wizard where the autist uses his savant skills to win a big, climactic video game competition for Super Mario Brothers 3). We also find that a majority of these stories focus on autistic children (see Mercury Rising, The Wizard, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Silent Fall, Tully) which perpetuate the stereotype of autism as an infantilizing disorder. Additionally, most of these stories focus on autists who are cisgender, white men, only occasionally showcasing cisgender, white women with the disorder (Snow Cake, Mozart & the Whale). Little to none of the mainstream depictions of autism have presented people of color with the disorder and/or people who are LGBTQIA+. Like the psychoanalysts of the past, these stories create a very limited, narrow view of the disorder that highlight and distort parts of the disorder for the intrigue of an outside group. It would be understandable for someone to watch these movies and assume that most autistic people are either children, or cisgender, heterosexual white men who go back and forth between being Sherlock Holmes grade geniuses and sheltered,

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accident prone babies who require constant maintenance and surveillance by families, friends, and other restricting systems of support.

Most autists have their own stories of when they discovered that the filmic identity of their disorder failed to match up with their own experience of the disorder. For myself it was *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Dir. Stephen Daldry, 2011), where an overly precocious autistic child solves different puzzles in order to find the lock to a mysterious key left to him by his father after he died in the World Trade Center attacks. The film is tripe for a number of reasons (its manipulative attempts to track the aftermath of post 9/11 America, an insane plot arc where it turns out that his friendly, mute next-door neighbor is an ex-Nazi, etc), but it’s the performance of autism (so over the top, so whimsical, so artificial) that I remember feeling actual rage upon watching. There was something so upsetting and enraging about its twee, cute version of autism that I couldn’t fully express to my family I was watching the film with. It was the first time I realized that the versions of autism put on film (most often by Hollywood Oscar dramas like this one) frequently don’t match with the actual identities of autistic people, often choosing the archetypes most convenient to the drama being told (like an autistic child being a metaphor for a society which is “autistic” in the aftermath of large scale trauma). Once again, a system using our disorder for its own benefit.

Thanks in part to the internet, we now have the freedom to create our own diverse narratives through the use of blogs and social networking platforms like Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit. You can find sites that focus on autism from the perspective of one individual. You can find blogs dedicated to people with autism writing about cinema. You can use blogs and Discord servers to find support systems for people who are on the spectrum, as well as sites working to
debunk the old practices and theories offered up by psychologists like Bettelheim and organizations like Autism Speaks. There are organizations that work to help and assist people of all age groups rather than focusing solely on parents and the “cure for autism”. The rise/tactics of self-advocates with autism in the new millennium can be seen as a response to a lack of a clear, authorial voice in our disorder. It is an opposition to a history that wasn’t written by us that provides a present written entirely by us. Compare the more inclusive mission statement of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network to that of the aforementioned Autism Speaks.

“The Autistic Self Advocacy Network seeks to advance the principles of the disability rights movement with regard to autism. ASAN believes that the goal of autism advocacy should be a world in which autistic people enjoy equal access, rights, and opportunities. We work to empower autistic people across the world to take control of our own lives and the future of our common community, and seek to organize the autistic community to ensure our voices are heard in the national conversation about us. Nothing About Us, Without Us!”10

This disability rights movement ASAN speaks of came to fruition during the 1970’s and focused on creating awareness of the ways society privileged able bodied citizens while frequently limiting the freedoms and dignities of those who lived with a disability. One example of this is “The Fundamental Principles of Disability”, a document created in 1975 as a kind of declaration of the requirements of this new disability movement and its focus on the social aspects of disability that have to be addressed (i.e. depiction in media, comfort getting in and out of common spaces, and general treatment in jobs, businesses, home life, hospitals, etc.).

“Fundamental principles to which we are...in agreement: disability is a situation, caused by social conditions, which requires for its elimination, (a) that no one aspect such as incomes, mobility or institutions is treated in isolation, (b) that disabled people should, with the advice and help of others, assume control over their own lives, and (c) that professionals, experts and others who seek to help must be committed to promoting such control by disabled people.”11

Instantaneous technologies which are easily accessible for a diverse group of people have only made these goals louder as more people in different communities finally have the ability to use/create platforms where their messages can spread to a wider audience. We can see this reflected in the goals of ASAN, as well as in the endless spaces in the 21st century which prioritize the often-misplaced autistic voice above all else.

As we move away from this brief history and move into actually structuring a canon for the autistic community in our second section, we need to understand that the autistic community is itself a new option that the majority of our history has lacked. In establishing a cinematic canon for our benefit, it’s important to note that our history (and “cinema”) has frequently lacked our identity, and our pleasures in recent history have come from establishing our nuances and complexities unbound by earlier routes. This cinematic canon must express this new lack of limitation, this new finding of community, and this deconstruction of earlier methods used to decenter ourselves. It must offer a fluidity to our identity that outsider narratives and definitions have often been unable to comprehend.

Part Two: “Ah, Making a List”

Very recently, I’ve been going through the music publication *Pitchfork’s* 2017 list of “The 200 Greatest Albums of the 1960’s”. As someone who consumes a lot of music, but not to the extent that I do with films, I find lists like this extremely helpful in determining what I should or shouldn’t listen to. Methodically listening to every album on this list over the past few months (to the point where I’ve gone to record stores to find copies of music unavailable in a digital format) has been a deeply rewarding experience thanks to how many different genres and artistic movements the publication chose to include in curating this canon. It’s given me the ability to finally listen to the more iconic albums of beloved, popular acts of the decade I hadn’t heard before like Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, and The Impressions, but I’ve also been able to discover incredible recordings I never would’ve considered prior to examining this catalogue: compilations of American experimental music of the era, compilations of Gamelan gong kebyar music from Indonesia, incredible free jazz musicians like Sonny Sharrock and Don Cherry, and underappreciated singer/songwriters like Mickey Newbury and Buffy Sainte-Marie, just to name a few. Thanks to the detailed, extensive range of records *Pitchfork* put together for this list, their project has given me a richer understanding of the different music scenes happening internationally throughout the 1960’s, all while introducing me to amazing songs and albums I never would’ve considered prior to this canon that I now include in my own collections of favorite music. It’s something that’s been both extremely informative and extremely pleasurable.

At their best, this *Pitchfork* list exemplifies what canons allow for in different mediums. For outsiders, and insiders, of an art form, the creation of these collections is helpful in drawing attention to the works they should be on the lookout for in order to understand a chosen subject.
further. The chosen subject can be something vast like a canon highlighting the “best” movies or music of all time, but it can also recommend something more niche; like the best music of a single decade, or the best films of a single director or artistic movement. For the people and organizations creating these canons, the act of canonizing allows for them to use their knowledge and interests to create a collection of pieces that they wish to share to a larger audience in order to express their love of a subject and hopefully, get others interested in their specific passions. This process of canon building can be seen in the structuring of lists like the ones Pitchfork makes, but it can also be expressed in other acts: books created by critics examining different works throughout, programs curated at various festivals and screenings, and the collections displayed at libraries and stores. If you’ve ever gone to a bar and asked the bartender for their recommendations, you are collaborating in the joy of a kind of canon creation.

Creating a canon for autistic cinema ideally allows for the same benefit. It can be a collection of movies that both autistic and non-autistic viewers can go to if they want to understand more about autism on film. However, for numerous reasons mentioned in the previous section, applying a traditional method to an autistic canon based on a more rigid set of rules about what is or isn’t autistic representation can be difficult if the end goal is to “understand” autism. Not all of these films are fully terrible and even some of the terrible ones (like the campy, Nintendo inundated The Wizard) can still be fun to watch. There are also some examples of works (even with non-autistic writers and performers) that do their research or still tap into some area of the autistic community that we can find identification or empowerment in (while autism is never directly mentioned, Paul Thomas Anderson’s 2002 film Punch Drunk Love comes to mind). But ultimately, we can’t base an autistic film canon off of this because so
much of it is based on systems of knowledge surrounding autism that have long served to marginalize autistic people from their own stories; whether that be the speculation and gawking of the psychologists of the 1950’s or the heavy-handed condescension of more recent parents advocate groups. Still, there are a number of different areas of research we can consider to create a precedent for an autistic canon which is far looser in form.

A relatively new area of research has been found in the development of the concept of neuroqueer. Terms like “neurodivergent” and “neurotypical” have been around for some time to help label our differences, but what neuroqueer specifically sets out to do is compare and link the experiences of the autistic community with that of the queer community. One of the developers of this term, M. Remi Yergeau, elaborates on what this could allow for in their book Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness. You can observe neuroqueer history in the shared experiences and persecution of the two groups throughout their histories. Panics in nineteenth century science that made people fear both “the feeble minded and sexual deviance.”  

Behavioral therapy being used as a tool to “correct” people who don’t conform in their gender and/or sexuality, as well as people with autistic traits that need to be fixed in order to normalize them in relation to their neurotypical peers. Yergeau also states that neuroqueerness could potentially be found “in the self-identifications of autistic people, who, anecdotally, have a far higher preponderance of queer identifications than do non-autistic populations.”  

While all of these points are compelling (and while speculative, it is worth noting that the majority of

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13 Yergeau, Authoring Autism, 26.
autistic writers I will reference, including myself and Yergeau, also happen to be queer), the thing Yergeau discusses that could be particularly helpful in creating an autistic film canon is in the literal concept of queering.

The hints for what queering allows for are present in the use of the term “queer” itself. Long used a label of disrespect by outsiders, the recontextualization “queer” has taken on suggests an embrace of an aspect of the LGBTQIA+ community that was long considered abject and vulgar by a mainstream, heteronormative culture. It is an acceptance of an inability to fall into conventional societal norms and the decision to instead live by your own set of rules and patterns that exist untethered and unbound by these regulations (“I don't need you to respect me, I respect me. I don't need you to love me, I love me”\(^\text{14}\)). Filmically, a “queer” cinema can be seen as applying similar tenets to the conventional principles of the dominant Hollywood apparatus. To focus on lifestyles and behaviors seen as too “upsetting” to a traditional audience, in a manner which is itself upsetting the rules of storytelling and filmmaking that these traditional films regularly follow. As just one example, think of Todd Haynes’ 1991 debut feature *Poison*. On one hand, Haynes breaks Hollywood convention by using imagery and presenting actions that would be considered too risqué for a large studio film; graphic depictions of sex between men, a 1950’s B-movie inspired section that literalizes the AIDS epidemic as a monstrous, ravenous disease, and a drawn-out, sensually shot sequence where different men come together to spit on the body of another man. However, Haynes also breaks convention in the structure of the film itself, in how it differs from Hollywood convention; bouncing back and forth between

three totally disconnected storylines which he shoots in different ways reminiscent of completely dissimilar genres (a mockumentary mimicking the style of a tabloid news report, a campy black and white horror movie of the 1950’s, and a brooding prison drama). B. Ruby Rich summarizes it best in her 1992 article commenting on the rise of diverse, queer independent cinema being presented at a number of film festivals; “the new queer films and videos aren’t all the same, and don’t share a single aesthetic vocabulary or strategy or concern. Yet they are nonetheless united by a common style. Call it ‘Homo Porno’: there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitively breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive. Above all, they’re full of pleasure.”15

For Yergeau, queering takes on a similar degree of pleasure for the autistic community by applying this tactic to the behavioral traits of autistic people that have been referenced throughout this paper and have been viewed as unseemly and in need of a fix by many of the same organizations and systems that also viewed “sexual deviance” as something unseemly and in need of a fix. In neuroqueering, we allow ourselves the visibility of our disorder, and we allow our traits to shape the stories we tell, the ideas we communicate, and the movements we take without fear of acceptance or understanding to a larger neurotypical system. “To compose is to comply; to teach is to inculcate compliance. Conversely, queering, as (Jonathan) Alexander maintains, ‘confronts all of us with the incommensurabilities of desires and identities and

socialities”.16 What nueroqueer potentially allows for is the creation of an autistic film canon that can be built within the same structure, or lack of it as Yergeau argues. A record made entirely of scratches, where no clear notes or obvious rhythms or patterns need to be made audible. “If clinical discourse is...storied around rhetorics of ‘scientific sadness’, then autistic rhetorics, in all of their contrastive resonances, queer the motifs, structures, modes, and commonplaces of what nonautistics have come to narrate and hereby know about autism. To author autistically is to author queerly and contrarily.”17

While an end goal is an autistic canon dominated largely by works made by autistic people, this movement is still in its beginning stages and lacks the expansive, diverse abundancy that something like a queer film canon can offer. Where queer cinema started in Hollywood largely portraying negative stereotypes that didn’t reflect/weren’t told by the community itself, there is an expansion of queer cinema that has grown from the late 20th century and has flourished into an endless variety of genres, forms, and festivals. An autistic cinema is largely not at that level. There has been no “New Queer Cinema” movement for the autistic film, no wide variety of mainstream representations that vary heavily from work to work, or massive, well-funded festivals dedicated entirely to our cinema. The only one, Autfest Texas, is a smaller program which was only able to show a limited number of independent short films and one feature length documentary work just this past year. This is deeply admirable, and it shouldn’t be diminished what is being done here (especially since so many of the works in their program are

17 Yergeau, Authoring Autism, 6.
made by autistic artists) but what is being done here is still small-scale and it’s far from enough in comparison to the endless barrage of bad tropes and archetypes elevated by mass media. It’s also worth mentioning that Autfest is run by the Autism Society of America, an organization which has recently been working to improve and move away from their long history of promoting long discredited links of vaccines to autism.

One thing we can look at with queer film’s history is its legacy of decontextualizing mainstream Hollywood cinema in order to fit the community’s needs. In Robin Wood’s 1978 piece for Film Comment, *Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic*, Wood examines how the classic movies of Howard Hawks, a heterosexual director who made westerns, comedies, and adventure pictures with seemingly no “canonical” queer characters, relates heavily to his own experience of being a queer man. Hawks’ depictions of communal groups formed on the outskirts of society away from traditional expectations of family and married life (the cowboys of *Rio Bravo*, the pilots of *Only Angels Have Wings*), and the shifts male and female characters in his movie have from conventional gender roles (the more “masculinized” personas of Jane Russell in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* or Angie Dickinson in *Rio Bravo* and the more “feminized” persona of Cary Grant in *Bringing up Baby*). Wood concludes by saying that “the logical end of the characterizing tendencies of Hawks's work is bisexuality: the ultimate overthrow of social order, and the essential meaning of the chaos the films both fear and celebrate. Ultimately it is always contained (Andrew Britton would say "repressed") within Hawks's classicism, which is also the
classicism of pre-Sixties Hollywood. Yet it seems to me nevertheless the secret source of the oeuvre's richness, vitality, and fascination.”18

We can also look to the larger queering of *The Wizard of Oz*; a film with no directly queer characters that has become a staple of queer terminology (“friends of Dorothy”) and iconography (the cult status of the film’s lead actress Judy Garland) because of its story of escaping home and going to a new, fantastical world of seemingly limitless possibility. In an early queer cinema where many of the “canonical” depictions of queerness relied on tropes of self-loathing and a number of the other tropes we’ve found in autistic cinema; there is a pleasure in queering the escapist cinema that isn’t tethered to the “realism” or pain of more definitive imagery. Wood himself uses his article to attack the contemporary queer representation in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s cinema which he sees as melodramatic pabulum reinforcing painful, ugly stereotypes about the community, instead finding more queer solidarity in Jean Luc-Godard’s *Tout Va Bien*. Here, we find Wood making the argument for a queer canon which can be applied to an autistic film canon, that ignores *Rain Man* in favor of something perhaps not as “canonical” but perhaps more pleasurable and empowering.

“The other type of gay critic places the emphasis strongly, sometimes exclusively, on ‘gay,’ and concerns himself strictly with works that have direct bearing on gayness, approaching them from a political-propagandist viewpoint: do they or do they not further the gay cause? He will find it necessary to review Fassbinder’s *Fox (and Friends)*, but will probably ignore Godard's *Tout Va Bien*. My choice of examples here is not arbitrary. The objection to such criticism is not merely

that it is aesthetically restrictive but that it implies an inadequate, and insufficiently radical, grasp
of what the Gay Liberation Movement stands for at its best, of its more general social
significance. Godard's film, in which gayness is nowhere alluded to, seems to me to have far
greater positive importance for Gay Liberation than Fassbinder's sour determinism, with its
incidental reinforcing of gay stereotypes for the bourgeois audience (‘the truth about the
homosexual milieu,’ as the English Establishment critics greeted it).”

While I have some trepidation with Wood’s view of Fassbinder and “negative” depictions
of queerness (I would personally argue the act of erasing depictions of queerness that showcase
painful or complicated aspects of queer identity can itself be another tool of conformity for the
bourgeois), his efforts to shift queer cinema from having to follow an “objective” canon which
only adheres to deliberate representations of homosexuality on screen are extremely pivotal both
for larger queer film theory, and for understanding what can be done by autistic cinephiles and
filmmakers. It breaks the traditional rules of canons or genres which suggest labeling different
types of films under stricter definitions; i.e. westerns can only equal a certain set of films that
follow a certain set of rules (The Searchers, Rio Bravo, and High Noon are westerns while
Desert Hearts, Paris, Texas, and The Power of the Dog aren’t), and “canonized” lists of the
greatest films like the American Film Institute’s “100 Greatest Movies of All Time” are
obligated to include a certain set of films that cover “important” areas of popular culture
(obvious mainstream successes like Titanic and Star Wars, as well as already widely canonized
classics like The Godfather, Citizen Kane, and Casablanca).

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19 Wood, Film Comment.
Critic Jonathan Rosenbaum’s book *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons* further admonishes American Film Institute’s list by writing that it’s the responsibility of critics to use canons in a way that lacks clear boundaries between high and low culture, feature and short length works, and the films that have or haven’t already been canonized by wider culture. He argues that modern lists like that of AFI (aired on ABC and only allowing for the selection of “Hollywood” movies) spend too much time prioritizing only a certain set of films readily available or well-known to a mainstream film culture. For Rosenbaum, it is the responsibility of critics and other organizations to create their own canons which combat mainstream, hegemonic expectations and focus on highlighting films which are personal, constantly evolving, and “pleasurable”. A widely known, highly canonized film like *Rear Window* has as much value as a more obscured, less discussed movie like *A Tale of the Wind* within the canon he builds.  

Rosenbaum’s view of the canon is one of constant exploration, filled with collaboration between cinema modes and cinephiles.

There’s also the question of whether genres themselves, the most widely accepted examples of cinematic labeling dating back to the Golden Age of Hollywood, are as clearly placed as they appear. Rick Altman’s *Film/Genre* argues otherwise, using his book to show that many of the classic genres the studio system relied on only came to fruition during their decline when the films could be looked at from a distance; not as a result of clever, thought out marketing or organization. In his section “What role do genres play in the viewing process?”, he examines how the purpose genres often truly serve is in creating community for the spectator. In

observing movies that fall within these specific tropes and labels, the viewer is allowed to believe in this communal fantasy that is otherwise nonexistent. I am participating in watching a noir, this unites me with a group of people who are like me who also seek out the specific thrills that noir allows for that might differ from the romantic comedy or the melodrama.\textsuperscript{21} This view of genre is one that can be seen as a kind of cult study of cinema, where the audience and the film itself are equally important to the analysis of the other. Where the space of the cinema is one of both individual and communal uplift for everyone involved. If a group of people that identify as autistic are watching a movie with an autistic character that they don’t enjoy because it doesn’t connect to their experience or provide any kind of pleasure or value to them (like many of the films featured last section), is it fair to call it autistic cinema? In different ways, Rick Altman and Robin Wood would argue it’s not.

As we enter into the final sections of this paper which will focus on the autistic film canon itself, this section has served to present the bedrock that this canon will be placed on. A formula which can be explained using a set of rules.

1. In a more conventional format, an autistic film canon based solely on “representation” is limiting for those on the spectrum because most of the mainstream depictions of autism lack authorial control by autistic people and reinforce negative, regressive stereotypes of the disorder for the consumption of a non-autistic audience. A movement to combat these

harmful stereotypes by creating images from within the community is still in its
beginning stages.

2. A more subjective autistic film canon can find its roots in queer film’s history of
embracing “non-representative” films as queer and telling independent, deliberately
transgressive stories that go against a larger history in cinema that enforced lazy,
recessive stereotypes from outside the community. Furthermore, the act of “queering”
can be related to the creation of a looser, more flexible canon; especially in looking at the
recent development of the “nueroqueer” term linking the two identities.

3. More conservatively formed canons (and within that, genres) are themselves deeply
subjective and it is the job of critics and communities to bend these mechanisms to their
advantage rather than letting larger systems and studios be the sole proprietors of these
devices. This can be found in cult screenings, personal film canons, and in the case of this
article, a new canon for the autistic community.
Part Three: “Lifting My Head, Looking Around Inside”

In November of 2020, the pop musician Sia released the trailer for her directorial debut feature *Music*. The film follows a number of the tropes that have come to be associated with an outsider depiction of autism in a mainstream movie. It follows an ex-drug dealing young woman (played by Kate Hudson) who is trying to get her life together by taking care of her non-verbal autistic half-sister Music (played by non-autistic actress Maddie Ziegler). Ziegler’s imitations of autism in the film border on parody with over the top, eccentric spasms and quirky facial expressions (with the occasional big meltdown) that are supposed to mimic an extreme version of autism that a traditional audience has come to expect from depictions of mental illness on screen (*I am Sam*, *Forrest Gump*, the parody “Simple Jack” from the film *Tropic Thunder*). Expectedly, the film is largely from the perspective of Kate Hudson’s character and shows her progression as a person as she learns to take care of her sister. Additionally, bright, over the top musical numbers throughout the film take place from inside Music’s head to showcase how she views the world.

For many reasons, *Music* seemed like the culmination of every autistic “representation” to come before it. Autism is represented as an infantilized disorder where every aspect of the disorder is heightened and distorted by non-autistic writers and actors alike. Autism is depicted through wild, larger than life methods that border on inhuman acts of wonder for entertainment’s sake. Autism is witnessed through a “normal” surrogate that a neurotypical viewer can latch onto. And, in what is a strong contender for the most controversial decision Sia made, the film features a scene where Music is prone restrained by her older sister during a meltdown in a tactic
that is supposed to calm her down. The positively represented tactic (“where a person’s face and frontal part of his or her body is placed in a downward position touching any surface for any amount of time”\textsuperscript{22}) has proven to not only be unhelpful in stopping meltdowns, but has actually proven to lead to many autistic individuals having PTSD afterwards, with some incidents where it’s used even leading to suffocation or death.

Sia isn’t necessarily doing anything new; it’s based on countless tropes from movies that no doubt shaped her view of what autism was and presumably led her to believe that what she was doing here would receive commercial and critical accolade. What differs though is the sheer amount of righteous anger the project immediately received throughout the internet. As soon as the trailer dropped, it quickly went viral with thousands of autistic people taking to social media to vehemently dissect and attack the old hat renderings of autism Music provoked. Sia reacted negatively on Twitter; first accusing people of criticizing the movie prior to watching it.\textsuperscript{23} Then, arguing that what she was doing was fine because she “cast thirteen neuroatypical people, three trans folk, and not as...prostitutes or drug addicts but as doctors, nurses and singers.”\textsuperscript{24} After an autistic actor stated that she, or any number of autistic actors, could’ve taken the autistic parts in the film that were played by non-autists and accused Sia of putting in no effort in casting, Sia responded “maybe you’re just a bad actor.”\textsuperscript{25} In the aftermath, Sia put out an apology for her

\textsuperscript{23} Sia [@Sia]. “Grrrrrrrrrr. Fuckity fuck why don’t you watch my film before you judge it? FURY.” 20 November 2020, Twitter.com.
\textsuperscript{24} Sia [@Sia]. Twitter.com.
\textsuperscript{25} Sia [@Sia]. Twitter.com.
behavior, stated she should’ve done better research for her film, and briefly deleted her Twitter account. But the damage was already done; Intense backlash from the community only continued to spread with the release of the movie and the film was panned by both autistic and non-autistic critics and audiences. The film garnered a 7% critical score and a 14% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes, going on to win three Razzie awards for Worst Director, Worst Actress, and Worst Supporting Actress (for Sia, Kate Hudson, and Maddie Ziegler respectively). You can’t search for the film on sites like Twitter or YouTube without finding a barrage of posts dedicated to lambasting the movie. Multiple self-advocacy organizations denounced the film as harmful propaganda, with even Autism Speaks having to put out a statement distancing themselves from Music after Sia claimed she used them as research for her project. As of writing this, Music remains one of the twenty lowest rated movies on the film social networking platform Letterboxd, with most of popular reviews of the film coming from either autistic critics explaining their anger at the movie, or reviewers simply stating, “maybe you’re just a bad director”\(^{26}\) or even more simply, “fuck you.”\(^{27}\)

Movies like Music have been getting made by studios for decades; Sia is far from the only one complicit in the tropes she used to make her movie. And yet, there was obviously a major difference in the response her film received in comparison to the response Rain Man or even something more recent like Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close received. These films absolutely had their critics upon release, but in relation these films still received awards and


mostly did well with mainstream audiences at the box office. *Music* received a massive, all-encompassing level of vitriol just on the release of its first trailer that overwhelmed any potential this film had of crossing over to mainstream audiences. And, it eventually helped lead to the film being viewed as a disastrous, ill-advised inferno to scare off any filmmakers interested in telling a similar story using similar methods. How can we account for this? What changed? For starters, this incident reflects the extreme growth of self-advocacy in the autistic movement within the millennium. In particular, it highlights how autistic advocates have strategically used the internet (and the accessibility that comes from the virtual, seemingly boundless landscapes of social media) to get attention directed towards their goals and get people talking on a wider scale (to the point where even non-autistic people can now recognize and also help criticize the negative tropes found in a film like *Music*). An out, active, thriving community now exists which is finally loud enough to combat hack, lazy stereotypes that would’ve been easily passed along in earlier decades. It’s hard not to view *Music* as a turning point in the way a film like William Friedkin’s *Cruising* was for the queer community in 1980, where large queer activist groups popped up at theaters and studios to loudly protest the project and force mainstream media to pay attention to a collective anger at past and present negative stereotypes of the community.

More specifically, the reaction to the film especially on Letterboxd brings light to the growth of autistic writers bringing their own experiences to discussing film and actively rejecting the conventional autistic canon placed out for them. Autistic cinephiles can use their accounts to condemn an ablest depiction of their identity, then use these accounts to draw attention to the films that actually matter to them. Writers like Aaron Murray and Chelsea Mackerel opened up to their readers about their experiences with autism in order to discuss how *Music* failed these
lived experiences in a number of ways. Many of these reviews by autistic critics follow similar patterns. There’s discussion of what is was like growing up on the spectrum and how their version of the disorder has given them different perceptions of the world (difficulty with sensory issues, trouble interacting in social situations, PTSD from prone restraint, etc.), there’s anger at the inept methods Sia used in her film to depict autism (Murray calls her “a scumbag that wanted to use people like me so she could look like a hero. A shining saviour for representation of my community no matter how shallow it really is”\(^\text{28}\)), and finally there’s the hope that they can eventually create art in the future which better presents the disorder for the community. Mackerel specifically ends her review by stating “my anger, disappointment, frustration, and sadness do not compare to how determined I am in this moment: to grow up, attend film school, learn everything I can, and finally make some worthy goddamn movies about autistic girls.”\(^\text{29}\) Looking at both of these accounts, we see the platform being used to draw collective outrage at a film like *Music* which unites the community in frustration. But perhaps more importantly, both of these accounts largely serve the personal comfort and expression of their users. A majority of Murray and Mackerel’s reviews aren’t constantly tied down to mentioning autism directly within their writings, with most of their other more popular reviews simply discussing films they did or didn’t like. One of Murray’s top reviews on the site outside of his piece on *Music* is one where he writes about his enthusiasm for the new *Sopranos* movie *The Many Saints of Newark*, whereas Mackerel’s top reviews are joke posts for films like an Ariana Grande concert documentary and


a live recording of a Grinch musical. There are critics on the site like Logan Kenny or Jaime Rebanal who choose to discuss autism more openly in a larger number of their writings. Kenny has extensively written for various websites about different films which he connects to his experience with the disorder like Uncut Gems or Kimi. Rebanal has written similarly on Letterboxd about their experiences with autism from the perspective of a film like The Apartment, while also helping to run Cinema from the Spectrum, a blog more directly focused on highlighting the work of autistic film critics. A system like Letterboxd allows for this freedom in the diversity of autistic visibility. Posts can serve a more activist, communal goal, but aren’t tethered to one purpose. Critics can use their writings to make their disorder visible in expressing their love or hate of different movies directly or non-directly attached to their place on the spectrum, but they can also simply choose to just write about different movies they love or hate freed from having to constantly present/discuss autism in 100% of their work. A site like Letterboxd allows for this ambiguity and complexity within the autistic community that is missing in previous decades of speculation about autism, and is certainly missing from previous decades of filmic representation.

In 2020, Logan Kenny created a film canon for his autism on Letterboxd when he posted a list to the site titled “autistic canon”. He states ahead of the list that the films he has selected don’t “have to be explicitly about autistic people”, but rather, “are the movies that capture the existence of being autistic to me.”30 Some of the films feature characters with autism or a different kind of neurodivergent disorder (Punch-Drunk Love, On Body and Soul, The Girl with

the Dragon Tattoo) but his canon also includes films that seemingly have nothing to do with autism, like the Tony Scott directed sci-fi action film Déjà Vu or the Studio Ghibli anime Kiki's Delivery Service. Films in Kenny’s personal canon can feature autism, or feature characters going through experiences adjacent to his version of autism, but aren’t limited simply to these confines. Kenny’s autistic canon also gives space to the films that give him pleasure or catharsis, regardless of how much or how little the individual pieces of the film explicitly showcase autism. It is autistic expression, for the sole purpose of the expresser. Other writers on the site have taken Kenny’s idea and run with it, creating their own film canons to reflect their version of autism. User Enric’s list includes non-canonical films like Pather Panchali or Ghostbusters, while the user Reid includes films like Venom or Pride & Prejudice. These films widely have nothing to do with one another, taking on different genres, modes, and spaces in film history; and yet somehow, they can all be placed into an autistic canon.

There are methods we can use to consider what kinds of films could make up this sort of canon. We can analyze deliberate techniques in sound, cinematography, and editing; techniques that can often help convey the feeling of sensory overload many autistic people deal with in their surroundings. Kenny writes about this in his review for the 2019 crime drama Uncut Gems (Dir. Josh Safdie and Benny Safdie), a film about a high stakes sports gambler with a pension for making bad, last minute decisions to win big. The movie includes near constant noise from different characters shouting over one another to reflect the daily stress of his life, filled out with

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an intense, pulsing electronic soundtrack throughout which also helps provoke the feeling of being immersed in a world that is unrelenting in its stimulations. The Safdie Brothers also rely on quick edits, shaky camerawork, extreme lighting, and endless close-ups to further express this sense of persistent sensory overload that goes on in their character’s life. In Kenny’s review for The Film Stage, he suggests that “each element of the film comes together in harmony to create one of the definitive portrayals of an autistic meltdown in recent memory. The entire feeling of the film is constantly being on the verge of total collapse, with every mistake and regret you’ve ever made creeping up on you with malicious intensity. The sensation of letting your battle with your own mind fade and succumbing to whatever comes after has never been captured so efficiently than it has here.” Autism is never mentioned in the film, and yet Uncut Gems garners this praise from Kenny by connecting to a sensory experience of autism in the methods it uses to showcase stress. We can also look for a potential method in the stories themselves. Like Uncut Gems, we can focus on stories of characters with obsessive tendencies, sensory problems, and troubles communicating with others. Stories of aliens or robots can also be potentially useful tropes to examine for the way these works often focus on fish out of water scenarios with characters interact withing worlds they struggle to understand or view in the same way as “normal” characters. These kinds of stories can also speak to the dehumanization of autistic people and the fight to be treated/perceived as a person rather than a sub-human. Clay Morton writes about this in relation to the 1982 science fiction film Blade Runner by using his article to compare the differences between how the film and the 1968 book the film is based on, Do

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*Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, depict their cyborg characters. Philip K. Dick’s original book largely focuses on cyborg characters as inhuman sociopaths incapable of expressing the same emotions as “real” human beings. Whereas, director Ridley Scott’s adaptation shows its cyborg characters often displaying more genuine emotion and empathy than the humans of the story, with the final arc of the story being the main character realizing the humanity of the robots he’s been hired to hunt down and quitting his job. Morton argues that the difference in how these stories navigate robots also showcase the differences in how autistic people were viewed in 1968 and 1982, with 1960’s discussions of autism centering on the sociopathy of autistic individuals and their lack of “regular” human components, while the 1980’s discussion of autism was the beginning of viewing autism as a spectrum and the people with the disorder as full human beings worthy of respect and dignity. “Dick's novel is a product of the same Zeitgeist that created infantile autism, a debilitating disorder for which institutionalization would likely be a necessity. Scott's film, on the other hand, is a product of the Zeitgeist that created an autism spectrum, the high-functioning end of which contains people who have difficulty with certain cognitive functions such as empathy but also extraordinary gifts that make meaningful contributions to humanity.”34 Again, autism is never mentioned in either of the stories, but the problems/discussions both of these works engage with can still be heavily compared to the stories of autistic identity and representation (in Kenny’s autistic canon, he includes the 2017 sequel film *Blade Runner 2049*).

But ultimately, this autistic canon doesn’t have to be tied to any specific principles or clear understandings. You can see yourself reflected in the storytelling or the filmmaking of a project, but it can also be something much simpler than that. For example, I love the film 2007 comedy *Hot Fuzz* (Dir. Edgar Wright). It’s a film that has nothing to do with autism, and I don’t relate any of my own experiences with autism to the story or any of the technical decisions Wright is making in his movie. However, it’s a film I’m deeply entertained by and it’s one of my ultimate comfort movies to watch when I’m stressed and need something that makes me happy. Because of that, *Hot Fuzz* is a movie that would be in my own autistic canon. This canon is both innate and unidentifiable. It encompasses the totality of a singular autistic individual, in order to help encompass the totality of the autistic community.

Like the canons of Rosenbaum or Wood, it is tied to neither direct patterns of logic nor direct representation. It queers (or more accurately, neuroqueers) hegemonic forms and assumptions; rhetoric that for centuries has been at the forefront of keeping a self-advocating group of autists from coming together. It stems from the freedoms of a postmodern, virtual landscape that doesn’t have to exist within these traditional boundaries, which has allowed for self-advocating (especially on film specific platforms) to grow exponentially and receive attention to our causes. This canon respects the ambiguity and spectrum of autism by allowing for the canon to be flexible with the individual creating said canon; creating a more united, loud filmic community through this embrace of individuality and rejecting the restrictions of a singular canon written by one author or organization. It’s capable of being articulated only by those with the disorder; nothing more, nothing less. Based on both a rejection of canons, and a
love of what canons accomplish in giving a voice to autistic cinephiles to express our love of film in a medium that’s widely never been able to love us back.
Conclusion: “I-I-I'm Still Waiting”

“I-I-I'm Still Waiting”

“Byrne has a withdrawn, disembodied, sci-fi quality, and though there’s something unknowable and almost autistic about him, he makes autism fun.”


I’d like to finish by returning to Stop Making Sense and using the information presented throughout to make a closing argument for the film’s placement into my personal canon. It’s a movie that technically has a simpler line to this kind of canon based on the fact that the man whose image and voice takes up the majority of documentary is canonically autistic. This also gives it a step ahead of most “canonical” autistic representations that don’t include voices that are authentically autistic. However, David Byrne didn’t come out as on the spectrum until decades after the release of the film, and because of that autism is never brought up in the film itself. The movie also differs from other music documentaries in that it includes nothing outside of the actual performance; no interviews, no set up, just a recording of Talking Heads performing spliced together from three back to back concerts the group did at the Hollywood Pantages Theatre in December 1983. So, even if Byrne had a diagnosis at the time of the film’s release, it’s unlikely it would’ve come up in the format Stop Making Sense takes on.

In whittling the film down to everything but the concert, Jonathan Demme and David Byrne construct a documentary that is performed and edited with both the mediums of cinema
and the stage in mind. It begins with David Byrne alone, playing an acoustic version of the song “Psycho Killer” as a crew of people surround him setting up the stage. The camera follows him as he moves around without the assistance of any other band member. While we know the show is being recorded in front of a live audience, the camera mostly doesn’t present them to us and it’s almost as if the performance is taking place in Byrne’s own world rather than one dictated by any of the other expectations of a traditional concert. In the next song, “Heaven”, Byrne is accompanied by bassist Tina Weymouth on the stage. Then, in the next song by drummer Chris Frantz. And then, by guitarist Jerry Harrison. As the songs are performed and band members are added, the film continues to cut off any views of the crowd as the crew continues to set up the stage behind the group. Additional musicians beyond the four band members continue to be added to each song with the final set up of the stage being the members of Talking Heads along with back-up singers Lynn Mabry and Ednah Holt, keyboardist Bernie Worrell, percussionist Steve Scales, and guitarist Alex Weir. The wider performance of the event emphasizes both unity and individuality. The set-up of the show allows each song to respect the contribution of the new performer, while what the concert eventually evolves into allows you to respect the larger music which comes from every piece finally being combined. The performers wear matching khaki colored clothing and have synchronized dance routines throughout the show. However, Byrne contradicts this by frequently creating his own specific dances to go to the songs that stand out from the rest of the artists on stage, like when he runs around during “Life During Wartime” or dances with a lamp during “This Must be the Place”. He also breaks from these matching clothes when he leaves during a song and comes back out wearing a giant, oversized suit to shake around in for the song “Girlfriend is Better”. With the act being recorded from different positions over
three separate nights, the film combines a number of different shots and angles to capture the performers. Some wide shots allow you to see the whole band perform from different sides, while Demme also regularly uses intimate close-ups of the band members at numerous points in the documentary. With the last number “Crosseyed and Painless”, the film finally allows you to see a full view of the large audience of the theatre; experienced in both extreme wide shots of the entire crowd and close-ups of single members of the audience dancing to the music. The climax of the song bounces back and forth between shots of different members of the band and the audience, all united by the high tempo track being played out on the stage. Byrne then brings out the entire crew who put the show together to be applauded by the crowd before they all wrap up the song and let the curtains close for the night.

As a piece of autistic cinema, *Stop Making Sense* is also a perfect representation of the autistic canon itself. The film celebrates and shows a genuine empathy for individual pieces of the performance, giving time for you to take in and appreciate why every part matters. In particular, the show and the film give space for Byrne to perform freely and express himself in whatever way he chooses; the spasms of his body, the wild decisions he makes with the stage, and the noises he creates are all given a deep focus and are rendered in a celebratory mode that he clearly has some control over. Intentionally or unintentionally, what is captured in this movie is autistic performance without the limitations of shame or outsider gawking that come with most depictions of autism on screen. We see the ability for someone with autism to nueroqueer the conventional boundaries of society within the warm, joyous space of the venue, where these aspects of the disorder cannot just be played out comfortably, but elevated to the rhythms of the music. And yet, it’s a movie that above all focuses on the power of community. Single acts of
skills or beauty throughout the show take on a greater meaning in the larger context of the performance, with musicians, crew members, and attendees joining forces to find a higher power in the compositions being played. It simultaneously prioritizes art as the beauty of the singular and the plural; it’s a film that sees music, and specifically the performing of music at a concert, as an experience defined by a love of being yourself and being a part of a larger unit. The autistic canon, elaborated on throughout this paper, functions in the same way. In opposition to earlier tactics in both autism’s larger history and its filmic history, it gives space for autistic members to create their own canons and in doing so, create their own histories, make their own movements, and tell their own stories. In doing this, these single canons create a larger canon that allows for the autistic community to be seen in all of its complexity and diversity, unbound to any concrete expectation of what an autistic person is supposed to look, sound, or act like. And, still functioning together and building a community uplifting one another’s strengths, weaknesses, and differences. We are not the same, nor do we create the same canon, but in combining pieces which are allowed these differences, we can empower one another, and form a canon that highlights this united instrumentation. We write, speculate, scream, dance, sob, and beat our hearts like a concert; the autistic canon the venue where anything can happen within.

But of course, the films in our autistic canons shouldn’t be tied solely to direct representation. So, it’s only fair I conclude by saying this about Stop Making Sense. Music has always been one of the outlets for my disorder. I like to use headphones in public as a way to give me a sensory barrier from others. Much like with film, I find comfort in listening to lots of varied sounds and ranking what I hear obsessively. When I was growing up, I used the privacy of my family’s garage to blast music on my headphones and go into my own world for extended
lengths of time. I’d shake, pace, bounce, and rock to the rhythm, sometimes repeating single parts of music for a long period. I remember doing this prior to even knowing I had autism, and after my diagnosis it became an even deeper way of going into my own space and letting go of the limitations I felt on my body in environments where I was terrified of my disorder, or my queerness, becoming visible or public. It’s this reason why I love going to concerts so much; because said restrictions are allowed to fall by the wayside. When I saw David Byrne for the first time in Stop Making Sense, something about my disorder clicked for me and felt represented on the screen in a way I had never seen before. Whereas earlier representations of autism largely had made me feel angry or embarrassed, Byrne in this film is in complete control and showcases himself with unfiltered beauty that dares to let go and do what he wants with his body, in the fun and comfort of the safe space the concert and the documentary offers him. As Kael mentioned in her original review, I like this movie because it is a depiction of autism which is fun. There’s no need for condescending rhetoric or drawn out explanation of who we are, just the total euphoria of letting go of yourself in the name of music and knowing that everyone around you is doing the same thing. This is the feeling I hope our canons can help us provide. Autism, as an act of total, uncompromising pleasure.
My Autistic Film Canon

- *The Best Years of Our Lives* (Dir. William Wyler, 1946)
- *The Big Lebowski* (Dir. Joel Coen, 1998)
- *Certain Women* (Dir. Kelly Reichardt, 2016)
- *Die Hard* (Dir. John McTiernan, 1988)
- *A Hard Day’s Night* (Dir. Richard Lester, 1964)
- *Hellzapoppin’* (Dir. H.C. Potter, 1941)
- *Hot Fuzz* (Dir. Edgar Wright, 2007)
- *House* (Dir. Nobuhiko Obayashi, 1977)
- *It’s Such a Beautiful Day* (Dir. Don Hertzfeldt, 2012)
- *Moonrise Kingdom* (Dir. Wes Anderson, 2012)
- *Nashville* (Dir. Robert Altman, 1975)
- *Paris, Texas* (Dir. Wym Wenders, 1984)
- *Porco Rosso* (Dir. Hayao Miyazai, 1992)
- *The Shining* (Dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1980)
- *Speed Racer* (Dir. The Wachowski’s, 2008)
- *Stop Making Sense* (Dir. Jonathan Demme, 1984)
- *Tropical Malady* (Dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004)
• *Vertigo* (Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)

• *Zodiac* (Dir. David Fincher, 2007)
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