




Representation of autistic women in the media. The cases of *Forbrydelsen* (2007) and *Bron/Broen* (2015)

LA REPRESENTACIÓN DE LAS MUJERES CON AUTISMO EN FORBRYDELSEN (2007) Y BRON/BROEN (2015)

Maria Medina-Vicent

Universitat Jaume I
medinam@uji.es

 0000-0002-2716-6786

Irene Garcia-Molina

Universitat Jaume I
imolina@uji.es

 0000-0002-5150-9371

Abstract

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis tests have been based on, and tested mostly with, men. This, along with the *camouflaging* and masking behaviours developed by autistic women, gives way to a bias for the identification and diagnosis of autism. This means that many autistic girls, female adolescents and women still go unnoticed today. If we acknowledge this reality, and also consider the clear potential of audiovisual products for generating representations in certain social groups, we believe that lack of diagnosing autistic women spells their underrepresentation in audiovisual products like films or TV series. So, the main

objective of this article is to analyse the representation of autistic female characters in the *Forbrydelsen* (2007) and *Bron/Broen* (2015) TV series, which correspond to the Nordic Noir genre, to verify the traits and values associated with them by critically analysing discourse.

Keywords

Autistic women, media, representation, Nordic Noir.

Resumen

Las pruebas diagnósticas del Trastorno del Espectro Autista (TEA) han sido basadas y testadas principalmente en hombres. Esto, junto a los comportamientos de camuflaje y enmascaramiento desarrollados por las mujeres con autismo, dan lugar a un sesgo en su identificación y diagnóstico, provocando que muchas niñas, adolescentes y mujeres con autismo pasen desapercibidas aún hoy en día. Partiendo del reconocimiento de esta realidad, así como del claro potencial de los productos audiovisuales para generar representaciones sobre grupos sociales concretos, consideramos que, la falta de diagnóstico de mujeres con autismo se traduce en su infrarrepresentación en productos audiovisuales como películas o series de televisión. De este modo, el objetivo principal de este artículo es analizar la representación de los personajes femeninos con autismo en las series de televisión *Forbrydelsen* (2007) y *Bron/Broen* (2015), enmarcadas en el género del Nordic Noir, para constatar los rasgos y valores que se les asocian, a través del análisis crítico del discurso.

Palabras clave

Mujeres, autismo, representación, Nordic Noir.

Sumario / Summary

1. Introduction / *Introducción*
2. Nordic Noir and the feminist film theory / *El Nordic Noir nórdico y la teoría cinematográfica feminista*
3. Autistic women. The women detectives of the *Forbrydelsen* and *Bron/Broen* series / *Mujeres autistas. Las detectives de las series Forbrydelsen y Bron/Broen*
 - 3.1. Empathy / *Empatía*
 - 3.2. Flirting, sex and shyness / *Coqueteo, sexo y timidez*
 - 3.3. Sensorial hyper- or hyporeactivity / *Hiper o hiporreactividad sensorial*
4. Conclusion / *Conclusión*
5. Bibliography / *Bibliografía*

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopment disorder characterised mainly because the people with this condition have problems with: (1) communication and social interaction; (2) following restrictive and repetitive patterns with behaviours, interests and/or activities, according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Research in the last decade has examined gender differences between autistic people because the prevalence estimation was 4-fold higher in males than it was in females, and even reached 6-8:1 when individuals' intelligence was average or high (Fombonne, 2005). Nevertheless, the fact that diagnosis tests are based on, and tested with, autistic males (Lai et al., 2015; Rynkiewicz & Łucka, 2015), and autistic women have learned *camouflaging* and masking behaviours so they can go unnoticed (Beck et al., 2020; Halsall et al., 2021), give way to an identification bias. So it is quite possible that many autistic girls, female adolescents and women have not been diagnosed, are not included in this estimation (Duvekot et al., 2017; Rynkiewicz et al., 2016), or have been diagnosed in adulthood (Leedham et al., 2020).

The fact is that this disinformation and gender biases affect individual and social levels as reaffirmed over mass media: series and films whose female autistic characters acquire traits based on autistic men. So, they do not tend to benefit from a clear autism diagnosis and, once again, women with this condition are stigmatised (Malia, 2017). This issue is reflected in audiovisual products, such as films or TV series, where different problems are reproduced. Firstly, the many female characters who actually enter the autism spectrum are not explicitly diagnosed. One such case is the forensic anthropologist known as Temperance Brennan in the *Bones* series (played by actress Emily Deschanel) or neuroscientist Amy Farrah Fowler in the *Big Bang Theory* series (played by Mayim Bialik). This might lead to autistic women's experiences being distorted or not made visible because they are not represented in mass media or productions. Secondly, when these leading characters are explicitly diagnosed, they acquire traits that could be associated with the conventional male role, which could mean confounding typical autism spectrum traits with those traditionally associated with men. This means that leading female characters are defined as "masculine women" and not as "autistic women". We believe that this fact might be the direct consequence of what has been indicated in previous paragraphs; that is, tests might have been designed according to the male experience. Thus, autistic women are represented by reproducing behavioural models associated with men and not with women. This would mean that the experiences of autistic women have been erased and

are subsumed in autistic men's experiences, which are allegedly universal. A character with a disability serves as a lens through which an audience can view and define that disability (Baker, 2007; Conn & Bhugra, 2012), Prochnow, 2014; Dean & Nordahl-Hansen, 2021). For this reason, narrative representations of that disability provide powerful definitions, and it's important to analyse them. In the case of autistic women, there could be significant benefits to improving how they are portrayed in the media, because they are at risk of being unrecognised as having the condition, and thus being unable to access specialist support services that they may stand to benefit from (Tharian et. al, 2019).

So starting from acknowledging this reality and also from the clear potential of audiovisual products to generate representations about certain social groups, and for very valuable and interesting social debates for minority groups, the main objective of this article is to analyse the representation of female autistic characters in the *Forbrydelsen* (2007) and *Bron/Broen* (2015) TV series, which belong to the Nordic Noir genre, to verify the traits and values associated with them by a critical analysis of discourse. The choice of these TV series is based on three central issues. In the first place, its protagonists are autistic women. Secondly, the popularity achieved by the series internationally. Thirdly, by placing it in the Nordic Noir genre, a more coherent comparison can be established between the contextual constraints in which both protagonists are inserted.

The analysis is mainly of the social discourses that are revealed to us when we view the above-cited TV series, which allow us to not only form a picture of autistic women, but to also identify some problems and distortions when they appear on the screen. According to critical discourse analysis, all social practices are tied to specific historical contexts and are the means by which existing social relations are reproduced and different interests are served (Janks, 1997). In that sense, audiovisual representations are texts that represent power relations and ideologies. Our ways of consumption of film are ideologically inscribed, and also representations inscribed on it. For this reason, there are filmic mechanisms that call equally serve for critical analysis. So, we need to pay attention to these filmic narratives from gender perspective, in order to analyse the portrayal of women and gender relations inscribed in those TV series (Bateman, 2017). This work is inspired by similar works previously carried out by authors such as Monica Dall'Asta (2021), and Camilla Schwartz and E. Ann Kaplan (2018).

To fulfil this objective, the present article is arranged as follows. Firstly, an introduction is provided about the central traits of the Nordic Noir genre and the bases of the feminist film theory, which provide tools to allow us to approach a critical analysis of the discourse that we are to perform. Secondly, an analysis of the representation of autistic women is introduced by the female detectives in the *Forbrydelsen* and *Bron/Broen* TV series. Some of the typical autism spectrum

traits are highlighted in relation to both female detectives. Finally, some conclusions are reached and possible future work lines are presented.

2. Nordic Noir and the feminist film theory

We believe that it is necessary to take an initial approach to the gender within which both these series are framed, and also to the bases that the feminist film theory confers us because this field poses questions and concerns about the role played by women in audiovisual products. Both these TV series belonging to the well-known Nordic Noir genre are analysed (Hill & Turnbull, 2021) which, as this name suggests, are detective stories that take place in a specific geographical place: the Nordic area, made up of Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland, the Faroe Isles and Greenland.

Some of the key elements used to help to recognise this genre are harsh landscapes, icy temperatures, melancholic environments and moody detectives. Although Nordic Noir follows the same narrative, stylistic and thematic concepts, the thrillers and police stories genre characterised by tragic plots, melancholic and desperate antiheroes, unusual camera positions, faint light and a marked use of shadows, the main difference lies in Nordic Noir using phenomena, environments, light, Nordic seasonal and climate conditions, and language/s, characters and themes like gender equality, the provincial culture and social-democratic well-being (Waade, 2013). Nordic Noir stylistic elements include poor lighting, profuse shadows, wide-angle lens use (to deform the perspective) and close-ups of the overall plane in *plongée*, which form the Noir setting *par excellence* (Mascarello, 2006). Iconographic motifs also stand out, like mirrors, windows, stairs, clocks, etc., as do nighttime city scenes with dark deserted streets (Pellegrini & Swchartz, 2020).

To a great extent, the growing visibility of the audiovisual products in this genre has come about since the *Millennium* Trilogy (Stieg Larsson) appeared. This trilogy includes three novels about the investigations followed by a social hacker Lisbeth Salander and the popular journalist and Editor of the "Millennium" magazine Mikael Blomkvist. This successful saga has led to various cinema adaptations with resounding box office success. Up to a point, *Millennium* placed Nordic Noir on the international cinematographic scene and later led to successful TV series like those herein analysed (Waade & Jensen, 2013), and other examples: *The Rain* (2018-2020), *Sorjonen* (2016-2020), *Bedrag* (2016-2019), *Bonusfamiljen* (2017-2019), *Karppi* (2018-), *Advokaten* (2018-) or *Brat* (2019).

It is worth stressing that most of the leading characters in these productions tend to be men, whose roles are framed within tormented antihero logics.

It is worth emphasising some cases in which women play the main role of these stories. They are normally the characters who play the role of a female detective, investigator or policewoman, who are tormented by past events, or have a personality that differs from traditional femininity patterns (values such as empathy, tenderness, care, etc.). In fact, the prevalence of non-traditional gender identities in the representation of many autistic characters often invite to alternative understandings of sex/gender as a multiple, rhetorical phenomenon (Jack, 2012). In principle, this reality does not differ that much from the typical outline of police thrillers. Some examples of such can be found in *Broadchurch* (2013-), *The Fall* (2013-), *True Detective* (2014-2019), *Fargo* (2014) or *Sharp Objects* (2018). In fact, some studies have pointed out clear similarities to these productions with Nordic Noir cinema (Creeber, 2015; Pelegrini & Schwartz, 2020).

After having considered the basic characteristics of Nordic Noir, it is necessary to also contemplate the basic claims of the feminist film theory (Dittmar, 1982; Mulvey, 1988; Kuhn, 1991; McCabe, 2004). This theory has substantially evolved since it appeared in the 1970s, when an emphasis was placed on making women's audiovisual productions visible, which had been forgotten, and it went from deconstruction from a masculine view to reflect on representing women and other groups, and also constructing audiovisual narratives to represent them (Gámez Fuentes, 2003; Laguarda, 2006; Molina García, 2020). Throughout this period, many debates have taken place, and perhaps that which may contribute the most to the task that we herein perform is the representation of certain groups: in our case; autistic women. Some of the questions we consider are: how are autistic women represented on the small screen?; what characteristics/symptomatology is/are attributed to them; what social problems or concerns stem from these representations?; what potentialities of including their particular experience do these analysed characters confer?

The intention of conducting this work is to contribute to: make autistic women visible; acknowledge the enunciative limitations of the position they occupy in the world; the main forms of representation that devising audiovisual narratives currently have for this group. This theme has also aroused academia's interest, perhaps not by focusing on the matter of autistic women, but on analysing these new female detective characters with traits that differentiate them from the traditional female gender stereotype. These female detectives' "masculine" traits have been dealt with by different female authors, and some such reflections consider if detectives like female detective Saga Norén from *Bron/Broen* actually represent a new set of rules to represent women in Nordic Noir (Schwartz & Kaplan, 2018). Nevertheless, it is true that the more masculine characteristics related to these characters allow them to do their work better;

that is, they become more capable as female detectives because these characteristics completely match what is expected of them as “professionals” in the public sphere. Nevertheless, and at the same time, these characteristics make their presence in the domestic sphere and their private life difficult, especially in relation to them managing their social relationships.

3. Autistic women. The women detectives of the *Forbrydelsen* and *Bron/Broen* series

Forbrydelsen (2007–2012) is a Danish series. It is made up of three series and 40 episodes about the murder of Nanna Birk Larssen. The first series contains 20 episodes, and each one corresponds to 20 days of the police investigation carried out by detective Sarah Lund (Sofie Gråbøl). The plot of this series interweaves family and political elements by connecting its characters with Nanna’s murder, characters who would never have otherwise been connected to one another because they come from completely different worlds. In 2011, the North American AMC channel created a remake of the series, which it called *The Killing* that is set in Seattle, a scenario with similarities to Copenhagen. So this remake shares most of the Nordic Noir essence in the original version.

Bron/Broen (2011–2018) has four series in which Saga Noren (Sofia Helin) and Martin Rohde (Kim Bodnia) are two police officers from Sweden and Denmark, respectively, whose roads cross because of a crime that occurred on the bridge connecting both countries, right on the border. Both start to investigate, which leads them to hunt a mysterious unknown psychopath who aims to show society the biggest problems that its citizens suffer.

As a starting point, it is worth stressing that the scenarios of both these TV series employ characteristic Nordic Noir elements as a backdrop, such as poor lighting, muffled tones, specific camera positions and the relevance of weather (Jenssen & Waade, 2013). The scenario in which the action taking place in *Forbrydelsen* corresponds to the streets of Copenhagen, which are deserted and light shines from faintly lit streetlamps. At the same time, the murder scenarios take us to nature that is rainy and shadowy. Both scenarios serve to represent the female detective and murderer’s mood.

A matter that both female detectives share is their lack of concern about the way they physically look. They are neither very “feminine” characters, nor characters who pay much attention to their hairdo, makeup or clothes. They completely break away from the *femme fatale* image (Jankowiak & Ramsey, 2000; Hanson & O’Rawe, 2010), and look like the typical ungainly and slovenly tormented detectives in other series like *True Detective* (2014–2019). We are not talking

about women who strive to conciliate family and work, but who follow the typical male detective line of not being able to strike a balance between their obsession for work and having a normative family life (Swartz & Kaplan, 2018). With Sarah Lund (Sofie Gråbøl), who is a mother, we find she faces major difficulties when acting according to the expectations of a traditional maternity model. Indeed her son goes to live with his grandmother during the second season. Saga Noren is a single woman who is not interested in children or being a mother. Up to a point, both characters represent the two stereotyped behaviour models that tend to be associated with men in this type of TV series or films: a divorced father who has never lived up to his expectations and a single man not interested in paternity. Nonetheless with Saga and Lund, the “masculine” characteristics that allow their colleagues to see them as good detectives to a certain extent become an obstacle when they live up to their expectations in the domestic sphere. It can be stated that they match the typical detective model of this genre, but do not match the traditional stereotype understood for women. They almost always prioritise work over everything else: partner, family, children, sex, etc.

The two female detectives are characterised as autistic women who, from the very first episode, show the spectator how this condition affects, on the one hand, their work positively (by concentrating on details that neurotypical people would not see, their ability to memorise, etc.) and, on the other hand, negatively when it comes to their social relationships (absence of feeling empathy when communicating sensitive information, inflexibly following rules even if it affects other people’s well-being, etc.). This is such an “extreme” representation of autism, or even a way to simply portray some details of the whole complexity surrounding the diagnosis of this condition, especially in women. In fact, it is hard to see to what extent we are not referring to a ‘superior’ naturalised woman: cisgender, Caucasian, blonde, and with masculine characteristics (see the analysis of Sherlock Holmes and his possible autism in Dall’Asta, 2021). However, all this ‘superiority’ falls under its own weight when both female detectives face social difficulties because their behaviour can be even childish at times. As Dall’Asta describes (2021), Martin, Saga’s colleague, sees her as someone to laugh about when her social codes fail, which makes her performance somewhat comical or embarrassing. This means that the television audience does not understand autism as a condition, but it could imply an advantage in the crime research fields, as the leading characters show (detecting details, having an extraordinary memory, sticking to rules), but as an “embarrassing failure”, or even as someone to take care of. This is a paternalistic view insofar as the female detectives occupy an inferiority position compared to some of their other colleagues, which is the precise opposite of the admiration that Watson feels for Sherlock (Dall’Asta, 2021).

In short, the importance of autistic characters (especially women) being well-defined lies in the role that this type of series may do for the (early) diagnosis and recognition of girls, female adolescents and adults in the spectrum. A personal identity may be offered from its validation by placing these females on the same level as autistic men as regards prevalence percentages so that society feels more empathy and can understand this condition a bit better. For this reason, we go on to analyse some characteristics or traits typically associated with autism, and how they have been dealt with in the female detective characters.

3.1. Empathy

Saga is characterised as a woman who sticks to rules: if something must be done in a certain way, so it must be. Although this might be an autistic trait shared by both genders (cognitive inflexibility, following set rules and norms), how this inflexibility affects this character (at least that is what spectators are intended to see from episode 1) lies in her lack of empathy. Autistic individuals who barely show empathy or completely lack tact have been considered by not only the collective imaginary, but also by researchers. Yet the collective has started raising its voice about this to make the values associated with these individuals problematic, and to also make it understood that this would be a poor interpretation of autism (Fletcher-Watson & Bird, 2019). As Carly Jones describes for the “Things not to say to an autistic person” BBC programme: “I actually believe that autistic people feel too much empathy”. The autistic artist Daniel Bendelman adds: “For me, it’s very hard to sometimes pop myself into another person’s shoes, and people mistake that for lack of empathy”.

So, it is not a matter of whether characteristics are of a man or a woman, rather the characterisation of characters in the media often tends to overdo autistic traits or make them appear more similar to Savant Syndrome (e.g., *The Good Doctor*, Sheldon Cooper in the *Big Bang Theory*, etc.). In the past, this term was coined as ‘idiot-savant’ and used to describe individuals with intellectual disability but, at the same time, with skills far in excess of the average (Down, 1887). With Saga, her cognitive inflexibility makes her appear to be ‘barely human’, almost robotic; for example, to follow a rule she does not let an ambulance through, she asks a man who has just been widowed if she was unfaithful to him, or she seems more interested in coaxing information from a journalist who looks as if he is about to die rather than calming him down. Even this inflexible behaviour sometimes seems childish. Yet there are other times when Saga comes over as being capable of reacting and showing her feelings. For instance, in one scene she argues with her mother who accuses her of not having properly looked after her younger sister and leading her to suicide for, among other reasons, not being able to show her

feelings for people. This scene reveals a complex Saga who has different facets as regards her emotional reactions to certain matters, as well as an inner life that might go unnoticed given a certain facial hieratic attitude (figs. 1 y 2).

Figures 1 and 2.

Bron/Broen (2015)



Let's look at an example of this matter in a scene from *Forbrydelsen*. For example, when Nanna Birk Larssen's father finds out that his daughter has been murdered and forces his way into the crime scene to see her. Here we can clearly see the father's pain from his facial expressions, while Sarah Lund's facial expression is much more controlled. We see how she does not let him through to see his daughter (following rules). However, her face reflects sorrow in this situation, as the following images show (Figure 3-4). Sarah is not generally over-expressive with her emotions on a day-to-day basis. Indeed, she prefers to remain silent most of the time, which some of the characters who co-exist with her daily interpret as lack of empathy, or even as a kind of permanent anger.

Figures 3 and 4.

Forbrydelsen (2007)



It is worth pointing out that, according to Janet McCabe (2007), these characters offer narratives about the power of a traditionally masculine working environment by offering a wide range of reflections on acknowledging, representing and transforming injustices. In other words, both these female characters allow, or enclose within, a latent female claim because they demonstrate that the capacities appreciated in the labour world or public sphere cannot be carried out exclusively by men, but anyone can personify them. This proposal also indicates that Sarah's silence as a conduct results from her being continuously interrupted, and no-one listening to her or allowing her to voice her own views in the workplace. So up to a point, the lack of empathy that our leading characters are accused of might also be interpreted as the absence of empathy shown by their work colleagues in working environments.

3.2. Flirting, sex and shyness

The *Bron/Broen* series offers scenes about social relationships which, following the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), can be classified as the 'abnormal social approach'. For example, we see how Saga changes her clothes in front of known people and strangers, and shows no shyness in doing so or does not understand social rules even for a few seconds. Another conduct worth stressing is the direct way that she addresses a man to have sex with him by making simple purpose-seeking conduct out of behaviour in which flirting, gestures, looks, social codes and intentions play a fundamental role (Figure 5-6).

Therefore, on the one hand, we could re-analyse this from a simplified point of view by interpreting that Sara's conduct towards her sexual partner responds to the complete lack empathy from the other person to simply satisfy some primary desires, but without showing any affective involvement. On the other hand, if we look closely at these desires and beliefs, a possible difference appears between autistic men and autistic women: most autistic women have a more developed Theory of Mind (ToM) than men, or at least show better social skills than men do (Lai et al., 2016). ToM can be defined as the capacity to recognise others' mental states (desires, beliefs, intentions, etc.) and to act according to them (Premarck & Woodruff, 1978). This scene certainly demands a high level of ToM to correctly identify an intention or interest from merely a glance, especially after observing in previous scenes how Saga has serious problems with understanding and recognising what other people think or feel. Hence this scene offers two interpretations: not knowing social rules while flirting and, in turn, a feminist icon that is not taken in by a man's desires, nor does she wish to attract him. Thus, it emphasises her independent appearance (Schwartz & Kaplan, 2018). However,

reading between lines, once again adulterated thinking about autistic women is hidden, but still gets to us, and it is as if they are shown to have no empathy.

Figures 5 y 6.

Bron/Broen (2015)



3.3. Sensorial hyper- or hyporeactivity

We talk about sensorial hypersensitivity (over-responsiveness) when people very intensely react to stimuli (noises, lights, pain, etc.) because they perceive them very strongly, and these stimuli can even make them feel considerable pain or discomfort. Conversely, sensorial hyposensitivity (under-responsiveness) is when intensity is low when facing environmental stimuli. People with hyposensitivity might sometimes seem tired or show little interest. At other times they may react by excessively moving, causing and/or listening to loud noises (e.g., leaving the television as loud as possible), eating very strong-tasting food, gripping too tightly, etc.). The first descriptions of autism characteristics (Asperger, 1944/1991) recognised the paradoxical deficiency of reactivity to sensorial stimulation, and also described exaggerated reactions to stimuli, e.g. sound or touch. According to the study of Elwin et al. (2013), which analyses sensorial profiles in autistic men and women, all the highlighted examples and experiences related to hyper- and hyposensitivity have to do with autistic women. Some examples are: (i) *reacting too strongly to specific stimuli*: like always wearing the same kind of clothing so that skin feels pleasant. This might be related to the fact that Saga always wears comfortable clothes or cannot stand high-pitched noise; (ii) *noting minor or unusual details in stimuli*: like when the female detectives find clues on bodies which apparently they only see; (iii) *being hyporeactive to specific stimuli in the long term or temporarily*. Here the study of Elwin et al. (2013) stands out: "Sometimes I can notice everything from really quiet to really loud and sometimes it is the other way round and I can't hear anything, and then I

often don't hear what people are saying either, it's like all frequencies and sound levels or none at all". These matters are clearly reflected in the two TV series because both female detectives are well able to react to specific stimuli in their environment, especially when they detect certain details that go unnoticed by others. This capacity confers them an advantage in their work because they can find clues to solve cases more quickly and more efficiently than their colleagues can, and by also considering alternative scenarios and routes to solve them. In the image below (Figure 7), Sarah Lund is analysing a possible crime scene and realising the possible position of the dead body in a nearby lake when she watches some girls cycling by.

Figure 7.

Forbrydelsen (2007)



4. Conclusion

Some themes more related to autistic women would perhaps take TV audiences closer to a more accurate reality, which is being studied in the socio-scientific domain to better understand diagnoses; in other words, autism is not diagnosed today in many women. This reality, which affects many autistic women, goes from making several diagnoses before reaching autism, identity seeking and feeling lonely to learning to mask their traits and camouflaging themselves to, thus, adapt to a society that drives them towards normativeness. Such camouflaging can be understood as a discrepancy between apparently internalised atypical social/cognitive skills and apparently externalised neurotypical behaviours (Lai et al., 2017). It is believed that such camouflaging differs depending on gender, and autistic women are more likely to attempt to camouflage their autism to blend in with their colleagues, unlike autistic men (Hull et al., 2019). This constant struggle to be someone else has been associated with exhaustion, anxiety and depression (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Hull et al., 2017; Lai et

al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016). So we believe that if this reality were shown on the screen, it would help to understand the complexity, and quite often the subtleness, of autistic traits masked after years of imitating, copying, learning scripts, avoiding behaviours or modelling their 'neurotypical' communication (Cook et al., 2021).

It is true that both TV series seem to centre on the traits better known in the popular imaginary of autistic boys showing childish behaviour, a gift in some cases (normally functional for photographically memorising or recognising details that no-one else sees), with scarce or nonexistent social interaction, etc., that can offer more to solve crimes. However, these characteristics still do not represent the autistic women who attempt to fit in by adopting camouflaging strategies to go unnoticed, and to get on well with a group of peers and with a normative society. This representation would make women closer, and their autism more comprehensive and 'real'.

This poor interpretation, dealt with from the gender perspective, allows us to identify the base which diagnostic tests of ASD have been based on, and tested mainly with, men. This, along with the camouflaging and masking behaviours that autistic women develop (as previously mentioned), gives way to a bias for identifying and diagnosing them. So many autistic girls, female adolescents and women still go unnoticed today.

By acknowledging this reality, as well as the clear potential of audiovisual products to generate representations about certain social groups, we feel that scantiness of diagnosis in autistic women means that they are underrepresented in audiovisual products like films or TV series. This is why the main objective of the present work is to analyse the representation of autistic female characters in the *Forbrydelsen* (2007) and *Bron/Broen* (2015) TV series, which correspond to the Nordic Noir genre, to verify the traits and values associated with them by critically analysing discourse. The audiovisual representation of autistic people can contribute to discussion about associated stereotypes, and present social discourses about this group, challenges or the problems these people face. At the same time, it is necessary to reflect on the situation of the women in this group. The power of the media in relation to suitable representation is a double-edged sword because it contributes to society not only recognising women in the spectrum, but to also empower these autistic women naturally and inclusively. With this work, we intend to contribute to make autistic women visible, recognise the enunciative limitations of the position they occupy in the world, and indicate the main forms of representation that audiovisual narratives make of this group.

5. Bibliography

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.) <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>
- Asperger, Hans. (1944/1991). Die "autistischen psychopathen" im kindesalter. *Archive fur Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten*, 117, 76–136.
- Baker, Anthony D. (2007). Recognizing Jake: Contending with Formulaic and Spectacularized Representations of Autism in Film. in M. Osteen (Ed.), *Autism and Representation*. New York: Routledge.
- Bateman, John A. (2017). Critical discourse analysis and film. En J. Flowerdew & J. E. Richardson, *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315739342>
- BBC Three. (21 de juny 2016). Things not to say to an autistic person [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d69tTXOvRq4&t=3s>
- Beck, Jonathan S., Lundwall, Rebecca A., Gabrielsen, Terisa, Cox, Jonathan C., & South, Mikle. (2020). Looking good but feeling bad: "Camouflaging" behaviors and mental health in women with autistic traits. *Autism*, 24(4), 809-821. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320912147>
- Cage, Eilidh, & Troxell-Whitman, Zoe. (2019). Understanding the reasons, contexts and costs of camouflaging for autistic adults. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 49(5), 1899–1911. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-03878-x>.
- Cook, Julia, Crane, Laura, Hull, Laura, Bourne, Laura y Mandy, William. (2020). Camouflaging behaviors used by autistic adults during everyday social interactions. *Research Square*. <http://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-96362/v1>
- Conn, Rory, & Bhugra, Dinesh. (2012). The portrayal of autism in Hollywood films. *International Journal of Culture and Mental Health*, 5(1), 54-62.
- Creeber, Glen. (2015). Killing us softly: Investigating the aesthetics, philosophy and influence of Nordic Noir television. *The Journal of Popular Television*, 3(1), 21–35. https://doi.org/10.1386/jptv.3.1.21_1
- Dall'Asta, Monica. (2021). European Neurodivergent Detectives and the Politics of Autism Representation. *Cinéma & Cie. Film and Media Studies Journal*, 21(36/37), 145–174. <https://doi.org/10.13130/2036-461X/16393>
- Dean, Michelle & Nordahl-Hansen, Anders. (2021). A Review of Research Studying Film and Television Representations of ASD. *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40489-021-00273-8>
- Dittmar, Linda. (1982). Images of Women in Film: An Introductory Women's Studies Course. *The Radical Teacher*, 22, 6-9.
- Down, J. Langdon (1887). *On some of the mental affections of childhood and youth*. Churchill
- Duvekot, Jorieke, van der Ende, Jan, Verhulst, Frank C., Slappendel, Geerte, van Daalen, Emma, Maras, Athanasios, & Greaves-Lord, Kirstin. (2017). Factors influencing the probability of a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder in girls versus boys. *Autism*, 21(6), 646–658. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361316672178>

- Elwin, Marie, Schröder, Agneta, Ek, Lena, & Kjellin, Lars. (2013). Too much or too little: Hyper- and hypo-reactivity in high-functioning autism spectrum conditions. *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities*, 38(3), 232-241 <https://doi.org/10.3109/13668250.2013.815694>
- Fletcher-Watson, Sue, & Bird, Geoffrey. (2020). Autism and empathy: What are the real links? *Autism*, 24(1), 3-6. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361319883506>
- Fombonne, Eric. (2005). The changing epidemiology of autism. *Journal of applied research in intellectual disabilities*, 18(4), 281-294.
- Gámez Fuentes, María José. (2003). Género, representación y medios: una revisión crítica, *Asparkia. Investigación feminista*, 14, 59-70.
- Halsall, Joanne, Clarke, Chris, & Crane, Laura. (2021). "Camouflaging" by adolescent autistic girls who attend both mainstream and specialist resource classes: Perspectives of girls, their mothers and their educators. *Autism*, 25(7), 2074-2086. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211012819>
- Hanson, Helen, & Catherine O'Rawe. (2010). *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hill, Annette, & Turnbull, Susan. (2021). Nordic Noir. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology. Retrieved 18 Nov. 2021, from <https://oxfordre.com/criminology/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264079-e-294>
- Hull, Laura, Lai, Meg-Chuan, Baron-Cohen, Simon, Allison, Carrie, Smith, Paula, Petrides, K. V., et al. (2020). Gender differences in self-reported camouflaging in autistic and non-autistic adults. *Autism*, 24(2), 352-363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361319864804>.
- Hull, Laura, Petrides, K. V., Allison, Carrie, Smith, Paula, Baron-Cohen, Simon, Lai, Meg-Chuan & Mandy, William. (2017). 'Putting on my best normal': Social camouflaging in adults with autism spectrum conditions. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 47(8), 2519-2534. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3166-5>
- Jack, Jordynn. (2012). Gender Copia: Feminist Rhetorical Perspectives on an Autistic Concept of Sex/Gender. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 35(1), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2012.667519>
- Janks, Hilary. (1997). Critical Discourse Analysis as a Research Tool. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 18(3), 329-342, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0159630970180302>
- Jankowiak, William, & Ramsey, Angela. (2000). Femme Fatale and Status Fatale: A Cross-Cultural Perspective. *Cross-Cultural Research*, 34(1), 57-69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/106939710003400104>
- Jensen, Pia M. & Waade, Anne M. (2013). Nordic Noir Challenging 'the Language of Advantage: Setting, Light and Language as Production Values in Danish Television Series *Journal of Popular Television*, 1(2), 259-265.
- Kuhn, Annette. (1991). *Cine de mujeres. Feminismo y cine*. Cátedra.
- Laguada, Paula. (2006). Cine y estudio de género: imagen, representación e ideología. Notas para un abordaje crítico. *La Aljaba*, vol. X, 141-156.
- Lai, Meng-Chuan, Lombardo, Michael V., Ruigrok, Amber N., Chakrabarti, Bhismadev, Au-yeung, Bonnie, Szatmari, Peter, Happé, Francesca, Baron-Cohen, Simon, MRC AIMS

- Consortium. (2016). Quantifying and exploring camouflaging in men and women with autism. *Autism*, 21(6), 690–702. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613166671012>.
- Leedham, A., Thompson, A. R., Smith, R., & Freeth, M. (2020). 'I was exhausted trying to figure it out': The experiences of females receiving an autism diagnosis in middle to late adulthood. *Autism*, 24(1), 135–146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361319853442>
- Malia, Jennifer. (2017). I'm an autistic woman, and bones is the only character like me on TV. *Glamour*. Retrieved from: www.glamour.com/story/bones-series-finale
- Mascarello, Fernando. (2006). *História do cinema mundial*. Papirus.
- McCabe, Janet. (2004) *Feminist Film Studies: Writing the Woman into the Cinema*. London and New York: Wallflower
- McCabe, Janet. (2007). Disconnected Heroines, Icy Intelligence: Reframing Feminism(s) and Feminist Identities at the Borders Involving the Isolated Female TV Detective in Scandinavian-Noir. In A. Backman Rogers & L. Mulvey (Eds.), *Feminisms. Diversity, Difference and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures* (pp. 29–43). Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048523634-005>
- Molina García, Berta. (2020). El feminismo en la teoría cinematográfica. Un estado de la cuestión, *Comunicación y género*, 4(1), 61–71.
- Mulvey, Laura. (1988). *Placer visual y cine narrativo*. Centro de Semiótica y Teoría del Espectáculo.
- Pelegri, Christian H. & Lemos Schwart, Mariana. (2020). Estética noir na primeira temporada de "True detective", *C. Legenda*, 1(38/39), 189–203.
- Premack, David & Woodruff, Guy. (1978). Does the chimpanzee have a theory of mind?. *Behavioral and brain sciences*, 1(4), 515–526.
- Prochnow, Alexandria. (2014). An Analysis of Autism Through Media Representation. *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 71(2), 133–49..
- Rynkiewicz, Agnieszka & Łucka, Izabela. (2018). Zaburzenia ze spektrum autyzmu (ASD) u dziewcząt. Współwystępujące zespoły psychopatologiczne. Różnice międzyplciowe w obrazie klinicznym. *Psychiatr. Pol*, 52(4), 629–639. <https://doi.org/10.12740/PP/OnlineFirst/58837>
- Rynkiewicz, Agnieszka, Schuller, Björn, Marchi, Erik, Piana, Stefano, Camurri, Antonio, Lasalle, Amandine & Baron-Cohen, Simon. (2016). An investigation of the 'female camouflage effect' in autism using a computerized ADOS-2 and a test of sex/gender differences. *Molecular Autism*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13229-016-0073-0>.
- Schwartz, Camilla, & Kaplan, E. Ann. (2018). The female detective as the child who needs to know: Saga Norén as an example of potent yet dysfunctional female detectives in contemporary Nordic Noir. *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies*, 48(2), 213–230. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ejss-2018-0017>
- Tharian, Priyanka Rebecca, Henderson, Sadie, Wathanasin, Nataya, Hayden, Nikita, Chester, Verity, & Tromans, Samuel. (2019). Characters with autism spectrum disorder in fiction: where are the women and girls?. *Advances in Autism*, 5(1), 50–63. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AIA-09-2018-0037>
- Tierney, Siobhan, Burns, Jan, & Kilbey, Elizabeth. (2016). Looking behind the mask: Social coping strategies of girls on the autistic spectrum. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 23, 73–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2015.11.013>

Waade, Anne Marie. & Majbritt Jensen, Pia. (2013). Nordic Noir Production Values. The Killing and The Bridge. *Academic Quarter / Akademisk kvarter*, 7, 189-201. <https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.academicquarter.v0i7.2830>

Waade, Anne Marie. (2013). *Wallerland, filmturisme og skandinavisk tv-krimi*. Aalborg University Press.

Acknowledgements Maria Medina-Vicent

This work has been funded in the context of the research project financed by the *Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación* (Spanish Government) with reference PID2020-113054GB-I00. I would like also to acknowledge the funding received from the Universitat Jaume I through its Research Stay Grants (E-2022-11).

Acknowledgements Irene Garcia-Molina

I would like to acknowledge the funding received by I Premi UJI Compromís Social-Banco Santander.