

Who Hath Made Man's Mouth:

Exploring Autism Representation and its Eugenic Connections to Criminality Within the Realm
of Film and Media Culture

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Abstract

Meaning-making dynamics within and across workgroups: An inquiry into the creation and movement of usable knowledge in a long-term care facility in Ontario

Julio Lombardo, M.A.

Concordia University, 2025

This thesis explores the putative correlations between the modes of criminality and its correlations of historically depicting autism on screen in a negative light. By analyzing pro eugenic propaganda films, the essay argues there has been a consistent pathology which has over time developed into a caricature common described as the “creep”. The Thesis demonstrates how this unique trope continues to negatively influence the way we see autism in films and media by exploring different film representations which involve autistic coded characters.

Acknowledgements or Dedication

To God, who has walked beside throughout this entire journey and showed me the wisdom of how the last shall be first, and the first last. I pray this thesis will demonstrate how the works of God may truly be seen through the disability community and be light that will shine throughout the world. To my Mom and Dad and Brother Carlo, thank you for loving and supporting me throughout this entire journey. Carlo and I would not be where we are today if it were not for your love and encouragement to defy the odds and achieve our higher education. Finally I would especially like to give a big special thank you to my thesis supervisor Erin Manning, who has guided me throughout my thesis journey and has taught me so much about neurodiversity and about life. Erin I hope I can inspire to be a great professor like you one day as you have shown me what it truly means to be human.

Table of Contents

Prelude: A brief confession from the author before we depart	vii
Introduction:.....	1
Chapter 1: The Black Stork/Tomorrow's Children and the Neurotypical American Family	13
How "The Black Stork" influenced politics in early 20 th century eugenic films:	14
The Black Stork's Transition from Boyhood and Manhood:.....	22
Eugenics Debates within the Studio Hollywood era of Cinema (Tomorrow's Children):	27
Conclusion:	38
Chapter 2: The Creature and the Crime against humanity	41
Eugenics Influences within the Monster/Horror Genre and Frankenstein:	41
Blackness, Frankenstein and the "voice":.....	52
Frankenstein, Blackness, and the use of Language:.....	64
Conclusion:	78
Chapter 3: How Lack of Gemüt Still Presents Itself in Modern Film's Featuring ASD	80
The Fanatic, Horror Films, and the Subnormal Family:	89
Moose's Childhood and the Subnormal Family:	91
The Fanatic: Stalking and Autism, and "Mindblindness"	104
The Night Clerk: A Modern Narrative from a New Hut.....	111
Violence and Autism:	123
Conclusion:	127
Conclusion: How Eugenics and the Creep Trope Still Presents Itself in Contemporary Media	130
Epilogue: A Message from the Author	148
Bibliography:	152

Table of Figures

Chapter 1: The Black Stork/Tomorrow's Children and the Neurotypical American Family

Fig. 1.	19
Fig. 2.	20
Fig. 3.	23
Fig. 4.	25
Fig. 5.	25
Fig. 6.	34
Fig. 7.	35
Fig. 8.	35
Fig. 9.	36
Fig. 10.	37

Chapter 2: The Creature and the Crime against humanity 41

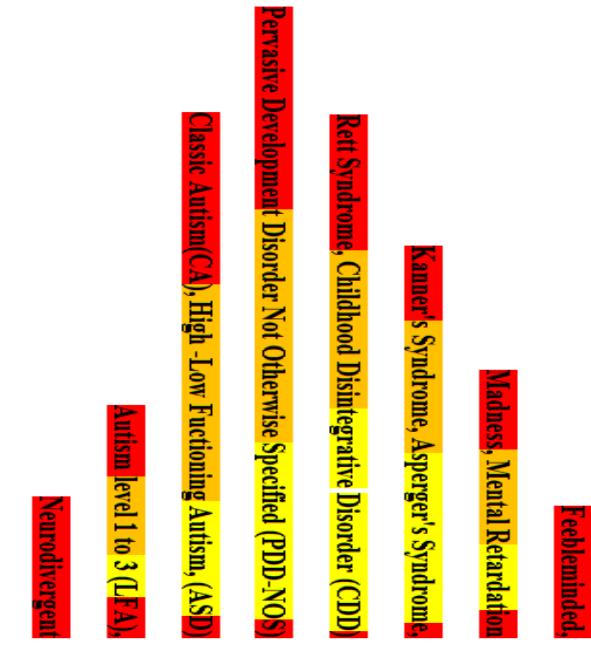
Fig. 11.	46
Fig. 12.	47
Fig. 13.	47
Fig. 14.	52
Fig. 15.	62
Fig. 16.	63
Fig. 17.	66
Fig. 18.	66
Fig. 19.	70
Fig. 20.	72
Fig. 21.	72
Fig. 22.	75

Chapter 3: How Lack of Gemüt Still Presents Itself in Modern Film's Featuring ASD 80

Fig. 23.	84
Fig. 24.	89
Fig. 25.	92
Fig. 26.	93
Fig. 27.	97

Fig. 28	112
Fig. 29	113
Fig.30	121
Fig.31	126
Fig.32	127
Conclusion: How Eugenics and the Creep Trope Still Presents Itself in Contemporary Media.....	130
Fig.33	133
Fig.34.	134
Fig.35	144
Fig.36	144
Fig.37.	145
Fig.38	146

Prelude: A brief confession from the author before we depart



Above are the names bestowed on the children time has forgotten. These labels have dwelt among us for a long time, and have been the result of much prejudice. They have also historically contributed to mass exterminations of thousands of innocent lives. All because of a label, or as I will soon argue in my thesis, an assumption.

There has also been an idea that has been propagated through western media, that neurodivergent people are fruitful, prolific, and are accepted within mainstream society. The assumption is that because autistic diagnoses have been increasing within the past couple years, eventually there will be more tribes of neurodiverse individuals than, there will be of neurotypicals.

I must confess to the reader, being diagnosed as an autistic individual; I have hesitated writing this prelude out of fear that I will somehow be labeled and put in a box that I do not identify with anymore. If anything, I sincerely hope my research can offer something new in the ever-growing

discussions surrounding neurodiversity representation. Perhaps one of the reasons I still feel this hesitation stems from constantly being pathologized by my neurological condition, my autism used to explain underling issues at odds with the normopathic public.

I would like to propose an idea. Below I have left a relic from my past which carries a stigmatization which has pathologized me for years. Such a label has benefited me while also inclosing myself from ever extending the barriers of who I can become. Below I have left my official ASD diagnoses which I received when I was 11 years old. It is five pages. Five pages that claim to know who I am. Some see it as a blessing, others as a prison sentence. If there is anything I wish to prove throughout my thesis, it is that a diagnosis has the power to either benefit or as we will soon see, stereotype every facet of your entire autonomy. It is with this spirit that I gladly share my diagnoses, as I would like the reader to see how I do not identify with the symptoms this label entails. Inspired by one of my favorite biblical verses from the book of Exodus, I have dedicated my thesis on the bases of asking the reader, “Who gives one person speech? Who makes another mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?” (Exodus 4:11, USCCB). This is not to say I don’t identify as being neurodiverse, rather I want to assert that just like any other body, I too have changed and have grown into different modes of being. Like a faint whisper, I can still hear the proliferated assumptions of my identity call me...

...Here I am.



**AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS PROGRAM
DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT CLINIC**

DATE: MARCH 27, 2007

PATIENT IDENTIFICATION

Name: Lombardo, Julio
DOB: 95/08/04
Age: 11 years, 4 months

Date: March 27, 2007

Hospital #: [REDACTED]

Referral Source: [REDACTED]

Daycare/ School Attended: [REDACTED]

Identification of those present at the interview:

Mrs. and Mr. Lombardo, julio, [REDACTED]

FAMILY CONCERNS

Julio has an older brother with Autism, and mother is concerned as Julio exhibits similar behaviours, and he is working at a grade three level at school.

PREVIOUS EVALUATIONS & INTERVENTIONS

1. [REDACTED] – Psychologist – ADI and ADOS Module 4 – Feb. 2007 – referral to ASDP.
2. Diagnosed with Global Developmental Delay at MCH age 2.5
3. [REDACTED] – 2004,2005 – Learning Difficulties assessment using the NEPSY. She recommended smaller class size, individual attention and structured behaviour modification.
4. Concordia University – WISC – III – average range.

FAMILY

Family Composition

	AGE	EDUCATION	OCCUPATION	ETHNICITY
FATHER	50	College diploma	cook	Italian
MOTHER	45	High school	Homemaker	Italian
SIBLINGS	14	Summit School	student	

Family History

Julio's older brother has been diagnosed with Autism

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



OBSTETRIC HISTORY

Pregnancy Complications: 2nd trimester hemorrhaging (19 weeks) then again at 31 weeks.

ILLNESS	MEDICATIONS	SMOKING	ALCOHOL USE	SUBSTANCE USE
none	General anesthetic at delivery	None	None	None

BIRTH HISTORY

GESTATIONAL AGE	MODE OF DELIVERY	DELIVERY COMPLICATIONS	BIRTH WEIGHT	APGAR SCORE
37 weeks	C-Section	3/7 at NICU JGH, required O2	7lbs	8,9

DEVELOPMENTAL HISTORY

MILESTONES

	SIT ALONE	WALK ALONE	SINGLE WORD (apart from Mama/Dada)	PHRASE SPEECH	TOILET TRAIN
AGE ACHIEVED	4 MONTHS	12 MOS	2 YEARS	2.5 YEARS	

FIRST CONCERNS

Parent became concerned because Julio was not speaking and not responding to name being called at 18 months, and also had poor eye contact

GENERAL HEALTH

Past Medical History:

Infant asthma

Allergies: NKDA

Medications: none

Diet: normal variation, but sensitive to taste and texture as a young child (cold)

Stools: regular, depends on diet, occasional constipation

Sleep: sleeps through night, up early (5 AM).

CURRENT FUNCTIONING

I. LANGUAGE

Julio's parents find his speech "odd", with unusual speech mannerisms, such as "once in a moon" to signify things do not happen regularly. He picks up these phrases from television, movies, or other people. He does not always use them appropriately. His vocabulary is very good and his articulation

is very good as well. When he was young, he was difficult to understand, as his speech was “muffled.” As a young child, he would also point at objects in which he was interested, using his finger to indicate things like juice or milk. He would “go to” objects and position himself in front of them, such as the refrigerator, to indicate his needs. He would also bring his parents to an object and place their hands on it. He did not blow kisses to clap his hands. He never used nods to indicate yes, or shaking his head to indicate no. Currently, he nods only very slightly.

II. SOCIAL INTERACTION

Currently, Julio uses language occasionally to be friendly or social, such as when he calls a friend from school to « say hi. ». Julio has learned to look directly at people when they speak to him and vice versa, but eye contact is brief. When he was small, his parents reported that he did not try to comfort them if they were sad or sick. Currently, he will ask them how they are or touch them briefly. His parents state they can tell what he is thinking by looking at him. They report he « looks down » when upset and smiles when happy. Julio does not display other emotions such as disgust, surprise, or guilt. When he was younger, he would stay by himself if he was in the company of other children. His parents report he « kept himself busy » by walking around, and playing on the jungle gym. If other children approached him, he would speak to them. His parents also report that he is not interested in engaging with children his own age, and shows no reaction around unfamiliar children or adults.

PLAY

FAVOURITE TOYS	FAVOURITE ACTIVITIES
	Xbox video games Watching television Drawing and making his own comic books

PLAY

When he was younger, Julio would be “mesmerized” by the wheels on toy cars and stare at them for long periods of time. He lined objects up over and over and made patterns. Julio would not “pretend” play. He would “reenact” television shows “word for word,” but did not alter the format. Julio used to collect bottle caps and rocks. Currently he collects yu-gi-oh cards. His parents did not find these interests particularly intense.

BEHAVIOURS

Julio will rub his hands up and down his thighs, and his parents feel this is when he is anxious. When he was younger, he used to pace, but did not have any other particular movements of hand and body. Currently, he “fidgets” and appears to have difficulty sitting still. Julio’s mother reports that he will rock and occasionally flap his hands. She thinks he does this when he is nervous. He also “regresses” and uses baby talk and “silly sounds.” He makes high pitched noises and funny faces into a mirror. His parents state he does this daily. Julio himself is not aware of this behaviour. As a young child, he was sensitive to clothing that itched. His mother buys him clothing currently that will not exacerbate this sensitivity. He is less sensitive to loud noises. Julio has a particular routine with his drawings and his books. According to his parents, they have to be arranged in a particular way. He does not

become upset when this is disturbed. He will seek an answer to "why things have been changed" in the home, and will persist in asking why until an answer is provided. He is not aggressive, nor does he self-injure.

DIRECT OBSERVATION

AUTISM DIAGNOSTIC OBSERVATION SCHEDULE (ADOS-MODULE 4)

COMMUNICATION: Julio speaks in full sentences with grammatical markings and is easy to understand. He sometimes muddles some words up in the order in the sentence but he makes his meaning clear. He has quite precise and formal speech at times. His speech is sometimes monotone. There is no echolalia. He uses some idiosyncratic phrases such as "I will be working in the family business when I grow up" or "I was hurt and it felt like there was a tornado on my head". He occasionally offered information and reported events although he needs a lot of prompting and structuring in order to give answers that explained what he was trying to communicate. His level of conversation is low. He is sometimes off-topic and hard to follow. He uses a lot of incidental gesturing and some emphatic gestures but descriptive was limited, for example within the toothbrush task.

RECIPROCAL SOCIAL INTERACTION: His eye contact is generally poor. He will look at the evaluator at times and was able to make better eye contact as he relaxed during the assessment. His facial expression rarely changed. He looked a little surprised when he saw the bag of toys but he did not direct this expression to anybody. He did not express much enjoyment within the interaction and he had trouble communicating his affect. When he was happy, it was 'great', and he could not describe sad. He is unable to comment on others' emotions and his level of responsibility is not too bad. He likes to save his money for his own things but he, at this point, is not able to manage his own affairs. He has very limited insight into his role in relationships. His friendships are about doing things with a good friend and you can get along better but he does not really talk about his place within the friendship. Overall, the quality of social overtures is somewhat stilted and awkward. His body movements look a little bit uncoordinated. He responds appropriately but still somewhat awkwardly. There was very little reciprocal social communication and the rapport was quite limited unless the evaluator structured it well.

IMAGINATION: He has limited imaginative ability. He could make up part of the story and use objects symbolically but this was not at a very high level.

STEREOTYPED BEHAVIOURS AND RESTRICTED INTERESTS: He has no sensory interests or hand mannerisms. There is no self-injurious behaviour. He does not have highly referenced interests and he does not display compulsions or rituals. He is not overactive or negative and, in fact, he is a very pleasant boy to talk to. He showed mild anxiety at the beginning of the interview, which disappeared later on.

Communication score is 5 (autism cutoff 3, autism spectrum cutoff 2).

Reciprocal social interaction score is 11 (autism cutoff 6, autism spectrum cutoff 4).

Communication and social interaction total is 16 (autism cutoff 10, autism spectrum cutoff 7).

Imagination/creativity score is 1.

Stereotyped behaviours and restricted interests score is 0.

(Scores above the cutoff indicate that the child is in the autistic spectrum).

DSM-IV Diagnosis:
PDD-NOS.

Julio has communicative language but difficulties with conversation. His language is somewhat formal and his voice is monotone. He also has poor eye contact, and limited social functioning outside of his one friend. He has a history of poor social interaction. Finally, his interests are restricted to his computer and television. His creativity is low. All of this is consistent with the diagnosis in the autism spectrum, particularly PDD-NOS. He is functioning very well as a result of a lot of intervention as a younger child. He will need intervention from the Rehabilitation Service to help him integrate into high school, attend social skills groups, and eventually support to get some vocational training and a job.

Plan:

1. I will speak to [REDACTED] the psychologist at Summit School, to discuss psychology testing for IQ test prior to starting High School in the Fall.
2. He was referred for research testing where he could get some speech and a Stanford-Binet test.
[REDACTED]
4. He would be a candidate for a social skills group in a year or two when he gets older. The mother was given the number to call if she wants that for him.
[REDACTED]



Introduction:

Fred Durst's latest thriller film *The Fanatic* (2019) starring, John Travolta, Devon Sawa, and Ana Golja is a controversial film that attempts to display the relationship between celebrities and fans. Travolta plays the film's protagonist named "Moose", an obsessed stalker who also displays neurological symptoms of autism spectrum disorder. Throughout the film, it becomes abundantly clear that Moose's only objective in life is to obtain an autograph in hopes to become best friends with his B horror film hero, Hunter Dunbar (Devon Sawa). Accompanying Moose on his quest is his friend Leah, (Ana Golja) a paparazzi photographer who helps him stalk his favorite celebrity. Moose's stalking eventually turns violent, as he accidentally kills Dunbar's maid, takes photos of himself with Dunbar while he is sleeping, and during the climax of the film is tortured by Dunbar by having his eye stabbed and part of his hand shot off. The film's catastrophic ending leaves viewers with the ultimate impression that the violence committed and received by Moose was due to his inherent neurological nature of being a dangerous and aggressive creep. On August 22 2019, the cast of Durst's film hosted an early screening which later was accompanied by a Q&A. The panel consisted of Travolta, Sawa, and Golja, along with Durst himself. During the Q&A Durst went into detail on how Travolta originally received the script and prepared himself to play the role of Moose. As Durst states, when he "...gave the script to John, he'd called me back the same night...and he was just in love with the character and he said 'it brought tears to my eyes' and he said 'Fred, I relate to this guy and there's a little bit of Moose in all of us'" (Nico7 Films, 00:03:12 – 00:03:19). Although Travolta tries to display a level of sentimentality towards this character, one cannot be shaken by the film's final result. The film's reception can be best summed up by Brian Tallerico's review: "Fred Durst's

‘The Fanatic’ hates fans. It hates actors. It hates tourists, shop owners, and servants. It really, really hates autistic people. And it hates you. It’s a movie that thinks you’re an idiot, someone who won’t see through its shallow provocations, illogical behavior, and vile misanthropy” (Tallerico). Tallerico’s review best exhibits the frustration that ensued within the ASD community after the film’s initial release. Travolta’s depiction becomes even more of a blatant insult once one considers that his real life deceased son was also autistic. Unfortunately, depictions of such characters that are coded autistic are not unfamiliar within the realm of cinema and media. This ultimately leaves us to some important questions, how did we get to this point of representation towards autistics? Is criminality inheritable to autistics, or is it solely due to environmental factors which enable them to commit crimes? What sorts of narratological methods and discourses are being used to reinforce this ideology? Finally, is this argument that autistics are inherently violent still happening today? If there are so many films which are claiming to be inclusive to the way they portray autism, why are there films that still proceed to display these types of caricatures within our current social discourse of cinematic representation?

In this thesis I explore putative correlations between the modes of criminality and its negative depictions of framing autism on screen. To be more specific, I explore how pro eugenic propaganda films have played a consistent role in influencing the pathological development of a caricature that I will describe as the “creep”. I argue that this trope not only continues to negatively influence the way we see autism in media and films, but also has been the direct cause of the social stigmatization that has lead to the deaths of thousands of disabled individuals. A creep as defined by Cambridge.org, is “an unpleasant person, especially a man” (dictionary.cambridge.org) which exhibits behaviors that are unnatural to societal norms. The example within the same database describes as follows, “He was such a creep - he was

always staring at me...” (dictionary.cambridge.org). The “creep” trope’s connection to the autism community is one that has been developed throughout the past century through eugenic propaganda seen in multiple films and other forms of media. My first encounter of the existence of this trope which also furthered my investigation came from a YouTube video titled “Autism Tropes in Media [CC]” which covered a variety of stereotypical character archetypes around autism representation in film and media. Youtuber Jessica Kellgren-Fozard, describes in her video that the trope of the creep is often used to describe autistic characters which are “...portrayed as lacking emotion, empathy and compassion. Everyone acts like he’s so totally weird and incredibly annoying and a complete burden...” (Kellgren-Fozard, 00:08:21-00:08:32). Kellgren-Fozard’s definition sparked a curiosity in me to explore where this caricature originated from and how it still manifests itself in film and media today. Although there are some portrayals of autistic creeps that fit within the realm of non-violence as described by the two definitions above, I am more curious to explore the historical stigmatization behind the ones that do associate violence as a key character trait within this trope.

The representation of those with autism spectrum disorder has become a critical topic within the realm of cinema over the past decade. Despite narrative films and media platforms embracing characters who fall under the spectrum, much exposure of the autism community is still severely limited and misunderstood by the general public. These portrayals often lack an exterior “voice” that can narrow down the major misconceptions that often misrepresent an entire community. In fact, an unbeknownst reader may be surprised to discover that there is a long history surrounding criminality and it’s correlation within the autism community by associating violence as an inherent trait of what was once called “feeble-mindedness”.

History shows us that this ideology of the feeble-minded “creep” committing criminal acts can be linked to its earliest on screen depictions which emerged during the early 1900s America. These depictions were mainly influenced by the eugenic rhetoric that emerged during the zeitgeist of late 1800’s. Eugenics as famously coined by the anthropologist Francis Galton, concerns modifying and preserving the more desirable genes of one’s anatomy. Eugenic movements split themselves into two camps, positive and negative eugenics. Positive eugenics consists of the idea that one could build an elite society by maintaining certain desirable genes through the method of selective breeding, while negative eugenics consists of the notion that this could be achievable through the methods of euthanasia and segregation of less desirable peoples (Kevles, 436). As we will see in the coming chapters of my thesis, these ideologies of producing superior beings would later go on to produce the fundamental blocks of scientific racism and become a major contribution towards the development of Nazi ideology. In particular, eugenics experts often promoted the idea that disabled individuals were the biggest threat to their cause, as many believed that this community was far more likely to engage in criminal activity solely based around their genetic features. As one text states,

“The experts raised the spectre of social degeneration, insisting that “feeble-minded” people (the term then commonly applied to people believed to be mentally retarded) were responsible for a wide range of social problems and were proliferating at a rate that threatened social resources and stability. Feeble-minded women were held to be driven by a heedless sexuality, the product of biologically grounded flaws in their moral character that led them to prostitution and producing illegitimate children. ‘Hereditarian’ biology attributed poverty and criminality to bad genes rather than to flaws in the social corpus.” (Kevles, 435)

A solution that was most commonly promoted during this era was to euthanize these types of “criminals” before they had the chance to grow up and multiply. Many eugenic films promoted a similar solution as scholar Martin Pernick is noted in David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder *Narrative Prosthesis Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* that eugenic propaganda films rationalized the “...medical murder of disabled infants, ultimately premise the determination of expendability upon an aesthetic criterion” (Mitchell, Snyder, 28 and 29). These films were produced as a means to sway the general public in favoring the extermination of those they thought would be a great burden on society. This thesis will not only expand on the historical impact these representations had on the disability community, but also demonstrate their long lasting effects that continue to reemerge today in the ASD community.

Durst is not alone when it comes to these portrayals of coded autistics being associated with criminality, as there have been other films within the horror and thriller genre that have capitalized on this ideology of the “creep” trope in the past century. Films like, Lew Lehman’s *The Pitt* (1981), Vincenzo Natali’s *The Cube* (1997), Charles Russell’s *Bless the Child* (2000), Pete Riski’s *Dark Floors* (2008), Carlos Brooks *Burning Bright* (2010), and Jacob Chase’s *Come Play* (2020) all depict characters who display symptoms of ASD or other neurological disorders which are often presented as, creepy, demonic, and typically commit acts of stalking or violence towards their neurotypical counterparts. Although these films present many different versions of the creep figure in the media, my thesis will explore the specific historical correlation between criminality and autism to better understand how we evolved to these modern depictions.

Since 2013, autism has become regarded as an umbrella term for many other former neurological conditions that were once considered a separate neurological condition. The diagnosis seen in my prelude categorized my neurological conditioned being under the title of

pervasive development disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS). Generally, individuals who received this diagnosis were framed as having milder symptoms of autism, as they did not match the complete diagnostic criteria. While others have categorized PDD-NOS as being a form of mild Asperger's syndrome, or mild/high functioning autism, the diagnosis became invalid and was removed since the release of the fifth edition of the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DMS-5). Since this time anyone who was formally diagnosed with PDD-NOS would now fall under the guise of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Seladi-Schulman). Considering how the definition of my own diagnosis had rapidly changed within the span of a couple of decades, it is important to note that while I am analyzing my selected examples which represent the creep trope within my filmography, I will be using a mix of DMS-5, along with other formal and colloquial terms that were commonly used during these selected time periods. Terms like, "feeble-mindedness" and "autistic psychopathy" were all once considered legitimate terminologies in psychology that would describe figures which fell under the definition of the creep caricature. It is important to note to the reader that over the 20th century what we now call autism was not always seen as a social impairing neurological disorder. Rather early eugenic movements framed mental health and neurological disorders as a slip in the genetic pool that either could be altered by one's environment or needed to be eliminated from society as a whole. As we will see in the coming chapters of my thesis, such key terms that were mainly used to dehumanize neurodiverse individuals grew in popularity from the eugenic films and media propaganda that were being exposed to the general public. As such, these films serve as a base to expand upon the characteristics of how a creep figure became to be. Thus, although many of the terms that I will be using, like "feeble-mindedness" do carry the weight and negative

connotations of historically prejudice rhetoric, it is important to note they were also once considered a widely acceptable and legitimate medical terminology.

With these terminologies in mind, I will now describe the symptoms that one may use when diagnosing someone for ASD. The DMS-5 describes someone with autism having a delay in three areas of social communication and public interaction. These consist of “(i) social-emotional reciprocity; (ii) developing, understanding, and maintaining relationships; and (iii) nonverbal communication” Furthermore the DMS-5 also states that someone with autism must also demonstrate two of the four behaviors within their social interacts like, “(i) inflexible to changes in routine; (ii) restrictive or fixated interests that may be abnormal in focus or intensity; (iii) hypo- or hyperactivity in response to sensory input or abnormal fixation with sensory aspects of the environment; and (iv) repetitive movements, speech, or use of items” (Lordan, Ronan, et al, 20-21). Not every single person diagnosed with ASD will display all the symptoms listed above, but it is important to note that each autistic person is an exception to the rule and should not be pathologized under one set label. Furthermore, I will also be using terms like “non-speaking” autistics rather than “non-communicative”/“non-verbal” autistics to describe some of the artists mentioned particularly in the second chapter of my thesis. This is due to the fact that the definition of “nonspeaking” is not only a more inclusive terminology, but has also played a critical role in sparking numerous conversations around the fundamental aspects of how language is constructed and the boundaries which encompass speech as a whole. Many autistic advocacy centers like ASAN (Autistic Self Advocacy Network) and The Guild for Human Services have acknowledged and promoted the recent attempts to educate the public on these inclusive terms. As Senior Clinical Advisor Corrina Riggs, from the Guild Team states, many self-advocates, “...feel that the term nonverbal is stigmatized because the general population

equates nonverbal to not having or receptively understanding language. Many advocates want to change the narrative on that. Semantically speaking, the word nonverbal means without words, and there's pushback to say that nonspeaking individuals have words, but they cannot speak them." (guildhumanservices.org)

There is also an urgent need for conducting research on the historical representation of neurodiversity within the realm of cinema, especially within the confines of the autism community. Although there has been an increase of scholarship over the years which have explored autism on the silver screen, there is still little written on the correlation of eugenics remerging within the realm of autism representation. One can argue that this is due to the lack of social awareness many are unfamiliar with when discussing the history and development around the pathology of the autism community. To further this point, there is also very little written about autism representation from the perspective of someone who is autistic themselves and has been associated within this community throughout their entire life. I will argue that this is because there are aspects of negative eugenic propaganda that still remains present within the zeitgeist of our society and cinematic consumption. Take for example; the discussions in recent times around the idea that science can one day hope to genetically modifying the human anatomy through technologies of artificial wombs. Such concepts are not new within the realm of science fiction, as there have been films over the decades which have explored this premise to the extent of seeing what sorts of obstacles a society can find itself in if it were to live in a deterministic society that sees little to no value in disabled individuals and dehumanizes them to a category of being a second class citizen.

One of the main reasons for conducting my research stems from the influence that eugenics still holds on the structure of our society, especially in the realm of cinema. Although

there are plenty of films that expand upon this idea, none come close to examining the intricate debate around the morals of artificial genetic selection like Andrew Niccol's debut film *Gattaca* (1997). Niccol's film takes place in a not so distant dystopian future completely structured around the politics of eugenics. The film shows what would happen if society were to genetically select favorable genes and create a new class of people which dominates every aspect of society. The film shows that those who are born from natural conception are ostracized and segregated for their genetic imperfections. The plot of the film expands on the extent of this genetic discrimination as the protagonist Vincent, played by Ethan Hawke, must disguise himself as a genetically "valid" candidate in order to achieve his dream of venturing into space. Since the time of its release, the film has grown a cult following for being one of the most realistic science fiction films to have ever been created. In fact, the film's depiction of a eugenic future seems so tangible, that in 2011 NASA claimed that the world of *Gattaca* was arguably the most realistic science fiction film to likely become a reality in our near future. NASA's statement was a result of a conducted list which sought to find the best/ worst sci-fi films that our society was most likely going to progress into in the near future. Although the list mentions that other films like Robert Zemeckis *Contact* (1997) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) could be plausible realities, *Gattaca* was still selected as the most likely science fiction film to become a reality in the not so distant future. This is because *Gattaca*'s concepts parallel the incredible advancements genetic science has accomplished in our society over the past twenty-seven years since the film's initial release. To further this point, "this concept aligns with current research in medical genetics, which focuses on studying hereditary diseases within families. According to the Commissariat à l'énergie atomique (CEA), our increasing understanding of human DNA could indeed lead to the identification of individual genetic predispositions" (msn.com). It is for this reason that I will

argue throughout my thesis that if we do not explore this specific topic more in depth, there will unfortunately be more potential aspects of negative eugenics that will slowly remerge within our society again in the near future. In fact, some concepts of genetic segregation have become fully prevalent in our society and have been a point of contention against the disability community for decades. Take for example the increased number of abortions committed from women who are pregnant with babies who have Down syndrome. A 2022 report by The Joint Economic Committee Republican confirms that about, "...60 percent to 90 percent of children diagnosed with Down syndrome are aborted in the U.S., compared to 18 percent of all pregnancies ending in abortion" (Lee, 1). Despite this incredibly high statistic, it fails in comparison to how high the percentage has grown in Europe over the past three decades, since prenatal screenings have become more of a common necessity for women. One of the European countries who have the highest pregnancy terminations for Down syndrome individuals is Iceland with an almost 100 percent pregnant termination (Quinones & Lajka). It is unclear if this is solely due to it being a strictly political or cultural endeavor, however these statistics affirms the notion that parents would prefer to terminate their pregnancy as a way to modify ones genetic selection, rather than allow a child to be born with Down syndrome.

Other conceptual ideas have sprung within the realm of eugenics and determinism developing in the sometime near future. A company called EctoLife released a promotional video in 2022 which advertised the possibility of creating genetically modified babies through the technological advancement of artificial wombs. The company confidently demonstrated that it had the proper funding from tycoon Elon Musk and will be able to hopefully produce 30,000 wombs each year (Gordon). Although EctoLife seemed like an incredibly innovating opportunity and a great advancement in genetic selection, there is only one major issue that

remains in its way, the company does not exist. By this I mean, I am referring to the fact that the ad, as well as the supposed technology in genetic selection are all a fabrication from a German filmmaker named Hashem Al-Ghaili. The video in question was the subject of an overnight sensation in the realm of science, as his video was increasing being shared and reported on multiple social media sites and news outlets. The video became so big that Al-Ghaili even had to comment on the realities his “company’s” technology was able to do. In a MSN interview, the German filmmaker stated how the technology in the video was nowhere near to existing anytime in the near future and that his company was only in the conceptual stages of forming nuance discussions around society’s relation to genetic selection. In the interview he states, “I understand that the video was taken out of context and some people shared it online as if it were real...The main goal of creating the video was to ignite the discussion about an emerging technology and to highlight scientific progress in the field of ectogenesis”(Petersen). Despite the fact that the fraudulent company had no intention of mass producing its technology, it none the less still generated a discussion around the prevalence eugenics and determinism still holds in our society. Due to the large amalgamation of misinformation from news outlets, some academic journals also cited the fake EctoLife as a futuristic alternative to natural conception for the general public. In an article from the International journal of surgery titled “Artificial womb: opportunities and challenges for public health”, the authors not only confirmed that Al-Ghaili had the advance technology to would soon be available, but also stated that, “It can be a suitable alternative in cases of placental insufficiency, which can lead to preterm labour and intrauterine growth retardation.” (Khulbe et al, 618). This means that the technology, if it were to be available, could ultimately prevent the growth of individuals with neurological disorders. Although we can rest assured that the technology of Al-Ghaili’s company is nowhere near the

world *Gattaca*, one must still question how such a eugenic concept can still entice some people toward a disability free society. This phenomenon is nothing new to the disability community, and as you will soon read from my thesis, has ultimately led to significant direr consequences that still loom over this misrepresented community today.

Overall, very little has been written about the epistemological origins of these frequent autistic tropes that are constantly being displayed in everyday media. If my research is a success, my thesis will not only prove that there must be a call for critical change within the cinematic world as regards to how we present autism, but also provide a resource for the neurodiverse community. As a neurodiverse individual who grew up in this community, I have personally witnessed what limited resources there are for the public to be more acquired on these subject matters. I hope to provide more knowledge to slowly close the gap in our academic field by asking audiences to become more critical in the ways they view the autistic body on screen. In order to achieve this we must first take a step and examine where these stereotypes were once formulated.

Chapter 1: The Black Stork/Tomorrow's Children and the Neurotypical American Family

The development of the typical American family has been held as one the most important foundations which have contributed towards a capitalistic society. The institution's ideal premise consists around the notion that families with normative bodies could enjoy a prosperous life, if they are able to contribute back towards the modes of production. At the beginning of the 1900's, the ideal American was expected to fashion one's self around these morals. The development of films provided the opportunity to present and uphold the sanctity of typical families and the roles each had to play. Families that had members, who were considered disabled, were often left to be subjected to forms of isolation and humiliation. In many ways, a disabled family member often signified a great burden upon the family as well as society. What sorts of impact could a disabled body have on the establishment of the American family, if they would even have a place in the family at all? If the disabled body was unable to fit into the premise of American ideals, this often left room for others with nefarious intentions to speculate what the disabled body might do if left to its own 'nature'. For my first chapter, I wish to present an analytical timeline which will argue how the eugenic movement of the early 1900's proposed the notion that disabled figures would evolve into criminals. I wish to also demonstrate how eugenics from this time period proposed to fix this controversial issue through radical ideologies. In order to do this, I will be examining two films, Leopold Wharton and Theodore Wharton's infamous feature *The Black Stork* (1917), and Crane Wilbur's *Tomorrow's Children* (1934), which proposed two different eugenic ideological solutions toward disabled American family members.

How “The Black Stork” influenced politics in early 20th century eugenic films:

The socio-political zeitgeist of early 20th century America was without a doubt heavily influenced by negative media depictions towards disabled bodies. Many states in 1920s America voted to “...legislate the compulsory sterilization of criminals, the insane, and the retarded...” among immigrants who also did not fit the ideal American archetype (Pernick, 22). Much of this philosophy was based on the predication of preserving certain races in America that were deemed “superior” to others. From the ideology’s earliest inception, a great sum of eugenicists gravely warned the dangers of having disabled family members, as their disability was often associated with criminality. These disabled family members were referred to as “...‘the menace of the feeble-minded’ and the danger of ‘race suicide’ brought on by too few births among ‘socially inadequate’” (Lombardo, 248). This ideology can be further explored in Madison Grant’s pseudoscientific book called *Passing of the Great Race* (1916). The controversial book depicts racist undertones and suggests the idea that the Nordic race is superior to others due to evolutionary factors. In Grant’s chapter “The Competition of Races”, he discusses the need for government intervention in regards to poverty and its relation to the “feeble-minded” population. It is important to note to the reader that during this time period, “feeble-mindedness” would not only represent what we would later categorize as part of the ASD community in the coming decades, but also included a larger range of other cognitive disorders that would be seen as inferior to the normalized development of mental cognition (Smith, 64). Grant believed the disabled community’s only purpose was to be a burden upon society, including the American family. As a result, Grant felt the need to construct a systematical structure which would pathologize around the notion that disabled individuals categorized as a specific “race”? The belief consisted in the notion that this “race” was immorally incompatible of participating in the

progression and sustainability of western culture, solely due to their bodies and minds being unable to be exploited from a capitalistic system. Therefore, Grant proposed that those who were of a “superior stature” have a duty to prevent these communities from overpopulating in order to allow for progress for the human race. As Grant states, “...the percentage of incompetent’s increases; the burden of their support will become ever more onerous until, at no distant date, society will in self-defense put a stop to the supply of feeble-minded and criminal children of weaklings.” (Grant, 49) Grant states that the only solution to avert this crisis is to get rid of charitable organizations that wish to relieve the suffering of these “feeble-minded” criminals, and demand governmental intervention to destroy what he refers to as, a “defective strain”. This solution can only be done through the methods of eugenics. As he writes:

“The individual himself can be nourished, educated and protected by the community during his lifetime, but the state through sterilization must see to it that his line stops with him or else future generations will be cursed with an ever increasing load of victims of misguided sentimentalism.”
(Grant, 51)

These legislations were not exclusively being discussed in the United States, as many professionals within the medical field of Canada displayed similar interests. One figure who contributed immensely to this narrative was Thomas Douglas, formerly known as “The Father of Medicine,” and responsible for the creation of the national system of healthcare in Canada. In his master’s thesis *The Problems of the Subnormal Family*, Douglas proposes three solutions to the raise of welfare participants that he believes hugely went to “imbeciles”, prostitutes, and criminals in lower-income households. His proposed solutions were to segregate the lower class, the sexes, and sterilize defective individuals, including those who are deemed “feeble-minded”. From the author’s perspective, “...it gives protection to society, yet it deprives the defective of

nothing except the privilege of brining into the world children who would only be a care to themselves and a charge to society” (Douglas, 25). Douglas’s ideas are important to note here, as his arguments on the relation between “feeble-mindedness” and the dysfunctional family will manifest themselves during in my coming chapters that explore the development of the early monster genre in 1930s America and how these ideologies reemerge later in contemporary cinema which involve critical aspects of the ASD community.

These textual sources offer us an inside look of the state that eugenics was in during the early 1900s. However, no event better illustrates these ideologies than the Bollinger case of 1915. On November 17, John Bollinger was a newborn disabled infant with no neck or right ear. Convinced that the child would grow up to become a burden to society, Dr. Harry J. Haiselden, with the permission of the child’s mother, allowed the infant to die of natural causes rather than performing a lifesaving operation. The case caused an immense uproar, later sparking a debate on the boundaries of positive and negative eugenics and its role in legislating euthanasia towards the disabled American public. The case proposed the question of whether doctors had the superior moral right to perform such life-ending measures on newborn infants. The case was nowhere unique for its time, the Bollinger case grew to exponential heights making it one of the biggest events that would cement the moral dilemma zeitgeist of the decade. “Although Haiselden’s cases may not have directly influenced present debates, they illuminate that critical period in which many present attitudes and assumptions first took their current form.” (Pernick, 13) In fact, many parents of disabled youth from around the country applauded Haiselden’s decision of terminating the Bollinger baby and “...wrote moving letters of support to Haiselden and requested his help in allowing their children to die” (Pernick, 5). When questioned about his actions, Haiselden insisted to his critics that the baby would never achieve the intellectual

functions of an “ordinary animal” and would go on to eventually become an impoverished criminal (Pernick, 72). Therefore, it is here where I wish to conduct my analysis and examine how figures like Haiselden would use propaganda to propagate the notion that disabled babies would turn into impoverished criminal if not euthanized at the time of their infancy. After Haiselden’s status became an overnight national phenomenon, he would soon go on to gain international recognition for influencing and starring in one of the most infamous eugenic films to be created from the American film industry. Such a film would generate a mass ambivalence of discussions among the American population to what a typical eugenic family should look like.

The Black Stork (1917), later renamed to the title *Are you Fit for Marriage* (1929), bases a majority of its plot off the Bollinger case by depicting a hypothetical scenario in which a disabled newborn grows up to become a social outcast, eventually turning into a down-hearted criminal. The story consists of a young engaged couple named Claude and Anne, who plan on starting a family but ultimately come to a difficult decision on whether or not they should reproduce. Dr Dicky (played by Haiselden himself) on multiple occasions is critical about the union and reproduction between Claude and Anne, mainly due to Claude’s unnamed inheritable disease. The film makes the suggestion that Claude’s disease came from his grandfather having a sexual relationship with a slave woman, therefore implying that Claude’s offspring would be physically and racially inferior (Smith, 18). Dr Dicky strongly recommends that the couple does not have children for the betterment of society. Ignoring his pleas, the couple proceeds to reproduce and have a baby boy; however, they soon come to discover that their newborn son is severely disabled and is on the verge of dying. Dr Dicky being the “pious” man, refuses to perform the lifesaving surgery on the newborn child. In that same moment, Anne is suddenly struck by a vision from God, in which she sees her son’s horrific future if he were to receive the

lifesaving operation. The vision shows the audience the newborn growing up to become a crimped hunchback that would experience a life “...filled with pain, madness, and crime” (Pernick, 6) and eventually become a dangerous criminal who would live a life of immorality. Enlightened by this, she agrees to allow the doctor to terminate her baby through lethal injection, resulting in the newborn’s spirit to be embraced in the arms of Jesus Christ.

Ironically, the religious components of the film sparked a major controversy among some religious and political groups and denominations across America. Many were split on the issue of whether terminating a disabled newborn was justified. The religious element of depicting Christ in the film was by no means unintentional, as historically the representation of disability has been associated on screen as either as a form of God’s punishment or his divine love. The usage of religion in a film depicting disabled figures would create a major shift in the viewer’s experience and knowledge of disability itself. As Martin F. Norden’s book *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* states, “...movies that featured the concept of a God-delivered cure represented a major shift in moviemaker attitudes towards disability” (Norden, 38). Around the same time of the film’s release, a poll was conducted to the general American public which wished to evaluate the public’s views on the ethics around eugenics and the Bollinger baby (Fig. 1) (Fig. 2). The polls found that more protestant denominations along with Socialists groups were in favor of “not treating” as well as “killing” the Bollinger baby and other disabled newborns due to their rapid growth. On the other hand, the poll also showed that the biggest opponents to euthanasia came from a majority of Catholics who due to their beliefs saw eugenics along with other forms of birth control as contrary to their faith. As Christine Rosen states in her book *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement*, a major component to this notion was the Catholic community’s rejection

of modernity in North America. As she sates, “Catholics argued that natural divine law—not the laws of biology—governed human behavior and protected, among other things, the indissolubility of marriage, the sanctity of protection and human life (born and unborn), and the family. By interfering with these things, eugenicist violated natural law, and thus earned the censure of most Catholics” (Rosen, 140). Other officials of the Church like the Bishop of Montana, commented during this divided time by stating that disabled individuals like the Bollinger baby, all had the equal civil right to life as lamented through the authority of Church doctrine along with their constructional rights as indicated from the American declaration of Independence (Pernick, 75).

Table 3. Publicly Stated Position on Treatment, by Religion

	Catholic	Jewish ^a	Protestant/Other	Atheist/Unknown
Treat all	14 (78%)	6 (33%)	36 (44%)	60 (28%)
Don't treat some	0	10 (56%)	31 (38%)	115 (53%)
Actively kill	0	0	3 (4%)	11 (5%)
Up to doctor	4 (22%)	2 (11%)	6 (7%)	20 (9%)
Other	0	0	5 (6%)	10 (5%)
Total (N = 333)	18	18	81	216

^aIncludes those with confirmed affiliation and those with surnames that in Europe had been legally designated for Jews.

Fig.1. A poll which was conducted in America showing the different responses each religions had towards treating/terminating disabled babies (Oxford University Press, USA, 1996) 34.

Source: Martin S. Pernick. *The Black Stork: Eugenics and the Death of "Defective" Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures since 1915.*

Oxford University Press, USA, 1996.

	<i>Democrat</i>		<i>Independent or Progressive</i>	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Socialist</i>
	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Others</i>			
Treat all	4 (80%)	5 (29%)	10 (67%)	15 (43%)	0
Don't treat some	0	10 (59%)	4 (27%)	13 (37%)	9 (82%)
Actively kill	0	0	1 (7%)	1 (3%)	2 (18%)
Up to doctor	1 (20%)	2 (12%)	0	3 (9%)	0
Other	0	0	0	3 (9%)	0
Total (N = 83)	5	17	15	35	11

Fig.2. A poll which was conducted in America showing the different responses each political affiliated parties response towards treating/terminating disabled babies (Oxford University Press, USA, 1996) 33.

Source: Martin S. Pernick. *The Black Stork: Eugenics and the Death of "Defective" Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures since 1915.*

Oxford University Press, USA, 1996.

Haiselden occasionally used religious and political semantics to justify his “naturalistic” approach to the Bollinger case. When questioned about his moral obligation to the newborn, Haiselden’s character states in the film, “It was the will of God that the child be born defective. It is his will that the child die. Shall I set myself up as wiser than the Almighty” (Pernick, 86)? Thus, depicting the termination of a disabled newborn was considered, for the most part, a commonly accepted solution among many different political and religious groups at the time. These policies, along with the national, political and religious rhetoric of the time, clearly demonstrate much of the public’s view on disabled individuals and the need to eradicate them.

This rhetoric can also be commonly found in many literary depictions of disabled individuals. These stories consisted of the question of how these disabled individuals should interact with their neurotypical counterparts and be framed within society as a whole. Many of

these literacy artists as well as their methods of telling stories about disabled individuals eventually found their way to cinema. For this reason it is important to note to the reader that such narrative structures like “The Black Stork”, were not new within the realm of cinema. Often time’s disabled characters were written with one of two solutions to rid their disability. Scholars’ note that the majority of narratives would either allow those disabled characters to be “cured” (typically by some miraculous miracle, prosthetic, or sterilization) or die (murder, euthanasia, etc). It would reinforce audience members that the disabled character was only used as a metaphorical or allegorical plot device to push the narrative forward. This is what David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder define as a “narrative prosthesis”. In their 2000 book with the same name, Mitchell and Snyder examine disability through different literary representations, and discuss how many able-bodied writers have historically relied on the disabled body as a plot device for their stories. As the text states, “...narrative prosthesis is meant to indicate that disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight.” In other words “we want to demonstrate that the disabled body represents a potent symbolic site of literary investment” (Mitchell and Snyder, 49). By examining these open ended narratives, the authors conclude that the initial goal of the disabled body is “...to return the incomplete body to the invisible status of a normative essence” thus reestablishing the normative body as the standard within society (Mitchell and Snyder, 8). This narrative device will soon become a common theme throughout the chapter, as many readers will note that the substantial films and texts that will be referenced featuring characters that fall within the ASD/disability community are framed around this ideological structure that goes against the stereotypical American family. For example, *The Black Stork* presents a similar lesson towards audience members, as the film

exhibits how the cripple newborns' hypothetical life will spiral into a life of isolation and criminality. Through this narrative device, the director will insist that the cause of the cripple's inability to assimilate into society solely comes from his inherent genealogical nature.

The Black Stork's Transition from Boyhood and Manhood:

Throughout *The Black Stork*, we are presented with two major stages that contribute to the cripple's descent into criminality, "Boyhood" and "Manhood". In the first stage, "Boyhood", we see a particular scene that demonstrates how the disabled body is not able to function within the film's structured and social norms of society. In this scene, our protagonist along with his mother encounter a group of boys who are playing outside which entices the cripple to want to join. As seen below (fig.3), the group of boys replies in a mean manner saying, "Go away—you're a jinx—you bring bad luck" (Wharton & Wharton, 00:50:44). Rejected by his peers, the disabled boy isolates himself and then is seen reading the story of "The Ugly Duckling" with his mother. The parallels of social rejection from the story become a form of comfort for the child.

In *Symbolising Boundaries: Identity and Diversity in British Cultures* (1986), Allison James writes about a lack of "sameness". In her chapter "Learning to Belong: the Boundaries of Adolescence," Allison states that adolescents socially strive to achieve a sense of physical "sameness" among their peers: "Bodies must not deviate from a *median* upon which they themselves have tacitly agreed. Those who are perceived to differ *too* much from this symbolic mean are ruthlessly identified and named..." (James, 162). This is consistent within *The Black Stork*, as the film shows us how the disabled body is segregated due to the protagonist's physical difference. Another example to illustrate this idea can come from comparing the disabled protagonist to another disabled literary figure from William Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Mitchell and Snyder's book *Narrative Prosthesis* cites Leonard Kriegel's essay "Disability as Metaphor in

Literature” which examines how *Richard III*’s deformity makes him a subject of public rejection and pity to the reader. As the book states, “The cripple is threat and recipient of compassion, both to be damned and to be pitied—and frequently to be damned as he is pitied.” (Mitchell and Snyder, 18) Therefore on a narrative component, the cripple’s failure to achieve a sense of “normality” creates an environment of isolation which will later be the cause for him to take revenge upon the world.



Fig. 3. Still from *The Black Stork* (00:50:48). A group of kids mock the crippled protagonist calling him a jinx.

In the next stage of “The Black Stork,” “Manhood”, we see a continuation of isolating the cripple, as Claude and Anne try their best to hide the disabled child from the public. Even when the protagonist manages to run away to the bustling streets, “where bodies may be straight but minds are crooked--” (Wharton & Wharton, 00:58:49) the film goes out of its way to demonstrate how little use the disabled body is in society. One such example includes the

protagonist realizing he would be rejected from the army due to his disability as, "...Uncle Sam demands perfection." (Wharton & Wharton, 00:59:44) Another example can be seen when the cripple gets into a bar fight over his appearance (fig. 4). Being of no use to his country and unable to establish normal relationships among his peers, he vows to take revenge against his parents for fostering a life of isolation. When the moment finally arises, the protagonist is taken back to see that his parents are in a constant state of grief and guilt for giving him life. (fig.5) Unable to kill his parents, he realizes the real person responsible for his tortured life is, Dr Dicky. Thus the disabled protagonist vows to kill the doctor for performing the lifesaving operation on him. When he finally encounters an old Dr Dicky, ashamed of what he has allowed to live, the protagonist states, "You are the man who condemned me to this life of torture and shame—See what you have saved me for! Now you will pay!" (Wharton & Wharton, 1:10:46). The cripple then proceeds to murder the doctor and goes to prison. Eventually he is freed and meets his future spouse leading to a cue card that states, "The horrible evil grows and grows--" (Wharton & Wharton, 01:13:41) suggesting to the audience that the criminal will spread his seed like a disease eventually leading to a total collapse of society.



Fig. 4. Still from *The Black Stork* (01:02:14). The crippled protagonist gets into a bar fight after being made fun of his appearance.



Fig. 5. Still from *The Black Stork* (01:06:30). The crippled protagonist attempts to murder his mother as an act of revenge for her giving him life.

The ending of the film proposes upon audiences that, the only solution to stop this newborn cripple from turning into a criminal and depleting society is to kill him through lethal ejection. In this instance, the narrative prosthesis reaffirms to the audience that an abnormal person (in both body and mind) will never be able to be integrated within society. Rather than suggesting a cure through sterilization, the film proposes that the only solution to this abnormal body is to eliminate it before it rapidly spreads.

Although *The Black Stork* was highly influential for creating mass hysteria regarding the relationship between disability and criminality, its success would be short lived as the American public would momentarily see a rapid decline in feature films that promoted eugenic ideologies. A contributing factor behind this major shift within the realm of the American zeitgeist came from the film industry censoring and banning eugenic medical procedures from being depicted in public theater's. Suddenly films like *The Black Stork* were moved from the silver screen and shown in "...classrooms, road shows, and other marginal locations..." all in hopes to codify the eugenic frame work to promote euthanasia to poor and underprivileged communities. (Pernick, 160). Another major contributing factor came from American medical professionals who were highly critical and constant in boycotting and interfering with Haiselden's pseudoscientific campaign. Pernick also suggests that Haiselden's lack of academic scholarship, along with his reserved and isolating character of being a loner, ultimately saw the demise of this self-made entrepreneur fade into obscurity within the realm of medical academia (Pernick, 162). It would seem that euthanasia in America was slowly becoming a footnote in the long complex history of disability studies. Although no longer being promoted within mainstream theaters, other eugenic procedures like sterilization, were still very present and accepted within the realm of the American public as a means to protect the typical American family. For the moment, it would

seem as though America had moved on and forgotten this bit of dark history of promoting negative eugenics within the realm of cinema. This unfortunately would not last long as the coming decades would see a revival in the promotion of such negative eugenic ideologies, now refined in a new cinematic light.

Eugenics Debates within the Studio Hollywood era of Cinema (Tomorrow's Children):

Although there was a short period of time where eugenics did not dominate mainstream theaters, the golden age of cinema ushered in a new age for many studios to incorporate different arguments around the promotion of positive and negative eugenics. The film industry which historically built narratives around conservative ideologies, insisted on upholding able and normative bodies and minds as a standard when constructing narratives structured around the representation of disabled characters. Although films during this time had disabled characters who could now voice their own opinions, much of these big budget narratives were still being constructed around the approval of able bodied figures who found more capital off exploiting disabled bodies for storylines that were associated with tragedy. Euthanasia had also made a popular come back as "...the mid-1930s, American newspapers and magazines resumed extensive coverage of mercy killing, and by the late 1930s, both topics returned to the screen." (Pernick, 160) As reiterated from my last chapter, early 1900's eugenics was divided into two subgroups which proposed different solutions to the spread of "bad" genes, in favor of a preserving and maintaining a normative society. Endorsements of positive eugenics meant that doctors had the moral superiority to manipulate a person's heredity through means of breeding in order to produce a superior race. Meanwhile negative eugenics still prompted the idea of 'mercy killings' as a solution to improving the conditions of society by eliminating and or sterilizing those deemed a burden on society as a whole. (Kevles, 436) Now, 1930s cinema saw one camp

primarily focused on aspects of societal regulations, while the other camp continued to embrace extreme alternatives as the ultimate solution to the disabled community. Despite euthanasia becoming popular again, many studio directors chose to critique the realm of negative eugenics as it allowed room for more public discussions on the usage of medical procedures like sterilization. Therefore, films that criticized the early 1900s era of negative eugenics often evoked open ended discussions on the validity and role of sterilization and euthanasia in the public domain. Since the heyday of *The Black Stork's* overnight popularity, the American government solidified its stance on mandatory sterilization and institutionalization, policies that segregated many disabled Americans (Smith, 36). Previous policies surrounding the sterilization of the criminally insane had existed in numerous states during the 1920's, and by the end of the 1930's the number of Americans forced to be sterilized was approximately 30,000 individuals (E. Evans, 107). Even though these laws were clearly meant to discriminate against the disabled community, these laws were considered a far better solution as the thought of euthanasia had now become a more taboo subject within the public perception. During the time these mandates were active, there were plenty of opportunities for individuals in the film industry to construct arguments critiquing the legitimacy and effect these laws would have on the balance and structure of society. Some studios thus shifted their focus on producing films that questioned the extension these mandatory sterilization and institutionalization laws had on the general American public.

Films like Crane Wilbur's *Tomorrow's Children* (1934) proposed an open ended discussion on the effects these mandatory sterilization laws had on the typical American family. Continuing on the nature vs. nurture narrative trope, the film presents Alice Mason, who wants to marry her fiancé Jim and start a family. Her dream comes to an abrupt end when her

impoverished and alcoholic parents are forced to undergo sterilization due to their reckless lifestyle. Being the only member of her entire family to financially support her physical/mentally disabled siblings, she is deemed too much of a liability to reproduce, and therefore must also undergo the sterilizing procedure along with her family. Alice is then arrested and prosecuted as a criminal by a corrupt judicial system, solely due to her inherited genes. Her fiancé Jim makes a bold case to Dr. Brooks, the family's social worker, but it is of little use as Alice is soon sentenced to be sterilized along with other criminals and "feeble-minded" individuals. The film then presents a new revelation, which proves Alice was never biologically related to her alcoholic "parents", but rather a part of an elaborate ruse to make Alice the sole financial provider off the laziness of the Mason family. Thankfully Alice's fiancé along with their priest Father O'Brien manage to stop the procedure before it is too late. The film ends with Alice and Jim walking out of the hospital ready to begin their new lives.

Wilbur's film aims to create an open dialogue which critiques the power dynamics of the corrupt medical and legal institutions and their associations with negative eugenics. This debate focuses on the necessity and legitimacy of mandatory sterilization laws. The film assesses the fragility and exploitive nature these mandates can have on the general public if governed by the wrong people. To further this point, the film depicts a scene in which Dr. Brooks is having an open debate with Dr. McIntyre, the surgeon who will soon perform the sterilization procedure on Alice. Both doctors present opposing arguments on whether Alice should proceed with the operation. The scene emphasizes the level of skepticism as regards the scientific legitimacy that sterilization has had on the prevention of criminality and the "insane" as a whole. As the discussion unfolds Dr. Brooks argues,

Dr Brooks: "...is science always right? Well your proceeding on a trial and error basis, is that fair? Well look at all the great men in the world that may be classified as having been insane or some other way unfit. Well look at Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Edgar Allen Poe. Suppose their parents had been sterilized."

To which Dr. McIntyre responses,

Dr McIntyre: "I admit these men are not what we call normal. Did any of them have insane parents? Were any of them father's to a genius? Listen Brooks; in most cases these operations are justified. The benefits are so great; we can take a chance for an occasional mistake. I don't think we've made one yet." (Wilbur, 00:39:32-00:40:06)

To further engage with this discussion, it will be of great importance to note to the reader how individuals could be medically exploited and labeled as insane criminals to begin with. In order to understand the role of these horrific institutions which are being depicted on screen, we therefore must examine the epistemology and immoral exercise of power one possessed to bestow such labels upon individuals who may have been categorized as "mad". In Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (1961), the author examines the history of how madness and reason were interlinked without distinction between one another. During the enlightenment era, madness and reason slowly diverged into two separate categories. Since then, madness (which Foucault connects to array of neurological conditions) became distinctly molded around different modes of societal constructs. In his chapter, *The Birth of the Asylum* Foucault explores the history of Samuel Tuke, a philanthropist and mental-health reformer whose methods of moral treatment generated the post-modern approach to institutional asylums. Tuke describes insanity as a disease which disrupts any form of agency a patient has with respect to his or her capacity to

function within the “normative” realms of society. Tuke saw insanity as something that needed to be cured and, “...believed that insanity consisted of only a partial ‘loss of reason’; thus, he said that the insane person's ‘intellectual, active, and moral powers are usually rather perverted than obliterated.’ This allowed for a balance between exonerating the insane of full responsibility for their behaviors and thoughts, on the one hand, and retaining some room for freedom of choice and moral autonomy, on the other.” (Raad & Makari)

Tuke’s psychiatric methods created an inherently exploitive power dynamic between psychiatrists and their patients. The pathology is exclusively seen through the doctor’s authoritative position, and it is only he who is capable of diagnosing an individual as “mad”. It follows that it is the doctor’s power which also has the ability to gate-keep the barriers of reality. To elaborate this point further, Foucault argues that after the 18th century the medical certificate became a powerful tool for doctor’s to mandate an undisputed diagnosis. Such power allowed doctors to turn the asylum into a medical area, and individuals as patients. However, Foucault states that doctor’s moral obligations are, “...not made by virtue of a medical skill or power that he possesses in himself and that would be justified by a body of objective knowledge. It is not as a scientist that *homo medicus* has authority in the asylum, but as a wise man. If the medical profession is required, it is as a juridical and moral guarantee, not in the name of science” (Foucault, 281). In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault reiterates this point again through what he calls “the medical gaze”. This ‘gaze’ is explained as an excess of power relation which pertains, “The absolute eye of knowledge” constructing itself around a biomedical paradigm, and filtering out non-biomedical material. Therefore, the “...‘gaze’ is an act of selecting what we consider to be the relevant elements of the total data stream available to our senses. Doctors tend to select out the biomedical bits of the patients’ problems and ignore the rest because it suits us best that

way” (Misselbrook, 1). If we apply Foucault’s observations to Dr. McIntyre’s position on sterilizing Alice, we will see a similar ‘medical gaze’ taking place which insists that the leaders of the medical system know better, solely due to their superior knowledgeable power dynamic. Considering that eugenics was a main proponent that was found in many hospitals and asylums during this time, one can only imagine what sorts of falsehoods were justified in the name of subjective truth.

Another example of this scenario in full force can be found from the writings of English philosopher G K Chesterton, who similarly commented on the severities such subjective criteria could have on a society who blindly diagnosed eligible individuals as “feeble-minded” or “mad”. Chesterton’s book, *Eugenics and Other Evils* (1922) was produced as a means to critique *The Mental Deficiency Act* (1913) which pushed through the United Kingdom’s Parliament. The Bill sought to implement institutional treatment for people deemed "feeble-minded" or "morally defective”, similar to the scenario of Wilbur’s film. Like Foucault, the definition of what the parliament considered feeble-minded was “... much looser and vaguer than the phrase ‘feeble-minded’ itself...” (Chesterton, 24 and 25) and therefore could be applied to anyone who was struck by poverty or happened to have a history of criminality. Chesterton’s book empathized that anyone, disabled or not, was vulnerable to be subjected to such inhumane punishments. In his famous quote Chesterton states, “Every tramp who is sulky, every labourer who is shy, every rustic who is eccentric can quite easily be brought under such conditions as were designed for homicidal maniacs. That is the situation and that is that point” (Chesterton, 25). Foucault and Chesterton’s analysis applies to the doctors of Wilbur’s film, as both exhibit the same positions of subjective morality over Alice’s body and other “criminally-insane” patients. In the film’s

case, Alice is solely deemed defective due to her inheritable genes, and therefore must be institutionalized and become sterile in order to become “cured” of her stand in life.

Wilbur’s film critiques another institution responsible for mislabeling criminals on the grounds’ of subjective truth. *Tomorrow’s Children* argues on multiple occasions that the corrupt legal system depicted in the film, is another establishment which exploits innocent victims like Alice towards a greater eugenic ideology. Through these legal exploitations we will be able to examine aspects of the “Creep” trope the depiction throughout the film. Disabled Criminals are grouped into two categories within Wilbur’s film, those who are victims of environmental circumstance, and those who are protected due to their relations to political intervention. To examine how criminals are described within the first group we will explore the film’s pathological components that frame disabled figures to be categorized as automatic criminals. During the court scene of the film, for instance, audiences see Judge Beakin determining which criminals should or shouldn’t be sentenced to sterilization. Within the opening moments of this scene, audiences see a non-communitive feeble minded character played by Schlitzie (fig. 6) an American actor and sideshow performer who starred in films like, Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932). Within minutes of the scene we learn through the prosecution of this muted disabled man that he was abandoned from his parental figure and therefore has no one to defend the accusations. With no one to defend the disabled man, the judge speaks on his behalf and sentences him to be sterilized. In a later scene we see the same disabled man ready to be operated in the hospital ward, (Fig. 7) (Fig.8) a result of Dr Brook’s comments on the unjustified punishment that was ruled by the court. When questioned if the judge should have released the criminal on the streets, Brooks states,

Dr Brooks: “Of course not, but why sterilize them. If they are dangerous they should be locked up for the rest of their lives...you really think an operation will help in most cases like that?”

Doctor: “In most cases a mental condition is frequently improved. It’s worth the experiment.”

Dr Brooks: “Yes that’s just what it is, an experiment.” (Wilbur, 00:31:21-00:31:40)



Fig. 6. Still from *Tomorrows Children* (00:21:51). American actor and sideshow performer Schlitzie is being prosecuted for their feeble-mindedness.



Fig. 7. (Left) Still from *Tomorrows Children* (00:31:42). Dr Brooks saying “Yes that’s just what it is, an experiment”.

Fig. 8. (Right) Still from *Tomorrows Children* (00:31:13). Shot of Schlitzie being pre-examined before sterilized surgery.

Later in the same scene, the film reiterates this point once again, when we encounter another criminal patient named Spike who will be going through the same sterilization process. Spike by no means is a coded disabled character but rather a depiction meant to represent the common thug who happens to get mixed up with the law. Despite his asserted criminality, Spike makes a comment on the validity of the operation will have on preventing him from committing future crimes. Spike’s monologue with Dr. Brooks reflects the ethos of Wilbur’s argument as he states, “How’s this operation going to keep me from stealing? Or packing a rod to use if I get caught in a jam? Well it won’t. Just wait till I get out of stir someday...They haven’t made me lose something I’m really going to miss...Okay Doc, you may be finished. But you got to do more cutting than that to stop me.” (Wilbur, 00:36:39-00:37:07) Spike’s comments are monumental here, as they provide a legitimate argument against the sterilization mandates and the role they are presumed to have on the rate of criminality. Although Alice, Spike, and the disabled figure are all arguably victims of a system which believes to have the moral right over their bodies, we will now explore how this same corrupt system depicts the protection of what Wilbur deems as the true villain of the plot.

During the court scene discussed earlier, we are presented with another non communitive “feble-minded” character named Mr Whitley, who is accused of committing a crime (Fig. 9). We later find out that Whitley is the son of a very influential doctor, and is exonerated from the sterilization operation. This is solely due to the fact that a senator intervenes on behalf of Whitley by exploiting his political power during the court hearing. By doing this, Wilbur makes

a clear point that any “feeble-minded” criminal can be absolved of their operation, if they are of a higher class status. Therefore, the film argues that politicians, along with other corrupt systematic figures, would never allow their own children to go through such a barbaric operation, despite their “disturbed” nature.



Fig. 9. Still from *Tomorrows Children* (00:24:21). Shot of Mr Whitley staring menacingly at the judge.

The film’s incentive becomes clear; those who are disabled and are of a poorer status are deemed a burden on society and must be sterilized for the greater eugenic cause. Those who are disabled and happen to be part of a wealthy influential family, can be absolved from their horrific destiny and continue to freely commit crimes. Wilbur thus demonstrates how class dynamics become a major factor in the ensuing hypocrisy that follows these eugenic laws. The film states that systematic corruption is still liable even if these laws were “fairly” mandated. The film also depicts elements of what will later evolve into the “Creep” figure that I further explore in the coming chapters. As we can see from the photo above, the actor playing Whitley has more

resemblance to a demonic monster, rather than a human being. Similar to the “cripple” protagonist in the *Black Stork*, Whitley is depicted as a figure that cannot be rehabilitated to the norms of society. An example of this can be seen when Whitley sexually assaults a nurse minutes before his repeal court case. (Fig. 10) His gruesome appearance is compiled of, pale skin tone, bushy eyebrows, dark lipstick, and dark circles under his eyes. All of these makeup prosthetics choices are meant to reinforce one thing; Whitley is an evil creature that should not be rehabilitated back in our society. Along with his deviant actions will later reaffirm a stereotype which will be further expanded upon in the coming chapters which explore the relation between the creep and the establishment of the early monster film genre.



Fig.10. Stills from *Tomorrows Children* (00:22:53-00:22:58). Shots of Mr Whitley demonstrating that he is a criminal by sexually assaulting a nurse moments before his court hearing.

Conclusion:

The archetype of the American family during the early 1900's consisted around the eugenic premise that only able-bodied individuals were deemed acceptable within ideal American homes. As we have seen throughout this chapter, disabled bodies that could not conform into this idealized institution were deemed a burden upon their families. Figures like Grant and Douglas believed that segregation and sterilization were suitable solutions in order to prevent disabled bodies from rupturing the establishment of the neurotypical family. Other extremists like Haiselden, believed the only solution to prevent a society filled with criminal infested disabled bodies, were to euthanize them before they had the chance to multiply. As we will see in the coming chapters, eugenic ideologies from Grant and Haiselden will eventually become commonly cited as key factors to the establishment of the Nazi T-4 programs. These programs sought to eliminate anyone that was deemed unfit to be a part of the Arian race. Psych wards that not even Wilber's *Tomorrows Children* could imagine will become the center stage of what horrors await a community that was guilty for simply existing.

Although many of the cinematic examples I have brought up so far ultimately demonstrate a pattern of cruelty and violence towards their fellow counterpart, if there is any form of consolation that I can offer the reader, it would be a stern belief that not every family subscribed to these eugenic ideologies. Some families did not see their "feeble-minded" members as a burden or nuisance upon the family dynamic. There were some who did not believe their children would grow up to be become indoctrinated into a world of crime, rather the opposite. When rereading *Eugenics and Other Evils*, I often ponder the observation Chesterton makes

around the important role “feeble-minded” family members have to the suitability of their families:

“Now, even if I could share the Eugenic contempt for human rights... I should not begin by removing feeble-minded persons. I have known as many families in many classes as most men; and I cannot remember meeting any very monstrous human suffering arising out of the presence of such insufficient and negative types. There seem to be comparatively few of them; and those few by no means the worst burdens upon domestic happiness. I do not hear of them often; I do not hear of them doing much more harm than good; and in the few cases I know well they are not only regarded with human affection, but can be put to certain limited forms of human use. Even if I were a Eugenicist, then I should not personally elect to waste my time locking up the feeble-minded. The people I should lock up would be the strong-minded” (Chesterton, 65-66).

Chesterton’s statement combats against the stereotypical notions surrounding criminality and “feeble-minded” individuals. His statement is one of the few that humanizes neurodiverse individuals and clearly demonstrates that disabled individuals could not only be of use in a capitalistic society, but also be capable of being loved from their family members. When I read this statement, I gain some form of comfort that there were individuals from back then who saw us as humans.

Overall eugenic films like Wilbur’s *Tomorrows Children*, allowed many filmmakers to create content to promote open dialogue on the state of euthanasia and sterilization laws in America. The mass distribution of these films would be short lived, as The National Film Board would implement the Motion Picture Production Code, otherwise known as the Hays code,

which would censor films that portrayed immorality, criminals, and dysfunctional bodies. The majority of complaints around the depiction of such grotesque bodies stemmed more from audience members than production executives. Many spectators feared that consuming such films which openly depicted disabled bodies along with the horrific eugenic operations that followed, would ultimately damage the national health of the country. The consensus behind segregating these disabled bodies was done to ensure that the American public would uphold its productive modes of capitalism, all the while promoting a morality strictly linked to eugenic ideologies (Smith, 20). As censorship began to take effect in Hollywood and disabled bodies became more segregated in mainstream cinema, some production companies attempted to get around these laws through different means of presenting these undesirable grotesque figures.

Chapter 2: The Creature and the Crime against humanity

In regards to 1930's cinema, eugenics would continue to impact the representation of disabled individuals, only through more subtle means. In this chapter, I wish to explore the history and socio political impact one particular monster film has had on the autism community. James Whale's 1931 classic *Frankenstein* is a story that is riddled with much eugenic themes that present's Frankenstein's Creature as a pitiful criminal to be feared. My goal in this chapter will not only be to research a more in depth history on the production and influence eugenic had on Whale's film, but also explore the ways the original novel by Mary Shelley incorporated aspects of disability politics in her story of the same name. Particularly I will be focusing more on Shelley's usage of the Creature's voice, or lack thereof, and how it connects to the politics of blackness and "nonspeaking autistics". This section of my thesis will be the most vital as I will be examining how aspects of language and body politics still have a negative impact on the ASD community by enforcing eugenic rhetoric through the mode of whiteness. By exploring the connections between *Frankenstein* and autism, I will demonstrate how both iterations continue to transcend and negatively impact the ASD community.

Eugenics Influences within the Monster/Horror Genre and Frankenstein:

Much of the early monster films were inspired and constructed around eugenic ideologies, thus allowing production companies to promote more pseudo-scientific theories to mass audiences. Production companies like MGM and Universal Pictures were finding new avenues to present disfigured bodies on screen due to the suggested mandates of the pre Hays Code era and the Ugly Laws. Film directors like James Whale had the chance to construct many of their horror ideas for features like *Frankenstein*. The majority of Pre-code Hollywood did not

abide to these suggested mandates that asked production companies to reframe from explicitly depicting films that featured the usage of sex, violence, or disabled figures. (Doherty) Another mandate which affected the development of many horror films was the Ugly Laws were a set of mandates that existed as far back as the late 1800's, and sought to arrest and institutionalize disabled members solely due to their aesthetic features. In Katherine Fusco's article "Feast Your Eyes, Glut Your Soul", the author explores the impact these laws had on the production of many horror/monster films during this era of cinema. As Fusco states "...horror films of the 1920s and early 1930s foregrounded their presentation of criminality and gruesome visages, offering up spectacles of nonnormativity that flouted regulations seeking to remove visible difference from public view. In particular, the so-called ugly laws, which criminalized visible disability, and the Hays Code, which forbade violations of the laws of both man and nature, effectively limited the variety of people who might appear in public view." (Fusco, 54)

To further examine this phenomenon, the introduction chapter of Angela M Smith's *Hideous Progeny disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema* critiques how many early horror films produced between the 30s and 40s depicted grotesque images of monsters which were meant to resemble eugenically societal fears. The pathologies that emerged from this genre, revolved around the depiction of bodily and behavioral traits that were representative of different outcast and minorities. This would reinforce the establishment and justification of governmental intervention which included the option of institutionalization, sterilization, and euthanasia. Thus, "... Hideous Progeny uncovers the film's pervasive and often 'ablest' exploitation of unusual bodily forms, however, it also demonstrates that the films complicate, diffuse, and even vilify eugenic messages." (Smith, 2 and 3) *Hideous Progeny*, as Smith argues, challenges film scholars

not to overlook the genre's underlining history of disability politics: it encourages readers to rethink how eugenics played a role in the aesthetics and production of such classic horror films.

Pseudo-scientific theories of the late 19th century had a dramatic impact in the field of criminology. One popular theory mentioned by Smith is the massive influence biological determinism had on assessing the disability community. “Degeneration theory” proposes the idea that one can determine if a person will become a criminal from birth simply due to their behavior and bodily structures. Originally derived from the studies of physiognomy and phrenology, the theory insists that one could determine if a “criminal” will commit crimes solely from the examination of their facial features and skull measurements. Experts of the time believed that examining specific physical abnormalities in the head could determine different aspects of a person's personality, allowing criminologist to speculate how one would act. (DrBSully, 00:01:29-00:02:05) This theory was mostly used to solidify a terrible form of racism that suggested that smaller heads, mainly from visible minorities like African Americans, equated to them having lesser intelligence. This is one of the ways racism and disability coincided with one another, particularly through the elements of anti-black racism. “...degeneration theory maintained that there was an original and superior white race, and that this group of humans moved about the globe and mutated in different climates. These morphological and pigmentation changes were not seen as adaptations or the results of natural selection; they were explained as a perversion or deterioration of a higher archetype.” (Curran) I will further expand on this commonality between both minority groups in the next subchapter of this section. My goal will be to dedicate a thorough analysis which will articulate how the creation of blackness connects to neurodiversity through colonial whiteness.

Smith introduces Cesare's Lombroso, a eugenic researcher and criminologist who argues that there are important interconnections between crime and the "feeble-minded" community. In his book *The Criminal Man*, Lombroso expands on what biological qualifications would make someone a criminal. Taking heavy inspiration from the fields of physiognomy and phrenology, Lombroso writes that "...anomalies in the limbs, trunk, skull and, above all, in the face, when numerous and marked, constitute what is known to criminal anthropologists as the criminal type, in exactly the same way as the sum of the characters peculiar to cretins form what is called the cretinous type." (Lombroso, 24) This cretinous type, as Lombroso states, was solely determined by a criminal's physical attributes, leading the "cretin" to be destined to societal degeneracy and deviancy. As a result Lombroso proposed that such cretinous types be emphatically incarcerated or exterminated. (Smith, 8) Similar to the pseudo-scientific observations of Harry John Haiselden in my first chapter, Lombroso also concluded that such species' physicality and intellectuality were comparable to that of an undeveloped animal. As he states, "The Idiot is prompted by paroxysms of rage to commit murderous attacks on his fellow-creatures. His exaggerated sexual propensities incite him to rape, and his childish delight at the sight of flames, to arson." (Lombroso 74 and 75) Therefore these pseudo-scientific theories would slowly redirect their way to the mainstream cinema and find a home within the horror/monster genre. The "Creep" would find itself displayed as a character that resembles the Lombrosian "cretinous type".

In the subchapter "Brain Damage: Frankenstein," Smith argues that the assessments of a feeble-minded individual from Lombroso's eugenic theory, would later go on to be a critical inspiration for the pathological framework that went into the development of "The Creature" in James Whale's classic film *Frankenstein* (1931). Smith argues that Frankenstein's creation is a metaphorical gesture that is meant to represent the feeble-minded as a cause to the dysfunctional

family. (Smith, 59) Adapted from Mary Shelley's novel, *The Modern Prometheus* (1831) the iconic horror film follows an "insane" scientist named Dr. Henry Frankenstein, who attempts to revitalize life into a creature composed of dead body parts. Once he succeeds, the creature is then subjected to months of torture by his hunchback assistant Fritz. Eventually the creature breaks free, murdering Fritz, and proceeds to venture into a local village where he accidentally drowns a little girl. This leads the local villagers to retaliate by hunting the creature and burning it in a windmill. Perhaps one of the most distinguishing aspects one encounters while comparing Shelley's novel to Whale's film, is the nature of the creature's abnormal brain. Shelley's novel makes no reference to the nature of the creature's brain in Victor Frankenstein's personal journal entries, leading to the conclusion that the creature's revenge arc comes from environmental factors. In the film adaptation, Whale makes a strong emphasis through eugenic ideologies that the creature's inherent nature is solely due to its abnormal brain of a criminal. Smith elaborates to the production choices behind the film: "...Frankenstein mobilizes tropes of bodily and mental debility to affirm, through disability, the degeneracy of 'inferior' classes. The film's rhetoric of abnormal and criminal brains references a eugenic discourse of 'feeble-mindedness', in which inferior intelligence, lower class status, and criminality are consolidated in and confirmed by the monster aberrant bodily appearance and behavior. As we have seen, the monster's abnormal brain constitutes proof of the aberrance of the reproductive method that brings him into being" (Smith, 62 and 63). This can be seen in one of the first scenes of the film where Dr Waldman addresses an entire classroom about an abnormal brain that would later be implanted into the creature's body (Fig.11). The implication of this scene, informs audiences that the abnormal brain demonstrates characteristics of the dead criminal "...whose life was one of brutality of violence and murder" (Whale, 00:07:11-00:07:46).

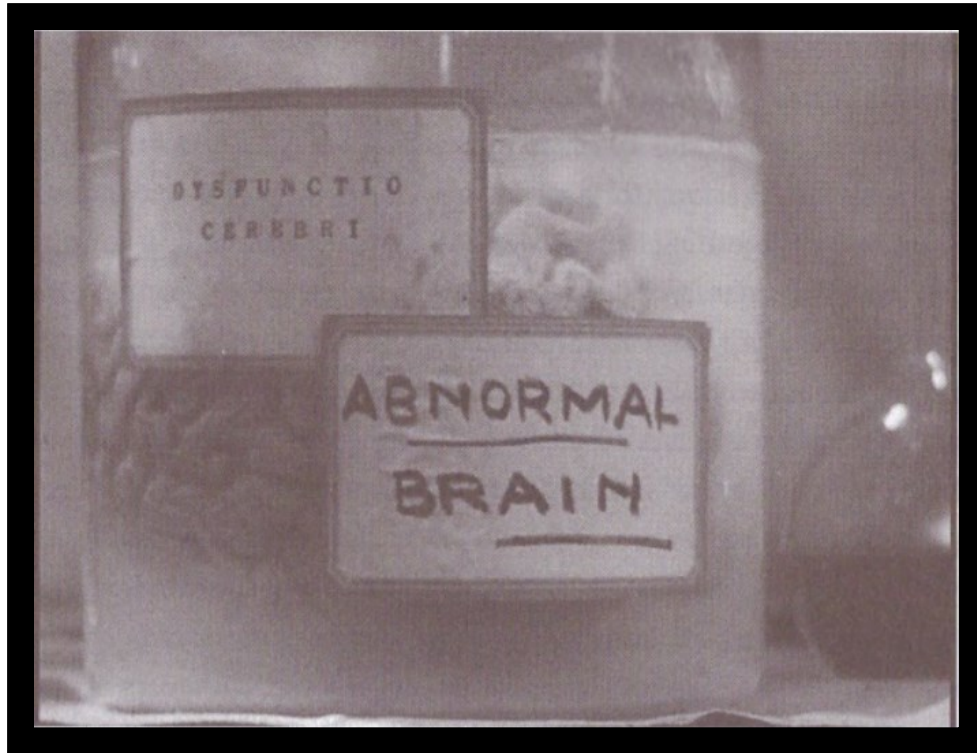


Fig. 11. Still from *Frankenstein* (00:08:59). Abnormal brain for the creature in *Frankenstein* (1931).

The scene exhibits a language reflective of Lombrosian science. Similar to the film, Lombroso was quite well known for his antics of displaying severed heads and brains of hundreds of criminals in large jars for public amusement. In his museum located in Turin, Italy, visitors can still see these remnants of criminals including Lombroso's head as well (Fig.12) (Fig.13). Convinced that his skull was of the acceptable kind, Lombroso allowed his colleagues to perform an autopsy on his body after his death, attempting to prove his own theory that his brain was superior to the average criminal. Therefore the film makes a direct connection between Lombroso's pseudo-scientific theory and the creature's inheritable nature to be bound to a life of crime. Therefore Lombrosian pseudoscience is clearly demonstrated throughout Whale's film. It is not hard to believe that Lombroso's theories could have impacted the development of the

production of *Frankenstein* considering that it was produced within a span of twenty two years after his death. Furthermore, there is a rise of other contemporary scholars who are noting the similar characteristic the “cretinous type” attributes to the depiction of the Creature from Whale’s film.

“Lombroso’s born criminal was a simple-minded monster, the offshoot of a biological disorder. An aberrant Frankenstein figure within the otherwise comprehensible—because cultural—world of villainy, the criminal man was unsalvageable, and therefore should be exterminated” (van Zuylen)

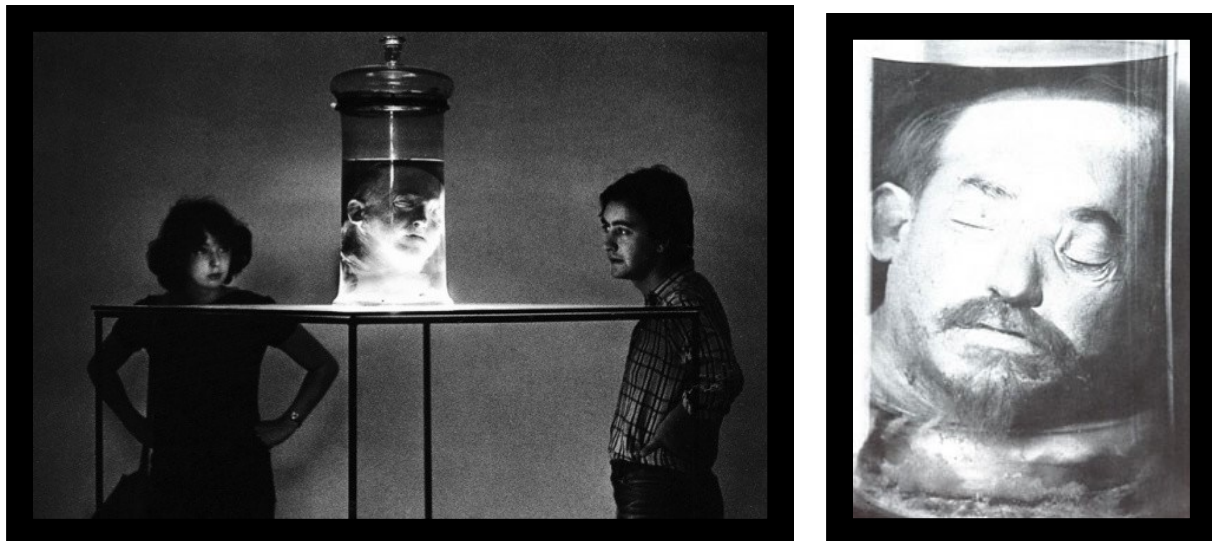


Fig.12. (Left) Romano Cagnoni. “Head In A Jar.” Photo of spectators looking at a Lombroso’s head in a jar at Lombroso’s museum, 1978.

Fig.13. (Right) Cabinet of Curiosities. “Lombroso’s Museum of Criminal Anthropology.” Cesare Lombroso’s head on display at his museum.

It is also important to note the extensive impact negative eugenics like Lombrosian pseudoscience may have had after the film’s initial release. Similar to Lombroso’s experiments, the extensive analyzation between human brains and criminality would manifest itself again in

Nazi Vienna. However, now it would expand its efforts to systematically target and exterminate a large number of the neurodiverse community. To reiterate from my introduction, the Nazi Euthanasia Programme, otherwise known as the Aktion T4 campaign, was established in 1939 with the sole intention of slaughtering individuals who the Nazi party deemed unworthy of life and unable to participate in the *volk*. As a result, doctors would conduct obscene experiments upon the cadavers of neurodiverse subjects with the intent to expand the research of negative eugenics. One of the most infamous names to conduct such inhumane experiments was Dr. Heinrich Gross, otherwise referred to by the children of his ward as the ‘Grim Reaper’ (Sheffer, 140). The nickname became a fitting epithet, as similar to Henry Frankenstein, Gross had extensively gone out of his way to collect and preserve the brains of over four hundred disabled children in Spiegelgrund, leaving him with an abundance of material to experiment on far after the war had ended. Another prominent Nazi figure was Dr Julius Hallervorden who collected hundreds of brains from disabled individuals, often times being delivered by the truckloads (Suzanne, 52). Children’s brains were often preserved and labeled in jars that stated their neurological diagnosis prescribed by Nazi physicians. Many of the deceased children’s brains were harvested for “...feeble-mindedness, epilepsy, or schizophrenia—the three diagnoses that autistic children were most likely to receive in the days before autism was an accepted diagnostic category.” (Silberman, 133) Unfortunately the brains were not the only body parts to be collected in the T4 program, as just like *Frankenstein*, many of the other Nazi physicians collected other body parts of exterminated children. In fact, a variety of these body parts were distributed to other Nazi researchers after the war was over as a way for them to continue their own personal research around eugenics (Sheffer, 196). Many of the other corpses were harvested for their organs sold to universities for pseudo-scientific research purposes (Suzanne, 57).

One cannot help but see the uncanny connection between these horrific events to the aesthetical choices that were present in Whale's film. As I will later elaborate in the next chapter of my thesis, there was strong evidence of German and American eugenicists having some frequent forms of inner dialogue among one another during the early 1900's. Much of the exchange consisted around the different theories and policies that would have been passed through eugenic films which inspired German race hygienists to slowly implement similar American policies in their own country. (Pernick, 162-163). Much of these policies found in American eugenics would go on to manifest fully in the Nazi regime. As Smith adds, "...not only did American eugenic policies and actions provide a blueprint for Nazi Germany's rounding up of 'inferior' groups, medical experiments and torture, and mass killings, but American eugenicists directly collaborated with and praised Germany's embrace of eugenics" (Smith, 234). There is also strong evidence that suggest that Whale's *Frankenstein* may have been influenced by depictions of Jewish folklore that came from German expressionism during the exchange of such ideologies a decade before the Nazi regime. Lester D. Friedman's article "The Edge of Knowledge: Jews as Monsters/Jews as Victims" explores how both Shelley and Whale were inspired by Germany's portrayal of the Jewish folklore of the monster called golem. The article argues how the mythological story of the golem, a nonspeaking clay monster brought to life by kabalistic magic, most likely had a pivotal point of influence which helped the development of Shelley's Creature. Friedman also argues that the film adaptation titled *The Golem: How He Came into the World* (1920) is noted as being an important form of inspiration towards Whale's version of the Frankenstein creature. As the text states, "Some writers have noted how both Frankenstein director James Whale...were influenced by Wegener's direction and performance (he played the golem), much as Mary Shelley – who devoured German ghost stories - was no

doubt herself influenced by versions of the golem legend” (Friedman, 51). Thus the creature’s cultural and eugenic influences demonstrate a complex narrative that can be widely signified as either being a positive or negative influence to different audiences.

One of the more widely accepted interpretations comes from the creature being a symbolic gesture which represents the dysfunctional family solely due to it being an unnatural offspring of Henry’s likeness. Smith reiterates this point by analyzing how the film on multiple occasions discusses the need for Henry to have a son to expand the family of Frankenstein. Through Henry conducting his dark act, the film shows audience member’s the disruption of the nature of the heterosexual relationship between him and Elisabeth. By creating a being that has an abnormal brain it “...confirms the degeneracy of any product of a non-heterosexual, non-natural, and thus non-eugenic act of procreation, initiating an explicitly eugenic narrative of biological determined character” (Smith, 61). Similar to Douglas’s thesis on the dysfunctional family, Whale’s film makes a subliminal suggestion that a similar fate awaits for feeble-minded individuals who disrupt the natural order of the world. Considering that the creature is unable to reproduce, one can see a similar pattern of sterilization and societal isolation as a solution to destroying this unnatural creature. When the creature is slain by the end of the film, Henry and Elizabeth are able to reproduce a healthy son, thus restoring all aspects of unnatural hierarchies that were once disrupted by the creature’s life. Smith concludes by noting that the reestablishment of the house of Frankenstein reminds audiences of their social, hierarchical, and eugenic status. This is reiterated by the family’s wealth, respected status, and the protagonist’s ability to reproduce a healthy male offspring (Smith, 62). The film also reaffirms that “...Lombrosian science ‘passes through’ bodily forms, quite literally looking into the ‘maw of disability’ in order to consolidate its expert status and maintain social hierarchies.” (Smith, 8)

Similarly to the previous chapter, Whale's film also exhibits aspects of the "medical gaze" and its relationship between the patient and cinema's history of mad doctors. Henry, along with the town's people objectively pathologize the creature as a criminal due to its inheritable nature. This imposes a gaze that results in the village destroying the destructive monster. Smith also argues that Henry's mad nature threatens the medical gaze, as his intelligence is also responsible and a threat to the balance and normativity of the town's people. "This duality—the intimate relationship between the medical gazer who projects and directs the disability spectacle and the monster or patient whose body constitutes the star attraction—is nowhere more evident than in films where doctor or scientist quite literally makes himself into a monster" (Smith 175). Considering that Smith argues that the creature is supposed to subliminally represent Henry's offspring, we can conclude that this duality between creation and creator is meant to represent Henry seeing himself in the monster. In other words, perhaps Henry's madness in creating such monstrosity alludes to his own hidden potential to manifest evil and animalistic tendencies on a society that neglects him for his intelligence. This suggested theory makes sense when we consider that the creature in its entire form is a literal representation of everything Henry is not. Therefore their duality is not something that can be measured on an external level, but rather I suggest a shared dual nature that clearly obstructs the balance of normality.

Just like *The Black Stork*, there is also a spiritual component that is found reaffirming these social hierarchies. In the film's opening monologue, the announcer tells audiences that Frankenstein is, "...a man of science who sought to create a man after his own image, without reckoning upon God" (Whale, 00:00:20-00:00:25). The film reaffirms a message that such abnormal "creatures" are curses from God and should never be mixed into a neurotypical society. Overall, Whale's *Frankenstein* is a film that exhibits many of the moral and social

dilemmas that surrounded the horror genre and its relationship to eugenics. As we will see in the next section, I will attempt to analyze how these structured hierarchies find their way to isolate characters who display ASD coded symptoms as “others”.

Blackness, Frankenstein and the “voice”:



[Shinichi Sawada](#), “Untitled”, 2007-2010, 29-19 in.

(A clay sculpture—that of a mythological creature with horns aplenty. Its arms and legs emerge from its head—they, too, look like horns. The sculpture is a tactile feast, with hundreds of little skin bumps.)

Fig. 14. Shimichi Sawada. Anthropomorphic clay sculpture of a mythological creature with description below it, (2007-2010) 11.

“How many critics does it take
to screw in a stereotype?

The autistic cannibal,
the ignoble savage

beating his drum—
not even the Other.

I’d rather live in the dark
than endure

such smug illumination.

Electricity be damned!”

THE HORNS OF A DILEMMA- (DJ Savarese, 11)

Now I believe it is worthwhile to pause the thesis in order to explore what significance Shelley’s work, both novel and film adaptation, may provide a glimpse into a larger discussion involving the complex relation between ASD and its underlining themes of “otherness”. That is to say, how can we as film theorists analyze Frankenstein’s creature through a more contemporary lens, in order to relate its manifestations to what we now call autism. Perhaps a fundamental factor will be to regard the creature’s similarities to autism through aspects like speech to the conceptual formulation of blackness. By analyzing these specific topics, we will not only be able to understand the devastating generational trauma that has been presented in the last section of this paper, but also understand what awaits the ASD community in my final chapter which explores more contemporary themes around autism and blackness.

Despite its initial terminology, the conceptual view of blackness is not limited to the skin color. As discussed in the previous section, “degeneration theory” was responsible for racially categorizing different minorities, mainly African Americans, as a less intellectually evolved species compared to the white race. In the introduction of her book *Pragmatic’s of the Useless* (2020) Erin Manning expands on the comparable dimensions of anti-black racism and the neurodiverse community. By referring to a quote from cultural theorist Fred Moten which states, “...all black life is neurodiverse life...” or “...black life is always neurodiverse” (Manning, 1) Manning suggest we juxtapose blackness and neurodiversity. What Moten is proposing within this statement is the hypothesis that all black life is neurodiverse life not within a metaphorical context, but rather through the means of infrastructures constructed around the modes of colonial whiteness. In fact, there is strong evidence to support this overlapping history between blackness

and the neurodiverse community within the realm of cinema. In a later deleted scene of Haiselden's *The Black Stork* (1917), audiences would have seen a black disabled child interacting with the disabled protagonist as a way to connect typical bad genes' and race inferiority (Pernick, 57). Pernick also notes that Haiselden's film also used the term "Blackness" to invoke negative connotations towards audience members, and would often associate it with "'Weakness—Pain—Disease—Degeneracy—Vice—Crime—Filth—Loathsomeness--...Ugliness'" (Pernick, 57) as ways to describe the crippled protagonist, along with many other patients euthanized.

Blackness is further explored in Moten's terminology of neurotypicality in Manning's previous book *The Minor Gesture* (2016). Moten, in Manning's words, insists that neurotypicality "...is another name for antiblackness. The neurotypical stages the encounter with life in such a way as to exclude what cannot fit within its order, and blackness, or what Moten describes as 'black sociality,' always ultimately exceeds capture" (Manning, 4). Manning therefore is interested in exploring how both minority communities struggle to conform to colonial whiteness due to presubscribed gestures. In particular, *Pragmatic's of the Useless* argues that neurodiverse gestures are mainly dictated within the realm of neurotypicality, which mainly consists around the notions of unspoken categories around movement and existence. Manning states that neurotypicality has the capability to fortify and manifest itself in every aspect of every day experience. She calls this normopathy. Thus neurotypicality presents itself as a standard which determines who can be considered and distinguished as Manning says, "truly human" (Manning, 4). In her work, blackness, following Moten, is defined as the ethos or generative capacity of the more-than of neurotypical existence. The text's study of blackness aims to

explore the full proximity that lies underneath black life, in order to compare and contrast its similar structures to the neurodiverse community.

How can we expand on Manning's statement through the guise of cinema and neurodiversity representation? Moten's chapter "The Case of Blackness" argues that the best course of action to investigate the ontology of blackness must first start by investigating the daily lived experiences of black life. Moten states that by exploring black life as a collective field of sociality, we may be able to uncover why whiteness fears it so much. As Moten phrases it, "What is it to be an irreducibly disordering, deformational force while at the same time being absolutely indispensable to normative order, normative form?" (Moten, 180) It is here, where I will insist we analyze the relation between the aesthetics and social gestures Frankenstein's creature presents within the functionality of the "cretinous type" and blackness itself.

As reiterated from my previous chapter, the golden age of cinema allowed studios more opportunities for producers to adapt literary works featuring disabled bodies constructed around narratives that have a more independent voice. The horror/monster genre was no exception: Wallace Worsley's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) was "...one of the first feature films of physical disability to replicate a disabled person's point of view" while still presenting the disabled Quasimodo as "...an object of spectacle." (Norden, 91) Other early monster films like *The Sea Beast* (1926), adapted from Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*, present the "monster" of Ahab within a relation between the world of normality encompassed by the mode of whiteness. Both films challenge audience's perspectives on how we see the isolated worlds the disabled characters are forced to inhabit. Both films also reaffirm eugenic stereotypes that present disabled character's as being unable to be rehabilitated within the normalities of their societies.

A contributing factor to this narrative structure comes in the form of agency, or lack thereof. One can acknowledge how these narratives demonstrate a shift within the public perspective of humanizing disabled figures from the time these films were released. At the same time, we can now acknowledge from a critically analytical perspective, that these films reaffirm stereotypes formulated around the disabled figures being framed within the constructs of neurotypicality. The transparent act of neurotypicality inducing itself within the concept of agency still inflicts members of the disabled community to this day, especially within the realm of cinema. Agency still enacts as a conflicting endeavor as Manning states:

“Even when we give voice to those silenced, even when we speak in the name of the multitude, even when we talk about the “agency” of an artistic process, even when we try to give agency to an oppressed people, we assume a mediation between an act and its unfolding, most often attributing the push to action to ourselves as a species, while still retaining a strong sense that the world is ultimately led and enhanced by the neurotypical few. This is the problem with agency: it makes the subject the subject of the action.” (Manning, 16)

Therefore, even though the golden age of cinema may have presented disabled bodies with a more “independent voice”, it ultimately failed to undermine that fact that its “agency” was built around an industry constructed around colonial whiteness.

Within recent years, autistic poets have taken it upon themselves to revisit these classic narratives as a way to invoke self-agency, or, even more interestingly, to trouble the very idea of agency to open the way toward more neurodiverse (infra-agential) ways of connecting. This connects to a concept of Moten’s that Manning takes up: an aesthetic of black sociality. Black sociality is not limited to Black people coming together. It is a way of being in the world, what

Edouard Glissant would call “a poetics of relation.” Glissant defines this terminology through the everyday experiences and identities that are shaped and encompassed by the rhizomatic thought of the African Caribbean community. As Glissant argues, “Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (Glissant, 11). Although Glissant’s work mainly centered on the different oral histories and aspects that surrounded the creolization of many languages and cultures of the Antilles, I argue this is what I see in much of contemporary autistic writing. Their contemporary pieces are attempts to reflect the uniquely daily experiences disabled individuals go through. Their goal is to examine how neurodiversity opens the way for new forms of sociality through the disabled character’s perspective.

Ralph Savarese’s *See It Feelingly: Classic Novels, Autistic Readers, and the Schooling of a No-Good English Professor*, is a book that best exhibits this perspective of neurodiverse perspective through the analyzation of classic literature. In his book, Savarese is in discussion with several autistics around specific literary texts’, reading together, is an example that features a variety of classic texts like Melville’s *Moby Dick*, and encompasses voices of autistic readers who interpret their own critical analysis of these literary works. Much of the critical analysis in the book is composed around the concept of what Manning calls “autistic perception”. By its definition, “autistic perception” is a mode of perception that precedes categorization into subjects and objects. It is what might be called a direct perception of the world forming itself. Autistic perception is not restricted to autistics. Autistics are simply the ones who most emphatically embody it, and especially in the “non-speaking” autistic realm, write about it. Manning’s research demonstrates how autistics, especially nonspeaking autistics, encounter the world perceptually in a nonhierarchical way, living it in and through relation. As Manning states,

“There is here as yet no hierarchical differentiation, for instance, between color, sound, light, between human and nonhuman, between what connects to the body and what connects to the world.” (Manning, 14)

Therefore “Autistic perception” allow “non-speaking” autistic poets like Tito Mukhopadhyay, the opportunity to be in conversation with Ralph Savarese about the neurotypical undertones found in literary works like *Moby Dick*, and the personal daily struggles that could be abstracted from the zeitgeist of the ASD community. In particular, Mukhopadhyay strongly relates to the unhealthy obsession Captain Ahab has towards killing the notorious white whale, linking it to a similar obsession neurotypicals have with eradicating autism. In his chapter “From a World as Fluid as the Sea” Ralph Savarese expands on the ways literature can be interrupted in multiple ways from an autistic’s sensory system. Savarese even goes as far as to state that while engaging with Mukhopadhyay on Melville’s novel *Tito*, “...identified with the creature whose liquid life seemed analogous to his own sensory one, he, too, felt hunted. Encountering Ahab, he compared the captain’s obsession with killing *Moby Dick* to our culture’s obsession with vanquishing autism. Just as Ahab believes that the white whale maliciously took his leg, so people believe that autism maliciously takes their children” (Savarese, 49-50). Inspired by Tito’s analytical interpretations of *Moby Dick*, I wish to dedicate the next portion of this subchapter to an analysis of Frankenstein’s creature in a similar manner through my own “autistic perception” in hopes of unraveling the hidden eugenic ideologies that lie in Shelly’s book by connecting them to concepts of blackness.

In order to closely examine what sorts of elements of whiteness lie in Shelley’s novel, we must first explore the socio-political context that was formulated around these eugenic ideologies. By comparing and contrasting the parallel worlds that both Frankenstein and his

creature are forced to coexist in, I will argue that the creature exhibits similar gestures of autistic “behavior”. It is important to note to the reader before we proceed that Shelley never explicitly stated whether her work was influenced, or meant to combat against eugenic ideologies. Contemporary scholars like Smith are reluctant to place Shelley’s novel in such light due to the lack of information about Shelley’s life. *Hideous Progeny* asserts that Shelly was more interested in critiquing the urge human beings have when interacting with uncharted territories within the realm of scientific discovery. The novel thus serves as a warning that these uncharted avenues could lead to paths of self-destruction if one is not careful. Despite this, Smith argues that the character of Frankenstein exemplifies multiple aspects of eugenic ideologies:

“Whether Shelley’s Frankenstein is a figure whose anti eugenic actions and their terrible results reinforce notions of proper procreation or a eugenic figure whose horrific actions suggest the monstrosity of eugenics itself... the novel suggests that the conditions of the monster’s conception and birth are less important than formative events such as his abandonment, his observation of the de Lacey family, his education in literature and history, and his repeated rejections by prejudiced individuals.” (Smith, 59 and 60)

Contrary to Smith’s argument, I will argue that Shelley’s design towards the creature’s social hierarchy most likely came from the influence of the early prototypical mandates of what would later be known in America as “The Ugly Laws”. In America, these mandates were mainly targeted to prevent street beggars and vagabonds, particularly those with physical disabilities, from wandering on the public streets in search of money. Susan M. Schweik notes in her book *The Ugly Laws* (2009) that before the existence of the American “Ugly Laws”, England had previously implemented similar restrictions in 1729 that caused discrimination towards the disabled community. This often led to disabled beggars to be jailed and fined for their physical

or disfigured bodies (Schweik, 4). The 18th century in England would become more complicated, as early institutions were also beginning to emerge but without the problematic structures that would later be critiqued by Foucault's *Maddens and Civilization*. Rather the opposite was happening: as disabled people were still capable of integrating in neurotypical society as a large sum had families that they could live with. The initial cause of these prototypical British "Ugly Laws" seems to suggest that they may have come from a place of social endearment towards the disabled community, rather than a place of stigma and discrimination. However, it should be noted that some English citizens would still have harsher feelings towards the disabled community, and would often result in mocking disabled individuals (Shakespeare, 1039). With this in mind, one can draw a conclusive argument that Shelley most likely was critiquing these social taboos which would have been the norms of her time. This theory becomes more evident when we consider the creature was forced into social isolation and harshly discriminated for its deformity. Another interesting argument that supports this theory, which I will go into more details later on, is how Shelley uses a hierarchal system contrasted by the mode of whiteness which determines the creature's societal value. This is best exemplified when the creature gains his voice and begins to talk to another disabled character forced to live apart from society in the novel, the blind father of the De Lacey family. Now that we have established a case to the social relationships and dynamics that contribute to the development of the creature, let us now explore the ways eugenics and whiteness may exhibit itself within the realm of Shelley's novel.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1831) presents the reader with detailed passages that suggest Victor Frankenstein's childhood was molded around high class sophistication. In Victor's journal entries, he relays to the reader that he was born and raised in an esteemed and wealthy family, thus invoking a sense of white privilege. As Victor illustrates, "I am by birth a

Genevese; and my family is one of the most distinguished of that republic. My ancestors had been for many years counsellors and syndics; and my father had filled several public situations with honour and reputation.” (Shelley, 18). Other renditions of Shelly’s novel like Junji Ito’s *Frankenstein* (2018), further illustrate the high-class environment Victor grew up in. As we see in the comic strips below (Fig. 15) (Fig. 16) Victor has a rather privileged childhood upbringing, which mainly consists around his love for scientific discovery. Shelley’s text reconfirms the notion of Victor’s fascination for science as he states, “The world was to me a secret which I desired to divine. Curiosity, earnest research to learn the hidden laws of nature, gladness akin to rapture, as they were unfolded to me, are among the earliest sensations I can remember” (Shelley, 23). As we can see from Junji’s panels below, the manga emphasizes that Victor grew up in an estate and was taken care by a maid named Justine. Victor is also seen having the opportunity and capability of interacting with other children his age, as well as being surrounded by loving family members who encourage Victor’s passion to explore the scientific realm of the unknown.

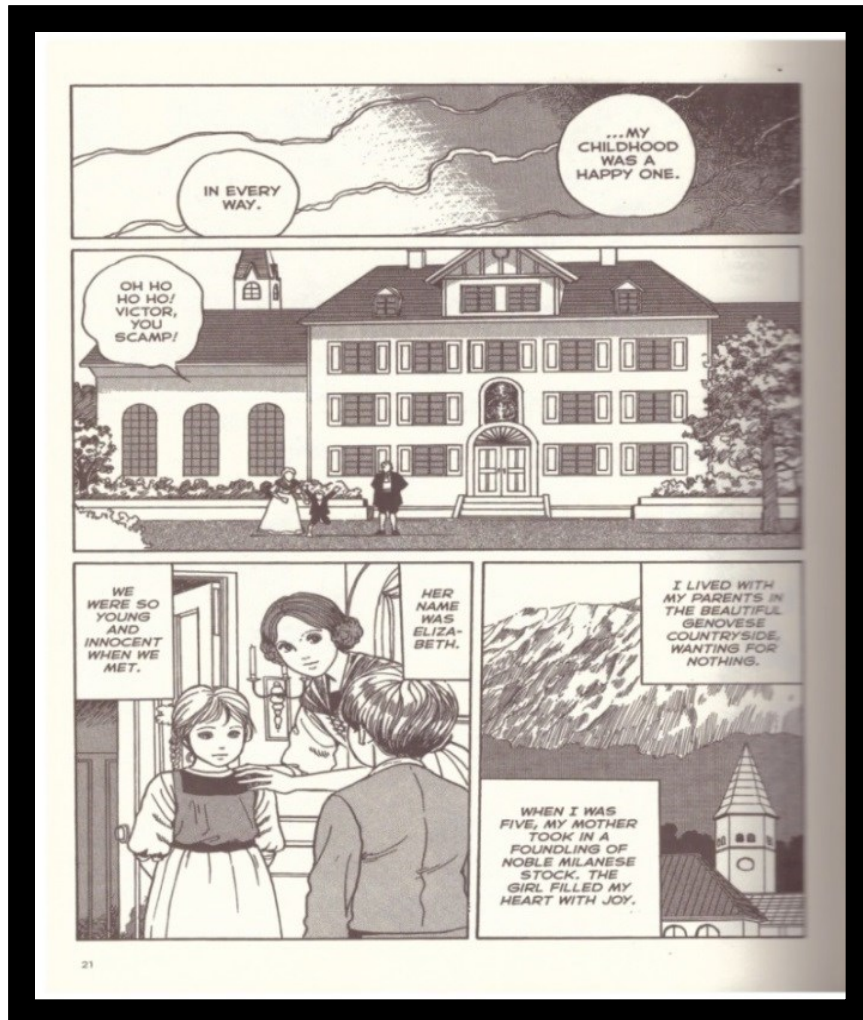


Fig.15. Junji Ito. *Frankenstein*, A comic panel demonstrating the lavish childhood, and later love interest of Victor Frankenstein (VIZ Media LLC, 2018) 21.

Source: Junji Ito. *Frankenstein*.

VIZ Media LLC, 2018.



Fig.16. Junji Ito. *Frankenstein*, two comic panels demonstrating the lavish childhood of Victor Frankenstein and how he become obsessed with science (VIZ Media LLC, 2018) 22-23.

Source: Junji Ito. *Frankenstein*.

VIZ Media LLC, 2018.

Eventually Victor's privileged upbringing allows him the opportunity to venture into one of the most sophisticated universities in Ingolstadt, where he encounters the different methods of natural science that would later contribute his obsession to reanimate life. From these examples, we can see that Victor passes the basic formalities that contribute towards the structure and concept of whiteness: he has the kind of access to dominant structures that speak of white privilege.

Shelley makes it undoubtedly clear to the reader that Victor's character was brought up in a high class, well-educated, and loving environment. If we compare Victor's childhood to the

reanimation of his creature, we see a stark difference in its environment. Compared to Whale's 1931 film adaptation of Shelley's work, the novel depicts Victor as being a reluctant guardian who ultimately abandons his creation solely due to how dreadfully ugly and deformed it looks. The creature discovers that he is destined to live alone without the nourishment of an intimate family, as well as slowly realizing that he will never be able to integrate within society. As the creature proclaims, "Hateful day when I received life!" I exclaimed in agony. 'Cursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust?" (Shelley, 112). Thus the creature's abandonment can be seen as symbolic form of exclusion, as the creature is forced to live a life of solitude and social isolation due to its appearance. Here, Shelley does not exemplify blackness and neurodiversity through the creature's generational trauma or skin color. Rather, blackness and neurodiversity is exemplified through the creature's lived experience and systemic treatment that is similar to how disabled individuals, as previously stated, would have been treated during Shelley's lifetime. Their many different overlapping aspects that one can explore of the creatures' mode of potential between neurodiversity and blackness, however for the sake of my argument I will be focusing on one of the fundamental overlaps that encompasses the "othering" of both communities, language.

Frankenstein, Blackness, and the use of Language:

Aspects of autism present themselves throughout Shelley's novel. In particular, the novel frames the creature having two of the most commonly associated elements that can be found in the diagnosis of classical autism, limited speech and social isolation. In Julia Miele Rodas's book titled *Autistic Disturbances: Theorizing Autism Poetics from the DSM to Robinson Crusoe*, the author critiques the ways autistic language can be found and associated through the analysis of different literary figures. Rodas argues that use of autistic language in classical literary texts

like *Frankenstein*, helps modern scholars understand contemporary literary aesthetics that are often associated with it. In her and Melanie Yergeau chapter titled, “The Absence of the Object: Autistic Voice and Literary Architecture in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*,” Roda presents readers with a complex framework which aims to comprehend the selective aesthetics that *Frankenstein*’s creature exhibit through the perspective of autistic language. Roda’s chapter focuses on the comparative ways the creature learns how to speak to the contemplative ways an autistic may find themselves in the modes of speech and social isolation: “In *Frankenstein*, the interrelationship between ‘muteness’ and ‘verbal precocity’ is evident at a number of levels, embodied most dramatically in the Creature himself, whose articulation of his earliest self describes a being utterly without language...” (Roda & Yergeau, 148) One example of the creature’s speech both authors focus on is when the Creature seeks refuge in a hut, and begins to slowly incorporate the ability to speak by spying on the De Lacey family that is located next to him (Fig. 17) (Fig. 18). Through multiple time-lapses, the reader begins to see how the creature formulates the ability to speak while isolated from social interaction with the outside world. Thus the creature’s social isolation ironically acts as a self-guide to slowly becoming more “human”. Roda argues that this private space allows the reader, “...to carefully consider the architecture of the Creature’s sanctuary, and to note that the privative space is anchored by a common wall, connecting the Creature by a ‘small and almost imperceptible chink’ to the social and linguistic life of ordinary humanity” (Roda & Yergeau, 148). By examining the creature’s ability to slowly incorporate vernacular speech from his hidden proximity, the authors argue and compare this method of incorporating verbal practices and social cues similarly to the ways autistics may incorporate aspects of neurotypical language through masking.

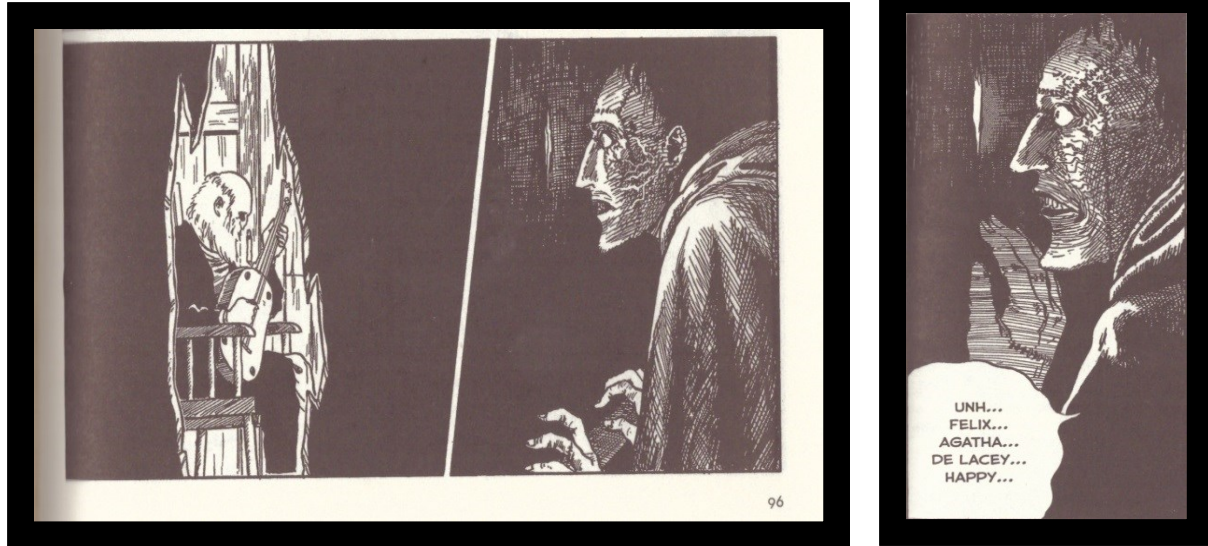


Fig.17 (Left). Junji Ito. *Frankenstein*, Comic panel of Frankenstein’s creature spying on the De Lacey family from a tiny hut (VIZ Media LLC, 2018) 96.

Source: Junji Ito. *Frankenstein*.

VIZ Media LLC, 2018.

Fig.18 (Right). Junji Ito. *Frankenstein*, Comic panel of Frankenstein’s creature incorporating the mode of language from the De Lacey Family (VIZ Media LLC, 2018) 100.

Source: Junji Ito. *Frankenstein*.

VIZ Media LLC, 2018.

Therefore the hut also enacts as a symbolic womb that not only nourishes the creature, but becomes a source of self-protection from exposure to the social norms of the outside world. Here, the creature is deprived of personal interactions with the world, but ultimately gains authentic experience that will later contribute to the development of his dialogue. In other words, “The fortress wall serves as a connective bond just as the word articulates silence.” (Roda &

Yergeau, 149) Thus the hut symbolically becomes a learning tool in which the creature can safely exhibit the world, without being condemned by it.

Shelley's novel suggests the creature's ability to construct language relies on his environmental field of relation. Roda points how the interrelationship between "muteness" and "verbal precocity" is most present in Shelley's novel when the creature is struggling to utter the "song of the birds", eventually resulting in the creature to retreat into the domain of silence. (Roda & Yergeau, 148). The creature's struggle to communicate is reminiscent of the environmental mode of relation that "non-speaking" autistics describe through their unique multisensory nature. Ralph Savarese even theorizes a similar environmental mode of relation that may exist when "non-speaking" autistics analyze different forms of literature through their "autistic perception" as an attempt to conduct their form of language in the world. As Savarese states, "Literature is our linguistic lifeline to the body: it not only simulates the real, but it also re-presents it in ways that disrupt our habits of perception. We might even say that literature is the autistic version of language, whose spoken and written forms become more abstract as the typical person ages. (Savarese, 40)

An example of this environmental mode of relation being manifested through the mode of language can be analyzed through Mel Baggs short film called "In My Language". Baggs film explores the way language can be composed from the angle of "autistic perception". The entire video consists of Baggs, a "non-speaking" autistic, interacting with her environment through multisensory gestures. Baggs demonstrates how they feel the world, and shows that their own language is mainly constructed around her relationship with her environment. As they state: "Many people have assumed that when I talk about this being my language, that means that each part of the video must have a particular symbolic message within it designed for the human mind

to interpret. But my language is not about designing words or even visual symbols for people to interpret. It is about being in a constant conversation with every aspect of my environment” (silentmiaow, 00:03:14-00:03:44). Although a person steeped in neurotypicality might claim what Baggs is doing is completely incompatible to the typical mode of language, Baggs argues that they are “opening up to a true interaction with the world” through stims and a constant connection to their environment. Ultimately, the video asks the viewer if language is a main component to identify someone as truly human. If true, where does Baggs fall under this category of the human, if at all? Baggs, along with the creature’s struggle to grasp traditional neurotypical thought, asks the viewer/reader to rethink the ways we encompass the standard modes of language, and who is left out when we do.

It is here where the mode of blackness and language overlap with one another, as both are built on the presupposition of colonial whiteness. The colonial function of what is normal, must always construct itself around the predication that considers what is linguistically compatible or acceptable in order to evaluate if a person is considered, as Manning stated before, “truly human”. In Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) in the chapter, “Negro and Language,” the author recounts a specific encounter he once had while examining an old disabled woman with dementia whose “mind was never strong” (Fanon, 20). Fanon compares the humiliating ways white men would talk down to Black individuals, to the similar way he once talked down to an older disabled patient. As Fanon states: “The fact that I adopt a language suitable to dementia, to feeble-mindedness; the fact that I ‘talk down’ to this poor woman of seventy-three; the fact that I condescend to her in my quest for a diagnosis, are the stigmata of a dereliction in my relations with other people” (Fanon, 20). As Fanon argues, we can see an identical use of whiteness being weaponized through the mode of language in order to

dehumanize a disabled individual. Fanon's segment illustrates a daily struggle many "non-speaking" autistics as well as Black individuals face, as society dictates the sum of both communities worth from their capability to speak in a neurotypical manner. It is this violence coded by whiteness, which ultimately presumes that both communities' gestures and modes of language are not only less than "human", but systemically assume that both have nothing of value to contribute or say. Manning expands this argument in her chapter, "backgroundingforgrounding" in which she explores how society imposes itself upon "non-speaking" autistics with the belief that their "non-thinking bodies" means they have no "voice". She later goes on to compare this disavowing treatment of the disabled body to the discrimination that black or brown bodies face on a daily basis due to societal prepositions (Manning, 112). If we apply Fanon and Manning's arguments for blackness within the neurodiverse community to Shelly's work, we can see a similar pattern emerging from the creature's inability to compose speech to indicate his societal value.

This is best exemplified when the creature attempts to form paternal bonds with a member of the De Lacey family. Once the creature develops a mode of language that is suitable to neurotypical speech, Shelly presents the creature's first interaction with another disabled outcast, the blind father from the De Lacey family (Fig. 20). As seen below from a recreation from Junji manga, the creature presents itself as a weary traveler who longs for a companionship and accompaniment towards the blind father, but its potential is stagnated to formulate such bonds due to its appearance.



Fig.19. Junji Ito. *Frankenstein*, Comic panel of Frankenstein’s creature talking to the blind father of the De Lacey Family (VIZ Media LLC, 2018) 104.

Source: Junji Ito. *Frankenstein*.

VIZ Media LLC, 2018.

The conversation exchanged between the two, reinforces the notion that both are outcast for crimes they did not commit. As the creature states,

“...‘I am an unfortunate and deserted creature; I look around, and I have no relation or friend upon earth. These amiable people to whom I go have never seen me, and know little of me. I am full of fears; for if I fail there, I am an outcast in the world for ever.’” (Shelley, 116)

To which the old blind man replies,

"Heaven forbid! even if you were really criminal; for that can only drive you to desperation, and not instigate you to virtue. I also am unfortunate; I and my family have been condemned, although innocent: judge, therefore, if I do not feel for your misfortunes." (Shelley, 117)

As we can see from the interaction, both characters are framed as disabled criminals who can never integrate into neurotypical society. This interaction does not last long as the creature is soon driven out of the cabin from other members of the De Lacey family, thus indicating to the reader that the creature is not welcome even to the lowest status of neurotypical society. From an autistic perspective, the creature's failure to develop normative bonds is seen as a far too common of an occurrence within the mode blackness. Ultimately, the exchange between the creature and the blind father shows how Shelley's creature has potential to try and express himself, but ultimately fails when neurotypical violence interceded from other non-disabled members of the De Lacey family.

In contrast to the creature's speech, Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) present's the Creature's ability to construct language in a way which categorizes "feble-mindedness" in relation to autism by constructing a flat artificial being that has no potential. Whale's film exhibits this connotation, as the creature is presented as having the inability to conduct a basic function of formulating language among his peers. Rather, the only sounds that the creature generates come in the forms of grunts, moans, or screams in order to express what he is feeling. Smith argues that Whale made a conscious decision to make the creature's inherent nature resemble the embodiment of a childlike state in order to justify its neurological "feble-mindedness". This choice allowed audience members to feel more empathetic towards the creature's lack of parental nourishment from Henry, and to be a misunderstood as a criminally neurological deviant (Smith, 68).

Presumptions connecting “feeble-mindedness” to a mind of a child were not uncommon within realm of films depicting eugenic pseudo-science. Haiselden’s *The Black Stork* (1917) presents a scene where Dr Dickey (played by Haiselden himself) displays a variety of different mental patients, one of which being a teenage woman “with the mind of three year old child” (Pernick, 144) (fig. 21) (fig. 22).

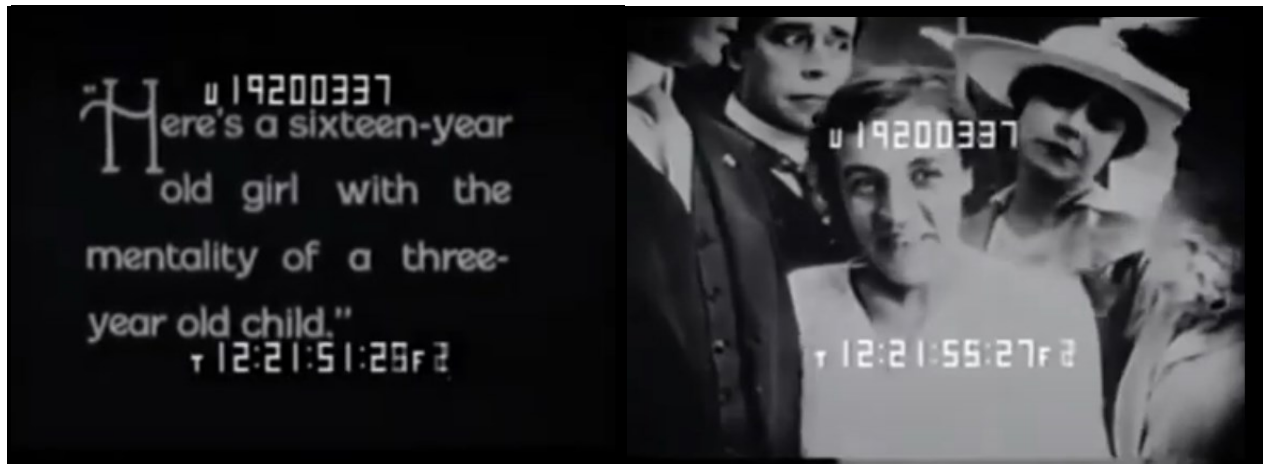


Fig. 20 (Left). Still from *The Black Stork* (00:21:30). Text which says “Here’s a sixteen-year old girl with the mentality of a three-year old child”.

Fig. 21 (Right). Still from *The Black Stork* (00:21:34). Frame of a “feeble-minded” girl who has the mind of three-year old.

Another example of this eugenic legacy associating a monster’s inability to conduct a basic function of formulating language due to its childlike nature can be seen developing in the slasher genre with a the character like Leatherface in Tobe Hooper’s classic film *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). It has been well researched that the director of this infamous film deliberately made his main villain neurodiverse to spark more fear from audience members. In his autobiography titled *Chain Saw Confidential: How We Made the World's Most Notorious*

Horror Movie, Gunnar Hansen, the actor who played the iconic villain, recounts the extensive sources that went into making Leatherface come alive. In the book he states: “Tobe explained that Leatherface—I loved the idea of having the title role—was retarded...In fact, Leatherface was so retarded that he didn’t really talk, though he did grunt and squeal like a pig at times....Tobe added that Leatherface was insane in a way that made him unpredictable and extremely violent. All this made for a very dangerous man” (Hansen, 17). Although this recounting is problematic on its own, Hansen would go as far to take it a step further by researching other forms of neurodiversity to create a more authentic portrayal of his character. In an article released shortly after his death, it was revealed that Hansen had spent an extensive amount of his time observing the gestures of multiple individuals with intellectual disabilities in order to develop the mannerisms of Leatherface (Cwik).

If we compare these pseudo eugenic rhetoric of childlike wonderment through the mode of constructing language demonstrated in Whale’s film to Fanon’s previously mentioned theoretical chapter on the relation between Black individuals and language, we will see a stark overlap between the two. In one section of his chapter, Fanon stresses how white Europeans would often associate Black individuals use of creole and slang words to that of an unintelligible status. This “jabber” as Fanon articulates, can be perceived and used from a white supremacist perspective to persecute Black individuals by theoretically comparing them to the intelligence of a little child. As Fanon argues, “...The Negro loves to jabber, and from this theory it is not a long road that leads to a new proposition: The Negro is just a child” (Fanon, 16). With this in mind, I will argue that Whale’s film incorporates the function of a sort of “childlike jabber” which consists solely of the creature’s grunts, moans, and screams, preventing him from being identified from the rest of normative society. Whale’s creature has become immortalized in the

realm of cinema for its use of distinct grunts, moans, and screams that have become a staple in signifying a demonic figure. Similarly to creole, these forms of language have been used to stereotype a perceived negative image that is often associated with otherness and Lombroso's theory of the "cretinous type".

The move Manning makes, following Moten, from Black individuality to blackness is important here. Blackness, as an aesthetic sociality, is not reducible to the individual. Similarly, in Manning, neurodiversity exceeds the individual: autistic perception demonstrates this exquisite quality of feeling-into the world, of not assuming a world-body separation. To further this analysis of Whale's film back to the relation of blackness and disability studies, we must explore a mode of communication that questions the formalities of language itself. Manning's chapter "backgroundingforgrounding" explores a technique that alludes to the concept around the mode of communication that is not recognizable to a neurotypical mode of speech. Contemporary poet Adam Wolfond calls this "linguaging," in which he specifies through his work how the noises and movements "non-speaking" autistics make are seen as taboo, compared to if neurotypicals were to make those similar gestures. In his poem called "Body of knowing is the relation of atmospheres opening the language," (Fig. 23) Wolfond's poem wishes to explore the inherent systemic violence that is ensued through whiteness on "non-speaking" autistics. The author argues how a neurotypical perceptive views movements and grunts that come from "non-speaking" autistics having little value, when in reality they are meant to project a far deeper meaning that goes beyond the boundaries and structure of neurotypical language.

**Body of knowing is the relation of atmospheres
opening the language**

Have the ways of water the ways
of the rallying dances of people
no
because knowing is about
the ways of having paces
that are landing and really fueling
Miss the ways
that can feel games of space opening
the answers about autism
that are crafted by non autistic people,
and that means we know how to be in relation
with the paces of that world we talk about as
making beautiful again and I am same as that
world that is always coming and connecting
like some tears in my eyes will salt the earth
and the faces of people
will turn toward it
and the way of the questions
will not be about autism
but about sudden feeling
and languaging that emerges
will buttress as the body
that moves.
The way I want to talk
is the way I really want
to think about belonging
but art's questions are using the ideas to feel
the way I answer with my body and I can question
the management of talking as the way of wanting sense
but I sense that the way of knowing rallies
as dancing real dear inside easy giving body opens
doors
to
needing
connection.

Fig.22.Adam Wolfond. *Frankenstein*. “Body of knowing is the relation of atmospheres opening the language.” (Toronto, punctumbooks, 2023) 11.

Source: Adam Wolfond. *Open Book in Ways of Water*.

Toronto, punctumbooks, 2023.

Furthermore, aspects of “linguaging” exist within the anthropology sounds of blackness, as both communities have been politically chastised and demonized from the domains of whiteness for using non-communitive sounds like grunts or moans. Blues legend Blind Willie Johnson’s song *Dark was the night/cold was the ground* is an excellent example of the sound of blackness encompassing past the barriers of language and formality. Originally based off a hymn written by Thomas Haweis titled with the same name, the lyrics describe the famous agony in the garden of Gethsemane in which Jesus Christ was conflicted with the excruciating pain that he would soon face at his crucifixion. However, Johnson’s song has a deeper connotation which is strongly connected to the African American community.

Originally produced as a “call and response”, a tradition formulated from West Africa and would later go on to contribute to the birth of genres like Southern Gospel and Blues, the hymn has been associated with many tragedies that involved anti-black racism in the south. From being sung on southern slave plantations, to it being recited after tragic events like a lynching, to its religious use on Good Friday services, the song carries a collective narrative that is embedded within the black community of America (Ford, 2). Johnson reimagines this song by excluding the lyrics and instead chooses to only hum and moan along with his Stella guitar. This haunting version invites the listeners to feel the collective generational trauma through Johnson’s personal agony of living in constant poverty and not having a place to sleep. It is for this reason that we can stipulate that Johnson’s song evokes the usage of Wolfond’s theory of “linguaging” as Johnson’s grunts and moans “...transcends language, straddling the abyss that lies between feeling and expression. In here, one can trace the words of the original hymn as Johnson hums and moans in the voice of his ancestors, while also constructing a new language, distilling the song to strictly emotional measures, and by not singing he is able to free it from categorization.

In the hands of Johnson, this is not only about the particular death and eventual redemption of one man but of a people, a universal moan.” (Ford, 3) Johnson’s song becomes an encoded message that signifies blackness to other African American’s who would understand the hidden meanings of the song. As an act of artistic solidarity, I cannot help myself but truly express my emphatic wonder that comes from Johnson’s religiously themed song. The heart wrenching grunts and moans, all expressed through a blind man, display how “... it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him” (John 9:3, USCCB).

If we apply this expression of constructing language to Adam’s poem, we will see a similar phenomenon taking place within the realm of blackness. Adam carries with him the grunts, moans, and hums that have historically stigmatized many “non-speaking” autistics from being seen as human beings. This violence of colonial whiteness becomes reflexive of how society should see and treat “non-speaking” autistics like Adam, as there are seen as having lesser value than someone who can produce neurotypical language. I personally know Adam, and I’m honored to call him a fellow research colleague. But I also know far too well that if the general public saw Adam without his chat box, or not having any prior knowledge of his published books, they would assume that he was incapable of producing works of art that touch the human soul. In fact I’m quite positive there are people in this world who most likely don’t believe Adam has a soul, or at least one that is equated to a neurotypical. Yet, Adam does, and just like Johnson, Adam’s hums, moans, and body gestures continue to be reflexive of a speech that also transcends neurotypical language. It is for this reason that we as film scholars should be more indicative of how Whale presents the creature’s moans and grunts in a childlike manner, as they carry a eugenic history that still stagnates a community till this day.

Conclusion:

There are a plethora of other monster films which involve undertones of eugenic ideologies, much of which I believe still need to continually be carefully examined for their socio-political impact on the disability community and how it can still contribute to stereotypes towards disabled individuals today. Much of the eugenic ideologies that are found in *Frankenstein* are still apparent within zeitgeist of our cultural influence. The concept of reconstructing a body and molding it to fit into a neurotypical society is a common sentiment that is shared within many psychotherapeutic institutions that practice ABA therapy. Perhaps an eerie example of this reconstruction of the human body and mind can be seen in the real life events that draw similar themes to Frankenstein's creature. An example of life imitating art could be seen in experiments of American psychologist Charles Fester, who was known for paving the path in using applied behavior analysis (ABA). Fester conducted an experiment in which he believed he could alter the behavior of an autistic child who had tantrums by locking it in a small room for a year straight. Similarly to the creature's isolation within the hut, the child eventually came out and was "cured" of any future tantrums from arising (Silberman, 284). Another example comes from the psychoanalytical methods of clinical psychologist Ole Ivar Lovaas. Although Lovaas is regarded as a major figure within the development of ABA therapy, his horrifying philosophy interjects a disturbing nature that one could compare to Victor Frankenstein. As Lovaas once stated in a clinical magazine about treating autism, "'You see, you start pretty much from scratch when you work with an autistic child. You have a person in the physical sense—they have hair, a nose, and a mouth—but they are not people in the psychological sense. One way to look at the job of helping autistic kids is to see it as a matter of constructing a person. You have the raw materials, but you have to build the person'" (Silberman, 285). Lovaas's concepts of constructing a human in order for them to be accepted

within neurotypical society can be juxtaposed alongside Manning's argument that autistics are forced to integrate within neurotypical society in an attempt to be deemed "truly human". As someone who has heard personal horror stories of the hut, who has known family and friends in my elementary school who would be subjected to Fester's technique of locking autistic children in a small dark room, or worst the janitors closet. I can only state that the voices that do merge from the departure of that dark void are not the ones that are accepted. In fact, just like the creature, many will have to wander in the world seeking companionship while cursing the ones who gave them their "voice". We are only free from being condemned behind the confine of our own isolated huts.

Electricity be damned!

Chapter 3: How Lack of Gemüt Still Presents Itself in Modern Film's Featuring ASD

Although one may argue that this history of eugenics, which took place decades ago, bears no resemblance to the current stigmas which the ASD community is facing, I would like to argue a different perspective that explores the (infra-agential) ways Nazi eugenics, (through its combinations of other previously stated eugenic influences) can still be seen in contemporary films and media depictions of autism today. That is to say, I would like to explore the structural elements that are at play that associate criminality to autism. To do so, I will focus on contemporary films which involve the characteristic aspects of autistic coded figures that feature aspects of the “creep” trope, primarily those that match the diagnostic criteria of someone who ‘lacks *Gemüt*’, a German concept popularized in Nazi Germany which I will soon explore more in depth. My goal for this chapter will be to show how the “creep” trope has not only been influenced by some of the socio-political events of the past century, but continues to emerge in modern films which feature autistic representation. In order to do this, I will be analyzing two contemporary films, Fred Durst’s *The Fanatic* (2019) and Michael Cristofer’s *The Night Clerk* (2020) and argues how both films perpetuate the viewpoint that autistics are criminals. This has a great impact on real life events that can end in detrimental consequences for the ASD community. By analyzing these films and their infras, we will be able to have a better understanding of which elements of criminality and mass violence are still currently being portrayed in the public view.

As mentioned briefly in my previous chapters, eugenic policies from the Third Reich owed a great debt to the pseudo-scientific ideologies that were popularized from American eugenics. Many American and German eugenicists exchanged theories among one another decades before the rise of the Third Reich. One of the main contributing factors came from Adolf

Hitler's admiration for many of the previously stated eugenic theories and policies. After taking full control over Germany in 1933, Hitler's dictatorship would go on to implement eugenic policies similar to the ones that were still being debated in America. These policies were aimed towards "...Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring, or Sterilization Law, authorising compulsory sterilisation of people said to be afflicted with congenital epilepsy, feeble-mindedness, mental diseases such as schizophrenia, alcoholism, and other supposedly heritable afflictions" (Rafter, 296). As a result, many American eugenicists were beyond enthusiastic to hear that their ideologies, which were always a point of contention of debate in American society, were finally being manifested to their fullest extent (Black). I wish to reanalyze the connections and causalities which involve my previously investigated research around negative eugenics, and explore how these theories may have played a direct and influential role on the development of Nazi eugenics.

Madison Grant's *Passing of the Great Race* (1916) was known for being one the biggest contributions to Hitler's ideological development of the "master race", eventually going on to promote and incorporate the fundamentalist view of Aryanism in Nazi Germany. Scholars have also noted that Grant's book had a fundamental role in shaping the mindset of Hitler's views on the disability community. In fact, the book had such a pivotal impact on the dictator, which Hitler would later go on to personally; write a thank you letter to Grant stating that his book was his personal "bible" (Black). Therefore it is not hard to believe that much of Grant's views on disabled individuals would manifest themselves in Hitler's personal manifesto titled *Mein Kampf* (1925). In this book, the soon to be dictator described a similar solution to Grant's book suggesting that the state should neutralize the neurodiverse community:

“The demand that defective people be prevented from propagating equally defective offspring is a demand of the clearest reason and if systematically executed represents the most humane act of mankind. It will spare millions of unfortunates undeserved sufferings, and consequently will lead to a rising improvement of health as a whole.” (Hitler, 255).

The passage eerily resembles Grant’s sentiments in the first chapter of my thesis, calling for the state to intervene and eliminate defective offspring for the betterment of society.

Another eerie yet indirect correlation between German and American eugenics could be found in the similar campaign slogans that were publicly used towards the disabled community. Pernick notes that Hitler’s slogan of “life unworthy of life” bears a striking resemblance to Haiselden’s euthanasia campaign which would promote the phrase “lives of no value” and therefore, “...helped promote concepts and catch-phrases that became central to the legitimization of genocide. Thus part of Haiselden’s historical importance derives from the light his actions shed on the way in which ideas and images later used by the Nazis first took shape.” (Pernick 165) Oddly enough, the Nazis would also start producing their own eugenic propagandic films with the sole purpose to promote and reinforce negative eugenic awareness towards the German public.

Wolfgang Liebeneiner’s *Ich klage an* (I Accuse) (1941) follows the story of a young woman named Hanna who is diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. After contemplating the magnitude of her disease and seeing no purpose left in her life, Hanna asks her husband Dr. Thomas Heyt’s and her family doctor Dr. Lang to end her life through the method of assisted suicide. After many failed attempts at finding a cure, Hanna’s husband comes to a similar conclusion and assists in Hanna’s suicide in order to spare her of her tragic fate. Eventually

Thomas is arrested and is persecuted by Hanna's brother. The rest of the film develops into a court room drama, with Thomas's only defense being that he ended his wife's life because he loved her. Much of the film's propagandic elements begin to emerge in the next scene when the counsel deliberates amongst one another, debating if a doctor should have the medical rights to perform a mercy killing if that patient is suffering from an uncommon or incurable disease. The debate soon becomes one sided as some of the members invoke emotional reasoning to justify why Thomas should not be sentenced for murder. It is here that film projects its arguments towards mandating a state law that would allow euthanasia towards those deemed unworthy of life, as Liebeneiner's film centers on the notion that, "...Dr. Heyt's mercy killing of his wife is according to the law a crime. However, he argues from a moral standpoint to affect a change in the existing law, to legalize euthanasia so as to reach acceptance in the viewers for the National Socialists' plan to do precisely that. The moral question *Ich klage an* purports to raise on the surface is whether euthanasia should be legal. And the film affirms it" (Steitz, 315). Unlike other eugenic films like Wilbur's *Tomorrows Children* (1934), which presents scenes that show the positive and negative repercussions forced sterilization policies can have on the general public, the goal of Liebeneiner's film was intended for the Socialist party to use *Ich klage an* to gain the general public's admiration towards euthanasia while the Nazi T4 program was starting to systematical assess and eliminate the disabled community for the *volk* (Steitz, 314).

If we compare Liebeneiner's film to the rhetoric Haiselden promoted in *The Black Stork*, we will not only see a stark overlap between both films similar overtones towards empathetically killing those who are deemed unworthy of life, but also systematic comparisons between disabled people and animals. As previously iterated, Haiselden's followed a eugenic philosophy which compared the Bollinger baby's human status to that of less than an "ordinary animal"

(Pernick, 72). This sentiment can be similarly reflected in Liebeneiner's film during the deliberation scene where one of the judges emphatically compares Hanna's mercy killing to the euthanization of an animal. (Fig. 24):

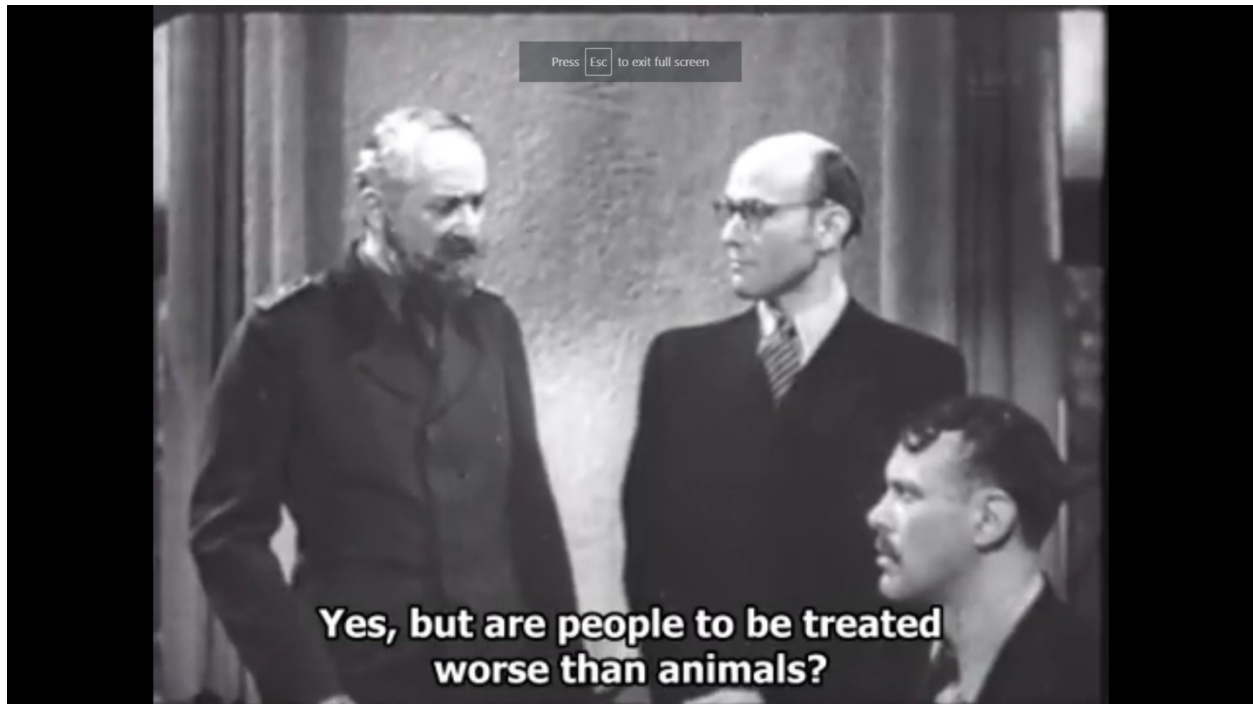


Fig. 23. Still from *Ich klage an* (1941), (01:43:51). Frame of jury deliberating on the fate of Dr. Heyt.

Jury 1: "...gentlemen just a few weeks ago I had to give my old hound the mercy shot. He was blind and lame. But otherwise, he had faithfully served me his entire life. And if a hunter doesn't do that, then he's a harsh fellow, not an honorable huntsman."

Jury 2: "Yes but those are animals"

Jury 1: "Yes, but are people to be treated worse than animals"

(Liebeneiner, 01:43:29-01:43:55)

Although there is no clear evidence of direct correlations between Haiselden's film which promoted his euthanasia campaign and Liebeneiner's film which was supposed to distract the German public from the T4 program's which were responsible for murdering thousands of disabled individuals (Pernick 166), Pernick argues how one cannot help but spot the similar yet eerie philosophies that emerged from both directors.

Finally, one of the last yet significant connections that formulated Nazi criminology came from the National Socialist parties' being heavily inspired by Lombrosoian pseudoscience. The fascist state was so inspired by the methodologies of Lombroso that the Nazis would go on to secretly establish an independent Gestapo which would systematically target and round up criminals/mentally disabled individuals who best exemplified the narrow terminologies that were defined in *The Criminal Man*. In particular, Nazi psychiatrists would adopt a similar perspective to Lombroso's view on biological determinism, as many child psychiatrists assessed disabled children predicting that they "...would grow up to be unproductive, criminal, or harmful to society" (Sheffer, 122). The Nazis also particularly admired Lombroso's concept of a 'social defense' society, which consisted in the philosophical view that the state should be allowed "...to defend itself, even with the death penalty, just as a man defends himself from wild animals" (Mazzarello, 100). However, this form of 'social defense' as defined by Lombroso, would go to manifest itself under the Nazi regime to harsher forms of brutality that went far beyond what Lombroso could have ever imagined. Criminals would soon be systematically collected in droves and subjected to harsh living conditions where they would either starve to death, or eventually be euthanized. Thus, "The Nazis carried Lombroso's 'social defense' position on criminal justice to an extreme that would have horrified the Italian liberal" (Rafter, 296).

It is here that I wish to conduct my final analytical argument in the investigation between criminology and its stereotypical correlations with the ASD community. During the T4 programs, Nazi child psychology played a major role in determining whether or not a child was acceptable to participate in the *Volk*. As similarly mentioned, in the mental deficiency act protested in G K Chesterton's *Eugenics and Other Evils* (1922), the criteria of diagnosing a child's fit for the Nazi *Volk* was incredibly vague and solely determined by the interpretations of child psychologists. Many of the children were not only tested to meet the standard criteria for the typical body and mind that was expected in the Nazi party, but also the spirit that was connected to the *Volk*. This meant that children needed to act and behave in a way that unified their characteristics to a sense of social adherence which demonstrated superiority over other racial and social classes (Sheffer, 67). The term that was often used to describe this collective social consciousness was called *Gemüt*.

Edith Sheffer's *Asperger's Children: The Orgins of Autism in Nazi Vienna* explores how this terminology was used to diagnose and systematically murder disabled children who were shown to have symptoms of "lacking *Gemüt*" or what we now recognize as autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Nazi child psychologists also used the definition of *Gemüt* as a core hypothesis within the development of Nazi criminology (Sheffer, 70). The definition of *Gemüt* is unfortunately hard to pin down, as Sheffer notes that the untranslatable German word can stand for multiple ideas and expression that has to do with one's personal role and responsibility within the community. Collinsdictionary.com associates the word with other connotations like, *mind*, *nature*, and *soul* (collinsdictionary.com). Sheffer notes that in Nazi Germany *Gemüt* alluded to "...one's fundamental capacity to form deep bonds with other people. It had metaphysical and social connotations..." and it "...was essential to one's worth as an individual, and to the health

of the *Volk*” (Sheffer, 69). Therefore, one can see how an autistic child who “lacked *Gemüt*” due to their difference would be targeted as a threat towards the Nazi party’s vision of what can only be described as a neurotypical standardization of the *Volk*.

This is not to say that terminology of autism didn’t exist prior to Nazi Vienna. On the contrary, the term “Autism psychopathy” was originally understood to be a condition that was thought to be a symptom of severe schizophrenia. In fact, Sheffer notes in one of her public presentations “The Origins of Autism in Nazi Vienna” that a majority of Nazi child psychologists would associate the language of *Gemüt* around the definition of autism to mean “...community, adverse, and weak.” (Talks at Google, 00:07:33-00:07:35). One of the earliest uses of “autism” in Germany came from a Swiss psychiatrist named Eugen Bleuler. During the 1908 German Psychiatric Association, Bleuler would introduce the term “schizophrenia” in a lecture he was conducting among his colleagues (Fusar-Poli & Politi, 1407). He would later go on to categorize the symptoms of severe schizophrenia in his book *Dementia Praecox or the Group of Schizophrenias*, where he would present the neurological condition under the guise of “autism”. In his subchapter “Relation to Reality: Autism” Bleuler describes the neurological condition as follows:

“The most severe schizophrenics, who have no more contact with the outside world, live in a world of their own. They have encased themselves with their desires and wishes (which they consider fulfilled) or occupy themselves with the trials and tribulations of their persecutory ideas; they have cut themselves off as much as possible from any contact with the external world. This detachment from reality, together with the relative and absolute predominance of the inner life, we term autism” (Bleuler, 63)

Other Nazi physicians like Hans Asperger, were major figures during the T4 Program where they developed *Gemüt* as a precursor in measuring the different degree of “autism psychopathy”. Sheffer notes that Asperger’s definition of *Gemüt* was heavily inspired by a child’s impulsive “readiness to serve their community”, otherwise phrased *Volksgemeinschaft* (Sheffer, 72). Asperger’s research surrounded the philosophy of positive eugenics as his research on the correlation between autism and criminology seemed to have a more sympathetic tone towards mentally “disturbed” children. In his journal article entitled *Das psychisch abnorme Kind* [The psychically abnormal child] (1938) the physician states,

“And if we help them with all our devotion, we will also do our people the best service; not only by preventing them from making the people victims of their anti-social and criminal actions, but also through our attempt to achieve that they find their place as hard working people of the Nation.” (Asperger, 1)

As we can see from the text above, Asperger believed there was a need to rehabilitate autistics into the Nazi *Volk*, in order for them to not give into their anti-social personalities and commit crimes. It should be noted that some of Asperger’s research on autism was met with much skepticism among his peers. This of course does not mean that Asperger’s did not participate in the systematic extermination of disabled children despite the evidence that suggests that Asperger was never a member of the Nazi party, even going as far as to be remembered as the “Oskar Schindler” of rescuing autistic children (Thomson). Throughout her book, Sheffer argues a different perspective. She suggest that there is concrete evidence which states that the psychologist would refer children with severe autistic traits to be transferred to the Spiegelgrund compound to be exterminated, while protecting the so-called “high functioning” autistics he found could be rehabilitated into the *Volk* (Sheffer, 230). One cannot help but emphatically see

how the conceptual development of Nazi eugenics had an impactful role in igniting the social stigmas which harshly associated autistics with the assumption that they would more than likely commit criminal acts due to their neurological differences.

In earlier chapters, I have demonstrated that the fictitious “creep” is a figure that was constructed for primarily eugenic propagandic use, and whose inability to merge into a neurotypical society led them to resent and even take revenge upon it for their misfortune. My research will now investigate how this figure continues to reemerge in contemporary films and affect the ASD community.

The Fanatic, Horror Films, and the Subnormal Family:

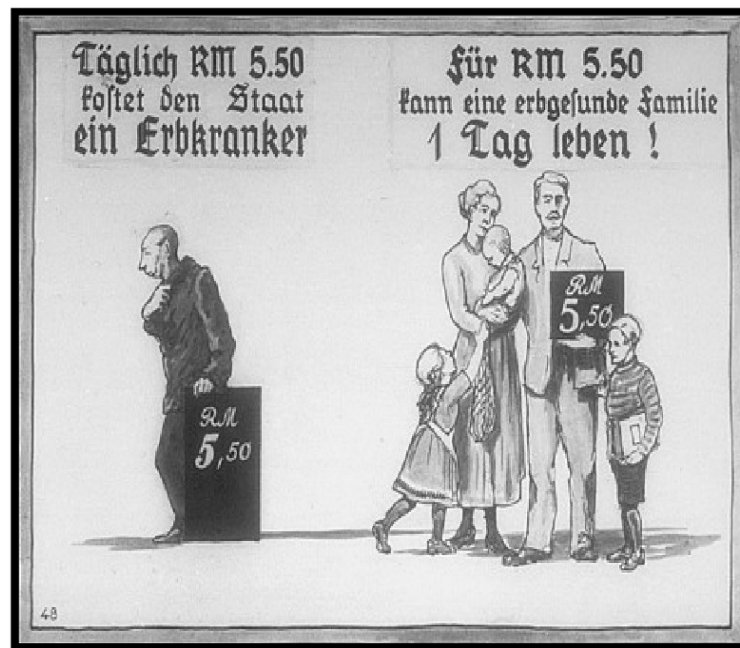


Figure 4: Nazi Propaganda for “useless eaters” (n.d) ⁸⁷

Fig.24. Jill Mitchell Nielsen. Nazi propaganda poster titled “Figure 4: Nazi Propaganda for ‘useless eaters’ (n.d) ⁸⁷”, (2012).

As reiterated from the introduction of my thesis, Fred Durst's *The Fanatic* (2019) depicts its autistic coded protagonist, Moose, as an obsessed fan who is infatuated with his b-horror idol Hunter Dunbar. Throughout the film, Moose is portrayed as not being able distinguish other people's personal boundaries, leading him to commit acts of stalking and occasional violence that leave the audience to not only question Moose's absurd and immoral actions, but also leave audience members to pity Moose's character as a whole. Durst portrays Moose as a more sympathetic "creep" figure who is misunderstood by society, rather than a traditional criminal that we have seen so far in my research. However, does Durst's depiction of Moose being a sympathetic criminal mean it exempts him of his immoral behavior, or does it leave the door open for other problematic depictions that revolve around autism and criminology? Where does Moose's tendency to stalk and commit such creepy acts stem from? One may conclude that Moose's neurological disability is a reasonable scapegoat for explaining the crimes he commits due to being a victim of previous hostile interactions with Dunbar. Durst's film seems to hint to audience members with a different and far more disturbing answer to this question, one that is riddled with a eugenic narratology that has been discussed in my research thus far. I will argue that Durst's film continues to contribute to a eugenic notion which suggests that Moose's "*lack of Gemüt*" stems from his inability to function within the structure of a neurotypical American family. I also will argue that Moose's fixation towards horror films is a coping mechanism related to Moose's neglected childhood and demonstrate how Durst reinforces this notion that Moose's autism is a direct correlation to his absent parental figures. I will do this by showing how Durst justifies Moose's criminal actions of excessively stalking Dunbar as a means to fill the void of Moose having an absent father figure. This is not to say that the theories and methodologies that I will present in my argument are a general justification for real life scenarios

where autistics do commit such crimes of excessive stalking. Rather my goal is to show how Durst's film justifies Moose's excessive stalking as a result of him wanting Dunbar to be a father figure he was deprived of during his childhood. I will also demonstrate how Durst's film contributes to the ever-growing history of misusing autism for pseudo psychoanalytic entertainment.

Moose's Childhood and the Subnormal Family:

Moose's obsessional love for Hunter Dunbar does not start with the celebrity himself. Rather, Durst presents a flashback sequence which suggests that Moose's fixation of horror films stems from being neglected during his childhood. While Moose is illegally trespassing in Dunbar's house, we see a sequence in which Moose is watching a film on Dunbar's TV which will later transition into a flashback sequence. During this flash back sequence seen below, (fig. 26) we see a young Moose, who is watching George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) while his mother is in the background inebriated and caressing a random man she has brought back to her home. From this scene, we can see Moose's unresponsive blank stare towards the TV screen as his mother tries to call for his attention, but is unsuccessful. This flashback demonstrates how Moose's obsession with horror films does not stem from a love of the genre, but is presented as a coping mechanism due to his neglected upbringing.



Fig. 25. Still from *The Fanatic* (00:52:45). A flashback of a young Moose watching George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* while his mother is the background caressing a random stranger

This becomes further evident in another montage where we see Moose illegally rummaging through Dunbar's house and eventually cut to Moose sitting and viewing Dunbar's cam-recorder. (Fig. 27) The scene then transitions into the found footage of the cam corder as the audience sees Dunbar and his now ex-wife interacting with one another on a beach. The video ends with Dunbar and his ex-wife kissing as the video cuts back to Moose tilting his head down somberly. The scene is juxtaposed with Moose's flashback: both scenes indicate to audience members that Moose's obsession with Hunter Dunbar stems far deeper than a celebrity fixation. Durst presents these scenes to show how Moose's obsession is in reality a deep longing for a typical American family that he was deprived of growing up. This family dynamic is not only present in Moose's obsession with Hunter Dunbar, but can be seen as reflective of Dunbar's relationship with his family as well.



Fig. 26. Stills from *The Fanatic* (00:45:38-00:45:45-00:46:01-00:46:14).A montage of frames which show Moose looking at Dunbar’s camera recorder

Dunbar’s character also falls within the category of an abnormal family, as throughout the film we see multiple instances where Dunbar’s character is unable to maintain a parental connection with his son, Danny (Dominic Salvatore) due to his ongoing stardom. The film presents Dunbar as being too career driven and unable to maintain a genuine relationship with his broken family. One scene offers us a glimpse into the broken dynamics around Dunbar’s relationship with his son. After having to step out of a sign and greet event, the scene cuts to Dunbar being scolded by his ex-wife for not taking responsibility and being more present in their son’s life. Moose who witnessed the heated interaction presents himself in a way that suggests that he struggles with “mindblindness”, a long suspected symptom of autism that has been widely debunked in recent years by multiple disability scholars. Moose demonstrates that he has

a lack of awareness when it comes to his interactions with other people and his environments. Durst often presents Moose's "mindblindness" as the punchline to many of the jokes that are meant to show how idiotic Moose is to audience members. Although there are too many to pick from, one does not have to go far within the movie to spot Moose's "mindblindness". Point and case, the first time we are introduced to Moose, we see him walking inside a memorabilia store in an augmented stride while greeting by the owner of the shop. Moose's first words to be uttered in the entirety of the film are "Hey Ern...I can't talk to long, I gotta poo" (Durst, 00:03:08-00:03:10). Truly Oscar worthy material, isn't it? Another example can be seen right after Moose accidentally kills the Hunter Dunbar's maid, and begins to talk to her as though she is still conscious. Again this form of "mindblindness" is solely executed as a joke towards audience members to show how stupid and childlike Moose really is.

Oddly enough, anytime Danny is on screen or is mentioned by other characters like Dunbar's ex-wife, Moose is always juxtaposed in the frame or within the conversations that take place in Dunbar's life, thus reaffirming a connection between Moose's childhood neglect and Dunbar's lack of parental guidance. It is from these interactions that we can conclude that Durst is suggesting that there is an allegorical relationship between Dunbar's inability to be a good father figure, and Moose's longing to have a father figure he was deprived of. If we reanalyze the cam-recorder scene, we can see that the footage being shown primarily empathizes with Dunbar's wife being pregnant with Danny. The scene not only gives audience members a glimpse of Dunbar's life before it being ruined by his acting career, but allows us to empathize with Moose's lack of parental figures he wishes he had while growing up. In this sense, Danny represents the neurotypical figure that Moose wishes he could have become due to his lack of childhood nurturing.

This allegorical relationship becomes more evident in the climax of the film when Moose kidnaps and ties Dunbar to the bedframe of his room as a direct act of revenge. The scene begins with Dunbar waking up and seeing Moose dead on the floor. Moose suddenly erupts from the floor in a childlike manner and shows Dunbar that he was pretending to be dead all along in order to scare him. Throughout the rest of the sequence Moose continues to play a similar prank on Dunbar by pretending to reenact multiple horror/thriller films. What is interesting is what Durst chooses to include in this sequence, as one of the choices can draw a deeper significance to the relation between the assertion of autism and its relation to criminality. In this sequence, we can see the fullest extent of Moose's obsession unfolding before our eyes as Moose dresses up as one character from a classic horror film as an attempt to recreate an iconic callback. Moose transitions from dressing up Jason Voorhees and what becomes even more interesting is the fact that Durst includes this particular slasher villain, as this character has been recently analyzed by some contemporary researchers to be part of the neurodiversity community.

By investigating the character traits of Jason Voorhees, we will begin to see a common pattern that has already been established in the second chapter of my thesis, in which I briefly explore the relation between the horror/monster film genre and its relation to the disability community. Although these films do not take place during the golden age of horror cinema, these B-slasher counterparts carry the legacy of ableism by reproducing tropes that are commonly found in the creep trope.

In the case of Jason Voorhees, there are fewer sources to support a direct link to the ASD community. However, despite Voorhees's odd and jaded nature, that has not stopped other sources from theorizing the neurological diagnosis that surrounds the iconic villain. Mark Wheaton's blogpost entitled "Jason Voorhees: Neurodivergent Icon? On finding empowerment

and autistic representation in an unlikely source: Friday the 13th's iconic slasher” explores the variety of symptoms that may link to Voorhees to being autistic. Wheaton assesses Jason’s autism diagnosis by noting his social disconnection from society, selective mutism, and hyperfixation on killing people. In my view, the article is not well researched and does not rigorously refer to the symptoms found in the DSM5, yet Wheaton’s blogpost does bring an interesting interpretation as regards Jason’s neurodiversity. Wheaton notes in his blog that Jason drowning as a child most likely came from others neglecting the needs of his neurodiversity. The author points out that Jason was hydrocephalic, and that the drowning incident that would have shaped his villain arc would have contorted his brain due to the extensive buildup of liquid, causing him to look and act neurodiverse. As Wheaton proclaims, “All we know for certain is that Pamela had a neurodivergent child, his appearance was grotesque and inspired fear, and it’s probable that counselors ignoring his special needs led to his drowning in the first place” (Wheaton). Wheaton’s interpretation, although expressed in good faith, gives us a chance to explore the self-serving aspects the author inserts into his own personal impartations of being autistic. Wheaton makes no secret throughout his blog that one the main reasons he relates closely to Jason is because he can see variates of autism in his persona. Although one can simply analyze this interpretation as a piece of fanfare, I would argue that this villain clearly display a “lack of *Gemüt*”, and demonstrates a neglected past that is synonymous with the childhood neglect of Moose.

After conducting his prank, Moose reenters Dunbar’s bedroom quoting the famous phrase uttered in Romero’s Night of the Living Dead: “They’re coming for you Barbara”, only to find out that his idol has absolutely no recollection where that cultural reference comes from. This leads Moose to discover the hack Dunbar has become, as Moose reintroduces the allegorical

relationship that has been suggested so far in the film. As Moose exclaims: “I’m starting to think you don’t know anything about horror pictures...I think Danny is going to grow up hating you” (Durst, 01:08:19-01:08:33) thus rearming Moose’s connection to envying Danny’s childhood due to his own parental neglect. Moose becomes even more infuriated with Dunbar after he begs him not to hurt his son, which results in Moose becoming appalled by the notion that Dunbar would suggest such an action. This all culminates in the climax of the scene where Dunbar tricks Moose into participating in an acting method called “visualization”, in which Dunbar talks about the imaginable future between Dunbar and Moose. In this exchange of dialogue the color of the film begins to change its shade to a bright red filter to symbolize the euphoria moment both men are sharing with each other as Dunbar talks to Moose in a parental tone. Dunbar explains that he and Moose will get ice cream and watch horror movies together as Moose lays on Dunbar’s chest crying and telling Dunbar that he loves him (fig. 28).



Fig. 27. Still from *The Fanatic* (01:13:46). Tint of the film changes to rose while Moose is hugging Dunbar and repeatedly saying “I love you” to him

The scene's climax clearly demonstrates the deep rooted trauma Moose faced due to the lack of a father figure in his life. This abruptly ends with Dunbar hitting Moose, fading to the rose tinted filter to go back to the somber tones of the previously established shot, allowing Hunter to escape and shoot Moose. I will go into more detail later on in this chapter to conduct a more in depth analysis on relation between autism and external abuse. With this evidence in mind, I would like to move on to ask if there is validity behind Durst's inclination that suggests there is a direct correlation between childhood neglect and crimes of stalking or violence. Would a child who "lacks *Gemüt*" be more inclined to commit such violent crimes due to their abusive family structure? For Durst, these scenes seem to justify an overall probability. However, after analyzing some of Asperger's autistic clients who "lacked *Gemüt*", Durst's answer to childhood neglect would seem to align more with rhetoric that was promoted from Nazi child psychiatry and the eugenic propaganda which was prompted from this time period.

In Sheffer's book, the author recounts the in depth profiles of 3 autistic coded teenage girls named Christine Berka, Elfride Grohmann, and Margarete Schaffer, who were sent to Asperger's clinic due to their "antisocial" behaviors among their family and peers. Sheffer notes that all three girls "...had rocky relationships in their families, particularly with their mothers, and reportedly did not integrate into society and social norms around them" (Sheffer, 154). Each girl was diagnosed with a variant of "lacking *Gemüt*" for having generally being unresponsive while participating within the *Volk*, and their mothers were relieved that they could get rid of their "burdens" by sending them away to the clinic. Aspergers would even go as far as to state that one of the girls, Berka, posed an issue towards the *Volk* due to her malice and inappropriate behavior and would eventually go on to develop into a "significant criminal threat" (Sheffer, 151). To further this point, women under the Nazi regime were expected to fulfil certain

expected social demands within the Reich. Particularly, there was propaganda about the ideal mother under Nazi ideology before the full on advancement of the war that encouraged girls toward a life of motherhood and becoming subservient towards their spouses. Wives under the Third Reich were forced towards a “...aggressive population policy...” which embraced “...‘racially pure’ women to bear as many children as possible...” in order to maintain the Nazi army’s durability (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). Considering these assessments were not meant to specifically analyze the effect and correlation of childhood neglect and the liability one could have in order to commit crimes in Nazi Vienna, perhaps an investigation on the expansion and discoveries of Aspergers’ work with autism may lead us to a more conclusive claim.

Across the pond, another psychologist named Leo Kanner was independently conducting extensive research in America that would shape the way we view the ASD community to the present day. Kanner’s most well-known article entitled “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact” (1943), was published one year prior to Asperger’s thesis. It explores the in depth criteria which he found was most associated with autistic children. Despite the advancements he made towards the diagnostic criteria for autism, Kanner was not any less guilty of participating in the social stigmas which surrounded negative eugenic rhetoric of his time. In one particular case, Kanner strongly opposed the release of a large group of feeble-minded girls to work into the public sector as he believed that “...the girls’ presence in the community encouraged illegitimacy, prostitution, and other social ills” (Herman). Furthermore, it is widely disputed among scholars that much of Kanner’s independent discoveries involving around the criteria of autism was most likely infringed from Hans Asperger work (Botha & Eilidh, 2). Steve Silberman’s book *Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity* notes that

while the majority of the academic world hesitated to read Asperger's underwhelming research on autism, Kanner's Jewish-German background posed more of an advantage to the majority of his other Anglophone peers, who were not fluent in German. As a result Silberman argues that this meant that Kanner was able to acquire different child psychiatry research papers from Europe due to his bilingual abilities (Silberman, 141).

Kanner and Asperger had another indirect link between one another which was responsible for bringing many of the aspects of German child psychiatry into America. Anni Weiss and Georg Frankl were Jewish child psychiatrists who collectively worked alongside Asperger. Due to the fear of an impending war, which inevitably was on the rise in Europe, Weiss and Frankl "...emigrated to America with Kanner's help before the war, and were working with Kanner when he claimed to 'discover' autism in 1943" (theguardian.com). Thus there is more than enough evidence to suggest that the development of what would later be known as early infantile autism was partly inspired by the research that was being conducted under the guise and linkage of eugenic rhetoric found in German child psychiatry.

It is here where I wish to explore a particular hypothesis that was developed by Kanner and would later be contorted by his Austrian-born associate Bruno Bettelheim. The theory was originally suggested by Kanner in his 1943 paper titled "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact" to explain why autistic children were unresponsive to their parents and surroundings. Kanner's hypothesis, which would later be called the "Refrigerator Mother Theory", centered on the notion that parental neglect, specifically mothers, was one of the contributing causes for autistic children. This hypothesis is an incredibly different assessment compared to Asperger, in which he theorized that certain genetic traits found in autistic children may be linked to that child's family history (Silberman, 188) however Kanner's research would suggest a different

argument. As a result Kanner would reference symptomatic elements of what would later be described in the 1980s as “early infantile autism”. Through an evaluation that occurred before a child was 30 months old, early infantile autism was defined as follows: “...pervasive lack of responsiveness to others, deviant language development, unusual responses to the environment, and the absence of hallucinations and delusions as present in schizophrenia” (Harris, 5). These symptoms would be used to directly diagnose a correlation between childhood autism and parental neglect. This stigma had an extremely long lasting impact on parents (especially mothers) who were accused of being the root cause to their child’s neurological disorder. This misinformed trope was mostly reconstructed for pseudo-scientific malice by Bettelheim who believed that autism was not innate and believed that others were the direct cause of their children developing autism. Kanner didn’t quite follow this psychoanalytic line. Instead, he presumed that autism was innate and “...found no evidence of parental abuse, and noted that the majority of these children lived in intact homes.” (Harris, 5) Regardless of how you feel about Kanner’s involvement and contribution towards the “Refrigerator Mother Theory”, one can ultimately conclude that Kanner’s misinformed research resulted in a stigma that would affect many families all around the world and allow for other child psychologist like Bettelheim to come to far more disturbing conclusions (Silberman, 188). In his assessment, Bettelheim would even go as far as to describe his theory of autism in a tone that was highly reflective of much of the pseudo-scientific theories that were inherited by Nazi eugenics.

The primary source of Bettelheim claiming autism was not innate may have come from his personal experience as a prisoner in two different concentration camps. There, he claimed he witnessed autistic behaviors from the constant dehumanization the Jewish community faced during the horrors of the Holocaust (Silberman, 205). Bettelheim thus concluded that autistic

behavior in children was not only the result of childhood neglect, but also insisted that the complex relationship between a mother and her autistic child could be compared to the humiliating power dynamics Jewish prisoners faced with Nazi guards. (Silberman, 205). Bettelheim would go on to describe this in his book *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the self* (1967). Unfortunately due to limited access to this infamous book, I was only able to find certain quotes which have been generously collected and reviewed by “The Autism History Project” website of University of Oregon. In their subpage titled “Bruno Bettelheim, The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the self, 1967” Ellen Herman, the curator of the website, laminates one of the more striking quotes one would have found in Bettelheim psychoanalytical book. As the text states:

“Some victims of the concentration camps had lost their humanity in response to extreme situations. Autistic children withdraw from the world before their humanity ever really develops. Could there be any connection, I wondered, between the impact of the two kinds of inhumanity I had known—one inflicted for political reasons on victims of a social system, the other perhaps a self-chosen state of dehumanization (if one may speak of choice in an infant’s responses)? In any case, having written a book on dehumanization in the German concentration camps what next preoccupied me was the present volume on infantile autism....” (Herman)

Bettelheim’s research poses a similar correlation of pseudo-scientific themes that is clearly reflective of Nazi child psychiatry and presents the same tonality one may find in Nazi eugenics. This is due to how both parties present autism as though it was an inflicted state of mind and claimed that autistic children could be rehabilitated from their disorder. With this in mind, how can we compare and analyze these eugenic theories to the likeness that is presented in Durst’s film?

Although the film never indicates to the audience when Moose's childhood flashback takes place, we may conclude it most likely occurred around the time Bettelheim's work would have already been published considering Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* was released one year after "The Empty Fortress" came out. This being said, how can we be certain of this connection between Moose's childhood neglect and his adult tendencies to commit stalking crimes? The psychology studies I will present in my research suggest there is a polarizing response in regards to the investigation between childhood neglect and trauma and its relation to stalking. One study published by *Alpha Psychiatry* in 2021, found that there was a correlation between males who experienced childhood trauma and a direct increase to commit acts of crime among male prisoners and inmates: "It has been determined that children with childhood trauma exhibit many problems such as psychiatric conditions, anger, susceptibility to crime, and antisocial orientation. In addition, childhood traumas can sustain their negative effects on individuals who experience trauma throughout life and cause psychiatric conditions in adulthood" (Cantürk, Müge et al, 57). Another study conducted by the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* found that negative social interactions between children and adult figures in their environments can play into the development of criminal activity later on in life. By observing how their parental figures treat one another, the study suggests that children are taught that violence becomes a "...means of resolving partner conflict, causing them to tolerate such behaviour and increase their likelihood of violence perpetration in adulthood" (Minh, 5471). When it comes to the relation between stalking and childhood neglect, one 2022 study from the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* actually found that individuals who were malnourished and neglected during their childhoods, had an higher risk of being the victims of stalking later on in their lives, although it should be noted that this study not only included

children who received various degrees of maltreatment in their childhood, but also included an introspective length of children who were sexually and physically abused (Bonagura, Grace et al, 61).

Durst's film clearly shows that Moose was neglected as a child, however there is no evidence throughout the rest of the film that suggest that his crimes or stalking were a direct result of any form of physical or mental abuse. Therefore we cannot conclude that Moose's violent actions are in a direct correlation from his parental neglect. That being said, how can we compare all of these previously stated studies mentioned when discussing the relation between autism and its association with violence and stalking? Thus far, I have presented studies that demonstrate the significant cause and effects childhood neglect and malnourishment can have in future criminal behavior. I will now explore some studies that feature the correlation between autistic individuals and other violent crimes like stalking.

The Fanatic: Stalking and Autism, and “Mindblindness”

The relation between stalking and autism is a subject which is unfortunately not widely researched. To further this point, a recent 2024 qualitative case study conducted by *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology* concluded that there was an overwhelming lack of data that was associated between stalking and autistics. In their research, which explored the interplay between autism and stalking, the paper suggests that the lack of neurological developmental skills may be a contributing component in leading male autistics to unintentionally find themselves at-risk of exhibiting stalking behavior towards their victims. The study states that some contributing factors may come from certain autistics possibly having a lack of empathy, social cues, and developmental skills. The study also argues that other vital contributing factors for excessive stalking behavior among autistic males may be a result of what

is referred to as “mind-blindness”, (otherwise known as a lack of Theory of Mind) in which an autistic individual is said to lack the ability to understand another person’s perspectives, motives, as well as their environmental mode of relations (Rawdon et al, 4). This argument is not a one off, as another 2014 study found in the journal of *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, which investigated “Stalking Behaviors by Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Employment Settings”, came to a similar conclusion of “mind-blindness”. As their study argues, “This unintentional stalking can be the result of an inability to understand the viewpoint of others, attend to other’s social cues, and not understanding that obsessive focus or fixations on others is considered intrusive by most people” (Post, 102). As far as the relation between autistics and celebrity stalking, a study published by the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* titled “Stalking, and Social and Romantic Functioning Among Adolescents and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder” found that a surprisingly large number of their stalkers were more likely to have symptoms of ASD. As the study states, celebrities were “...more likely to be targeted by persons with ASD, this nonetheless was a rare event in the data, occurring in only 20% of cases” (Stokes, Mark et al).

One of the leading authors and advocates for autism awareness, Nick Dubin, has written books that center on the complex relations between autism in realms of bullying, depression, and most infamously due to his own personal experience, the law. Dubin’s writings also advocate for “Theory of Mind” as a valid explanation for the relation between autistics and criminality. In his book titled *The Autism Spectrum, Sexuality and The Law: What every parent and professional needs to know*, Dubin recounts his own personal journey of going through the legal system with Asperger’s Syndrome while also being charged with the possession of child pornography. Dubin’s story is a significant example as regards the complex relations autistics have with their

own sexuality, and one that I will come back to when discussing sexuality in the conclusion of my thesis about the incel/auticel community. However, for the moment, I feel it is important to return to Dubin's explanation of mistaken crimes that stem from an autistic's lack of social or cognitive empathy. In his book Dubin argues that "People with Asperger's process information differently. Any crime that involves a social or cognitive misunderstanding, including stalking, harassment, disturbing the peace (because of a meltdown), possessing child pornography, inappropriate sexual touching...may be related in part to being autistic" (Dubin et al, 126). To further solidify this argument, Dubin's colleague and coauthor Dr Tony Attwood leans on "impaired Theory of Mind" and how this neurological theory would go on to contribute to the awareness and understanding of the complex dimensions of Dubin's infamous crime of downloading child pornography.

In his chapter titled "An Expert's View: The Pathway to Accessing Child Pornography" Atwood touches on a variety of different topics that may induce autistics to get mixed up into the realm of crimes. Atwood's defense for Dubin's actions are centered on the neurological premise that Nick would have not been able to empathize and considers the complex emotions of the children he was viewing due to his impaired "Theory of Mind". As Atwood states, "Nick would have had greater difficulty than a typical adult appreciating the perspective and experiences of the child in the photograph or movie. There would have been a sense of emotional detachment while he was viewing these images on his computer (Dubin et al, 135). Thus considering that many autistics are supposedly built to be cognitively impaired with "mind-blindness"; it would only make sense to apply these formal arguments as an excuse for Moose's inability to be aware of his environmental surroundings.

I've previously noted how Durst's film uses Moose's "mind-blindness" as a main source of comedic relief throughout the film, primarily in violent altercations with Hunter Dunbar. Although we can acknowledge that there are plenty of autistics in the world who, just like Moose, do find themselves in situations where they involuntarily break the law, one should not draw a quick conclusion that the causality behind these crime come from the person's innate "mind-blindness". Many have used Simon Baron Cohn's model of "mind-blindness" as part of their research. Cohen's theory is so commonly used in the realm of scholarship that it, "is promoted by thousands of psychology articles; in fact, the vast majority—over 75%—of the top 500 articles indexed by Google Scholar (for 'theory of mind' and 'autism') simply assert that autistic people lack a theory of mind rather than provide original data to buttress the claim" (Gernsbacher, Yergeau, 2). Unfortunately, the theory has ultimately become an undisputed fact which now reflects the universality characteristics of all autistics (Gernsbacher, Yergeau, 4). If it's assumed that all autistics share this common trait, it only makes sense that many films and different types of media that are meant to depict autistics in an authentic manner would incorporate this theory of as a primary characteristic into their medium. After all, one can argue that the fault shouldn't initially be thrown on the producers or directors who incorporate this theory into their medium, as they are only using what they believe will constitute an authentic representation. I cannot with good faith argue the same for Durst's film, (as I've already argued thus far in my thesis) however, I do feel as though it is my responsibility to debunk Cohn's theory with more recent evidence which suggest that autistics are not only capable of displaying a theory of mind, but some may be more hyperaware of their environmental surroundings.

In a chapter titled "Not at a Distance on Touch, Synesthesia, and Other Ways of Knowing" Erin Manning explores the socio-political barriers that are met when neurodiversity is

intertwined in a variety of different environments. Manning includes a variety of different techniques which explore disabled individuals “sense of agency” in their surroundings. Through investigating different forms of autistic perception, Manning critiques some of the more problematic elements that come from the theory of “mind-blindness”, focusing specifically on relation. Manning argues that Cohen could never understand nor feel the complex modes of neurodiversity as he “...cannot recognize experience expanded from the normative interiority of a neurotypical body schema” (Manning, 254). Manning then goes on to argue that Cohen’s definition of “mind-blindness” solely revolves around one’s ability to express empathy in a neurotypical manner.

If we apply Manning’s critiques of “mind-blindness”, to the examples that are presented in Durst’s film, we can see how an aspect of Moose’s value as a character revolves around his inability to merge into situations in a neurotypical manner. This is often played out and framed as a punch line through the majority of the film and therefore leads audiences to laugh at Moose’s awkward and unusual behavior. The audience never has a chance to recognize Moose’s personal experiences as being in intensive relation to his environment. Rather the film frames Moose’s experiences as being unorthodox to normal interactions. Take for example the scene where Moose is trying to get Dunbar to sign his memorabilia jacket. Here, Moose is scolded by Hunter Dunbar for dropping the heated interaction he had with his ex-wife. Moose tries to reaffirm that Dunbar was in the right, to which Dunbar reply’s to Moose that he needs to learn some manners, indicating a need for personal space. Moose apparently being unable recognize the depth of the situation leads Dunbar to vandalizing Moose’s forehead by signing his name on it. Now, if we were applying Cohn’s logic of “mind-blindness” to this altercation, we might conclude that Moose was incapable of recognizing the complexities of the situation, hence

lacking a “Theory of Mind”. Moose’s “lack of empathy” would be seen as a result of his inability to recognize an experience that is not his own. However, if we reframe the altercation and apply Manning’s counter arguments by looking at the greater context of how the situation came to be, we would ultimately see that Moose displays far more empathy than one might think. It is important that we take into context that Moose could not process Dunbar having to leave the meet and greet right before he was about to encounter his idol. Therefore Moose’s reluctance to change does not stem from his inability to comprehend Dunbar’s erupt situation; rather it comes from his relation to his environment changing which makes him more anxious.

Even after the altercation happens, we can see that Moose still tries to display a deep sense of empathy towards Dunbar as a way to mend the altercation. In a later scene we see a montage of Moose writing a sincere apology letter to Dunbar, after his paparazzi friend refers Moose to an app that would allow him to know where Dunbar lives. In the sequence, we can hear Moose’s inner monologue recounting the letter: “Dear Mr Dunbar, I am writing you this letter because I really care about you...you made it clear that I bothered you, and that’s the last thing I wanted to do. I have seen all your movies, I love, love, love them. But I waited in line for over an hour to meet you, and you didn’t even take the time to give me one autograph. I even spent all my money to buy your vest...please take more time to show your fans how much you care about them. Without us, you’re nothing...PS will you please sign my vest and follow me on social media. Love Moose” (Durst, 00:25:59-00:27:12). Granted, the scene is ultimately framed as a gag that doesn’t take Moose’s empathy seriously, as John Travolta accompanies the scene by doing unusual stims like, picking his nose, rocking back and forth, and even saying to himself that he should draw the vest on the letter that he wanted Dunbar to sign. Viewing this scene through Cohen’s neurotypical lens would be quite simple; Moose clearly does not understand the

social components that surround celebrity social hierarchy, resulting in him thinking that Dunbar would actually interact in a relationship where he is on the same status as him. Thus, Moose does not only know how to empathize to Dunbar's emotions of wanting to be left alone, but clearly Moose also has a lack of "Theory of Mind" because he cannot distinguish these hierarchies in a neurotypical manner. However, this scene clearly demonstrates the opposite, as Moose clearly acknowledges in his letter that he not only understood that he was bothering Dunbar, but also that it was not his intention to insult him by any account. To further reference this argument, Manning's work can be an example that perfectly summarizes the scene. As she states,

"If theory of mind relies on being able to demonstrate the ability to recognize an experience not our own, it by necessity implies parsing something like self and other in advance. Similarly, to be empathetic is to be able to subtract from experience that which most closely conforms to what we already recognize as having value. My empathy for a situation depends on my being centered in it. To recognize you as other I must already recognize myself as a bounded individual. According to this logic, to be empathetic is to carry forward a power relation that acknowledges similarity and responds benevolently to it: empathy, the feeling-in of an interiority that recognizes itself in the other, thereby creating a measure of the self-same, is the neurotypical marker par excellence of exclusion of all that cannot be recognized as self" (Manning, 256).

This context can even apply to Moose's stalking obsession with Dunbar, as the next scene shows Moose trying to deliver the letter to Dunbar by visiting his mansion. From one perspective, Moose clearly demonstrates that he doesn't comprehend the normative social protocol of not showing up unexpected to a celebrity's home. On the other hand, one could frame that Moose's empathy is what drives him to go to Dunbar's home to begin with. Also it should be noted that Moose ultimately gets blamed for stalking Dunbar, even though it is something that his paparazzi

friend clearly enables him to do. Overall, I have argued that Durst's film displays a variety of negative eugenic elements that can still be found in today's media. To further analyze the relation between autistics and stalking I would like to introduce another film that features other components of the creep trope that I have previously discussed so far in my thesis. In particular, I would like to focus on how a "lack of *Gemüt*" can be transmissible into films that feature eugenic forms of naratology and ABA theory.

The Night Clerk: A Modern Narrative from a New Hut

Another film which features an autistic character exemplifying a "lack of *Gemüt*", particularly through acts of stalking, can be found in Michael Cristofer's thriller *The Night Clerk* (2020). The plot of the film consists around Bart (Tye Sheridan), a night clerk who has Asperger's Syndrome and secretly stalks his customers as a means to practice his ABA therapy. Bart does this by planting hidden cameras in different parts of his house, as well as the motel he works at. The film justifies Bart's excessive stalking as an attempt for him to mimic the different facial and bodily gestures that he struggles to incorporate in his daily life. This is seen in the first sequence of the film, as a montage of different facial expressions overwhelm Bart as he tries to practice keeping eye contact with different by standards at his local mall. Discouraged by his attempts, Bart ultimately locks himself in his surveillance room located at the basement of his mother's house. From there, Bart is able to inquire the mode of neurotypical language from a safe distance while not facing condemnation from the world. The film even goes as far as to show that Bart's communication skills are so poor, that he spends the majority of the film communicating with his mother through surveillance cameras.

One night, while monitoring a female mistress with her secret lover, Bart discovers the woman being murdered, thus the plot now centers on our protagonist finding himself caught up

in the middle of a homicide case. Detective Espada (John Leguizamo) eventually finds the hidden footage of the murder which was accidentally left by Bart at the crime scene, igniting Espada to suspect that Bart as the main culprit. While this investigation is going on, Bart encounters Andrea (Ana de Armas) a hotel client who in time becomes Bart's love interest for the rest of the film. Through his surveillance camera, Bart finds out that Andrea is to be the next victim of the mysterious murderer. After helping her escape, the rest of the story concerns itself with Bart and Andrea attempting to unravel who could be the mysterious murderer. It is eventually revealed that the murderer is a crooked cop, and Andrea is his assistant. As an attempt to frame Bart for the murder, Andrea spends the night at Bart's house and vanishes the next morning leaving Bart with the planted gun used at the crime scene. As the police are on their way to raid Bart's home, we see Bart begin to dissociate as multiple flashbacks reveal how the murder actually took place. The scene ends with Bart walking into his surveillance room and gradually placing a loaded gun next to his head (Fig. 29) (Fig. 30).



Fig. 28 (Left). Still from *The Night Clerk* (01:21:43). An abandoned Bart walks towards his surveillance room with loaded pistol planted by Andrea

Fig. 29 (Right). Still from *The Night Clerk* (01:22:11). A montage of images connecting Andrea to the murder are reflecting in Bart's mind as he holds the murder weapon next to his head

In the next sequence we see Bart's mother calling for our protagonist, and a gunshot can be heard off frame, suggesting to audience members that Bart killed himself. It is later revealed that Bart shot his computer screen and ran away, leaving only a hard drive with evidence of the murder and a personal letter directed to Detective Espada. In the letter Bart states that he realizes how wrong it was for him to stalk individuals and that he promises to never do it again. The ending of the film shows the police arresting Andrea and the crooked cop, juxtaposed with Bart once again trying to practice his ABA therapy by engaging in eye contact with local by standards at the mall.

The ending of the film asserts that Bart's learnt lesson will give him the courage to eventually contribute to the improvement of his cognitive condition. Yet, whether it is the ABA therapy or the gun, the film draws to a conclusive argument; Bart's autism cannot be accepted in the social domains of our society. It is here where I wish to redirect my attention for the next segment of my thesis, as I will argue that Cristófer's film displays a subverted form of a narrative prosthesis by asserting that Bart's autism must either be cured or killed in order for the film's narrative to restore the confines of a neurotypical mode of being. I will also argue that Bart digitally stalking his motel costumers through his surveillance room bears a striking resemblance to the hut Frankenstein's creature uses as a way to incorporate the mode of language and speech in Shelly's novel. Exploring both of these points will help us understand how eugenics and naratological tropes can still be seen in films that present the creep trope.

For a “who done it” film, Cristofer focuses a great deal of his attention on the termination of Bart’s cognitive disorder through a variety of sequences. As I’ve already stated in previous chapters of my thesis, a “Narrative Prosthesis” is what David T Mitchell and Sharon L Snyder suggest consists around an old narrative device that has been used as a crutch for many literary narratives that encompass around the usage of disabled characters in a symbolic manner. The stories themselves often frame disability as a prime issue that disabled characters either must face or overcome, rather than focusing on the external socio-political factors that are often left out from being disabled in a society built on neurotypicality (Mitchell, Snyder, 48). *The Night Clerk* (2020) is no exception to using this narrative device by constructing what both authors indicate to be an “open narrative” to the symbolic usage disability is utilized and exploited. One such way Cristofer contributes to this device is by indicating multiple times throughout his film that Bart’s disability, although a device which drives the plot of the murder forward also restricts him from ever achieving a romantic relationship with his love interest which develops over the film’s narrative. Ultimately Cristofer’s film frames Bart’s character arc in a way which indicates his longing to get rid of his neurological disorder solely due to him being restricted from aspect of neurotypicality. Rather than representing a need to destroy Bart’s autism through conventional aspects of this narrative device, I will argue that the device is not only still present, but is subverted in a different matter that suggests a more sociably acceptable solution to ridding Bart’s disability.

The director demonstrates the usage of this device through a previous dream sequence, which is presented before the sequence where Bart supposedly kills himself. In the dream sequence, Bart imagines a scenario where he no longer struggles with any autistic symptoms and is able to be in a desired relationship with Andrea. Bart realizes he is now able to make eye

contact, have sensorial touch and kiss Andrea in a passionate way he has longed to. Considering the film demonstrates the excesses extend Bart is willing to go to practice his ABA therapy, one can conclude this sequence to clearly represent Bart's longing to become neurotypical in order to be in a relationship with Andrea. Much of the dialogue in the sequence also reinforces this argument as Bart states: "It's so easy to touch you. To talk to you. To look at you" (Cristofer, 01:19:18-01:19:26). The dream sequence abruptly ends with Bart waking up with Andrea nowhere to be found. The only thing left of Andrea, is a loaded gun that was planted next to Bart as a means to frame Bart for the homicide.

To the average viewer, this may not seem as though it carries much contextual weight. However, considering what we know about this narrative device, the scene abundantly makes clear what the director is trying to say: Bart's autism is the reason why he and Andrea could never be in a relationship with one another. The scene ultimately demonstrates that Bart is better off dead than autistic. Although Bart's autism is not cured through his surreal dream sequence or killed off due to his supposed suicide, the ending ultimately suggests that Bart will continue his ABA journey till he slowly becomes more neurotypically accepted. By paralleling the beginning and the ending scenes, showing Bart practicing his ABA therapy at the mall, we see him acquire little to no character development. The only message the audience is left with, is that stalking individuals via surveillance is bad, and autistics are unworthy of being in any platonic relationships. Trying to modify one's behavior is not exclusive within the autistic community. In fact, one may be surprised to learn that the origins and methods used in ABA therapy can be found as solutions towards other historically suppressed minority communities, like the LGBTQ+ community.

Recently, scholars have taken upon themselves to reevaluate the origins of applied behavior analysis as a means to document the unethical treatments that would be fold upon minority communities in order to reinforce the mode of neurotypicality. In an article in Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis titled “LGBTQ+ Conversion Therapy and Applied Behaviour”, the journal argues that many of the components that went into the creation of gay conversion therapy, stem from an overlapping history within the realm of ABA therapy. A primary reason behind this overlap between the two communities stems from the fact that, “...behavior-analytic researchers historically played a role throughout the 1960s and 1970s in the design and dissemination of a harmful body of work that today is most commonly referred to as conversion therapy” (Conine, Daniel, et al, 6). It is for this reason; the journal aims to call to action some of the more harmful methods and studies that have marginalized members of the LGBTQ+ community, in hopes that addressing this complex history of these methods will ensure a more inclusive space. Many of the methods that were used for gay conversion therapy bear a striking resemblance to methods that were commonly used in early ABA therapy and are still in use today in Canada. This is due to the fact that this is the only kind of therapy supported by governmental health care. Methods consisted primarily around physically abusing children in hopes that it would modify their behaviour back to heterosocial modality. Spanking, inflicting self-harming techniques, or worst electric shock sessions, have a striking overlapping connection to the abuse many autistic children would receive during this time period, as well as today in Canada as ABA-style therapy is the only one covered by government insurance (Conine, Daniel, et al, 8).

Therefore, I would like to focus my attention on a 1974 study that is mentioned multiple times throughout the article. George Rekers and Ivar Lovaas’s article titled “Behavioural

Treatment of Deviant Sex Role Behaviours in a Male Child.” This study focuses on an attempt to modify the “feminine” behaviours of seven young boys who were diagnosed with “cross gender identity problems.” One of the boys named Kraig was the main focus of a large part of the study, the emphasis not only on homosexuality but also on neurodiversity. The aim was to rehabilitate Kraig back into a neurotypical mode of being. The study allows us to see the various connections between ABA and gay conversion therapy and how they intertwine. One of the interesting connections comes from one of the authors, Ole Ivar Lovaas. As I have previously stated at the end of my second chapter, Lovaas was one of the pioneers in the development of ABA therapy. Lovaas not only developed different methods of ABA that were highly unethical, but regarded autistic children as empty vessels that one had to reprogram in order for them to be fully rehabilitated back into society (Silberman, 285). Lovaas and Rekers carry a similar philosophical approach to Kraig gender dysphonia, as both men believe that if it is left untreated, Kraig would ultimately be ridiculed by his peers and rejected by society as a whole (Rekers & Lovaas, 174). This call for concern mirrors an incredibly similar attitude many eugenicists and early child psychologists expounded in the development and treatment of autism. Considering Lovaas’s extensive work in ABA, it would not be too hard to see the clear connections between both fields of child development. The study then goes on to elaborate the grave consequences that would unfold if a child were to not be treated for their “sexual deviance.” One statistic that bares an incredible resemblance to my previously stated research, is the assumption that transsexuality can lead to an individual committing criminal behaviour. As the text states “...a recent study of the social and economic aspects of transsexualism found a high incidence of educational and work maladjustments, as well as a high proportion of criminal and other anti-social behaviour” (Rekers, Lovaas, 175). We can not only see how conversion therapy shares a

similar history with ABA therapy, but also see how it propagates a similar societal fear that resembles the campaigns in which advocates for eugenics argued that children with neurological and anti-social behaviours are more likely to commit acts of criminality when they get older. For instance: Bart's ABA journey towards developing more neurotypical behaviour reaffirms the notion that Bart is in fact trying to cure his autism in hopes to become more human. The fact that Bart is at one point of the film, considered the obvious suspect to commit the murder due to his neurological disorder reaffirms this notion. As detective Espada states "These kids on the spectrum, they can also be very violent" (Cristofer, 00:36:20). Overall, Cristofer's film demonstrates to audiences that autistics must go through incredibly complex expectations of being in a neurotypical mode of being in order to not be categorised and ostracized from society as criminals or a creep. If we bring back Manning's argument on the social ramifications of "mindblindness", the author sums up the unrealistic expectations autistics consistently must face on a daily basis's when having to function in a neurotypical framework of thought and movement. As Manning argues:

"The criteria for inclusion into humanity are always neurotypical...Functioning labels, as anyone in the movement for neurodiversity will emphasize, say nothing at all except that neurotypicality is obsessed with categories that keep its ways of knowing at the forefront. To function, according to these labels, means...to take on a posture that does not announce too forcefully the sensory processing challenges that come with overstimulation, to be able to meet requirements for independence imposed by a belief in individualism above all, to be able to perform competence in ways that do not endanger the body schema of those for whom the template of neurotypicality has become second nature" (Manning, 253-254).

Cristofer's usage of ABA therapy in his film also draws an eerie parallel to the symbolic functionality of the hut the Creature resides in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. This is due to the fact that both spaces are meant to represent a symbolic womb in which both Bart and the Creature are able to revert to a safe environment in order to inquire neurotypical modes of slowly becoming "more human". The concept of metaphorically using a womb is a convention that has from time to time been utilized in cinematic depictions of a character's self-regression into an enclosed space. This theoretical concept is best exemplified in Caroline Rupprecht's *Womb Fantasies: Subjective Architectures in Postmodern Literature, Cinema, and Art*, in which the author analyzes classic pieces of film, literature, and contemporary art that were formulated post World War Two and argues how many of these classic pieces of art implement a metaphorical "womb" that subconsciously looms over the zeitgeist of different artistic movements of its time. An example of a metaphorical "womb" can be seen in one of the chapter titled "Eero Saarinen's Womb Chair as Fallout Shelter". Here Rupprecht notes how the looming fears of post-World War Two, such as the invention of the atomic bomb or the horrific events of the Holocaust, led many contemporary artistic movements, like the avant-garde, to construct pieces of work that depicted imagery of a state of self-reversion which formulate a metaphorical space of a womb (Rupprecht, 3). Rupprecht elaborates how the extensiveness of what a "womb" could not just be represented in formats of physical art, but also within the domains of cinema. In the introduction of her book, the author describes how the "womb",

"...can represent interiors and exteriors, beginnings and endings, confinement or expansion—in other words, a range of spatial and temporal coordinates whose precise nature depends on the viewer's gaze; as well as on the perspective of whoever imagines being 'inside' or 'outside' of this malleable metaphorical territory. I say "metaphorical" since no one can recall what it feels

like to actually be in the womb. Rather, it is a mystery place, profoundly invested with allegorical and, therefore, cultural and political significance” (Rupprecht, xi).

Thus Rupprecht’s interpretation of what a “womb” is meant to signify has a broader and more contextual meaning than what is normally presumed a womb should represent. Rupprecht also states that such interpretations are not limited to the specific timeframe she decided to dedicate her book on. Rather she argues that such spaces have existed in our subconscious minds for decades, and can still be analyzed in the art we consume to this day (Rupprecht, xiv). With this statement in mind, I wish to apply Rupprecht’s interpretations around the functionality an aesthetical “womb” serves within cinematic boundaries Cristofer’s film.

In order to show that a metaphorical “womb” exists within Cristofer’s film, I wish to explore how *The Night Clerk* uses Bart’s surveillance room, as well as other household barriers, to not only shelter but nurture the protagonist from the violence of societal neurotypicality. Similarly the hut the Creature uses in Shelley’s novel, can reflect a similar function to Bart’s surveillance room as both spaces are used for these characters to encompass the mode of language. In the case of Bart, the mode of incorporating language stems from practicing self-scripted conversations from the hidden footage he gains from his surveillance cameras. The film demonstrates that Bart does this multiple times as a form of exercise to mimic the different words and tonalities he hears from his costumers. One sequence in particular elaborates the extensive measures Bart takes in order to improve his communication skills. While in his surveillance room, we see Bart reviewing a video he took of the failed social interaction he had meeting Andrea for the first time by constantly pausing the video to practice his conversational skills after every question which was initiated towards him. Bart’s surveillance room also prevents him from engaging with any other women besides his mother, and thus leads him to

self-nourish himself by regressing when he is later heartbroken from Andrea. This is best exemplified in a scene when Andrea visits Bart at his home and is blocked from a physical and metaphorical barrier which separates them from interacting with one another. The physical barrier as seen in the figure below (Fig. 31) demonstrates how Bart's household gate enacts as a defence mechanism to shield himself from any romantic forms of compassion that Andrea gestures towards him. This is because Bart is trying to cope from being heartbroken from Andrea. As Bart states in a monotone voice,



Fig.30. Still from *The Night Clerk* (01:08:39). Bart is standing behind a gated barrier to emotionally protect himself from Andrea after being heartbroken from her

Bart: "I have a broken heart."

Andrea: "You do?"

Bart: "Yes, it's very painful." (Cristofer, 01:06:24-01:06:30)

The usage of Bart's surveillance "womb" is reused again in one of the last sequences of the film as Andrea plants the murder weapon with Bart, suggesting audience member's that he will commit suicide. Here Bart's "womb" not only protects him from the violence of neurotypicality, but also serves as a space which suggests to audiences that the character will inflict self-harm in order protect himself from such neurotypical violence that has been implemented on him.

The notion of wombs representing as a symbolic gesture for life and death is further expanded in Rupprecht's chapter titled "Frontispiece- Eero Saarinen's Womb Chair as Fallout Shelter". Here the author argues how a womb fantasy cannot only serve as a literal functional space, but also symbolically represent a state of being. As the author states, "while the 'womb' as fantasy may be synonymoud with a human need to create dwellings, nest, and establish shelter, it is also forbidden territory where life itself begins and ends. Like the proverbial dying soldier who cries out for his mother with his final breath on the battlefield, its invocation becomes as much a sign of survival as of death" (Rupprecht, 3-4). Thus Cristofer's construction of Bart's surveillance room not only demonstrates how Bart implements a neurodiverse gaze towards all the victims he stalks, but also enacts as a barrier to protect himself from engaging in romantic relationships with the opposite sex. Overall Cristofer's film shows how Bart's seclusion and excessive stalking in his surveillance room, enacts as a way for him to slowly terminate his autism in hope that he will eventually become "more human". However, it is his "*lack of Gemut*", when perceived specifically from such authoritative figures like Detective Espada, which frames Bart to become more monstrous and dangerous for his neurological disorder. Thus far in my thesis, I have examined how systematic structures based on neurotypicality have stereotyped and presented autistic characters like Bart or Moose to be violent deviants who stalk, or harass their victims. However, I feel as it is just as important, if not critical, to see how both

films profile and demonstrate how authoritative figures, as well as the general public, should react to their autistic characteristics.

Violence and Autism:

Both Durst and Cristofer's films exemplify moments of structured neurotypical violence that untimely resemble events one may see in real life. It is important to understand that a film can address such forms of neurotypical violence without necessarily framing autistic characters as being justified for that inflicted violence solely due to their neurological disorder. I believe that both directors demonstrate a poor attempt in showing how they handle this form of violence, and thus contribute to the ever-growing representation of autistic characters perpetuated by figures of neurotypical authority. For this section of my chapter I will briefly analyze two scenes from both of the previously discussed films, and argue how both character's "lack of *Gemüt*" results in their character's to be profiled and have acts of violence inflicted upon them. I will also demonstrate how such poor representation of these critical issues can have dire consequences in real life scenarios.

I have demonstrated throughout my thesis the incredibly long and complex power dynamics that have segregated and perpetuated the autistic community. Some of these socio-political structures fall within the realm of the law, and its view on how autistics are portrayed living under it due to due to societal biases. Such scenarios of an uneven power dynamic can be seen in one sequence of Cristofer's film where Detective Espada is interrogating Bart in his home. After cornering Bart on the assumption that he committed the murder, Bart loses his temper from the thought of being a suspect and gives a highly detailed answer to how he would have committed the crime in a sarcastic tone. As conversation between Bart and detective Espada follows,

Espada: “Maybe you hit her?”

Bart: “And Then what happened?”

Espada: “Well Bart, you tell me”

Bart: (Frustrated) “Well I guess I just pulled the gun from my pocket, because I always have a gun in my pocket...and I shot her...but where did I get the gun? That what I would like to know...did I buy it? Did I steal it? Maybe I purchased it online, and then when I went to have sex with her and I brought the gun, because you know it’s always a good idea to go and take a gun when going to have sex with someone, because, just in case you suffer from impotence, or performance anxiety, you get frustrated and you can’t do it, and you have a gun in your pocket, and by golly you just take it out and shoot that person. Bang Bang!” (Cristofer, 00:56:04-00:56:45).

Bart’s sarcastically angry response unfortunately does more harm than good to help his innocence, as Detective Espada interprets Bart’s monologue as an actually confession to the murder. Even after Bart’s mother tries to intercede by telling the detective that Bart was clearly being sarcastic, the detective is still unconvinced. The scene unfortunately represents a sad reality of neurotypical violence that many autistics face when interacting with the criminal justice system. To further this point, a 2021 qualitative study titled “Autistic Adults and Their Experiences with Police Personnel: A Qualitative Inquiry” conducted an anonymously online survey which asked participants to answer questions and describe their personal testimony on their interactions with law enforcement. In the study, the authors found that autistics had higher chances of being reported and interrogated by law enforcements, than they were to be charged or arrested for committing any crimes (Calton & Hall, 274-275). The study found that some of the

reasons why autistic are more likely to be profiled by the police consisted around their unusual behavior. As the text states, “Characteristics often associated with autism—such as emotional dysregulation, heightened levels of anxiety and restricted and repetitive interests and behaviours—are argued to contribute to an individual’s risk of encountering the CJS at some point in their lives” (Calton & Hall, 275). What makes this scene worse is the lack of knowledge the film provides to help the audience understand Bart’s perspective, even if what he is doing is completely inappropriate. The nuance required to understand the complex relationship the ASD community has had with the criminal justice system is not present here and would have been integral to understanding the common experience many autistics have with law enforcement. In *Caught in the Web of The Criminal Justice System* (2017) the authors detail the range of difficulties autistics may face from systematic neurotypical violence while having an encounter, being interrogated, or being detained from members of the criminal justice enforcement. The book argues that many of the issues can start at the “beginning with the pre-arrest, the criminal justice system presents an array of problems for individuals with ASD...” as many may “...have difficulty quickly processing information and responding to requests and questions...” and thus “...there is great danger for false confessions during the pre-arrest, interrogation, and trial” (Lawrence A, Dubin et al., 81).

When it comes to the ASD’s community’s relationship with domestic violence, Durst’s film poorly represents many problematic elements while Moose is being attacked by Hunter Dunbar. After Dunbar shoots Moose’s hand off, the next scene transitions into a cinematic horror film as Dunbar continues to hunt him down. This is best exemplified in the cinematography of the sequence as the figure seen below (Fig.32) that shows Dunbar slowly creeping behind Moose as he tortures him as one of the B-characters he used to play in his films. The scene is incredibly

dangerous for a variety of reasons, mainly due to the amount of graphic violence, like having Dunbar stab Moose's eye out. (Fig.33) It is only when Dunbar sees Moose screaming like an innocent little child that he realizes the horrific harm he has done.



Fig.31. Still from *The Fanatic* (01:15:07). A still image of Moose crawling away from Hunter Dunbar as he slowly approaches from behind him with a shotgun



Fig.32. Still from *The Fanatic* (01:16:24). A still image of Moose having his eye stabbed by Dunbar while also covering his ears from the sensorial sounds of the shotgun blast

Granted, one could expend their belief to think that this scene is an isolated event that has little to no resemblance to how autistics are treated in reality. Unfortunately, this is sadly not the case, as this form of neurotypical violence is not only a sad reality that many people in the ASD community face on a daily basis, but is also increasing each passing year with deadly consequences. In the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, a study found that disabled teens between the ages of 12 to 15 had higher chances of being victims of violence. The study specifically indicated "...that the risk of premature death in children and adolescents with ASD is 2 to 10 times as high as in the general population" (Guan et al., 2). In fact, the mortality rate for domestic violence has increased so much in recent times that the disability community has advocated for a yearly day of mourning to remember the lives of those murdered at the hands of their parents or caregivers. The goal of the memorial is to protest the lack of media coverage and accountability parents/caregivers don't receive from the criminal justice system when being prosecuted for their unspeakably murderess acts against disabled individuals. (autisticadvocacy.org)

Conclusion:

Thus far I have argued that Durst's film explicitly hints multiple times that there is a symbolic parental filiation between Dunbar and Moose. Due to the depiction of this horrific scene, this call for systemic justice become even more important when one considers how the sequence may ultimately have an real life impact on the safety and wellbeing of individuals in the ASD community who are seen as having a "*lack of Gemüt*". One such case of systemic neurotypical violence could be seen the murder of Ryan Gainer, an black autistic teenager who

was shot and killed by police authorities in early March of 2024. Gainer at the time of the incident was struggling with a violent episode when officers had arrived at his home. The police claimed that Gainer was holding a sharp gardening tool and was treating the officers with it; however their body cameras could only capture mere seconds of the incident unfolding. “Body-camera footage showed that two San Bernardino sheriff deputies shot Ryan within roughly five seconds of seeing him. The videos captured someone inside the home saying Ryan had a “stick”, then Ryan appearing in the doorway. He moved toward a deputy, who immediately threatened to shoot – and fired as he ran from Ryan” (Levin). The incident ultimately sparks a variety of questions if the offices could have approached the situation in a less neurotypical way that could have deescalated this tragedy.

Unfortunately, scenarios such as Ryan Gainer’s tragic death are becoming more common-place, and films like *The Fanatic* and *The Night Clerk*, depict figures that react violently when autistic characters who display unnatural behavior. I do not believe that these reactions are “natural”, just as I do not believe these real life incidents are mere accidents. I believe that such reactions come from a long deep seeded history that has ultimately culminated into the way we see autistics today. Nazi psychiatry had promoted the idea saw such individuals had lacked a soul, and therefore were considered a burden among the *Volk*, with the expectation of a few who could be rehabilitated from such a greater tragic fate. Later some child psychiatrists believed that such individuals were a burden to the common family, and that it was most likely due to the fault of a parental figure. This led to some parents to ultimately disown, abuse, and in some cases murder their own children, all due to a neurotypical standard they could not achieve. Today it seems that neurotypical violence is always lurking around the corner, whether it is from parental figures, pseudoscience, or even the very law that was meant to protect you. Regardless

of how it takes shape, make no mistake, it all culminates from a singular eugenic source that dehumanizes another human being, whether it is conscious or not.

Conclusion: How Eugenics and the Creep Trope Still Presents Itself in Contemporary Media

My focus on the “creep” trope throughout this thesis allowed me to examine specific socio-political movements throughout the 20th century. I have argued that the history of cinema has incorporated a great deal of eugenic propaganda which depicts the correlation between what we now call “autism” and its historical correlations with criminality. I have analyzed the origins of this stereotypical caricature through different genres of film and literature, and have demonstrated how these tropes are still present in the media we consume today. From analyzing films like Leopold Wharton and Theodore Wharton’s *The Black Stork*, which promoted the extermination of disabled babies out of fear that they would grow up to be cold hearted criminals. To modern films like Fred Durst’s *The Fanatic* (2019) and Michael Cristofer’s *The Night Clerk* (2020), both which depict their protagonists engaging with such criminal activity like stalking and violent crimes. I have found that there is in fact a legitimate history of committed neurotypicality within the realm of cinema which has contributed to the negative presentation of individuals in the ASD community.

My approach has been to investigate the development and establishment of the neurotypical American family in the early 20th century, and how disabled family members were promoted as burdens to the capitalistic system they themselves could not participate in. *The Black Stork* (1917) and *Tomorrow’s Children* (1934) take us to the modern American family where we encounter different debated methods of sterilization and euthanasia, and whether or not one was more humane than the other. My argument here is that the preservation of the modern American family would eventually be utilized throughout different generational zeitgeists to condemn “creep” figures in the horror and thriller genre. Figures like the Creature from James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931) not only demonstrate the negative eugenic influences that were

implemented in the making of early monster films, but also demonstrate how such a Creature could never be fully identified or accepted as truly human. I cite how this is an allegory for how a disabled children burden the stability of the heterosexual hierarchy of a neurotypical family. I have also argued that Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) indicates instances where the Creature shares the same social status as someone who is disabled. An example of this manifestation comes from the Creature incorporating the mode of neurotypical language as a means to communicate with the outside world; even then, it is not enough for him to still be considered truly human due to his grotesque disfigurement. With these findings, I was able to build a cohesive argument that proves that such characteristic tropes can still be seen in autistic characters like Moose and Bart from *The Fanatic* and *The Night Clerk*. Although this trope has been continuously going on for more than a hundred years of cinematic representation, I aimed to demonstrate that the result of depicting such a caricature has ultimately led to autistics being isolated, abused, and in most cases murdered for their neurological disorder.

I consider that this thesis makes an important contribution within the realms of Disability and Film studies, as little is written on the history and correlation of eugenics and its influences on autism representation throughout the century of cinema. I would even go as far as to argue that a majority of scholars from different departments are not fully aware of how the scope such caricature's like the "Creep" can affect the perception of the ASD community as a whole, especially when it comes to more recent online observations like the correlation between autism and the incel community. In other words, one key contribution my paper has made, is enhancing the critical awareness of cinema spectatorship which one can spot in contemporary films that have eugenic influences of autistic characters. Although my thesis will hopefully garner more critical discussions around the influence eugenics still has on the portrayal of the disability

community, there are still some incredibly critical aspects of this trope I was unable to expand upon in my thesis.

One of the limitations I found most affected my research was the lack of scholarship surrounding the modern day impact and correlation the “Creep” trope has merged into fringe groups like the incelbate and black pill community. Despite this being the initial causality that drove me to conduct my research, I unfortunately was limited to time and the lack of scholarship that surrounded this topic. In the future, I hope to further expand my investigation on how eugenics still plays a role in the black pill community, a branch of the incel community which has been most prominent in associating themselves with alt-right ideologies. For example, the usage of phrenology, a pseudo-scientific theory which was believed to categorize mental health disorders and character traits solely based on an individual’s skull measure and facial features, is still being used today in black pill communities to determine the quality of one’s life. Some Black pill content creators like Wheat Waffles and Nero Angelo have made it their career to create in depth analytical videos which examine and scientifically rate the facial features of different people. Many of these videos like Wheat Waffles infamous playlist on male facial features analyze how specific facial features can either benefit or deplete a person’s overall worth and accessibility as regards to having a beneficial dating and social life. As seen from the figure below (Fig. 34), Waffles dedicates an entire playlist to the tiniest details on what the perfect face is supposed to look like.

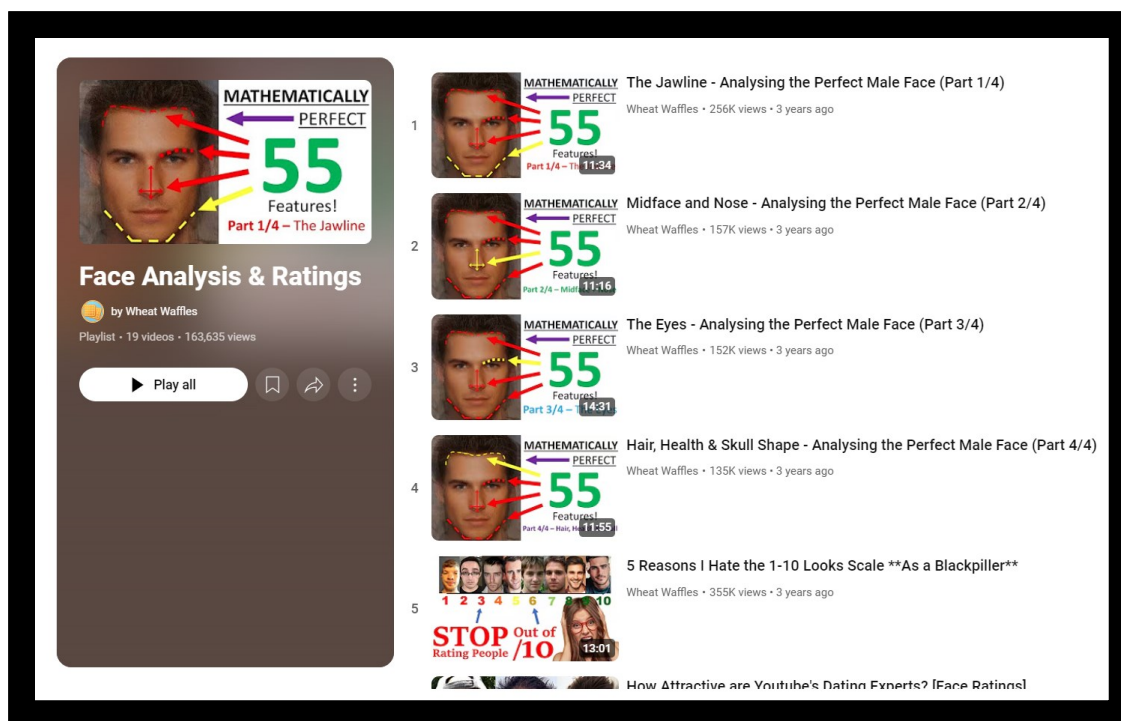


Fig.33. Still from Wheat Waffles playlist on YouTube called “Face Analysis & Ratings.”

This is incredibly similar to Lombrosoian pseudo-science as both figures use phenology, quantifiable data, and statistics to justify their arguments. In particular, some black pill Youtubers have even taken upon themselves to categorize those in the neurodiverse community through in depth analyzations of one’s facial features. In his video titled “This Can Ruin Your Looks? Autistic Features (blackpill)” Nero Angelo breaks down how autism can ultimately affect one’s facial attractiveness and perpetuate one’s likelihood of having a successful dating life. The video uses array of different studies which lead Nero to conclude that being autistic lacks three fundamental qualities to a successful social/ dating life. As seen in the photo below (Fig.35) Nero argues that the three qualities consist around attractiveness, likability, and dominance, qualities Nero argues autistics do not naturally have.

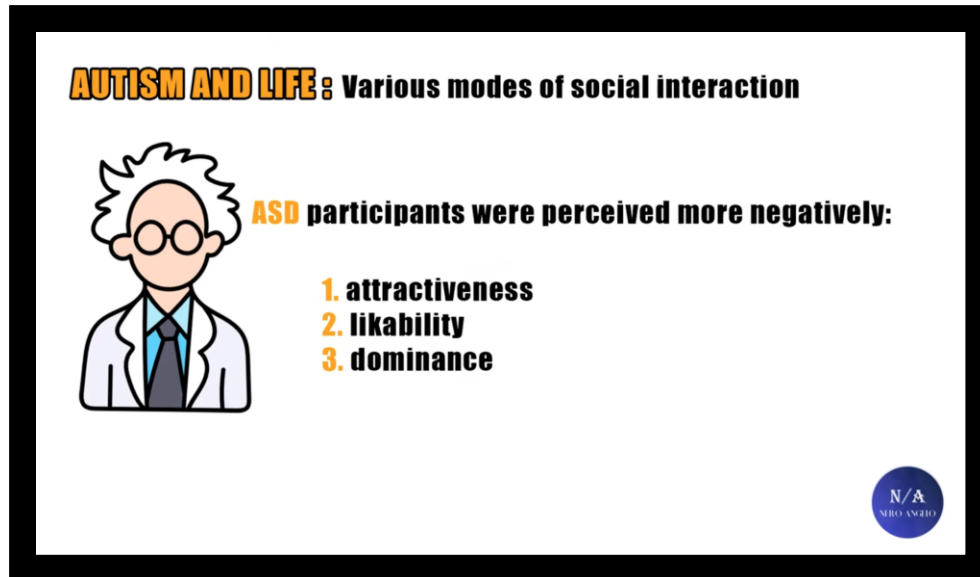


Fig.34. Still image from Nero Angelo’s “This Can Ruin Your Looks? Autistic Features (blackpill)” indicating the three components (attractiveness, likability, dominance) autistics supposedly do not pertain as a causality for their lack of intimate relationships (00:03:27).

Therefore Nero’s video clearly tries to present autistics as a monolith by utilizing the philosophy of Lombrosoian pseudo-science. As a result the video reinforces a sense of hopelessness towards its viewers by allowing them to compare themselves to a neurotypical mode of being.

The usage of phrenology and black pill content has been growing to such an extent that within recent times there have been films which have aimed to tackle the toxic elements surrounding the manosphere community. John Trengove’s *Manodrome* (2023) is one of such recent films which explore how aspects of phrenology and other red pill/black pill theology are contributing to the revamp of male toxicity. Although the film does not feature any negative commentary on the disability community, there are still many aspects of eugenic cinema tropes that I have previously investigated that present itself throughout the film. For example, Ralphie the protagonist of the film played by Jesse Eisenberg, is lured into a males only cult solely due to

his personal insecurities about his body shape, and the lack of a father figure in his life. Both reasons culminate to the same conclusion; Ralphie lacks self-belief that he is a real man, and therefore feels the need to become the neurotypical standard of what a man should be by altering his physical body through constant workouts and male chauvinism. If we compare this rhetoric to some of the other eugenic films we have examined thus far in my thesis, we can see the striking similarities of a lack of a parental figure and how that neglect can have a detrimental effect on others. It should also be noted that Ralphie gets so lost into this neurotypical standard that he eventually goes on to murder Dad Dan, the cult leader played by Adrien Brody who enticed Ralphie to join his male's only club in the first place. Thus incentivizing that Ralphie's neurological disorder of body dysphoria is the ultimate causality to engage him to commit such crimes like murder.

Another film which is hailed in the red/black pill community is Todd Philips *Joker* (2019) which gained a large amount of controversy for its toxic themes around mental health and its relation to the public sector. It is no secret that there was a polarizing debate from film critics on whether *Joker* is a masterpiece that explored the systematic issues surrounding how we talk about mental health within our society, or if the film promotes more stereotypes by associating mental health with acts of violent rhetoric. Critic Stephanie Zacharek even went as far as to call the protagonist of the film, Arthur Fleck, "...the patron saint of incels" adding that "In America, there's a mass shooting or attempted act of violence by a guy like Arthur practically every other week. And yet we're supposed to feel some sympathy for Arthur, the troubled lamb; he just hasn't had enough love." (Zacharek) Thus the film's controversy has opened more critical discussions within other neurological communities about how society perceives individuals who suffer with mental health conditions. Some of these discussions have even made their way into

the realm of the ASD community and its relationship with the Medicare system. One autistic YouTuber named Max Derrat dives into detail on the socio-political issues that surround the representation of the infamous film portrayal of mental illness. In his video essay titled “A Mentally Ill Person Analyzes Joker”, Derrat’s thesis goes against the many negative critics by boldly arguing that the Joker does not depict mentally ill people in a problematic manner. Rather he argues the opposite, as he believes the film reveals some of the more underlining issues around the lack of services for mentally ill/ cognitively disabled individuals’ who must face ridicule from a society that deprives them of their basic clinical needs. In particular, Derrat notes the hypocritical ways many of the would-be advocates for the mental health/ disability community withhold from interacting with the more taboo issues mentally ill individuals face on a daily bases. He argues that many of these advocates aim their campaigns around more generalized movements and slogans as a way to avoid discussing the harsh realities disabled people have to go through, and which many don’t want to talk about. In his own words Derrat notes,

“Throughout my life I have come across several people who signal they’re supposed virtue to one another...championing a need for diversity and inclusion on social media and at political rallies, advocating for a better world for people like me...yet when I tried to take these people up on their for support, for friendship, they make every attempt to abdicate their duty. After they witness our abnormal speech patterns, the anxiety inherent in our body language, the stories of self-harm and self-hatred, they see that our presence threatens their comfortable unconscious existence. Once they see that it takes more than uttering mindless mantras to help the disenfranchised...they might have to admit that like Arthur” (referring to the protagonist in Philips Joker) “they too are putting on a mask” (Derrat, 00:2:07-00:3:08).

Derratt's words speak on a more interpersonal level to the complex ways mental health and neurological disorders are being discussed in the media we consume today. Both *Manodrome* and *Joker* not only suggest elements of the "Creep" trope, but demonstrate how eugenic rhetoric and mental health are still prominent issues that appear in modern cinema and thus need further research to be conducted upon.

Another limitation towards my thesis is the lack of academic and scholarly research which explores the correlation between the incel community and how it perpetuates the ASD community in a negative light. Thus far in my conclusion, the majority of my evidence has come from Youtube videos which demonstrate an emerging socio-zeitgeist that links the behavior of incel members to autism. Since the writing of this thesis, there has been new data which has discovered more information around the relation between the incel community and the ASD community. A study conducted by Frontiers in Psychology titled "Incels, autism, and Hopelessness: Affective Incorporation of online Interaction as a Challenge for Phenomenological Psychopathology", came to a similar conclusion while using the same method to quantify their research. Their study, which was a combination of qualitative academic research and online circuits, used phenomenology to "analyze self-reported autism and its association with hopelessness in the online communities of involuntary celibates (incels)" (Tirkkonen et al., 2). After conducting their study, the researchers concluded that there was a surprisingly large number of members of the incel community, along with incel members who committed mass atrocities, who self-identified as either being or having symptoms of autism spectrum disorder. The study reads as follows, "There would appear to be specific links between autism and incelism, and roughly a quarter of the users of incel forums have reported a formal diagnosis of autism...In addition, research that focuses on incels in forensic psychiatry, radicalization and

terrorism studies became interested in autism after noticing that many of the incels who committed violent attacks and mass shootings against women had a formal autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis” (Tirkkonen et al., 2). Such associations do not stop there, as I mentioned in the introduction of my thesis, there has been an alarming amount of media broadcasting which has linked school shootings, many of which identify as incels, having autism as one of the underlining reason for their horrific actions. There has been no evidence thus far that proves that autism is a liable cause to make a person more likely to commit such horrific acts of terror. Such emerging phenomenon’s lead many to speculate as to why so many autistics would be susceptible to toxic aspects of the incel community in the first place. It is precisely for this reason that I wish to further my research by investigating more key influences that may be a probability to the causality of such violence.

One of the more toxic traits to be associated with the incel community is male chauvinism towards women. When we consider how films like *Joker* (2019) or *Manodrome* (2023) feature elements of stalking and verbal abuse towards women and associate those elements to both protagonist’s neurological disorders, it’s not hard to see a rather linear connection between the two. In the case around the usage of phrenology in the black pill community, one can only conclude that such disdainful attitudes toward women can solely be due to males feeling utterly hopeless in ever obtaining a healthy relationship with a woman because of the consumption of such self-hating videos that denigrate their worth as a human being. Therefore it would be the natural conclusion to hate what when cannot have. These observations are unfortunately not new, and I find it quite interesting that Shelley’s *Frankenstein* even narrated a similar passage to the creature’s disdaining attitude towards women. In one section of the novel, the creature is seeking revenge against Victor Frankenstein for giving him

life. After murdering Victor's younger brother, the creature spots another informal member of the Frankenstein family late one night. The member of the family is Justine, the maid of the Frankenstein residence. As she is sleeping the creature looms over her and is struck by her radiant beauty. This abruptly ends when the creature realizes that his disfigured body could never be acceptable or worthy of any woman's love. Thus the creature comes to the conclusion that if he could not have Justine as a romantic partner, he would punish her for her beauty by framing her for the murder the creature committed against Victor's younger brother. As the creature exclaims, "...if her darkened eyes opened, and she beheld me. The thought was madness; it stirred the fiend within me — not I, but she shall suffer: the murder I have committed because I am forever robbed of all that she could give me, she shall atone. The crime had its source in her: be hers the punishment!" (Shelley, 125). Thus, considering what I have argued about the cultural influences in regards to disability studies in Shelley's novel, it would only be beneficial to further investigate the historical relation between societal beauty standards and its relation to the disability community.

In particular I would be interested in exploring the origins of other novels and films that have disabled characters that grow in bitterness towards women due to them being unable to obtain a neurotypical relationship. In Nick Dubin's *The Autism Spectrum, Sexuality and the Law* one of the authors Isabelle Henault expands on the complex relations autistics have with sexual education. In the second of her section titled "Factors Influencing Sexual Development", Henault notes some of the struggles autistics face in the dating realm that can lead to more frustration in interpersonal relations with their peers. In particular, the author notes how "Words and sentences with double meanings lead to confusion. In addition, non-verbal communication (which acts as a parallel language) is also difficult for them to detect and interpret. As such, a simple

conversation can easily turn into a nightmarish experience. Even more disturbing, sexuality is filled with subtleties in small gestures and intentions that must be decoded on a second level” (Dubin, Nick, et al, 194). Henault almost notes how autistics may be more susceptible to sexual content that one may encounter online, particularly the usage of pornography. Such reasoning behind this observation may stem from the author arguing that a majority of autistics may lack a proper sexual education and connective judgement to realize the extent of what they are consuming. Her solution to this issue is for parents to intervene and explain the extensive and complex levels pornography can have on their autistic teens, especially if the pornography they are consuming is illegal. (Dubin, Nick, et al, 195). Henault’s words also ring true for other forms of social media platforms, as many incels bully female victims through the usage of the internet.

Finally another limitation I was unable to explore in my thesis is how autism has been shaped as a reasonable causality to justify mass atrocities and terrorist attacks. In particular, I would have liked to explore why news outlets and other forms of social media associate horrific acts of mass shooting and terrorism to the assailants neurological disorder as being a suggested causality for their horrific actions. In recent times, there has been a mix of opinions within the media sphere as to whether a terrorist’s lack of empathy has a stark connection to their autistic diagnosis. This reasoning has not stopped defense lawyers from ultimately justifying the initial reasoning to say some of their clients are influenced by the alt-right community to commit such acts of violence. An example of this can be seen from the testimony given by the defense lawyer who represented the QAnon Shaman, a figure who grew in online popularity for being associated with the January 6th insurrection on the American capital. Albert Watkins, the defense lawyer for Jacob Chansley, aka the QAnon Shaman, argued that his client’s neurological disorder (Asperger’s syndrome) was a reasonable cause for him to be unaware that he was committing

such crimes due to what sounds like Chansley having a lack of theory of mind. As Watkins states “‘A lot of these defendants — and I’m going to use this colloquial term, perhaps disrespectfully — but they’re all f----- short-bus people,’ ... ‘These are people with brain damage, they’re f----- retarded, they’re on the goddamn spectrum’” (Garcia). Another example of lawyer’s using a lack of theory of mind to justify horrific crimes which were committed by autistic assailants, can be seen in the van attack massacre case that took place in Toronto Canada. Alek Minassian, the suspect who was found guilty of 16 counts of attempted murder, had his defense team argue that he was not fully aware of the crimes he was committing due to his ASD diagnosis. Therefore the defense team’s argument was to prove that Minassian was not entirely to blame because he claims he didn’t know what he was doing was morally incomprehensible (Gollom). Both cases have had prosecuting teams and a number disability activist groups who have consistently fought back on such insulting and blatant accusations about autism. However, these accusations are not just limited to these cases, as there have been other forms of terrorist attacks which have used this piece of negative rhetoric to justify an increase of mass shootings in American schools.

As restated in my introduction, some of the primary events which drove me to research my thesis, surrounded how different news outlets often mentioned how many of the mass shooters were autistic, and how many of outlets would go to great lengths to try and psycho analyze their mental health conditions as an answer to their crimes. Although there are articles which have clearly stated that autism is not a contributing factor for why someone would commit a mass shooting, some of those same articles unfortunately still paint a bad picture for members of the ASD community. This is because some articles tend to highlight the more unusual symptoms of autism as a connection to a shooters motive to kill others. An example of this can be seen in Andrew Solomon’s article titled “The Reckoning” in which the author interviews

Peter Lanza, the father of Sandy Hook school shooter Adam Lanza. Solomon's article was conducted in hopes to gain more information on the background of Adam, and what neurological conditions may have played a factor in him committing the horrendous crime of killing 26 elementary school children. Although both Solomon and Peter state that they don't believe Adam's Asperger's syndrome diagnosis was a contributing factor that led Adam to commit his crime, the article does dedicate a large portion of itself on Adam's hyper fixations on serial killers and lack of empathy as somewhat probable motives. As the article states,

"Both autism and psychopathy entail a lack of empathy. Psychologists, though, distinguish between the "cognitive empathy" deficits of autism (difficulty understanding what emotions are, trouble interpreting other people's nonverbal signs) and the "emotional empathy" deficits of psychopathy (lack of concern about hurting other people, an inability to share their feelings). The subgroup of people with neither kind of empathy appears to be small, but such people may act out their malice in ways that can feel both guileless and brutal." (Solomon)

Although Solomon's analysis connecting the lack of empathy to autism may have been insightful during the time the article was written, we now know that an autistic's ability to display no empathy, or lacking a theory of mind, has been debunked by multiple disability scholars (as argued previously in my thesis). Therefore we cannot conclude that Adam's lack of empathy was a primary motive as to why he committed such a horrific crime. Neither can the article assume that Adam's hyper fixation on consuming nor writing about graphic violence be a justification for his criminal actions. Lydia X. Z. Brown is one of the many authors of the book titled *All the Weight of Our Dreams on Living Racialized Autism*, dedicates a large portion of her work in responding to such accusations. In their chapter "I am autistic, and I am obsessed with violence" Brown directly responds to Solomon's article by arguing that an obsession with violent content

does not necessarily equate to an autistic being more likely to commit such criminal acts. In their chapter, Brown discusses how their hyper fixations also revolve around exploring disturbing graphic content including mass shootings that happen in America. Brown states that an accusation of exploring such content ultimately generalizes other autistics to be suspected of becoming another mass shooter like Lanza. As Brown states, “I read Solomon’s descriptions of Adam, and I was crying because most of what he wrote could have been written about me if you changed the names. When he suggested that Adam’s obsession with reading and writing about extreme violence could have been a warning sign, I became terrified. Not because I’m afraid that people in power will start using that as an excuse for hurting people like me, but because I know they already do and I’m afraid it will happen even more” (Brown, 91). In my future I look forward to exploring how media outlets use symptoms of ASD to propagate an image which suggest that autistics are liable to commit such acts of terrorism. Brown also notes that many of the media outlets which reported Lanza’s autism, failed to include that Lanza’s two victims (Josephine Gay and Dylan Hockley) were also diagnosed as autistic themselves (Brown, 100) reinforcing the notion that there is a clear media bias when it comes to framing autism and it’s correlation to school shootings.

News outlets are not the only source of public influence to promote the idea that symptoms of autism are a likely cause for school shootings. In recent time’s social media has played a pivotal role in influencing the general public’s view that autism is linked to the characteristics of a school shooter. Such assumptions have not been proven from any form of statistical data or academic journals; rather they are catching a wider circulation through the art form of meme culture. Below I have selected a few memes which correlate how autistics can be just as liable to commit acts of terrorism towards their school peers. The jokes in the two first

figures listed below (Fig. 36) (Fig. 37) demonstrate how autistics are just as much of a threat, if not worse, to become a school shooter as they are more unpredictable with a gun. The jokes in both memes are simple, autistics are either too dumbfound to realize the grave danger of the situation and therefore are seen as being potential threats among their peers. The third meme (Fig. 38) is similar to the other two, however the joke in this case mainly deals with the notion that autistics would be completely oblivious in their environments if a school shooter started to attack them. Either description clearly does not paint autistics in a positive light and demonstrates the little expendable value they hold in society.

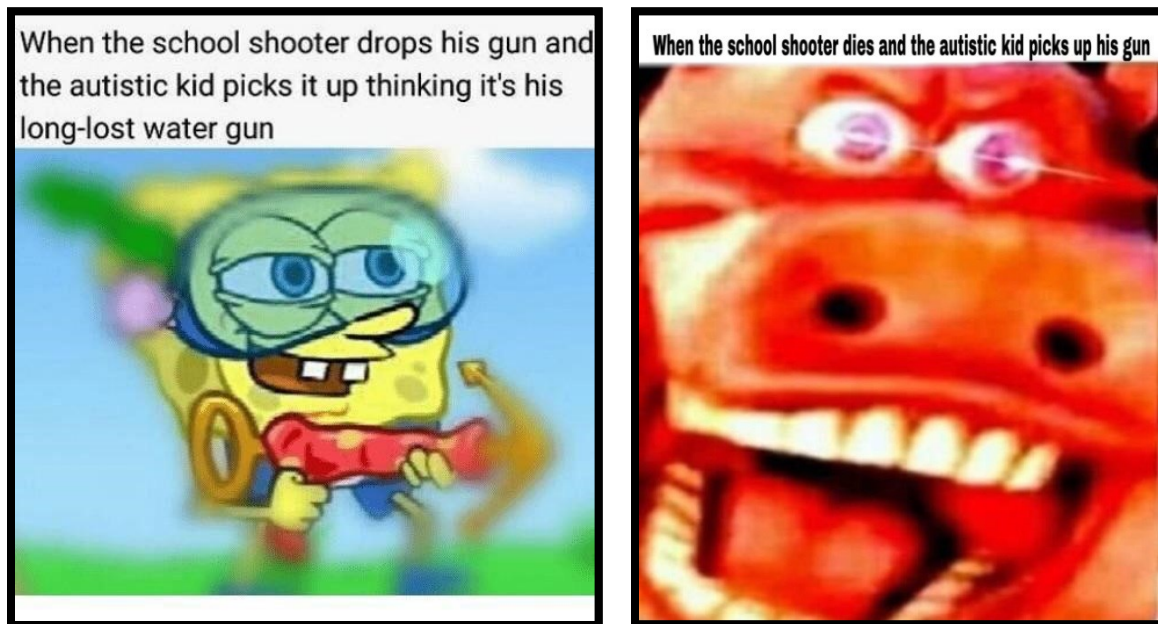


Fig.35 (Left). BetaThetaOmega. “Hey at least the picture matches?” 16 April 2018.

Reddit.com,

[https://www.reddit.com/r/ComedyCemetery/comments/8cn6oy/hey at least the picture matches/?rdt=59172.](https://www.reddit.com/r/ComedyCemetery/comments/8cn6oy/hey_at_least_the_picture_matches/?rdt=59172)

Fig.36 (Right). Asimpleplebian. “Classy.” 26 March, 2018. *Reddit.com,*

[https://www.reddit.com/r/ComedyCemetery/comments/879hrt/classy/.](https://www.reddit.com/r/ComedyCemetery/comments/879hrt/classy/)



Fig.37. ob9410. “LOL!! HE HAS THE TISMS.” 14 July, 2017. *Reddit.com*, [https://www.reddit.com/r/ComedyCemetery/comments/6nabw4/lol he has the tisms/](https://www.reddit.com/r/ComedyCemetery/comments/6nabw4/lol_he_has_the_tisms/).

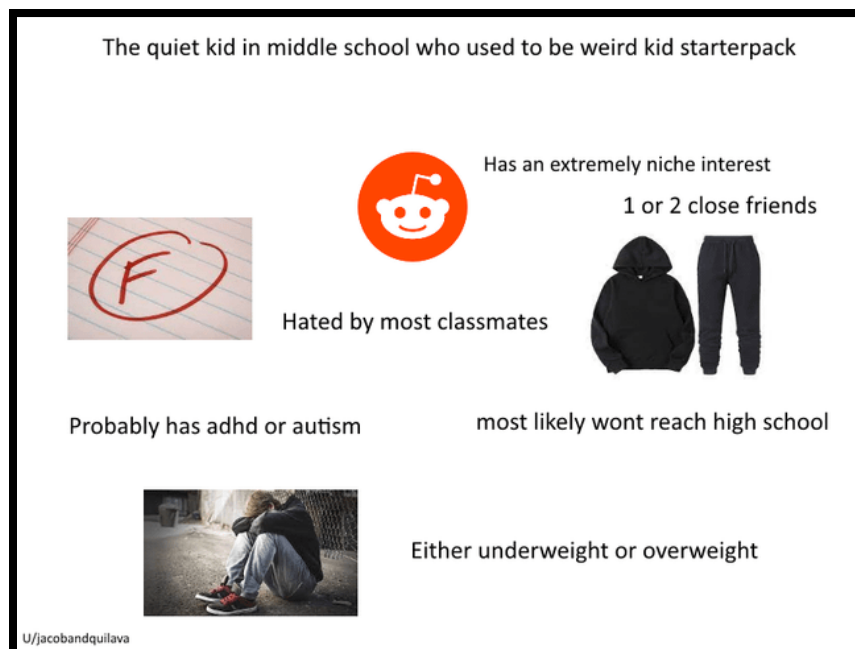


Fig.38. JacobAndQuilava. “quiet kid in middle school who used to be the weird kid starter pack.” 29 April, 2021, *Reddit.com*, https://www.reddit.com/r/starterpacks/comments/n1c5e6/quiet_kid_in_middle_school_who_used_to_be_the/.

The final meme (Fig. 39) indicates an quiet kid starter pack and includes specific qualities a quiet kid is most often stereotyped to commit mass shootings would likely have. One of the characteristics includes a description of “Probably has adhd or autism.” Clearly the makers of these memes are hinting that a typical “quiet kid” must have some aspects of autism in order for them to commit acts of mass violence. I hope to continue exploring this caricature in my future research, as my thesis was limited to a small window in history and does not include an in-depth analysis of where the current zeitgeist is leading this trope. Thus it is important to recognize that my research cannot be generalized as there may be other contributing factors at play.

A film that captures this allegory best is Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* (2003). Inspired by the 1999 Columbine High School massacre and Alan Clarke’s film of the same name, here Van Sant tries to tackle the reasoning behind why two young teens would commit horrific acts of violence by shooting their high school peers. The film tries to give the audience a couple of leading reasons as to why two of the characters, Eric and Alex, would commit such a horrific crime, however these reasons ultimately leave the audience to wonder at their sinister motivations. A video essay titled “Elephant (2003) — Limitations of Perception” by Jane Brown best sums up how we are left unknowing as to why such acts occur. As the creator notes, “What has led these two kids to murder numerous innocents. Is it the neglect from their adult authorities? Family life at home? Persistent bullying? Repressed homosexuality? Mental illness? The influence of media and violent video games? The answer is all of them and none of them. We do not know. We might not ever know” (Brown, 00:05:33-00:05:55). Therefore, just like Van Sant’s film, we

cannot single out autism as being a leading factor that may have motivated school shooters like Adam Lanza, Nick Cruz, or Audrey Hale to commit such horrid acts of violence to innocent civilians.

Despite the limitations of my thesis, I believe I was able to make an important contribution to how films and media depict, frame, and often isolate those in the autism community as criminals. Overall I'm quite cautious to see where the future of this trope will lead autistic individuals to be categorized in the realm of eugenics. Since conducting my research I have seen that eugenics has not so much resurged in popularity, but rather unmasked itself again in our society. Take for example the EctoLife artificial womb facility I mentioned in the beginning of my introduction. An obvious factor as to why someone would want a baby that is without blemish could be because a parent may not want to deal with the underlying risks and challenges neurological disorders may bring in their child's development. Similarly, if we are to frame the narrative that having a child with autism may or may not risk that child growing up to become a school shooter, parents may start to believe that it would be safer to get rid of this neurological disorder once and for all. If this seems like a stretch, consider that scientists are currently analyzing Adam Lanza's DNA, "...to see if they can find anomalies that might explain what was broken in him. And yet, if someone has committed heinous crimes and is then found to have bad genes or a neurological abnormality, should we presume that biology compelled him?" (Solomon). Thus, it is my belief that for the disability community, our future may very well soon start to look more like our past. It is precisely for this reason that we must continue to expand our research and have these discussions in order to not dehumanize autistics and place them into a box that frames them as suspected suspects. If not, we will continue to allow others to construct their own biases against us.

Epilogue: A Message from the Author

For the past two and a half years, I have entrenched myself in exploring these topics and during that time, I have burnt out approximately four times due to the amount of graphic content, physical and mental abuse stories, (some from personal family and friends) which have left knots in my stomach. I feel as though it is my responsibility to not share these stories out of respect for the victims who have gone through such forms of neurotypical violence. I know I had stated that I would include some personal examples in my thesis, but I cannot in good conscious exploit these stories. Such stories have their own narrators and I cannot in good faith take advantage of them. To put it in retrospect, when you constantly investigate a thousand reasons why society doesn't believe you or anyone who acts like you, should have self-autonomy, achieve higher education, or even in some cases throughout history have a right to life, it eventually starts to weigh you down and becomes more present in your daily interactions. One descriptive image that occasionally crosses my mind comes from Suzanne Evans' *Forgotten Crimes: The Holocaust and People with Disabilities*. In her chapter "The Children's Killing Program" Evans mentions a traumatizing passage about the cruel actions of Dr Hermann Pfannmüller, one the most notorious doctors who was in charge of the so called "starvation pavilions" of the Nazi regime. Evans quotes one of the eyewitness testimonies who describe the horrific violence that took place.

"After visiting a few other wards, the institution's director [Pfannmüller] led us into a children's ward....About 15 to 25 cribs contained that number of children, aged approximately one to five years."

Through the rest of the passage Pfannmüller describes to the eyewitness why starvation is a better method of exterminating the disabled babies in his ward.

“...[Pfannmüller] and the nurse from the ward pulled a child from its crib. Displaying the child like a dead rabbit, he pontificated with the air of a connoisseur and a cynical smirk something like this: ‘With this one, for example, it will still take two or three days.’ I can still clearly visualize the spectacle of this fat and smirking man with the whimpering skeleton in his fleshy hand, surrounded by other starving children” (Evans, 33).

Having these images in the back of my head while hoping your research will maybe make some fundamental change is by itself exhausting. In truth, I’m quite tired. I am tired of hearing stories of neurodiverse people who have fought the good fight, only to be abandoned and in some cases murdered by a society that continues to take advantage of them.

During my thesis I have had the chance to encounter a film that best exemplifies my own experience growing up in the autism community, and the amount of hopelessness from neurotypical standards that often comes with it. In Ragnar Keil’s documentary called *Being Rachel*, Jesse Heffring, one of the writers of the film, explores the complex sociopolitical issues that surround teens with autism at a special education school called Summit Elementary School. What makes this film significant to my thesis is that I attended this school when I was younger. Many of the autistics featured in the documentary were childhood friends I had grown up with. At one point during the film, a few of the students are asked to discuss some of the challenges that autistics face in the educational realm. For some being in a special needs school is a blessing in disguise as they can relate to other autistics that go through different social stigmas. For others, they feel frustrated at how little control they have over their future academic career. As one student states, “People or teachers say ‘Yeah, you’re just like everybody else’. But in a way, were not. Everybody else in normal high schools get high school leavings. What do we get? We don’t get anything” (Summit Creative Arts, 00:07:08-00:07:22). This sadly was my exact

realization that made me want to leave Summit to venture into higher learning. It was not uncommon for many of us to learn that we may be staying in our elementary school till we were twenty one. It didn't help that we rarely got any words of encouragement, or even imagined our lives outside of Summit school. When we leave, we are often criticized and looked down upon for not achieving a neurotypical standard of life. The principle of Summit school gives a statement on why that may be. As he says, "Some of our students as they grow up, they feel that they need to be part of society like any other person, and that's where the conflict comes in where they feel and they ask themselves 'What am I doing?' 'What's wrong with me?' 'How come I can't get this?' 'How come I can't do this?' These students, who are social much higher, have a difficult time accepting their disability" (Summit Creative Arts, 00:42:45- 00:43:12). In this sense, I suppose one can argue that my formal principle is right, "higher functioning" autistic students who go on to achieve neurotypical goals like obtaining their high school leavings or other forms of higher education; do face much isolation from their peers. This is something I can personally attest to through my own experience being in university. However I want to make it fundamentally clear, the reasoning behind these endeavors does not consist in the idea that we cannot accept our disabilities. Yes, there are those who will struggle to accept their neurological or physical disability; however has anyone ever taken the initiative to ask why that may be? Perhaps it is because our diagnoses, a piece of paper build off social constructs, ultimately cages us, limits our potential, and becomes the determining factor which will dictate the quality of the rest of our lives. In this sense, the issue becomes not that we can't accept our disability, but that society with its complex social structures, won't let us forget it. The reality is to my formal principle, despite your attempted words of affirmation; this issue is rooted at heart of something far more complex and intrinsic than just acceptance of one's own disability. The issue has and

always will be without a doubt a systemic one. If we are to dream of a future where autistics do achieve such goals in their higher education, it will not come from an autistics' ability to accept them self. Rather it must come from society's ability to adapt and deconstruct its initial prejudices. That is the only way disabled students can contribute their voice, by providing opportunities for them to thrive.

Overall, I don't want a future where autistic children have to stay in their special needs elementary schools until they are twenty one, only to go into a job training program where they will be prepared to become a janitor or stock shelves at Walmart. I want others to experience all the trials and tribulations that I have gone through, as it can only benefit both the autistic and the neurotypical to hopefully mold a more inclusive world filled with opportunities for everyone. I want their voices to matter in a society that doesn't even know they exist. Not through words of affirmation, but through phrases of equality. Many of my childhood friends who were featured in this documentary, just like me, went on to obtain their high school leavings. And they did. In this sense, I suppose the Creep figure is rather quite a reflexive allegory to many struggles I and other autistics face on a daily basis. I've demonstrated how the Creep is often seen as a loner, misunderstood, and often times suspected of negative intentions. I along with others, despite our achievements, must also continue to wonder in a world where we will forever be misunderstood as loners who can never truly fit into a society that rejects our very being.

...Happy are those who have found solace in this tribe, for one day they shall conquer their own mountains, and walk hand in hand in peace with those around them. Amen.

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