

Title: The Autistic Mediated Body. The Representation of Autism in Italian Contemporary Audiovisual Media as researched during the Narrative Change Fellowship at the Italian Coalition of Liberties and Civil Rights (CILD)

Presented at “OUTKASTS!” Conference at the University of Lisbon, Portugal

October 2024

Abstract: As highlighted by the most recent report of Auditel-Censis (2023), the screen is now an integral part of the life of Italians and their imagery. Concurrently, Italian cinema and television largely lack representation of autistic people. For these reasons, the aim of this research is focusing on the quantity and quality of autistic representation in Italian cinema and television, while also confronting the data emerged from the initial desk research, which consisted of the observation of the language being used by Italian institutions, journalists and audiovisual texts for cinema and television, with the desires of self-representation of autistic people and their family or caretakers. The latter was embodied by 5 interviews with experts on the topic (one academic researcher, two university professors, a neurodivergent advocate for autistic people, a neurodivergent DE&I consultant). The interviewees were inquired about their personal and professional view over the representation of autistic bodies and their desires for the future of autistic representation.

Both the desk research and the interviews described the representation of autistic people as lacking a diversified approach, stereotypical and as being heavily influenced by the medical model of disability in mainstream media, while nonetheless being positively pushed forward by the grassroots activity of advocates and other independent people and associations online. Thus, if it's true that Italian mainstream media continues to be fond of the white autistic male, it's also true that feminine and gender diverse people present a more complex way of representing the autistic

body—much more in line with international texts and narrations, that is to say a sociocultural model of disability.

This suggests that the state of representation of autistic people in Italian media is stagnant and self-referred when mainstream (national), and naturally more in line with the international landscape when independent and grassroots (local). This two-pole situation can be explained by a general lack of understanding of the day-to-day life of autistic people by mainstream media and national institutions, the need for hegemonic identities to keep disabilities at the margin and a deeply unstable national identity of the Italian nation.

Bio: Sara Giudice (they/them) is a Narrative Change Fellow at CILD (Italian Coalition for Liberties and Civil Rights). They graduated from Sapienza University in Rome with a thesis titled ‘Ab/normality in Rai Fiction. Narrations of diversity in Rai Fiction productions from 2014 to 2020’, which won an Honourable mention from the degree award “Francesco Valdiserri” (2023). Sara continues to research the representation of underrepresented communities in Italian media, writing about the topic for Media Diversity Institute and founding Crip 101, an observatory on media diversity in the form of an open-access newsletter.

Key words: Autism; Autistic Representation; Italian Media; Cinema; Television.

1. Introduction

As of today, the Italian National Observatory on Autism states that a total of 78.826 people have received a “diagnosis of autism” (National Observatory of Autism, 2024). These 78.826 people have been diagnosed either in the 782 facilities that offer treatment or diagnostic services for children or the 648 that offer the same services but for adults. What immediately meets an expert eye is the fact that the number of people who received a diagnosis in a medical time and space

cannot represent the exact amount of autistic people on Italian national territory. On the other end, another issue arises, when thinking about a person reflecting and exploring their neurotype: if they didn't receive a diagnosis as a child, how can an adult know they are autistic?

As showed by Gellini and Marczak (2023), adults who seek a diagnosis in their adult life often try to put an end to a sense of lacking, estrangement and unsolvable difference from other people. It can be inferred that this sense of displacement and alienation comes from both personal experience in social contexts and narrations that are absorbed throughout a lifetime. It can also be inferred that this kind of experience, while being culturally influenced, can be interpreted as “universal”, at least in Western countries.

As demonstrated by Diversity Foundation with their 2024 “*Diversity Media Research Report*” and FISH (Italian Federation for the Overcoming of the Handicap) with the 2012 report called “*Disability and Media. The representation of people with disabilities in the Italian information system*”, the way in which disability (autism and other neurodivergencies included) is narrated and overall represented is partial and, often, harmful. FISH denounces the usage of an improper language when defining disability, with expressions that promote themes of absence, deficiency and illness. In the same fashion, Diversity Foundation reports that news about disabled people in mainstream media (newspapers) are a miniscule part of the overall total of news considered (1,3% of 548 news) and that the most reported themes, regarding disability, are charity, solidarity and awareness (with a spike of news in April, during the National Day of Autism Awareness), psychiatric issues and criminality, healthcare and scientific research.

It is clear, then, that mainstream media, especially news, provide a bleak picture of disability to the public, as most recently confirmed by Peruzzi and Battisti (2024).

2. Methodology

This research was developed during six months (March 2024 to August 2024) at CILD (Italian Coalition of Liberties and Civil Rights), under the supervision of Andrea Oleandri (Co Executive Director of CILD).

The collected data has been the result of a first period of desk research, to explore and understand general narration of autism in Italy, then followed by a second phase of semi-structured interviews with 5 experts on the themes of autism and autistic representation, both on a professional and a personal base.

The data collected in the first phase of the research (desk research) regarded the whole Italian media scape with a focus on audiovisual texts.

The data collected during the interviews was archived within the duration of the fellowship, but direct words of the interviewees will not be shared in this paper, since the experts didn't agree on sharing their statements outside of the fellowship. Their statements and words will be indirectly reported, when useful for drawing a clearer picture. The names of the experts will not be shared.

The objective of this research, within the Narrative Lab of CILD, was to understand the contemporary narration of autism in Italy (within cinema, television, news outlets, national and local institutions) and act upon that same narration, finally understanding what elements, tools, strategies and media concurred in it and how to change it. This final part was developed at the end of the fellowship, after the research had concluded, with the aim of developing a narrative change project for the modification of autistic representation.

3. Autistic bodies in Italian Screens

a. How do we relate with stories about autism?

As Stuart Hall stated, throughout his work, what we see and absorb through media has a way of influencing what we are going to do in our day-to-day life and how we are going to do it. In *The*

Narrative Construction of Reality, Hall says that “the fictional forms in which those questions are rehearsed do connect imaginatively, and they connect [...] as a kind of rehearsal: they’re imaginary scenarios for the sort of things that could happen to people, and they begin to rehearse how you match up to that” (Hall, 1984). In this passage, Hall refers to the double-system-ed way by him described, with which humans consume and process images in the media, assuming that every medium uses his own language, and that imagination (inside) is the pre-requisite of action through language (outside). But this precise flux of representation doesn’t happen in a vacuum—it exists in social and cultural contexts (Hall,1997).

Italian sociocultural context is now surely shaped by the most recent rise and settling of the far-right, both politically and culturally, but much more deeply by the historically fixed hegemonic relationship between social groups on the territory (Gramsci, 1975). The term “hegemonic”, here, is used specifically in its most original Gramscian meaning, in which the dominated group is both oppressed and dependant on the dominant one. In Italy, this relationship reflects in its clearest form within the relationship between mainstream media and disabled people, as explained before.

Assuming that autism is a disabling condition because of the way in which modifies an individual way of interacting with others and, thus, their positioning in society, and assuming that this particular feature of autism made it inevitable for an autistic community to form and thrive (Bagatell, 2010), and that this kind of social metamorphosis has led to a new perception of the self that could never be related to an abled-bodied or neurotypical person (Samuels, 2023), an analysis of the state of representation of autism in Italian audiovisual media will be now illustrated.

b. How many stories about autism?

A group of 11 audiovisual texts (4 movies, 3 tv shows, 4 documentaries) was considered within the research. The texts were distributed from 2006 up until 2024, with an irregular rate of release.

Nonetheless, the first data that emerges from the gathering of the texts is the difficulty of finding movies, tv shows and documentaries that directly approach the theme of autism or that have an autistic character among the Italian audiovisual market. Amid the 356 Italian movies released in 2023 (Cinetel, 2024), only one was detected that dealt with theme of autism: *Io ci provo (I'll try, 2023)*, an independent documentary. The situation doesn't change in the previous years: among the detected texts, only 1 was released in 2006 (tv show distributed by broadcaster Mediaset), 1 in 2012 (movie released in theatres), 1 in 2013 (independent documentary), 1 in 2017 (independent documentary), 2 in 2018 (1 tv show distributed by broadcaster Rai and 1 movie distributed in theatres), 1 in 2019 (movie distributed in theatres), 2 in 2022 (1 animated tv show distributed by Rai's streaming service Rai Play and 1 movie distributed in theatres), 1 in 2023 and 1 in 2024 (movie distributed in theatres). Without delving into the analysis of the distribution of the texts and their economical and audience-related success (which is out of the scope of this research), it can be inferred that the Italian audiovisual market isn't extensively interested in stories about autistic people or, at least, that Italian authors and producers do not put out a notable number of stories about autism or with autistic characters.

2006	<i>E poi c'è Filippo</i>	Tv show	Canale 5
2012	<i>Pulce non c'è</i>	Film	Prime Video
2013	<i>The Special Need</i>	Documentary	Prime Video
2017	<i>Tommy e gli altri</i>	Documentary	//
2018	<i>Tutto può succedere</i>	Tv show	Rai 1
2018	<i>Quanto basta</i>	Film	Rai Play

2019	<i>Tutto il mio folle amore</i>	Film	Prime Video
2022	<i>Il Mondo di Leo</i>	Tv show	Rai Play
2022	<i>Sul sentiero blu</i>	Documentary	Prime Video
2023	<i>Io ci provo</i>	Documentary	Youtube
2024	<i>Flaminia</i>	Film	Nelle sale

Tab. 1. Details about the group of audiovisual texts considered in the research.

c. Documentaries

As mentioned before, documentaries about autistic people are mostly produced via independent means, not necessarily production companies, small production companies, single individuals and/or organizations or institutions for autistic people. This tells us that the greater mainstream distribution system does not include such type of documentaries within itself.

By observing the subjects of the documentaries, it is noted that all the documentaries feature male protagonists. This puts this type of productions in line with the international tendency of including autistic male protagonists in successful stories for the screen (Hattenstone, 2021) but also inevitably positions the Italian audiovisual market as well: if these are the only stories produced on the matter in the last 20 years, it can be interpreted as a sign that Italy is still behind in comparison with other countries—such as Australia (*Heartbreak High*), the US (*Everything's Going to Be Okay*) and the UK (*A Kind of Spark*).

Another notable detail regards the way in which all stories feature a journey in search for something: in *The special need*, the autistic protagonists look for a romantic and sexual partner; in

Sul sentiero blu (*On the blue trail*) the protagonists walk the via Francigena towards Rome; in *Tommy e gli altri* (*Tommy and the others*) and *Io ci provo* (*I'll try*) the journey is simply adult life. As in a classical hero's journey (Campbell, 1990), the audience follows the protagonists in a personal saga of day-to-day life obstacles, social difficulties, redemption through employment and fear for the future.

It is noted that this kind of narrative organisation surely recalls a classic way of telling, but also flirts with the most stereotypical depiction of autism as something to cure, correct or at least modify. This shows that the documentaries included in the groups of considered texts align with the medical model of disability (Ellcessor, Kirkpatrick, 2017).

d. Movies and tv shows

As for works of fiction, the group of considered texts included 7. For tv shows *E poi c'è Filippo* (*And then, there's Filippo*, 2006), *Tutto può succedere* (*Anything can happen*, 2018), *Il Mondo di Leo* (*Leo's world*, 2022), for a total of 3 texts. For movies, *Pulce non c'è* (*Flea isn't here*, 2012), *Quanto basta* (*To taste*, 2018), *Tutto il mio folle amore* (*All of my foolish love*, 2019), *Flaminia* (2024), for a total of 4 texts.

The stories here listed mostly feature an autistic male super-crip character (Shek-Noble, 2022), either protagonist (*Leo's world*), co-protagonist (*To taste*, *All of my foolish love*) or supporting character (*And then, there's Filippo*, *Anything can happen*), with the exceptions of *Flea isn't here* and *Flaminia*, that feature two autistic female co-protagonists. The representation of autism, both in men and women, aligns with Diversity Foundation's above-mentioned research, in the way in which the stories explore themes of psychiatric assistance, struggles within the family, abuse, the diagnostic process, social difficulties and employment as a way towards freedom.

It is also noted that most the films and tv shows considered in the research represent autism and autistic characters as lacking something—in their personal, professional or scholastic life. When

they don't lack anything in terms of physical means, they lack in social skills, making the autistic characters incapable of dealing with day-to-day life by themselves. When this happens, the autistic character also functions as moral support for the neurotypical counterpart (usually a sibling-caretaker), providing suggestions and ideas to solve problems in life from their "special" point of view.

Empowerment happens in one text only, *Leo's world*, which is also the only animated children tv show in the group of considered texts. *Leo's World* is a particularly interesting example of an audiovisual text with autistic representation, here aimed at children, because the tv show is directly aimed at a neurodivergent audience, as stated by the creative and production team. It is inferred that this does not happen in the rest of the considered texts, because of the victimising and magical-black-man-ning (Hughey, 2009) of the characters, both men and women. However, it can be also inferred that this type of autistic representation not only reflects the current medical-model point of view of Italy as a society, considered the fact that Italy has struggled with its national identity since its unification (Gramsci, 1975), but also that it is functional to reaffirm the same to the audience (Gilman, 1985).

Overall, as for documentaries, movies and tv shows included in the group of considered texts, they remain as heavily influenced by the medical model of disability.

4. Interviews with the experts

As previously mentioned, the second phase of the research consisted in interviewing 5 experts on autistic representation in Italian media, both from their personal and professional point of view. The experts were selected among a network of stakeholders build under the supervision of Andrea Oleandri (CILD).

The interviewed experts were: two university professors (Expert 1 & Expert 2), one academic researcher (Expert 3), one DE&I consultant (Expert 4) and an advocate for autistic people (Expert

5). Two of the experts were parents of autistic people, two were neurodivergent people themselves, while only one wasn't either personally related to autistic people or neurodivergent themselves. All the experts approached or are still approaching the question of autism and autistic representation in their professional life.

It was clear, right from the first semi-structured interviews, that the experts were expressing sentiments, ideas and suggestions that were in line with what had been observed in the first phase (the observation of Italian media, with a focus on audiovisual texts). All the experts report, in their personal and professional point of view, that autistic representation and narration in Italian media are still shaped by the medical model of disability, which makes the consumption of the texts, images and products that engage with the theme difficult to approach. This alignment with the medical model is mainly observed in mainstream media. However, all the experts also recognise a current positive change that is happening in Italy. It is noted that this positive change is observed, both by the experts and in the first phase of the research, mainly in grassroots media, specifically online advocacy efforts. Instagram is mentioned as the main platform that brings a positive, more authentic way of representing autistic people in the media. Nonetheless, this positive change is seen as partial because of the political and cultural positioning of some national organisations for autistic people, that often work side by side with the Italian Government in the body of the Ministry of Health and the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (the Higher institute for Health). Both these institutions, who lead part of the scientific research on autism, were observed, in the first part of the research, as using a language more in line with the medical model of disability than any other else.

For what regards the future of autistic representation, which was at the very centre of interest of the interviews, Expert 1 expresses their desire of emancipating from the current oppressing and grey rhetoric of autism, which is also followed by a language that constantly recalls a lack of something deep and existential. Both Expert 1 and 2 express a desire of change that can surpass the categorisation of autism and other neurodivergences, while also cultivating a strong and rooted culture of difference and leaving a rigid identity-politics approach behind (Expert 2). Expert 3 also

mentions the need for more authentic and empowering autistic representation, specifically from a qualitative point of view, rather than quantitative. They also notice how dis-edulcorating the life and body of neurodivergent and autistic people can be of help in changing the direction of the current narrations.

Expert 4 and 5 closed the round of interviews with views on the future of autistic representation that were in line with the others'. Both expressed the need for, yet again, a more authentic representation of autistic people through the self determination of autistic people themselves. This need is placed both in intradiegetic and extra diegetic terms, with Expert 4 expressing the desire of more neurodivergent and autistic writers in writer's rooms and editorial teams. Expert 5 focused more on the intradiegetic field, expressing the desire of seeing autistic characters in their whole human complexity—desires, goals and, views on the world.

A remarkable consistency is observed along the five interviews, with the Experts voicing desires and expectations that align within themselves, generally calling for a change that concerns the dominant medical model of disability used (consciously or not) in Italy.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, what mainly emerges from the research is the clear gap between autistic representation in mainstream media and in grassroots media. The first is identified in news outlets, institutional statements and overall language used, as well as audiovisual texts, while the second is mainly embodied by the social media platform Instagram. In fact, when building the network of stakeholders and when asking the experts how they approach autism outside the medical model and medical facilities and services, online advocates and content creators were mentioned as a constant. Indeed, all the Experts mentioned content creators as their main initiation to a (perceived as) new interpretation of autism, neurodivergence and disability. Expert 3, in particular, talked at length about how content creators and advocates for autistic people (especially if autistic themselves) have

increasingly changed the perception of autism and made (consciously or not) efforts in aligning the online-attending public opinion with the socio-cultural model of disability (Elcessor, Kirkpatrick, 2017). Finally, Expert 5 expressed a sense of euphoria recalling the pandemic and the 2020 lockdown in Italy, during which they observed a peak in interest in disability, neurodivergences and autism, then faded as soon as the country started to overcome the white-yellow-red lockdown system and the pandemic as a whole. It is observed that this great attachment to normalcy was present, between 2021 and 2022, in the form of the rhetoric of “the new normal”, also known as “return to normalcy”, that European and International governments pushed after the pandemic was seemingly overcome and suspend the states of emergency (Beresford, 2021), which in Italy happened on the 31st of March 2022.

Again, as it was already highlighted in the desk research, then confirmed within the interviews, the medical model dominates mainstream and institutional communications, as also confirmed by Diversity Foundation and FISH, thus reiterating the experts’ impressions and personal/professional reports.

In the language used by mainstream media, national institutions and diversity-based events, the thematical approach to autism shows, in fact, a conservative view on disability, neurodivergence and autism. Thus, a divide is also observed between Italian mainstream media, understood as a collective, and the internationally acclaimed and used paradigm of neurodiversity (Jaarsma, Welin, 2012). The latter is nevertheless brought to the country by online advocacy efforts, in an almost natural turn to online platforms, that generally prove a more accessible form of communication and organisation, in the short term, for disabled people (Hamraie, 2023).

The gap between mainstream (national) and grassroots (local) representations of autistic people in the media also exists in relation with the efforts of organisations for autistic people. Expert 1 and Expert 2, in particular, deem national organizations and events as much less authentic and effective, for autistic children and adults, because they observe their language, activities and events as much more worried in using a medical language than in caring for the day-to-day life and future of

autistic children and adult on every level of support. This can be also observed when looking at the gap between research developed, both in Italy and Europe, with the support of autistic-led organisations, such as Neuropeculiar APS (Italy) and EUCAP (Europe), or with the support of the Ministry of Health and the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (Higher Institute for Health). The first ones quantitatively and qualitatively express much more concern towards the cultural and social positioning and struggles of autistic children and adults, while the second ones are much more focused (quantitatively and qualitatively) on the biologic and genetic causes and expressions (as in symptomatic) of autism.

As previously mentioned, it is argued that this kind of relationship with the medical model of disability, used to represent autism throughout media and particularly on the screen, is functional from a Gramscian point of view. What emerges from this research is the commodification of autism in the media (Mallet, Runswick-Cole, 2012), that is showed on the screen only when it is functional to the neurotypical (as in normal) audience: autism in Italian mainstream media, whether it is showed in a movie, in television, in the news or an institutional statement, can only inspire, reassure or draw the line between the normal and the abnormal. As in Gramscian terms, the autistic body in Italian mainstream media is an object for the nondisabled gaze (Loja et al, 2013) to observe, but it is absorbed by the neurotypical audience in a context in which the autistic body (especially if with a higher need for support) needs the neurotypical one to survive, both inside and outside the screen.

This whole paradigm, however, is overthrown in grassroots media, particularly Instagram, where the autistic body can, for a short period of time, gain partial control over its own narration and hopefully contribute to a narrative change in the long term.

References

BAGATELL Nancy, From Cure to Community. Transforming Notions of Autism, *Ethos*, Vol. 38, No. 1, Rethinking Autism, Anthropology (March 2010), 33 – 35

BERESFORD Peter, et al., COVID-19 and Co-Production in Health and Social Care Research, Policy, and Practice: Volume 1: The Challenges and Necessity of Co-Production. 1st ed., Bristol University Press, 2021.

CAMPBELL Joseph, *The Hero's Journey*, Novato: New World Library, 1990.

CINETEL, *Cinema in sala nel 2023. I dati del box office*, Rome, 2024

DIVERSITY FOUNDATION, *Diversity Media Research Report*, 2024

ELLCESOR Elizabeth, KIRKPATRICK Bill, *Disability media studies*, New York: New York University Press, 2017.

FISH, *Disability and Media. The representation of people with disabilities in the Italian information system*, Fondazione Giacomo Matteotti Onlus, 2012.

GELLINI Hannah, Marczak Magda, "I Always Knew I Was Different": Experiences of Receiving a Diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder in Adulthood—a Meta-Ethnographic Systematic Review, *Review of Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 2023.

GILMAN Sander L., *Difference and Pathology. Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

GRAMSCI Antonio, *Quaderni del carcere*, Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1975.

HALL Stuart, *Representation. Cultural representation and signifying practices*, London: The Open University, 1997.

HAMRAIE Aimi, *Crip Making*, in MILLS Mara, SANCHEZ Rebecca, *Crip Authorship*, New York: New York University Press, 2023

HATTENSTONE Simon, *Why do they have to be brilliant? The problem of autism in the movies*, *The Guardian*, 2021

HUGHEY Matthew W., *Cinethetic racism: white redemption and black stereotypes in "Magical negro" films*, in *Social Problems*, Vol. 56, No. 3, Oxford University Press for the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Oxford, 2009, 543-577

JAARSMA Pier, WELIN Stellan, Autism as a natural human variation: reflections on the claims of the neurodiversity movement *Health Care Anal.* 2012 Mar;20(1), 20-30.

LOJA Ema Loja, COSTA Maria Emília, HUGHES Bill & MENEZES Isabel (2013) Disability, embodiment and ableism: stories of resistance, *Disability & Society*, 28:2, 190-203

NATIONAL OBSERVATORY ON AUTISM, Mapping of Services, April 2024.

O'HARA John, Interview with Stuart Hall for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Doubletake programme, originally broadcast 5 May 1983: The Narrative Construction of Reality – Stuart Hall. Republished in centerforbookculture.org's Context online edition, No. 10. Retrieved 16 April 2008

PERUZZI Gaia, BATTISTI Fabiana, Covering disability in Italian journalism. Language, practices and perspectives in mainstream and alternative media, *Journalism*, 2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–19

SAMUELS Ellen, Twenty-Seven Ways of Looking at Crip Self Autotheory, in MILLS Mara, SANCHEZ Rebecca, *Crip Authorship. Disability as a Method*, New York: New York University Press, 2023

SHEK-NOBLE Liz, Supercrip in Motion: A Critical Visual Analysis of Promotional Materials for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, Liverpool University Press, Vol. 16, 4, 2022