Autism & Aspergers In Popular Australian Cinema Post 2000

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Australian Cinema is known for its tendency to feature bizarre and extraordinary characters that exist on the margins of mainstream society (O'Regan 1996, 261). While several theorists have noted the prevalence of disability within this national cinema (Ellis 2008; Duncan, Goggin & Newell 2005; Ferrier 2001), an investigation of characters that have autism is largely absent. Although characters may have displayed autistic tendencies or perpetuated misinformed media representations of this condition, it was unusual for Australian films to outright label a character as having autism until recent years. Somersault, The Black Balloon, and Mary & Max are three recent Australian films that explicitly introduce characters with autism or Asperger syndrome. Of the three, the last two depict autism with sensitivity, neither exploiting it for the purposes of the main character's development nor turning it into a spectacle of compensatory super ability. The Black Balloon, in particular, demonstrates the importance of the intentions of the filmmaker in including disability among notions of a diverse Australian community.

Somersault. Red Carpet Productions. Directed By Cate Shortland 2004 Australia

Using minor characters with disabilities to provide the audience with more insight into the main characters is a common narrative tool in Australian cinema (Ellis 2008, 57). Film is a visual medium that adopts visual methods of storytelling, and impairment has become a part of film language, as another variable of meaning within the shot. Somersault is about growing up without guidance, without role models, and without the ability to articulate emotions and understand how your actions impact on other people. Karl is an underdeveloped but pivotal character whose Aspergers helps to reveal the inner world of the main characters, Heidi and Joe.

Heidi is a self-destructive teenager who allows herself to be sexually exploited by any man that shows interest in her. She runs away to a tourist town in the Australian snowfields after her mother finds her in bed with her [mother's] boyfriend. She was promised a job there by a man who probably slept with, and disregarded, her, too. When he doesn't remember who she is, she decides to stick around anyway. She gets a job at the local BP service station and a place to stay
in a flat behind the local motel. She embarks on a relationship of sorts with Joe, the son of some farmers. Joe is unable to deal with the emotions awakened in him by Heidi, and he proceeds to reject her and then seek her out perpetually. Meanwhile Heidi, stuck between adulthood and adolescence, is both lying to everyone she meets in an attempt to forget her past and telling them exactly how she's feeling and what she's thinking. She befriends Bianca, another teenaged girl from work, and Irene, the widowed motel proprietor whose son is in jail and continues to fantasize about Joe. When Joe refuses to call her his girlfriend and she is rejected by Bianca for attempting to seduce her stepfather, she picks up two "fucked up rich guys with dope" and brings them back to her flat. When Joe shows up, Heidi's new world entirely unravels as her argument with Joe results in her being kicked out by Irene. Although difficult and humiliating at the time, the situation leads Heidi on the path toward home and redemption.

At Bianca's house, Heidi watches as the family supports and nurtures Karl, Bianca's younger brother who has Aspergers. As Heidi learns more about Karl, the viewer learns more about Heidi. According to Shortland, Heidi is not unlike a person with Aspergers:

> Her sense of touch and sight and sound is really strong, but she has absolutely no idea of her effect on other people. She is really blunt and just too intimate and so she is always inappropriate. She is almost like a Mac truck. She just keeps going. It doesn't matter what happens to her. (*Snow Worries*, online)

For example, Bianca explains to Heidi that Karl lacks empathy (a common stereotype about people with Aspergers):

> It's like if you feel pain I can understand or if I'm happy you can tell. He can't tell so he can't make friends. He just says exactly what he's thinking, he doesn't know how he's [going to] make the other person feel.

Karl's Aspergers and inability to make friends parallels Heidi's inability to anticipate how her actions will make other people (such as Bianca and Irene) feel or to understand what she's done wrong when they get upset. We are reminded of Heidi's disastrous introduction to Joe's friends when Bianca explains, "If you tell a joke he waits for everyone else to laugh because he doesn't know what's funny." Earlier, when Joe introduced Heidi to his friends, one of them comments that working in a service station must be a real mixed bag, and Heidi doesn't get the joke. Joe's friends proceed to laugh at her, humiliating Joe who subsequently won't hold her hand. Heidi, although highly sexually active, still carries a scrapbook of old birthday cards around with her. These cards seem to perform the same function as Karl's Emotion Expression flash cards with which his mother instructs him. While Karl is unable to recognize happy, interpreting it as "eating something that didn't taste good," at least someone is trying to teach him. No one is instructing Heidi or Joe about how to relate to people as Heidi's mum seems more interested in the pub than her daughter and Joe's father won't engage with his son emotionally when he tries to open up to him. For example, Heidi eats a bowl of fresh chopped chili on her first romantic dinner with Joe—she thinks---as a way of telling him she loves him and wants to be his girlfriend. According to Shortland:
The film is about intimacy and people's inner emotional life. We set out to make it as truthful and, I suppose, as fragile as we could (Joyce, online)

Karl's Aspergers and purported inability to understand empathy or make friends provide a clear narrative shortcut for Heidi's inner emotional life. This is an intense film with very unlikeable characters. The only exceptions are the stereotypical Australian including the weary widow, the gay famer, the down on their luck Aboriginal family and the farmer's wife silenced in a patriarchal environment. They, too, function as shortcuts, or as an essential subplot, that gives more information about the main characters.

**The Black Balloon.** Black Balloon Productions. Directed By Elissa Down 2008 Australia

Like other significant Australian films that include characters with disability and impairment such as *Muriel's Wedding, Strictly Ballroom,* and *The Piano,* Elissa Down's debut feature film *The Black Balloon* received many accolades at the Cannes Film festival. However, Down's film offers a very different characterization of disability through the inclusion of a main character with autism. Based on Down's own experiences of growing up with two brothers with autism (she wanted to give an "insider's view"), *The Black Balloon* is a sensitive and humorous look at family politics in early 1990s Australian suburbia when disability marks a family as different:

His autism just *is.* That's who he is and that's what I wanted to show. Obviously it's going to make you think and I hope make you laugh and cry - but it's not like we should bring out the violins for poor Charlie. He does have autism but he's also a very willful character who loves his life. Even though there are a lot of things he can't do there are also a lot of things he *can* do. And that's what I wanted to show that my experience of growing up was a little different. There's a lot of laughter and a lot of joy but there are also a lot of tears and frustration. And I just wanted to show this is how it is. (Rassos, online)

Charlie has autism and ADHD, and he communicates through signing and through a single word, "duh." His younger brother Thomas remembers when Charlie could say "Tom, Mum and Dad," and he wishes that his brother could just be normal. For his parents Simon and Maggie, Charlie is Charlie, but Thomas at 15 years old is struggling, especially as he tries to fit into his new school where the daily sighting of the "spastic bus" provides a great source of amusement to his peers. Charlie takes this bus to school each day, and Thomas hopes that no one realizes that they are brothers. When pregnant Maggie is prescribed bed rest, Thomas becomes responsible for giving Charlie his medication and making sure that he doesn't break into strangers' houses to use the toilet. When Charlie breaks into Thomas' potential love interest Jackie's house as she is taking a shower, Thomas' secret is discovered, and he and Jackie embark on a relationship.

The film succeeds in making audiences feel uncomfortable as Down explores the frustration of having a brother with autism through several provocative scenes. Charlie defecates in his bedroom after being locked there by Thomas, who is trying to hide his existence from Jackie, and then later mistakes one of Jackie's tampons
as a lollypop. Subsequently in the film, Charlie exposes his penis to Jackie at Thomas' birthday dinner, providing a powerful moment that ultimately allows Thomas to express his frustrations and to discover his love for his brother. These scenes are offset by laughter and joy as Charlie is involved in the family unit and in Thomas and Jackie's budding relationship. Unlike other films that deal with autism, Charlie has no compensatory abilities that make him special in another area. Thomas' failed attempts to teach Charlie to speak show that he is no *Rain Man*. Charlie himself demonstrates that there is so much more (and sometimes less) to autism than the *Rain Man* characterization suggests.

Down acknowledges that autism is unfamiliar to most audiences, and she sought to provide familiar points of reference—for example, the family structure and the parents in particular:

> You *know* someone like Maggie, you *know* someone like Simon, this is a married couple. When an audience comes across a story that is a little different, that has something unusual and new things like autism, it’s good to be able to cling to something familiar like the parents. (Rassos, online)

The film evinces the diversity of Australian identities through a mosaic of characterizations: the ocker parents, the disabled brother who throws tantrums in the shop, the beautiful yet dorky girlfriend, and Thomas who just wants to fit in and yet who ultimately learns to be proud to ride the bus to school with the brother he loves. It acknowledges that people with disabilities need to develop in order to lead fulfilling lives and, as well, that at times this process may be difficult on the people who love them. It highlights the impact of both impairment and disabling attitudes on people with disability but without paying undue attention to the body.

*Clubland* is another recent Australian film that explores a similar dynamic where a young man's first relationship is hampered by the interactions of his disabled brother. Although both films allow the character with a disability to drive the narrative, *The Black Balloon* does it in a more overt way as Thomas' coming of age is closely linked to Charlie. In *Clubland* the brother spends most of his time on the couch reminding his mother of how he has negatively affected her dreams of fame and fortune. *The Black Balloon* is a significant film in Australian cinema, especially when compared to films of the 1990s that include characters with disability (such as *Angel Baby*, *Shine*, *Romper Stomper*, *The Well*, and *Hammers Over The Anvil*). During that decade, disability remained in the background of many film narratives and was tangential to social critiques, particularly in relation to cultural diversity and national identity. The ubiquity of disability in more recent films suggests that it is a fundamental aspect of contemporary Australian culture.

In his analysis of the disability biopic and the most internationally popular Australian film of the 1990s, *Shine*, Tom Shakespeare suggests that the intentions of the filmmaker are crucial to the understanding of film analysis and production within critical disability studies. Down, who based *The Black Balloon* on her own experiences, believing she "had nothing to hide," encouraged naturalistic performances among her key actors. She comments in relation to Luke Ford who played Charlie:

> My support for him was centered on the type of autism of the character and really being that safety net for him, to take his character as far as he...
goes. He could really make bold choices because he knew that he would be supported if he did something that wasn't quite within the scope of the character. (Rassos, online)

Down focused on building relationships in rehearsals, particularly between Toni Collette (Maggie) and Luke Ford who would remain in character for hours:

[T]he first thing Toni did was just let Charlie put on his undies and his socks and his shoes and get him dressed, give him his medicine, brush his hair, and just have a day-in-the-life. They had barbeques together, played games and cards together, to get a real sense of how the family operates, and physically moves and physically interacts, because the minute you see them on the screen you believe that they're a family. (Rassos, online)

This film fits within the milieu of Australian family drama, and the inclusion of autism advances this genre as well as the general focus on diversity within this national cinema. The Black Balloon claimed six awards at the 2009 Australian Film Institute Awards including Best Feature and Best Director, and it opened the Generation 14plus program at the Berlin International Film Festival, winning the Crystal Bear for the Best Feature-length film.

Mary And Max. Melodrama Pictures. Directed By Adam Elliot
2009 Australia

Mary and Max is the Claymation creation of acclaimed Australian director and disability film festival (The Other Film Festival) patron Adam Elliot. Disability and autism in particular have been a recurring theme throughout Elliot's short and feature film oeuvre. In Mary and Max Elliot creates a pen pal friendship between a socially inept eight year old Melbourne schoolgirl, Mary Dinkle, and a 44 year old, obese New York man with Aspergers, Max Horovitz. The friendship spans 20 years, and the letters explore a myriad of difficult topics including where babies come from, autism, psychiatry, taxidermy and religion.

The film is based loosely on Elliot's own pen pal friendship with a person with Aspergers, and Elliot sought to depict the experience as faithfully as possible. Though he perhaps makes him too representative of "people with Aspergers, as if one could generalize without doing damage, he nonetheless breaks new ground. Elliot writes,

In this film, because I wanted the characters to be as real and authentic as possible, it meant that I had to match that with authentic and real dialogue. Because the film is based on my pen friend in New York, I really re-read his letters and worked out his speech patterns. I worked out how people with Aspergers structure their sentences; there is a certain oddness in the way people with Aspergers often speak, so I did a lot of research. I thoroughly investigated autism-with my pen friend's permission-and spent a year writing the script. (Wotzke, online)
Unlike Karl in *Somersault* whose experience of Aspergers acts as a subplot to shed light on the main one, Max is a well rounded character whose Aspergers is central to his personality. His is an exciting characterization that overturns stereotypes and offers some important critiques. The Claymation format allows Elliot, an angry filmmaker who tackles injustice in his films, to criticize the medicalization of, and stigma attached to, people with disabilities. He juxtaposes Max's Aspergers and Mary's lack of understanding of many social issues, including homosexuality and alcoholism, to show how disability is socially constructed and defined along culturally specific parameters.

When Mary uses Max's condition as inspiration for her research without his permission, Max feels used, and he abandons their friendship. He is horrified by Mary's call for a cure for Aspergers. Elliot creates parallels between the marginalization of people with Aspergers and the marginalization of people on the basis of their sexuality, as Max reworks a common gay expression to say not having Aspergers would be "like changing the color of my eyes."

*Mary and Max* has been described by some as a borderline infotainment for Aspergers (Urban, online), while others have celebrated it for being "neither about how horrible it is to be on the spectrum, nor [a] flashy [spot] about autistic "super crips"" (Raymaker, online). The back-and-forth, pen pal voiceover provides compelling, accessible and humorous insight into Aspergers, the problem of medicalization and stigma, obstacles to self-determination, and the predicament of not fitting into society's expectations.

**Conclusion**

Australian filmmakers have deployed characters with cognitive disabilities to invoke a feeling of lost innocence leading up to, and after, Australia's bicentennial celebrations in 1988. Characters in films such as *Tim, Malcolm,* and *Sweetie* can be read as adult-children who give voice to a national fear of growing up. Perhaps the current fascination with autism can be connected to uncertainty regarding the nuances of Australian humor and how they are received by international audiences. After all, changes in film funding in Australia have compelled filmmakers to seek international sources of funding.

The exclusion of disability from notions of cultural diversity in Australian cinema is significant, particularly because impairment as a signifier of weakness has been used to strengthen a multicultural national identity. In a cinema fascinated with social constructions, disability has remained located in the biological. However, due to the changing nature of the Australian film industry and the international politicization of disability, possibilities exist for a redirection of disability representation into the 2000s.

The move from a minor character in *Somersault* to major characters that drive the narratives in *The Black Balloon* and *Mary and Max* indicates the changing position of disability in Australian national cinema. Where previously it served to flesh out main characters by showing what's around them, it now warrants focus itself. Integral to this shift to include disability, and autism/Aspergers in particular, within ideas of Australian diversity are the intentions of the filmmakers.

**References**


Disability Studies Quarterly acknowledges and appreciates the Ohio State University Libraries for publishing DSQ as part of the University's Knowledge Bank initiative.