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Note from the Editors: Autistic Representation in Popular Culture

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Note from the Editors: Autistic Representation in Popular Culture

It is both the best and worst of times for autistic representation in popular culture. The good news is autistic individuals are appearing in cultural narratives like never before, even approaching saturation points in adult fiction, where works with autistic characters have spawned the genre *autlit*, as well as young adult fiction, autobiographical non-fiction, film, television, and the stage. The bad, however, is that authentic, responsible representations of autism remain relatively rare, while reductive, stereotypical treatments are in ready supply. Equally troubling, autism narratives are also being commodified, as the entertainment industry profits enormously from autistic people and their experiences, often without bothering to include them. As Broderick and Risigno (2021) rightly claim, many autism narratives are complicit in promoting interventionist rhetoric, pushing the idea that autism needs fixing, an ideology which funnels money into the medical, psychiatric, and educational marketplaces.

And so we take on autistic representation in popular culture, the focus of this issue, with due care. In doing so, we hope to follow the exemplary work of Sonya Loftis, James McGrath, Stuart Murray, Mark Osteen, and others who have examined autistic representation. Their scholarship has become foundational to critical autism studies, and we hope this issue of *Ought* continues the conversation they have begun.

Loftis (2015) and McGrath (2017), among others, have shown how popular culture often likens the autistic mind to a machine or computer, and two articles in this issue further examine this correlation. The first is John Bruni's scholarly analysis of Gary Numan's early electronic music. Bruni suggests that Numan, diagnosed with autism relatively late, created a new form of music befitting a world where "the organic and inorganic are already inseparable, of complex systems that can both free and constrain us—that is, whoever we think we are, or imagine ourselves to be."

If Numan's music narrowed the distance between human consciousness and artificial intelligence, then many of popular culture's most lasting portrayals of autism sought to replace one with the other. Such is the argument of

“Autism-as-Machine Metaphors,” Erin Felepchuk’s critique of the autistic-as-computer trope prevalent in films, television, and fiction.

This issue also presents excerpts from the *St. Elsewhere* podcast, which was created by Courtney Coulson and Hector, two autistic pop culture critics. In the excerpted episode, Coulson and Hector dismantle the Netflix series *Atypical*, likely the most watched depiction of autism today—and one which, in Hector’s view, “was a show targeted more toward autism relatives and relations than toward autists themselves.” Hector and Coulson’s incisive commentary also points out the lack of diversity in autism representation: the main character, Sam, is another white, male, heterosexual who is played, problematically, played by a neurotypical actor. Inclusiveness and diversity, in contrast, are the essence of Ronaldo Byrd’s art, which is featured on the cover and included in this issue. Byrd is an autistic African-American artist whose work is inspired by and reflects popular culture.

Finally, this issue is pleased to present poetry by Nadine Plentie; a brief critique, in words and images, of the BBC’s *Sherlock* by Sonia Boué; an additional poem from Archana Kadam, a mixed media installment from Visual Arts Editor Pernille Fraser; and a review of Simon Baron-Cohen’s *The Pattern Seekers* by Donald Brackett. The autism stories told by all of these pieces matter. Representation matters. Cultural stories matter.

—Robert Rozema and Chris Bass

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