

European Neurodivergent Detectives and the Politics of Autism Representation

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One of the most original, recent contributions of contemporary European seriality to the crime genre has been the introduction of a notable number of detectives repeatedly diagnosed as autistic by autistic online communities. Titles such as the *Millennium* saga, *Sherlock*, *Forbrydelsen*, *Bron/Broen*, and, more recently, *Astrid et Raphaëlle*, are all widely debated within autistic online communities. This article investigates the unique critical perspective brought by the autistic parlance on these popular products, through a survey of blogs, social networks, fanfiction, and videos, in English and French. The analysis of this material reveals that there is a whole spectrum of different opinions among autists when it comes to their approval, or disapproval, of media representations of neurodiversity, oscillating between complaints for the persistence of the 'savant autist' stereotype and a grateful appreciation of the effort to portray the condition in positive and empowering ways. Most of the comments reflect the stances of the neurodiversity movement and the complex context of autism advocacy, by which autistic individuals reclaim the right to speak for themselves and stand up to fight for a more inclusive society.

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INTRODUCTION¹

The trope of the autistic detective has become so widespread in TV seriality over the last few years that it deserves to be regarded as a major feature of contemporary popular culture. In a way, it all started off with Sherlock Holmes and his eccentric oddities, like 'his little monograph on the ashes of 140 different varieties of pipe, cigar and cigarette tobacco, his clear powers of observation and deduction, unclouded by the emotions of everyday people, and the extreme unconventionality'² of his investigative methods. And yet it is important to note that the association of fictional detectives with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) could only emerged as a product of reception, for of course, at the time when Conan Doyle published his stories, the autism diagnostic label was still far from being around.³

Initiated by psychiatrists and neuroscientists looking for representations to help the public understand the 'autism enigma', the debate around the neurodiverse characteristics of many a fictional detective has now become





ubiquitous in the context of autistic forums and fan communities, serving as a means to not only make meaning of the condition in empowering ways, but also question and debate the stereotypes continuously surfacing in contemporary media representations and the cultural discourse at large.

This article presents an analysis of the reception of a few extremely popular recent European TV dramas—*Sherlock* (United Kingdom, 2010-2017), *Bron/Broen* (Sweden-Denmark 2011-2018), *Forbrydelsen* (Denmark 2007-2012), and *Astrid et Raphaëlle* (France-Belgium 2019-)—revolving around eccentric figures of (often female) detectives that have been repeatedly diagnosed by fans as autistic or neurodivergent. The autistic audience's response to these shows is examined through a survey of online forums, fanfiction portals, blogs and social networks, with the purpose to identify the recurrent motifs and motivations that lie behind the appraisal, either positive or negative, of the representation strategies used to design and perform autistic characters onscreen. The positions thus identified are confronted with those expressed in the frame of autism advocacy and, wherever available, critical literature from disability and feminist/queer studies, to both help with the analysis and show how several issues raised in the social discourse are also topics of scholarly study.

The first paragraph introduces a few notions concerning the history of autism as a psychiatric label, which are needed to understand the stakes of the current—extremely lively and sometimes vehement—debates about the products of popular culture within the autistic community. The second paragraph moves on to examine the reception of *Sherlock*, on the background of the heated controversy about the stereotypical representation of autistic characters as individuals affected by the so-called 'savant syndrome'. The following paragraph focuses on Nordic noir's original introduction of the trope of the *female* autistic sleuth, presenting and discussing the different interpretations it has been given, particularly in a feminist context. The final paragraph deals in some more detail with *Astrid et Raphaëlle* as a case study. This time the focus is on the queer, or rather neuroqueer discourse that the show has inspired, at the intersection between autistic fandom and autistic advocacy.

In the following, I will be using Identity-First Language (e.g. 'autistic people' or 'autists') instead of Person-First Language (e. g. 'persons with autism'), out of the respect for what I have learned during this research from the people, activists and advocates that support this use.⁴

DIAGNOSING SHERLOCK HOLMES

Autism is currently defined as a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by impairments in social interactions, communication and behavioural flexibility. The history of autism as a diagnostic label can be described as curious at the very least, reflecting the enigmatic character



of a condition that is still to be fully understood. While the use of the term in psychiatric literature is documented as early as the beginning of the 20th century, in the context of research on infantile schizophrenia,⁵ the origins of the notion are most commonly referred to Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger's studies, first published, respectively, in 1943 in English and 1944 in German.⁶ First introduced in the inaugural edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) in 1952, the term acquired an autonomous status as a diagnostic label, for children up to 30 months, after the publication of DSM-III in 1980, when six broad criteria (including pervasive lack of social responsiveness, severe impairments in communication and bizarre responses to the environment) were finally defined, the last of which (absence of delusions and hallucinations) meant to serve as a differential diagnosis with schizophrenia. At this stage, the condition was still believed to be an almost exclusively male condition.

The recognition that many autistic children showed enhanced mental abilities (such as a phenomenal memory and precise recollection of complex patterns and sequences) led to the formulation of Asperger's syndrome in 1994 in DSM-IV, to discriminate between these cases and a more severe, low-functioning form of autism characterized by intellectual impairment.⁷

The notion of 'Autism *spectrum* disorder', introduced in 2013 in DSM-5 to account for the notion that autistic symptoms appear on a scale at different degrees of severity, spurred a wide debate and generated controversy, both within the medical profession and the autistic community. In particular, the decision to remove Asperger's Syndrome as a separate diagnosis and conflate it within the 'spectrum' as a mild (or high-functioning) form of autism found many people formerly diagnosed as Asperger's complaining 'about a threat to [their] 'Aspie' identity', which 'they felt engendered a strong sense of belonging [that] had been particularly helpful to them on their personal journeys'.⁸ In fact, depending on the point of view, the new diagnostic criteria in DSM-5 (now cut down to just two: social communication problems and restricted interests/repetitive behaviours, but with the specification that both issues must be present since early childhood) have been criticized for being either too broad or too stringent—too broad from the angle of low-functioning individuals (for example, non-verbal people), whose advocates support the definition of much more specific descriptors of the condition; too stringent from the angle of high-functioning, 'Aspie' individuals, who fear to 'lose' their diagnosis and, with it, not only a defining aspect of their identity but also the right to access social and medical services.

The choice to describe autism as a spectrum should be seen in the context of the exceptional increase in the number of diagnoses recorded in many countries in a short period of time. According to data collected by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention of the United States, the prevalence of autism has increased of 178% since 2000, with 1 in 54 children (1 out of 37 boys and 1 out of 151 girls) now diagnosed in the United States.⁹ While not



as dramatically as in the US, the prevalence of autism has been steadily increasing in all European countries, with cases said to be 'skyrocketing' in Northern Ireland since 2014 and a figure of 1 child out of 87 recently estimated in Italy.¹⁰ Despite worries that up to 40% of affected children may escape detection, the notion that the condition occurs on a spectrum is consistent with the idea that autism traits are actually 'distributed' across the population and may be responsible for minor troubles. In any case, and contrary to the fears expressed by Asperger's communities that the new diagnostic criteria might restrict the number of people who qualify for social care, the last couple of decades have witnessed a steep growth in autism diagnoses.

All these issues are widely, and sometimes wildly debated within online autistic communities, in discussions that often show the existence of heated contrasts between opposite stances. Two topics of dissent in particular emerge that are of interest for this study. On the one hand, within autistic forums, users generally regard the polemics against the merging of Asperger's diagnosis with ASD as an expression of an elitist attitude known as 'aspie supremacy'. Popularized during the 2000s through blogs and websites, 'Aspie supremacy is an ideology followed by a fraction of adults diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome [who] emphasize evolutionary superiority over individuals diagnosed with Autistic disorder' as well as 'over neurotypicals'.¹¹ Aspie supremacists believe that individuals with Asperger's do not really suffer any significant impairment and are instead endowed with special powers, which are not recognized as such just because of the social prejudice against their different way of thinking. In the effort to distance themselves from autism, aspie supremacists have often claimed 'that those who have it are sub-human, or at least a burden on society', while characterizing Asperger's individuals as the 'next step' in human evolution.¹² These positions have provoked strong reactions, especially from the proponents of the emergent neurodiversity paradigm.¹³ As we will see, neurodiversity activists question the media stereotype of the 'savant' autistic, seen as a kind of role model for aspie supremacists, while the same time refusing to frame autism as a pathology.

On the other hand, together with the boost of online tests, the introduction of the notion of autistic spectrum has triggered a new phenomenon, encouraging a growing number of adult individuals to seek a diagnosis, or even a self-diagnosis. This is related to a widespread perception that many people had their autism go unnoticed in the past because of a lack of awareness about the condition, which is particularly true for the female population, still largely believed to be disproportionately affected by autism symptoms. One characteristic aspect of the current debate, both among specialists and within online autistic communities, has to do with the experiences of many girls and women who feel their struggles have gone unrecognized because of the male-bias that dominates in autism clinical practice and research studies.¹⁴ Several recent studies have challenged



the Extremely Male Brain (EMB) theory of autism and have provided hints to recognize the specific presentation of the condition in female subjects.

In this context, the spread of the neurodiversity movement has marked lines of divisions in a field once occupied exclusively by the parents of autistic children and their medical counsellors. Once grown up, some of those children have taken stance against the types of treatment they were given during their infancy to 'cure' their condition and started to advocate for the rights of low-functioning autists on a militant base. Under the motto 'nothing for us without us', a growing movement of autism self-advocacy has emerged that questions and dispute the right of neurotypical parents to choose treatments for their children that the neurodiversity movement deems to be both abusive and degrading. On the other side of the barricade, parents' associations argue that those who reclaim for themselves the role of autistic advocates are too high-functioning to really understand the challenges and drama experienced by the families dealing with low-functioning, sometimes cognitively delayed, children. The discursive arena of autism's public sphere appears today as a site of profound controversy and conflict, marked by distinct, opposing positions with regard to the politics of autism representation.

Aspects of this intense debate surface clearly in the autistic fan communities' reaction to the products of popular culture and, more specifically, European crime television series.

NEUROQUEER FANS, ANTI-ABLEISM AND THE 'AUTISTIC SHERLOCK HEADCANONS'

No popular culture artifact has ever been responsible of such a deluge of social discourses about the representation of autism as that which followed the release of BBC's *Sherlock*. The title character played by Benedict Cumberbatch has come to occupy the centre of a debate focusing on the adequacy vs dangers of media representation of autism as a form of savantism.¹⁵ In December 2013, taking side with the opinions of many aspies, even the British National Autistic Society recognized that the character showed obvious symptoms of autism, citing his 'ability to concentrate' and memorize and link clues 'in quite a unique way'.¹⁶ While the show, like its later American counterpart, *Elementary* (US, 2012-2019), does not explicitly confirm this theory, writer Stephen Moffat and Cumberbatch himself have flirted with this reading in different ways. For example, episode 2x2 has John Watson mention Asperger's openly during a conversation with Lestrade about his friend.¹⁷ The comments posted by various users below the Youtube clip of this scene reveal the sense of pride that many aspie viewers take in recognizing Sherlock as one of them.¹⁸



- *I fully agree with that Sherlock is autistic, I've read many comments from autistic people which can identify with him.*
- *Seeing someone that extreme have a successful career, make friends, have people love him [...] is a confidence boost I think all people with Aspergers really need.*

Other users call for the diagnosis to be made explicit:

- *I kind of hoped the show would be more clear [sic] about Sherlock's aspergers, though, because so many people don't understand it.*
- *I have minor aspergers [sic], not quite as bad as some people and definitely Sherlock, but I did relate to him a bit. It would be great to have it actually confirmed.*

More comments in the page show how eager autistic subjects are for this kind of empowering representations:

- *Back in the day when I liked this show [the original poster writes], as an autistic person I felt seen because I had already felt connected to the character and that made it really special to me, to see any form of representation, especially in a character I actually liked (my mom called me Sheldon¹⁹ for several years...). That's why I originally posted this video, to share with other autistic people who also connected with the character to see representation with that.*

Clearly, autistic viewers perceive themselves as a minority group that is often misrepresented, and they voice a strong desire for validating renditions of their experiences in TV fictions. However, not everyone in this YouTube forum agree that *Sherlock* does a good service to the cause of an adequate representation of autism.

- *The idea that BBC Sherlock is on the spectrum is insulting to people on the spectrum and it's also used as a sort of functioning label, which isn't good and most of the autistic community disagrees with.*
- *So called after a NAZI.²⁰*

An article by autistic disability scholar Anna N. de Hooge helps shed light on the political motivations behind such severe readings. According to Hooge, BBC's *Sherlock* is an emblematic example of how current media products tend to portray autism in terms of Asperger's supremacy.

- *He may not be properly plugged into the symbolic network (and is therefore attributed inhuman, robotic qualities), but he acknowledges it, observing the occurring interactions from a bird's-eye-view. Even without ticking all symbolic boxes of humanhood, he corresponds exceptionally well with human (white, male) normativity'.²¹*

In other words, 'he is not portrayed as someone with a divergent neurotype, but as the extreme version of an entitled, allistic,²² white man', that is,



‘a high-functioning jerk’ who does not behave ‘like a common autistic’. Hooze’s thesis is that Sherlock is shaped after an ableist model, one that conceives of the condition of Asperger’s subjects as out of the ordinary only because of their exceptional skills and talents, not because they are disabled in any way. For example, she writes, Sherlock ‘does not stim’. Furthermore, the character illustrates a classical vision of autism as the product of an Extreme Male Brain, a theory coined by Hans Asperger and later popularized by Simon Baron-Cohen,²³ according to which the autistic personality is merely ‘an extreme variant of male intelligence’. Criticizing Sherlock is then to unmake a patriarchal notion of autism in which ‘the superiority of [white, cisgender] men is naturalized and reinforced, and the Aspie, with his Extreme Male Brain, stands at the top of this pecking order’.²⁴

Interesting attempts to make up for the ableist, patriarchal and virtually racist biases in the representation of Sherlock Holmes can be found in the domain of autistic fanfiction. The ‘Autistic Sherlock headcanons’ are narrative artifacts that re-imagine the famous sleuth as an autistic person. The term ‘headcanon’, a recurrent definition in fanfiction slang, is suggestive of the subjective attitude that the writers take in creating their stories—they reinvent Sherlock Holmes’ canon literally ‘within their heads’. At the time of this writing, using the keyword ‘Autistic Sherlock’ on the most popular fanfiction archive, *Archiveofourown*, allows to retrieve up to 263 items.²⁵ Building on the fans’ affective relation with their favourite character, these stories offer alternative representations that describe Sherlock’s presumed autism through the filter of the writers’ intimate experience. While the sentiment of ‘aspie pride’ is not totally absent, surfacing from time to time in both the narratives and the community’s comments, the fics are definitely more interested in exploring Sherlock’s inner experience as a disabled person.

For example, the two authors of, respectively, *Fresher* and *When Boys Fall in Love*, explain that their depictions of the character’s quirks and social struggles reflect their own lived experience:

- *Due to us both being autistic, I treat Sherlock how others tend to treat me;*²⁶
- *As someone who is autistic themselves I do love a good representation of Sherlock this way! I already connect so much with him in the show—this was just a little bit of projecting and indulging for me.*²⁷

The aim is generally to foreground those particular behaviours that conventional representations of Sherlock as a high-functioning subject tend to omit, thus delivering a false understanding of what being autistic is actually like. Contrary to Hooze’s description of the character in the BBC’s adaptation, ‘stimming’—that is, a kind of self-stimulating behaviour, usually involving repetitive movements such as spinning, rocking or hand flapping—is ubiquitous in fanfiction’s Sherlocks.



- *I don't know what stim Sherlock would find the most pleasing or would be the most commonly used, I tried to base it off of body movements observed in the BBC's version of Sherlock in addition to knowing personally which stims cause me, as an autistic person, to feel the happiest.*²⁸

Many of the stories are conceived as retrospective narratives of the character's childhood, working at once as attempts to explain the roots of his psychology and opportunities to explore the specific aspects and social upshot of autism as a neurodevelopmental condition. Other stories, however, offer more complex as well as more provocative insights into these characters' adult lives. Often Mycroft and John are also portrayed as autistic, and often their relation with Sherlock is imagined along queer lines. Although the representation of Holmes as an asexual person is well rooted into Conan Doyle's original canon, the bending of this trait within the framework of queer affectivity, and even atypical sexuality, is by all means an invention of fanfiction writers. A look at the keywords used to tag the Autistic Sherlock works shows the extent and variety of these variations on asexual romance: Sherlock's relationship with John is said to be 'fluffy', 'pre-slash', 'platonic' or 'queerplatonic'; he is represented as being a 'virgin' or 'demisexual'. Elsewhere the references to queer sexuality are more downright, with tags like 'Gender Dysphoria', 'Bisexuality', 'Pansexuality', 'Gay', 'Trans' or 'Genderqueer', but also fancier keywords like 'Lesbian Femlock', 'Lesbian John Watson', 'Harry Watson is now Hareem Watson but she's still a lesbian', 'Sharing a Bed', and even 'all of them are the "opposite" gender here'.

According to Scott Folsom, by representing 'Autistic-friendly' sex scenes—which favour 'specific sensory descriptors, such as the texture and temperature of John's lips, or the feeling of scar tissue'—autistic fanfiction offers an opportunity to counter current

*insufficient notions of Autistic sexuality [...]. One could reasonably argue that fan texts [...] operate as a sort of instruction manual for sexuality for Autistic people (and anyone else befuddled by the sensory experience of sexual activity)', therefore filling 'a teaching role left vacant by a popular media that erases Autistic sexuality'.*²⁹

Of course, queer narrative imagination is all but not exclusive of autistic fanfiction. The practice of 'slash', a genre of fan-written stories focusing on the representation (often in very explicit terms) of same-sex relationships between popular fictional heroes, has been around since at least the first attempts at creating alternative scenarios involving *Star Trek* characters in the early 1990s, 'where a slash between the names 'Kirk' and 'Spock' denoted sexual content, while an ampersand denoted simple friendship'.³⁰ In the case of autistic narratives, however, it takes up a particular relevance



because of the ‘significant over-representation of queer, trans, and otherwise gender variant individuals among autistics’. In fact, ‘partly because of this overlap, some autistic people refer to themselves as “neuroqueer”’.³¹

In line with a neuroqueer approach, Hooge notices a similitude between the ‘conversion therapies’ meant to ‘cure’ homosexuality and the controversial Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA), which is today considered ‘the gold standard for autism treatment. ABA and similar interventionist programs aimed at autistics never lost their anti-queer roots; social skills-training is still used to enforce gender roles in autistic subjects’.³² Interestingly, autistic fanfiction often takes stance against both conversion therapy and ABA. In *The Rainbow Connection*, Sherlock and John—now a homosexual adult couple—open up to one another about their earlier dire experiences as autistic boys enrolled into ABA therapy.

- *I know ABA therapy and conversion therapy is not the same, Sherlock says, but the toll emotionally for people who are different is hard.*

He then goes on recalling how treatment involved five hours a day after school and having his hands tapped when he didn’t listen.

- *The clinic was tedious at best and hateful at worst. ABA highlights the worst things about a person.*³³

The Struggles of Living in a World of Neuro-typicals has a whole chapter centred on Autism Speaks, a US-based organization that is a major supporter of ABA and generally of a notion of autism as a (quite horrible) illness to be cured. In contrast, neurodivergent, neuroqueer fanfiction authors espouse a vision of autism as just an expression of the natural diversity of human minds, which should be respected and accepted for what it is, rather than cured. John Watson voices fiercely this point of view in a scene in which he rips an Autism Speaks poster from a wall, addressing Greg Lestrade with these words:

- *‘Autism Speaks is a HATE organization, they are trying to find ways to ‘cure autism’ and detect if a baby is going to be autistic before it’s even born, so that people can ABORT it!’ He yelled and ripped the poster in two.*³⁴

All this demonstrates the reciprocal permeation between the worlds of autistic fandom and autistic self-advocacy. On the side of fanfiction, the critique of aspie supremacy, with its corollary of internalized ableism, is translated into narratives that often take side with the political stances of the neurodiversity movement. On the side of the self-advocacy community, examples taken from popular TV shows are often used to illustrate and condemn the simplistic stereotypes that prevent a complex understanding of the experiences of autistic and, more generally, disabled people.



FEMALE DETECTIVES ON THE SPECTRUM

If the stereotype of the eccentric, quirky detective has been with us since the invention of Sherlock Holmes, its representation as an autistic-coded character is a more recent phenomenon. In parallel with the growth of online autistic communities and their debates about popular media products, the last fifteen years or so have seen writers and screenwriters play increasingly with their expectations, 'penning eccentric characters whose quirks would seem to align with typical characteristics of ASD'.³⁵ While the trend finds several examples in the US,³⁶ European popular narratives seem to have been on the forefront of this movement, offering ever more original versions of the figure of the eccentric detective as an autistic-coded figure.

Although a number of these characters follow in Holmes's steps in portraying the socially awkward, but ultra-intelligent sleuth as male,³⁷ in a way that can remind us of the EMB theory, the most original contribution of European crime fiction (both in print and onscreen) to this development, enrichment as well as destabilization of the Sherlockian legacy was the introduction of a few, particularly engaging figures of female neurodivergent detectives.

More precisely, this move away from a traditionally masculine representation of ASD is one of the most remarkable contributions of Nordic noir to the European crime genre. There is general agreement that the first character of this kind to appear in popular fiction was Lisbeth Salander, the dark anti-heroine of Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy. An intriguing, mesmerizing figure, Salander is a brilliant computer hacker with a troubled childhood history. She ends up pairing with journalist Mikael Blomkvist to help him investigate about the disappearance of his younger sister forty years earlier, which uncovers a series of murders committed by Blomkvist's own brother. Intermingled with this storyline is the grim, merciless revenge meticulously planned and executed by Salander on her rapist and appointed guardian. Androgynous, bisexual and cold-minded, she is at least in part the blueprint for two more Nordic anti-heroines, Saga Norén of *Bron/Broen/The Bridge*, a Danish-Swedish television coproduction that ran four seasons and 38 episodes between 2011 and 2019, and Sarah Lund of *Forbrydelsen*, another lengthy Danish TV serial, broadcast in 40 episodes between 2007 and 2012. Interestingly, 2007 is the year when the Swedish public television broadcaster, SVT, made an agreement with the Swedish Disability Federation, aimed 'to promote a shift in the televised representations of persons with disability from [...] prevalent psychiatric perspective to a more emancipatory human right perspective, and to improve on the number of characters with disability portrayed and the way they are framed; from heroes or victims to multifaced, real-life people'.³⁸

While both Sarah Lund and Saga Norén are police officials who work within the boundaries of the law, their psychological as well as behavioural



characterization is clearly reminiscent of Salander. Solitary, unemotional, obsessively attached to their job, entirely absorbed in the details of the murder cases they investigate, they are mostly unable to meet social expectations or interact with others in reciprocal ways. But apart from this character type, there are other important elements that bring these titles together. Firstly, they have all originated complex transnational franchises that have further popularized the trope of the female autistic sleuth across Europe and beyond.³⁹ Secondly, both the originals and their sequels/adaptations/remakes have been met by both an exceptional critical and academic consideration and by an eruption of social discourse in online forums, blogs and social networks. Practically the entirety of this material deals in one way or another with the heroines' autistic personality, with various interventions aimed at making meaning of these works' engagement with ASD from a feminist angle. The intersection of autism, feminism and crime plots in this wave of serial narratives has thus proved 'to be particularly amenable to cultural exchange'⁴⁰ and 'cultural shareability [... of] common values, images, archetypes and themes'.⁴¹ In this way, these traveling figures have contributed to shape a widespread transcultural conversation about the representation of female autism, imbued with a cosmopolitan ethos. Finally, all these products result from a complex integration of a traditionally masculine genre like crime with the more 'feminine' appeals of serial melodrama, as proved by their 'focus on emotion, relationships, and open-ended seriality'.⁴² Kathleen McHugh discusses this point by elaborating on Jason Mittell's observations about the 'gender inversions' found in so much contemporary 'complex TV', well exemplified by the recent, prolific wave of female-led crime serials. These shows, Mittell's argues, use their melodramatic emphasis on 'moral legibility, narrative drive, and emotionally resonant characterization' to generate a sense of a 'shared felt good'. Yet in fact 'crime serials with gendered look and subject matter (gender-based violence)' McHugh contends, 'possibly shade complex TV's appeal of a "shared felt good" into a form of critical "felt knowledge" [...] central to what could be called the complex feminism that arises from these shows'.⁴³

Nevertheless, whether the character type at the centre of these stories may represent a feminist icon or not is a matter of disagreement. For example, in their article 'The Female Detective as the Child Who Needs to Know', Camilla Schwartz and E. Ann Kaplan argue that 'unlike the female detectives in the film and TV versions of the Scandinavian femi-crime wave such as *Anna Pihl* (DK), *Dicte* (DK), *Modus* (S) and *Fjällbacka Murders*', Saga Norén embodies 'an otherwise typically masculine genre ideal'.⁴⁴ In fact, not only 'she is not torn between family life and career [...] and she shares the traditional male detective's inability to sustain and nourish a normal family life';⁴⁵ and not only she looks 'almost inhuman because of her rational, slightly robotic ways of thinking'; in addition, she is 'depicted as a child who [because of her autism] has not learned (or cannot) learn the



social order of things or who does not [...] understand the demands of the Other'.⁴⁶ According to this reading, since Saga is only seen through the gaze of her male colleagues, who giggle, laugh or gasp whenever she fails to fulfil the social codes, 'her performance appears comical and embarrassing', creating an impression of a 'shameful dysfunctionality'.⁴⁷ While conceding that Saga represents a departure from the classic representation of the female character as a sexualized figure, since she seems 'uninterested in attracting the "male gaze"',⁴⁸ the article is quite stern in concluding that, as a 'dysfunctional detective [she] is certainly not understood as "the maker of meaning" (Mulvey)', nor as 'a potent performer of "female masculinity" (Halberstam)', or "'the subject who is supposed to know" (Zizek)', but simply as 'the passive bearer of meaning [...] or the subject who needs to know'.⁴⁹ This is reinforced through a comparison with the blueprint of all neurotypical detectives, Sherlock Holmes. Although Saga is said to be 'a female version of Sherlock Holmes since she is hyper intelligent and extremely skilled',⁵⁰ the reactions she elicits from the other characters regularly put her in an inferior position. 'While Watson is addressing Holmes with an admiring and impressive gaze, Saga's partner Martin looks at her [...] with] an indulgent and loving gaze that actually [...] puts the female detective in the child's position'.⁵¹ As a result, the authors contend, 'the dysfunctional female detective does not appeal to female identification and she therefore does not function as a feminist icon'.⁵²

It seems fair to say that this reading does not make good service to the cause of autistic women. Although it concedes, in just a few lines at the end of the article, that 'for women (or men) diagnosed with autism the recognition process of course is suspected [courtesy the authors] to be rather different',⁵³ the whole analysis is obviously delivered from a neurotypical standpoint that does not take into account any different possible subject positions. The hurried, last-minute addition, to an otherwise considerably lengthy discussion, that autistic women 'recognize aspects of themselves in Saga' and 'welcome her high-profile role'⁵⁴ comes as a somewhat unexpected surprise at the end of an article that, despite references to queer studies, appears fundamentally allegiant to the perspective of second-wave feminism. For example, there is no acknowledgment that, just like autism, feminism is today better understood as a spectrum across different stances, positionalities and theories, so much that it is now more common to speak of feminisms, not feminism. It follows that the notion of 'feminist icon' is too overly generic to be convincing, especially in a context where the concept of recognition/identification is referred to a specific character type defined by an intersection of *both* gender and neurodivergence.

Interestingly, the issue of the comedic effects of Saga's behaviour has been read along very different lines by authors working in the field of disability studies. Asking whether 'laughing at neurodivergence [could] be reconcilable with an agenda of propagating greater understanding,



recognition and acceptance of variations in human functioning [...] without echoing a discriminatory past',⁵⁵ Danielson and Kemani argue that the answer lies with our willingness to acknowledge Saga's 'discursive position and endorse our own laughter not as an expression of superiority, but as a journey into the liminal space' between neurotypicality and neurodivergence, 'where new insights are made, prejudices are scattered, and normalcy is challenged'.⁵⁶ Once this stance is taken we realize that, in the world of *Bron/Broen*, laughter is more likely to be 'generated by the incongruity between the two moral perspectives represented by the neurotypical Martin and the neurodivergent Sara, not as right and wrong, but rather as interacting fields between which moral considerations are negotiated and molded'.⁵⁷ While the series 'still contains stereotypical features and still denies Saga's neurodivergence the full status of normal variation', for we still laugh at times at her 'deviations from what is perceived as normal behaviour', it nonetheless indicates that 'popular culture is moving away from a ridiculing humour informed by a superiority-inferiority discourse',⁵⁸ reaching out to embrace acceptance and accommodation of difference.

Furthermore, the feminist perspective deployed in these works cannot be reduced to the characterization of the female detective's personality and should rather be seen as a function of the peculiar realism of their melodramatic structure. As Janet McCabe suggests in a poignant analysis, it is exactly in the contradiction at the heart of these characters—the conflict between their potency, talents, skills, and the limitations or expectations posed upon them by the social rules of a neurotypical world—that 'the new politics of feminism(s)' are made visible, allowing the identification of 'new sites of struggle and possible strategies of resistance (however limited)'.⁵⁹ While no doubt their physical appearance represents 'the contemporary state of the feminine ideal' and speaks to the neoliberal democratization of beauty 'exported globally as aspiration',⁶⁰ their investigative style in dealing with 'gruesome cases [...] involving sex crimes and brutal murders, most commonly of women (often at the social margins, immigrants, prostitutes)' ends up challenging 'beliefs and attitudes towards representing the feminine in terms of (in)equalities and (in)justice'.⁶¹ It is actually through their unbiased autistic *stare*—rather than *gaze*—that the burden of injustice behind the murders, the violence, the abuses is revealed to the viewer with the strength of an intolerable objectivity, as a 'felt knowledge'. In contrast to the.

*troubling erotic of male investigators' visual exploration of female corpses [...] in series where the chief investigator is female, this stare is often framed as empathetic [...]. However, where the female detective is neurodivergent, the stare acquires added critical and possibly political functions. [...] These protagonists often invite stares rather than gazes, perplexity rather than desire. At the same time, they themselves mobilize the stare as central agents within visual fields organized by their forensic look.*⁶²



This kind of impassive, unprejudiced way of observing the crime scene, from the same neutral position she holds in front of regular social interactions, is consistent with ‘a character able to deliver equality and social justice precisely because she can do so without recourse to difference, including gender’: ‘her so-called disability allows Norén to travel beyond the ambiguity of difference and adhere without sentiment to [...] universal standards of human rights and democratic values’.⁶³

Similarly, speaking of the *Millennium* trilogy, genderqueer writer and journalist S. E. Smith also emphasizes the ‘social commentary’—embedded in the novels through Lisbeth Salander’s own perception—on the abuse still suffered by many autists all over the world. Again, stereotyping is noted as a problematic issue: ‘Salander is, of course, depicted as the Good Autistic. She is hyperfocused, resourceful, intelligent, driven. She turns her neuroatypicality to her advantage and doesn’t do *scary* autistic things [...] there’s a lot to discuss about how she falls into some Autism In Fiction Stereotypes’.⁶⁴ But Smith points to yet another aspect of Salander’s characterization that has generally passed unnoticed, despite what she calls its important ‘feminist implications’: her institutionalization in a mental health facility at a very young age, ‘for absolutely no reason’.

*All of the reviews focus on her autistic behaviours. No one talks about the fact that institutionalisation, sexual assault, and social control are experienced by people with autism. It’s all about how her [...] autism influences her ability to do things like being a brilliant computer programmer, not how [...] the books are a pretty condemning indictment of the guardianship system and of the belief that institutionalisation is always in the best interests of the patient. Salanders exist all over the world. People all over the world are sexually abused by their ‘guardians’.*⁶⁵

A similar point is made by Caroline Narby:

*disabled people are far more likely than non-disabled people to be victims of violence and sexual assault. Lisbeth is not just acting against the violent force of misogyny, but against ableism and homophobia. Her interactions with her odious financial guardian demonstrate the intersection of those two forces: he makes it clear that her same-sex relationships are part of her overall inability to function like a ‘normal’ person. For a woman who is disabled or otherwise deemed ‘unsound’, non-heterosexual and/or non gender-normative behavior is considered part of her pathology. The very fact that she is considered mentally unfit and is therefore a ward of the state goes from being a plot device [...] to being ‘too real.’ It becomes a commentary on the systemic denial of disabled people’s agency and autonomy.*⁶⁶



Despite a widespread preoccupation with the number of stereotypes that still characterize these fictional figures, autistic women have generally reacted very positively to the new European vague of female autistic sleuths. The mere opportunity to recognize autistic traits in a fictional heroine is received as a refreshing novelty that helps dispel the notion of ASD as a purely male condition. 'I saw myself in Lisbeth Salander', says Leah Jane on her blog, *The Quixotic Autistic*.

Like Salander, I've experienced hardships in my life and abuse at the hands of parental and authority figures [... She] will change the way neurotypical authors portray autistic women [...]. Very rarely do neurotypicals take responsibility for isolating us, bullying us, abusing us, or turning us into pariahs for the crime of being different. But Larsson savages this illusion.⁶⁷

In her article in *The Art of Autism* online magazine, Stephenie Thorne argues that 'more autistic women on the screen could mean real changes in how autistic women are viewed',⁶⁸ spreading awareness that the gender ratio for ASD is not as disparate as was once believed. In fact, she writes, 'the lack of autistic women on TV only helps reinforce the narrative that autism is a disorder for men [...] if all the characters we see on TV are autistic men and never women, we might conclude that autistic women either do not exist or are a rarity. But we do exist'.⁶⁹ Indeed, the new visibility of female autism in the products of popular culture has come in parallel with a novel wave of research studies that have started to dismantle the idea that ASD is just another word for an 'extreme male brain'. There is also growing recognition that the autistic phenotype may present differently in women: they seem to be less impaired in terms of communication abilities and more likely to camouflage or 'mask' their symptoms, which 'may contribute to the under recognition, and diagnostic delay, of ASD in females compared to males'.⁷⁰ As a consequence, the number of adult women who seek, but struggle to get, a diagnosis has been steadily increasing. The notion that an autism diagnosis may be seen by many as an object of desire may strike neurotypical minds as a nonsense; however, it is not difficult to understand how a diagnosis, or even a self-diagnosis, can bring about an important sense of validation in terms of personal identity, both as an explanation for a pervasive feeling of not belonging and as a tool towards achieving self-acceptance of individual limitations.

Speaking of Saga Norén and other popular female autistic icons, Thorne reflects that more visibility for this character type would allow

more women seeing themselves in autistic characters and realizing they themselves might be on the spectrum. [...] It is crucial that autistic women see characters like themselves on TV, because it can affect how they see themselves. If young autistic girls saw more women on TV like themselves they might receive a boost in confidence and realize they are not



alone. Furthermore, if these autistic characters are portrayed achieving success and making a difference in the world, it will show young girls on the spectrum that they too can accomplish great things. This sort of representation is crucial to helping young girls and women on the spectrum understand they are valued and able to succeed.⁷¹

NEUROQUEER 'SHIPPING' AND ASTRID ET RAPHAËLLE

McCabe's description of the female autistic sleuth as a travelling representational type found new evidence in Europe with the release in the spring of 2020 of the first season of *Astrid et Raphaëlle*, a mystery series co-produced by France Télévisions and the francophone branches of the Belgian and Swiss national public broadcaster. The show (which was also seen in Italy, Spain, Portugal, and even reached English-speaking audience niches thanks to the work of an active subtitling community), was confirmed for a second season, aired on France 2 from 21 May to 11 June 2021.

When compared to the Nordic examples discussed above, *Astrid et Raphaëlle* presents with a few striking aspects, which prompted a rich debate in the francophone autistic community. To begin with, it must be noted that in terms of generic models *Astrid et Raphaëlle* is a much more conventional product than its Nordic counterparts. It would be hard to deny that, with its masterful combination of multi-layered long-running plots, its cold landscapes and dark imagination, Nordic noir has truly represented an aesthetic turning point for European television, marking in a way its coming of age. In comparison, the aesthetics of *Astrid et Raphaëlle*, its narrative structure and screenwriting style are more allegiant to the form of a traditional procedural, with single cases that come to solution at the end of each episode and a running plot centred on the recurrent characters' private lives and relationships. However, when it comes to the portrayal of autism, there are a few important departures from previous examples that deserve in-depth consideration.

Firstly, this is the first crime series featuring an overtly diagnosed leading character. This is an important point to be noted, since there is generally an ambiguity from writers, actors and directors as to their intention to really portray ASD. While they play with autistic audiences by disseminating clues through the narratives, when questioned in interviews they regularly deny that this was actually a strategy. As has been suggested, 'being vague means that writers have less of a duty towards accurate portrayal'⁷², which takes away the social responsibility that overtly mentioning autism would inevitably imply. The lack of diagnosis is also preferred because 'it allows other characters to poke fun, and create comedy', without putting the show



at stake of receiving criticism and lose ratings. This latter idea, expressed for example by *Bones*' creator Hart Hanson, 'is concerning, and supports the notion that whilst much work has been done to increase awareness and understanding of ASD, widespread stigmatisation continues to exist, or at least is perceived to do so by television executives'.⁷³

This is not the case with *Astrid et Raphaëlle*. Astrid Nielsen, a documentalist at the criminal investigation department of Paris police, played by Sara Mortensen, is explicitly autistic. She is terribly shy, has strong sensory issues (she has to wear headphones to avoid experiencing extreme confusion—meltdowns—in noisy places) and self-stimulating behaviours: she rocks, moves her hands in funny ways, takes strange postures, and so on. She also has a phenomenal memory: she is able to recall even the smallest piece of information in every single document in the archive and has extensive factual knowledge on the most improbable topics. Moreover, she is very detail-oriented and has a systemizing, hyper-logical style of reasoning.

A second original aspect of this series is the choice to have the female autistic character flanked not by a male, but by another female character. When chief inspector Raphaëlle Coste (Lola Dewaere) approaches her to ask for help in investigating a case of apparent suicide, the two forge what is going to become something more than a long-term collaboration—a devoted, affectionate friendship. Raphaëlle's personality could not be more different than Astrid's: she is a strong, determined woman with a leading position in the police department, where she is in command of several male colleagues. She is very empathic, good-hearted, and somewhat maternal. Together, Astrid and Raphaëlle form an odd, definitely atypical, and yet extremely efficient, duo, with Astrid providing Raphaëlle with the rational methodology and the data needed to solve the cases, and Raphaëlle helping Astrid cope in social situations, go through the elaboration of her traumatic childhood and build up the self-confidence she lacks. The special relationship between the two characters has been met enthusiastically by many female viewers. Queer viewers, in particular, have been attracted by what they have read as obvious allusions to a burgeoning erotic desire between the two heroines, which they have addressed and developed in different ways through practices of 'textual poaching'.⁷⁴

Thirdly, a mention must be made to the involvement of autistic advocates in the series' development. Alexandre de Seguins, who co-authored the concept with Laurent Burtin, refers to have been researching the issue of female autism extensively while elaborating the script since 2017. This process, triggered by the reading of Temple Grandin's books,⁷⁵ continued through conversations with French autistic authors and advocates Joseph Schovanec and Natalia Pedemonte and even involved passing on the scripts for revision to members of autistic associations.⁷⁶ The authors' engagement with the community resulted, among other things, in the inclusion in the narrative of a 'groupe de parole', that is, a self-support group for autistic



adults whose meetings Astrid is seen attending in a few episodes.

Finally, and connected to the latter point, the series also cast a few autistic persons. Some participants in the support group are actually autists—among them Lizzy Brynn, a youtuber and the author of a self-published novel featuring a lesbian romance between two adolescent girls, which also touches upon the issue of disability.⁷⁷ Hugo Horiot, an autistic advocate, a comedian, a playwright and an essayist, is cast in the role of a medical doctor who is the brother of the support group's animator, William.⁷⁸ There's enough to say that *Astrid et Raphaëlle* is quite a unique case.

However, looking into its reception within the community reveals a mixed reaction. Not surprisingly, despite Sara Mortensen's hard work to offer a sensitive rendition of her character, her performance is targeted as a major source of dissatisfaction. In her interviews, Mortensen recounts how attentively she observed the people in the 'groupe de parole'—their gestures, their use of language, their intonation—and how she went on using this inspiration to create her character.⁷⁹ Still, comments in the *Asperansa* forum, the main online francophone community for autistic people, are often very critical. A few comments in the dedicated thread read as follows:

- *'The way she moves, she speaks, super quick and jerky all the time, the way she rocks, nothing is credible (#16).*
- *I had the impression to be watching an accumulation of single traits, which do not work together. She definitely does too much, [...] it seems mechanical and really unnatural' (#24).*

While concurring that her character comes across as 'rough, exaggerated, a caricature' (#47), other users are more accommodating. There's a recognition that some of the scenes 'show a real knowledge of autism and an effort to portray it in all of its aspects' (#20), proving that 'the creators have really researched the subject' (#46). Many users even declare to have been unexpectedly pleased with the representation:

- *'To my great surprise, I was moved, and it was totally unexpected (#47).*
- *This series really 'spoke' to me (#50).*
- *It made me smile, since I recognized myself in certain situations (#28).*
- *Certain moments looked very familiar, as taken from my daily life' (#2).*
- *I really found myself reflected in certain aspects' (#55).*

The presence of real autistic people in the cast is particularly appreciated (to be able to see autistic adults 'who work, communicate, have different profiles', #47), as is the relationship between Astrid and Raphaëlle:



- *'You can add among the plus the representation of a female autistic profile (#19).*
- *I can't remember anything alike on French television (#2).*
- *It's fun that Astrid et Raphaëlle have become two gay icon on social networks' (#50).*

Unsurprisingly, the affectionate friendship that builds up between the two characters throughout the episodes has inspired a variety of lesbian fan 'shipping' content, which the show has obliquely encouraged. 'Shipping' is the term used by fans to define the different creative practices (fanfiction, memes, videos, gifs) through which they express their desire that their favourite characters get involved in a romantic relationship. Despite Lola Deawere's declaration that the presumed lesbian subtext identified by many fans was in no way intended by either the writers or the actresses, a dialogue in episode 5 of the second season hints openly to the fans' readings. At one point in the narrative, Raphaëlle congratulates Astrid on the new investigative success of 'Astraëlle'. Astrid is puzzled, so Raphaëlle explains: 'This is how everyone calls us in the team. Don't you know? [...] There are even some who think that the two of us [...] are a couple'. Here Raphaëlle is clearly referring to the tag #astraelle that queer fans had launched in the wake of season 1 as a tool to enable the retrieval of lesbian transformative works on the web. Searching #astraelle on the web digs up a wealth of fan content that unveils the neuroqueer quality of the desire elicited by the series. Given the higher prevalence of gender-diverse people among autistics as compared to the general population, this may not come as a surprise.

As in the case of Astrid's autistic characterization, the covert, coded allusions to a romantic interest between the two heroines has also spurred controversial opinions. In the lesbian forum *The L Chat*, some users complain that their love relationship is confined to a mere subtext, presenting as a typical case of 'queerbaiting':

- *Two girls close/kinda flirting but nothing will happen between them (#14).*
- *Seems like we still haven't learned any lessons from all the previous experiences. I would rather watch a 100% hetero show (#17).*
- *Writers and crew of the show are 90% men and they want you to know once and for all Astrid and Raphaëlle are just friends! (#72).*
- *However, most of the users find the subtext extremely engaging.*
- *'I'm not really one to get hung up on whether things are or aren't 'queerbaiting' I'm just gonna enjoy their relationship, but interesting to know that the writers do explicitly know people are shipping them and to have the characters outright reference it (#71).*
- *I came into the show expecting it to be just two friends, but this show really hits you in the face/heart with the bond between them, and it stands out all the more juxtaposed with how not-hetero they are in their interaction with men' (#38).*
- *I didn't expect much, but I was hooked right away. The show isn't*



- that subtle for me. Maybe the straights won't get the heart eyes Raphaëlle gives to Astrid or why she kissed Astrid on the cheek but it was all gay for me' (#44).*
- *I am so overwhelmingly happy with this show. I didn't expect anything more than subtext, but wow this season really delivered on everything I could hope for in a sweet blossoming romance' (#54).⁸⁰*

Astraëlle videos on YouTube play with this subtext to create lyric montages in which the two characters appear to actually be in love, as the titles anticipate: *Hungry Eyes*, *The Kiss*, *Crazy in Love*, and so on. As is customary in this genre of fan videos, the soundtrack makes use of love songs to better highlight the romantic theme, while the editing plays astutely with the actresses' close-ups, their gazes and smiles, to create evocative situations that were only partially there in the original. More 'shipping' content is found on fanfiction sites. At the time of this writing, the tag #astraëlle retrieves 12 titles on *Archiveofourown*, some of which cross-tagged with keywords like 'Friends to Lovers', 'Slow burn', 'Fluff', 'Domestic Fluff', 'Pre-relationship', and so on.⁸¹ The representation of same-sex attraction is given a further queer twist through the description of Astrid's peculiarities, struggles and special needs. What emerges is a very delicate type of sexuality, with excitement arising as the result of a profound trust and mutual understanding. *Trying is Caring* describes the romantic involvement of the two characters as an exciting process of discovery of their reciprocal differences:

Sometimes, Astrid would talk Raphaëlle's ears off about puzzles and the brunette would happily listen to her passionately ramble on and on until the blonde was yawning every few words. Sometimes, Raphaëlle would just go and on about 'neurotypical nonsense' as Astrid had once put it with a teasing smile. It was a great opportunity for them to learn about each other, to bond and just openly communicate. It also greatly benefited their relationship since, without really noticing it, it helped them apprehend Astrid's autism and Raphaëlle's neurotypicality.⁸²

Interestingly, the stories emphasize the points of intersection between ASD and queerness, actually presenting autism as a kind of neuroqueerness. In *Notes of Love*, the author has Astrid reject gender identification:

One uneventful day, after finishing her tasks, Astrid decided she was ready to begin her quest for a potential partner. She remembered William mention a forum where autistic people could interact. Creating a profile appeared to be an easy process until she was asked to specify her sexual orientation. She had read plenty of articles on this topic, but never once did she stop to ask herself who she was attracted to. Astrid refused to decide on the spot. Since she only wanted someone to talk to at first, under the 'Interested in...' line, she chose to select the box that said, 'Not specified'.⁸³



In *Astraëlle*, Astrid muses about queer sexuality in terms of a spectrum

*She had never thought about it. The possibility of Raphaëlle and her, being more than friends. Or had she? She sure knew about people like that. She read about them. People could be on one end or the other of the spectrum. She was familiar with the concept of a spectrum. But that is what it was, a spectrum. It was not black or white ... gay or straight. The animal realm was filled with examples. She just had not thought about it for her.*⁸⁴

Yet, Raphaëlle's caring attitude towards Astrid is also made the target of severe criticism. Autistic fans express a concern that her caring, supportive behaviour is just a front to hide her true, manipulative purposes. Comment #2 in the above mentioned *Asperansa* thread explains this clearly:

- :
- *The series' overall message is very disturbing [...]. It makes it appear acceptable that an autistic person is manipulated to have they do what she [Raphaëlle] wants (it's literally said by one of the characters: 'Autists have a weakness—their special interest. You can have them do anything you want by drawing on their special interest').*

This point, along with many others, is further discussed in two video reviews by autistic youtuber Angie Breshka. Her channel is an interesting site to explore for researching female autistic advocacy on the French-speaking web.⁸⁵ Breshka is a brilliant young woman whose mission is to 'debunk' widespread myths about autistic people that are detrimental to their social inclusion, to denounce abuses, mistreatments and misrepresentations and educate her audience on the neurodiversity paradigm. She has strong opinions that she exposes in typical autistic style, by analytically deconstructing the views she opposes by means of logical, data-driven argumentations. Her videos receive numerous comments and prompt debate, such as when her theses are countered in lengthy notes that sometimes take up the form of short essays. Her two videos on *Astrid et Raphaëlle*, in which she targets what she considers to be the series's flawed treatment flaws in the series' treatment of autism, are no exception.

Published in April 2019, the first video offers a harsh review of the pilot episode, just recently broadcast on France 2 to test the audience's response before putting the show in production.⁸⁶ Some of Bershka's observations reiterate the criticism against Mortensen's performance (e.g. her way to avert the gaze appears unnatural) and the inconsistencies in the script (e.g. Astrid is seen to go all of a sudden from a shutdown that makes it impossible for her to speak to an unhampered conversation with Raphaëlle, or being able to tolerate noisy environments—which is inconsistent, Bershka contends, with her wearing noise canceling headphones in other scenes). The main point, however, has to do with what she considers to be an inadequate involvement of the autistic community. Despite commending



the insertion of the 'groupe de parole' in the narrative as a 'super positive' initiative, one that draws autists from their invisibility and helps disclose the diversity of their individual profiles, she still contends that in the end the series comes across as 'made by neurotypicals to take advantage of our handicap to make spectacle'. Even the names of autistic advocates and associations credited in the end titles are turned down as problematic. Natalia Pedemonte, a legal expert and the founder of Juris Handicap Autisme,⁸⁷ gets criticized because of her dismissive attitude toward the increasing number of high-functioning people seeking a diagnosis or self-diagnosing for purely 'identitarian' reasons.⁸⁸ Her claim that 'anorexia is no more common among autists than across the general population' leads Bershka to provide a number of links below her video with specific information about female autism and its relation to anorexia nervosa. Most of these links are to the Association Francophone de Femmes Autistiques website⁸⁹ and in her introduction Bershka explicitly invites producers at France 2 to get in touch with this organization, since 'they know what it means to be both autistics and women, which obviously is not the case neither of your screenwriters, nor of your actress, nor of the people from the autistic world that you have consulted'. The only association mentioned in the pilot's end credit is indeed another target of Bershka's complaint. Like Autism Speaks in the US, Vaincre l'autisme is constituted mainly by parents of autistic children and medical experts. Many French autistic advocates have openly criticized its emphasis on the need to 'treat' autism, espousing a militant agenda in accordance with the principles of the disability movement and bringing to the fore the need to fight for a more accepting and inclusive societal attitude. Bershka finds a clue of the series' allegiance with the perspective of Autism Speaks ('this association that excludes autistic people') in the choice to have Astrid wear exclusively blue clothes—the colour adopted by the association as a symbol to wear on the occasion of the World Autism Awareness Day (2 April each year) to support the battle to 'win' the condition. For Bershka, the choice of blue is yet another sign that speaks of the dangerous belief that autism is merely, or at least predominantly, a male condition.

Most of these criticisms are dropped in the second review, posted after the end of season.⁹⁰ Bershka recognizes that the script has improved in several respects and even makes room for an ironic cameo intervention of a supporter of the series, Lyzzy Brin, who, as an autistic person involved as a figurant in the 'group the parole' scenes, expresses her unconditional gratitude for what she characterizes as 'the quintessence of entertainment'. Interestingly, Bershka declares to have been reached out by the production team in the wake of her first video. Apparently her criticism hit home, for neither Vaincre l'autisme, nor Natalia Pedemonte are now mentioned in the series end credits. Instead, a mention is made of the Collective pour la Libre Expression des Autistes, an association 'steered by autists of all profiles'⁹¹ that Bershka promotes on her channel. Among other initiatives,



CLE-Autistes has supported the #Redinstead campaign to declare April to be Autism Acceptance—not Awareness—month.⁹² Yet, despite recognizing a number of improvements, Bershka is still unhappy with Mortensen's performance. Although several of her subscribers express a different opinion, she insists that the only way to achieve credible performances is to have autistic characters played by autistic actors. Similarly, she argues, involving autistic creatives in the writing process would result in more interesting storylines. For example, after demolishing episode 7—in which Astrid's mother reveals that her own little autistic brother was killed by their mother (an incident that Bershka dismisses as undeveloped and too dramatic to be superficially treated as in this episode)—she comes up with 'an alternative scenario' in which Astrid's mum goes on discovering her own autism, 'something that occurs frequently to the mothers of autistic children'. Regretting not having been able to discuss this idea with the writing team before they finished the script, she argues that the story of a woman who finds out to be neurodivergent as an adult would have turned out to be ways more socially helpful than the current episodic plot, for 'there's a lack of this kind of representations'.

'Rien pour nous sans nous'—nothing for us without us—is thus the final message that this young female autistic advocate is proudly delivering across the French-speaking web through her acute, intelligent analyses of popular media products.

CONCLUSIONS

Studying the autistic reception of a few European crime TV series involving the character type of the neurodivergent detective has shown how widely issues of representations are debated within both the Anglophone and the Francophone autistic online communities. Autistic viewers express a complex, articulated desire of recognizing themselves in onscreen fictional figures, onscreen fictional figures, portrayed as round, layered characters endowed with distinct personalities, which they believe can help validate their own individual experiences. At the same time they reject the stereotypes that still bias media representations of their struggles, needs and diverse personalities. Their online critical interventions address directly the shows' production and creative teams, calling for more subtle, complex renditions of both their intimate and social experiences. Thankfully, there is also an increasing awareness among producers and creatives about the need to take into account the sensibilities of these growing audience niches, which show to at least partially overlap with queer niches. The neuroqueer intersection of autism and LGBTIA+-inflected storylines appears to have a particular appeal on these atypical viewers. Yet concerns remain that the use of autistic-coded characters is only aimed to make spectacle out of their disabilities, in the same way as queerbaiting profits



of gay figures and themes merely as a marketing strategy. While there is an appreciation of the steps forward made by some productions to offer nuanced representations of autism—including female autism, an area in which European productions have marked a considerable development in recent years—autistic communities are calling for more creative effort and more concrete inclusion, even in terms of their active involvement in the production process.

This survey has also shown that there is a whole spectrum of different opinions among autists when it comes to their approval, or disapproval, of media representations of neurodiversity. This reflects the complex context of autism advocacy, by which autistic individuals reclaim the right to speak for themselves and stand up to fight for their own rights. Controversial topics that are intensely debated in generalist autistic forums—such as whether or not ASD should be considered as an illness to be cured; or how to react to the tensions that threaten to divide the community between ‘high’ vs ‘low-functional’ people; or how to promote awareness of the unique struggles faced by autistic women—also surface in the discussion threads, blog articles, fanfictions and videos specifically devoted to reflecting and commenting upon the representation strategies of European crime TV dramas. In this way, the autistic reception of popular European narratives featuring autistic or autistic-coded characters can be said to be actively contributing to the circulation and development of an empowering autistic culture.



Notes

¹ The research presented here has been financed by the research project *DETECT — Detecting Transcultural Identity in European Popular Crime Narratives* (Horizon 2020, 2018–2021) [Grant agreement number 770151].

² Uta Frith, *Autism: Explaining the Enigma* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 23–24; see also Eric L. Altschuler, 'Asperger's in the Holmes Family', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 43.9 (2013).

³ Loftis, Sonya Freeman, 'The Autistic Detective: Sherlock Holmes and his Legacy', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 34.4 (2014).

⁴ 'Both person-first and identity-first approaches to language are designed to respect disabled persons; In person-first language, the person is emphasized, not the individual's disabling or chronic condition (e.g., use 'a person with paraplegia' and 'a youth with epilepsy' rather than 'a paraplegic' or 'an epileptic'). In identity-first language, the disability becomes the focus, which allows the individual to claim the disability and choose their identity rather than permitting others (e.g., authors, educators, researchers) to name it or to select terms with negative implications [...]. Identity-first language is often used as an expression of cultural pride and a reclamation of a disability that once conferred a negative identity'. American Psychological Association, 'Disability' <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/disability> [accessed 26 May 2021].

⁵ The term was coined around 1910 by Eugen Bleuler, who had already introduced the concept of schizophrenia in 1908. See Berend Verhoeff, 'Autism in Flux: A History of the Concept from Leo Kanner to DSM-5', *History of Psychiatry*, 24.4 (2013), pp. 442–458. See also the 'History of autism' project (University of Oregon), <https://blogs.uoregon.edu/autismhistoryproject/timeline/> [accessed 9 June 2021]. Generally uncredited in the history of psychiatry is the use of the term by Grunya Efimovna Sukhareva, a Russian child psychiatrist who described a set of clinical features closely resembling those reported in DSM-5 for ASD as early as 1926. First appeared in German, her article 'Die schizoiden Psychopathien im Kindesalter' is speculated to have been a major source for Leo Kanner's later work. See Irina Manouilenko, Susanne Bejerot, 'Sukhareva-Prior to Asperger and Kanner', *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry*, 69.6 (2015), pp. 1761–1764. DOI: 10.3109/08039488.2015.1005022.

⁶ Leo Kanner, 'Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact', *Nervous Child*, 2 (1943), pp. 242–243. http://Neurodiversity.com/library_kanner_1943.pdf [accessed 26 May 2021].

⁷ The term was proposed by Lorna Wing in her article 'Asperger Syndrome?: A Clinical Account', *Psychological Medicine*, 11.1 (1981), pp. 115–129. DOI: 10.1017/S0033291700053332. Hans Asperger's article, 'Autistic Psychopathy' in Childhood', was first published in English in *Autism and Asperger syndrome*, ed. by Uta Frith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 37–92. For a reconstruction of the label's vicissitudes from its inclusion in DSM-IV to its disappearance in DSM-5, see J. B. Barahona-Corrêa and Carlos N. Filipe, 'A Concise History of Asperger's Syndrome: The Short Reign of a Troublesome Diagnosis', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6 (2015). DOI 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.02024.

⁸ Bethan Chambers and others, "'Sometimes Labels Need to Exist": Exploring How Young Adults with Asperger's Syndrome Perceive its Removal from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition', *Disability & Society*, 35.4 (2019), pp. 589–608. DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2019.1649121.

⁹ See data in The Autism Community in Action website, <https://TACAnow.org/autism-statistics>. Source: Center for Disease Control (the US national health agency) [accessed 26 May 2021].



¹⁰ John Monaghan, 'Autism Diagnoses in NI Children up by More than 100%', *BBC News*, 21 February 2019 <https://BBC.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-47028502>; Antonio Narzisi and others, 'Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder in a Large Italian Catchment Area: A School-based Population Study within the ASDEU Project', *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*, 29.5 (2018). DOI: 10.1017/S2045796018000483.

¹¹ Cf. the well documented article on the 'Rational Wiki' website, https://Rationalwiki.org/wiki/Aspie_supremacy. [accessed 26 May 2021].

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ For an introduction to the neurodiversity concept and movement, see Steve Silberman, *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity* (New York: Penguin Random, 2015).

¹⁴ Kate Seers, Rachel C. Hogg, "'You Don't Look Autistic": A Qualitative Exploration of Women's Experiences of Being the "Autistic Other"', *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice* (15 March 2021). DOI: 10.1177/1362361321993722.

¹⁵ As Stuart Murray writes in *Representing Autism. Culture, Narrative, Fascination* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008, pp. 65-66), 'when seen through the contemporary lens of popular representation, autism and savantism appear to have become almost synonymous. [...] Savant skills excite in the ways in which they represent seemingly impossible capabilities and talents; they are exceptional and 'beyond' that which is considered normal human performance. [...] The degree of awe savant talents produce is matched by the idea that these skills act to compensate the disability with which they are associated. Hence the common attachment of the word 'idiot' to 'savant', to designate this double aspect of ability and impairment'. See also Christina Belcher, Kimberly Maich, 'Autism Spectrum Disorder in Popular Media: Storied Reflections of Societal Views', *Brock Education*, 23.2 (2014), pp. 97-115.

¹⁶ Harley Dixon, 'Sherlock Holmes is Autistic, Leading Charity Claims', *Telegraph*, 16 December 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/10521128/Sherlock-Holmes-is-autistic-leading-charity-claims.html> [accessed 26 May 2021].

¹⁷ *The Hounds of Baskerville*, first aired in the UK on January 8, 2012. For an introduction to the phenomenon of autistic fandom, see Scott D. Folsom, 'Autistic Self-Advocacy and Activism on the World Wide Web: Frontiers of Digito-Neural Subject Formation', *Autonomy, the Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies*, 1.5 (2017). Another useful source is the 'Autism and Fandom' article on the Fanlore web portal https://Fanlore.org/wiki/Autism_and_Fandom [accessed 26 May 2021].

¹⁸ *John Watson says Sherlock has Aspergers*, Youtube <https://Youtube.com/watch?v=l1lm5MyZTlM> [accessed 26 May 2021].

¹⁹ The reference is to Sheldon Cooper, a fictional character in *The Big Bang Theory* (USA, 2007-2019) that many believe to be the portrayal of an autistic person.

²⁰ Asperger's collaboration with the Nazi regime has been extensively documented in numerous recent studies. See Herwig Czech, 'Hans Asperger, National Socialism, and 'Race Hygiene' in Nazi-Era Vienna', *Molecular Autism*, 9.29 (2018). DOI: 10.1186/s13229-018-0208-6.

²¹ Anna N. de Hooge, 'Binary Boys: Autism, Aspie Supremacy and Post/Humanist Normativity', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 39.1 (2019). DOI: 10.18061/dsq.v39i1.6461.

²² 'Allistic' is a neologism coined within the neurodiversity movement, meaning 'not autistic'.

²³ Cf. Simon Baron-Cohen, 'The Extreme Male Brain Theory of Autism', *Trends in Cognitive Science*, 6.6 (2002), pp. 248-254. DOI: 10.1016/s1364-6613(02)01904-6.

²⁴ Hooge, 'Binary Boys'.

²⁵ 'Autistic Sherlock', *Archiveofourown* web portal <https://Archiveofourown.org/tags/Autistic%20>



[Sherlock%20Holmes/works](#) [accessed 26 May 2021].

²⁶ Orphan_account, *Fresher*, comment section, *Archiveofourown* web portal https://archiveofourown.org/works/17439941?show_comments=true&view_full_work=true#comments [accessed 26 May 2021].

²⁷ ZuccaFireTrash, *When Boys Fall in Love*, comment section, *Archiveofourown* web portal https://archiveofourown.org/works/18330593?show_comments=true#comments [accessed 26 May 2021].

²⁸ Goldenheartedrose, *Enraptured*, comment section, *Archiveofourown* web portal https://archiveofourown.org/works/382089?show_comments=true#comments [accessed 26 May 2021].

²⁹ Scott D. Folsom, 'Sleuthing and Stimming: Autistic!Sherlock Headcanons and the Cultural Politics of Autism', paper presented at Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association National Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana, 4 April 2015. <https://Academia.edu/11390453> [accessed 26 May 2021].

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Hooge, 'Binary Boys'. The notion of 'neuroqueerness' has been proposed by Melanie Yergeau, *Authoring Autism On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

³² Ibidem.

³³ Honeybee_motorcycles, *The Rainbow Connection*, Chapter 6, *Archiveofourown* web portal <https://archiveofourown.org/works/26986852> [accessed 26 May 2021].

³⁴ Xenay, *The Struggles of Living in a World of Neuro-typicals*, Chapter 11, *Archiveofourown* web portal <https://archiveofourown.org/works/18384842> [accessed 26 May 2021].

³⁵ Nick Patch, 'Characters with Autism Getting Prime Spots on Major TV Series', *Globe and Mail*, 27 December 2012. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/health-and-fitness/health/conditions/characters-with-autism-getting-prime-spots-on-major-tv-series/article6744446/> [accessed 26 May 2021].

³⁶ A few characters in American crime TV dramas that are widely held to be autistic by their fans are Inspector Monk of the eponymous series (USA 2002-09), Spencer Reid of *Criminal Minds* (USA 2005-20), Sherlock Holmes (and his girlfriend Fiona Helbron) of *Elementary* (USA 2012-19); among the women, Carrie Mathison of *Homeland* (USA 2011-2020) and, more recently, Holly Gibney of *The Outsider* (USA 2021), a mini-series adapted from a novel by Stephen King. None of these characters, however, hold a diagnosis in the fiction. Sometimes cited is also Temperance Brennan of *Bones* (USA 2005-2012), another character with a literary origin—she's the heroine of a long series of novels by Kathy Reichs. For more general information about the portrayal of autistic in American primetime television, see Phillip S. Poe, Maxwell C. Moseley, 'She's a Little Different: Autism-Spectrum Disorders in Primetime TV Dramas', *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 73.4 (2016) <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/SHE%27S+A+LITTLE+DIFFERENT%22%3A+AUTISM-SPECTRUM+DISORDERS+I+N+PRIMETIME+TV...-a0562370462> [accessed 9 June 2021].

³⁷ In addition to BBC's *Sherlock*, other dysfunctional European male detectives in the Holmes tradition, often diagnosed as autistic by their audience, are Endeavour Morse of *Inspector Morse* (United Kingdom 1987-1993), Sean Stone of *Chasing Shadows* (United Kingdom 2014), the protagonists of the two versions of *Professor T* (Belgium 2015-2018; Germany 2017-2020), and Dimitris Lainis of the *Eteros Ego* (Greece 2019-). In the literary field, it is worth recalling the hugely successful mystery novel by Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013) and Sandrone Dazieri's Italian trilogy about the investigative duo Colomba and Dante (*Uccidi il padre*, 2017; *L'angelo*, 2018; *Il re di denari*, 2019). The two detectives have been said to be 'neurodivergent' by the author himself, in an interview in which he also reclaimed the label for himself. See Berna



González Harbour. 'Sandrone Dazieri: "Yo soy neurodiverso, como mi personaje"', *País*. 5 May 2017. https://elpais.com/cultura/2017/05/05/elemental/1493962980_795296.html [accessed 9 June 2021].

³⁸ Magnus Danielson, Mike Kemani, 'When Saga Norén Meets Neurotypicality. A Liminal Encounter along *The Bridge*', in *Normalizing Mental Illness and Neurodiversity in Entertainment Media*, edited by Malynnda Johnson, Christopher J. Olson (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), p. 96.

³⁹ Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* book trilogy (2005-2007) was adapted for the big screen both in Sweden and in the US (respectively three feature films in 2009 and two in 2011 and 2018). A TV series based on the first novel, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, is currently in production at Netflix. *Bron/Broen/The Bridge* has been adapted in five different versions, through co-production ventures between, respectively, the UK and France (2013-2017), the US and Mexico (2013-2014), Estonia and Russia (2018-), Malaysia and Singapore (2018-). *Forbrydelsen* has been remade as *The Killing* in the US in 2011.

⁴⁰ Janet McCabe, 'Disconnected Heroines, Icy Intelligence: Reframing Feminism(s) and Feminist Identities at the Borders', in *Feminisms: Diversity, Difference and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures*, edited by Laura Mulvey, Anna Backman Rogers (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), p. 24.

⁴¹ Joseph Straubhaar, quoted in McCabe, p. 24.

⁴² Kathleen McHugh, 'The Female Detective, Neurodiversity, and Felt Knowledge in *Engrenages* and *Bron/Broen*'. *Television & New Media* 19.6 (2018), pp. 538.

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ Camilla Schwartz, E. Ann Kaplan, '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 (2018), p. 216.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Ivi, pp. 226 and 223.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 220.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 217.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 227.

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 216.

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 225.

⁵² Ivi, p. 228.

⁵³ Ivi, p. 227.

⁵⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁵ Danielson and Kemani, p. 99.

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 103.

⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 107.

⁵⁹ McCabe, p. 32.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 34.

⁶¹ Ivi, p. 23.

⁶² McHugh, p. 542.

⁶³ McCabe, p. 41.

⁶⁴ S. E. Smith, 'Lisbeth Salander and Social Perceptions', *This Ain't Living*. Blog article. http://meloukhia.net/2010/05/lisbeth_salander_and_social_perceptions/ [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁶⁵ Ibidem.



⁶⁶ Caroline Narby, 'Double Rainbow: On Lisbeth Salander', *Bitchmedia*, 5 January 2021 <https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/double-rainbow-on-lisbeth-salander-feminism-autism-millennium-trilogy>. [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁶⁷ Leah Jane, 'Fröken Salander & Me: How a Misanthropic Computer Hacker Will Change Autism in Literature and life', *The Quixotic Autistic*, 6 June 2010 <http://quixoticautistic.blogspot.com/2010/06/froken-salander-me-how-misanthropic.html> [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁶⁸ Stephenie Thorne, 'We Need More Autistic Women on TV And Here's Why', *The Art of Autism*, 18 September 2019. <https://the-art-of-autism.com/we-need-more-autistic-women-on-tv-and-heres-why/> [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁶⁹ Ibidem.

⁷⁰ Rebecca Tharian Priyanka and others, 'Characters with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Fiction: Where are the women and girls?', *Advances in Autism*. 5.1 (2019), pp. 50-63. DOI: 10.1108/AIA-09-2018-0037. See also J. R. Thorpe, 'Why Are There So Few Women With Autism On TV?', *Bustle*, 1 August, 2017 <https://www.bustle.com/p/why-are-there-so-few-women-with-autism-on-tv-71248> Accessed 9 June 2021.

⁷¹ See the following threads in online web forums: 'Are series and movies representation of autism realistic?', *Autismforums* <https://Autismforums.com/threads/27454/>; 'Female Characters With Asperger's Syndrome?', *Wrongplanet* <https://Wrongplanet.net/forums/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=223356>; 'How Many of You Are Autistic?' *Singletrackworld* <https://Singletrackworld.com/forum/topic/how-many-of-you-are-autistic/>. Accessed 9 June 2021.

⁷² Priyanka, 'Characters with Autism Spectrum Disorder'.

⁷³ Ibidem.

⁷⁴ The notion of 'textual poaching', or the transformative appropriation of the products of popular culture by fans, resulting in different types of artifacts, was introduced by Michael De Certeau in his *Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) and later developed by Henry Jenkins in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge: 1992).

⁷⁵ Temple Grandin. *The Autistic Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

⁷⁶ Julia Fernandez. 'Astrid et Raphaëlle sur France 2. "La complexité de l'autisme est une grande richesse dramaturgique"', *Allociné*, 21 May 2021 https://Allocine.fr/article/fichearticle_gen_carticle=18699631.html [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁷⁷ See her interview in the *Petites attentions* website <https://Petitesattentions.wixsite.com/petitesattentions/post/interview-avec-lizzy-brynn-actrice-youtubeuse-et-aatrice> [accessed 23 August 2021].

⁷⁸ Hugo Horiot. *Autisme: j'accuse!* (Paris: Iconoclaste, 2018) [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁷⁹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/10521128/Sherlock-Holmes-is-autistic-leading-charity-claims.html> Stéphanie Gorlin. 'Astrid et Raphaëlle (France 2): pourquoi Astrid boîte-t-elle ? La réponse de Sara Mortensen', *ProgrammeTV*, 4 June 2021. <https://www.Programme-tv.net/news/series-tv/277390-astrid-et-raphaelle-pourquoi-astrid-boite-t-elle-la-reponse-de-sara-mortensen/> [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁸⁰ 'Astrid et Raphaëlle', *TheLchat* web portal <https://TheLchat.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=4&t=75332> [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁸¹ 'Astrid et Raphaëlle', *Archiveofourown* web portal [https://Archiveofourown.org/tags/Astrid%20et%20Raphaëlle%20\(TV\)/works](https://Archiveofourown.org/tags/Astrid%20et%20Raphaëlle%20(TV)/works) [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁸² Zakary_little_lion, Trying Is Caring, *Archiveofourown* web portal <https://archiveofourown.org/works/24796378> [accessed 9 June 2021].



⁸³ Heartunderfire, *Notes of Love*, chapter 1, Archiveofourown web portal. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/26092453/chapters/63466939> [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁸⁴ 4AlarmFirecracker, *Astraëlle*, Archiveofourown web portal <https://archiveofourown.org/works/31030739> [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁸⁵ *Angie Breshka*, Youtube channel <https://www.youtube.com/c/AngieBreshka/videos> [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁸⁶ *Astrid et Raphaëlle: episode pilote* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQtFzM8CvDU> [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁸⁷ *Juris Handicap Autisme*, website www.Jurishandicapautisme.org [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁸⁸ A similar claim from Joseph Schovenec has caused huge indignation from a part of the autistic community. Bershka has polemically commented his argument in one of her videos, *Attention aux faux autistes! (Et au complotisme aussi...)* Youtube <https://Youtube.com/watch?v=e9WkdvXSHpM> [accessed 9 June 2021]. See also Pedemonte's statements on female autism: Jean Vinçot, 'La diversité dans l'autisme. Interviews de J. Schovenec et N. Pedemonte', 16 September 2018 <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/jean-vincot/blog/150918/la-diversite-dans-l-autisme-2809-interviews-de-j-schovanec-et-n-pedemonte> [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁸⁹ Association Francophone des *Femmes Autistiques*, website <https://Femmesautistesfrancophones.com> [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁹⁰ *Astrid et Raphaëlle: le retour* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTnZRZ2uwSg&t=18s> [accessed 23 August 2021].

⁹¹ *CLE-Autistes*, website. <https://Asso.cle-autistes.fr> [accessed 9 June 2021].

⁹² 'En avril tous en rouge ou or pour l'acceptation', *CLE-Autistes* website <https://CLE-autistes.fr/en-avril-tous-en-rouge-ou-or-pour-lacceptation> [accessed 9 June 2021].