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Sharp Stick Grasps at Autistic Women's Liminal Vulnerability


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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Dr. Eunjung Kim for deepening my thinking about vulnerability and challenging me to resist simplifying it, my fellow members of Critical Vulnerability Studies for their contributions, and to the reviewers for their valuable feedback.

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Meaghan Krazinski

McDermott (2022) writes, “Autism is an overloaded signifier obscuring both the autistic subject and the condition itself from view. Accordingly, when we look at autism, what we ‘witness’ is an evershifting coalescence of signs, signifiers, tropes and aesthetics that make reference to it” (p. 52). As others have noted, the perception of classification and the classification itself are always in dialogue (Freeman Loftis, 2015; Hacking, 2006; Rosqvist & Nygren, 2023), pointing to the influential value of analysis of autistic characters in media, communicating how autistic subjectivities, agencies, and vulnerabilities are understood. Mullis notes that the practice of adopting or disavowing autistic characters has become a part of autistic culture, prompting dialogue about what it means to be autistic and making this practice of analyzing mis/recognition a source of agency. Thinking with McDermott about the liminality of autism itself can help us to look at a more nuanced analysis and shift the gaze to more complex understandings.

McDermott draws upon Hacking's loop theory positing that there is a partial asymmetry between autistic people and media representation. She importantly connects this argument to the way language, as formulated by allistic-dominated norms, contributes to this asymmetry. Others such as Chapman (2022) have used framings of Fricker's (2007) hermeneutic injustice to describe related phenomena. Regardless, autistic people and their representation impress upon each other, both in recognition and misrecognition, shaping each other. This asymmetry that Hacking's Loop identifies becomes particularly salient as we engage with the parts of autistic culture that Mullis references, asking “Is this Autistic headcanon?” Thinking this way, analysis of the gap itself by autistic viewers is an act of dialogic shaping that enacts neurodivergent agency. Characters need not always directly align with our hopes to make the analysis worthwhile.

Likewise, Freeman Loftis (2015) argues for the influence of character diagnoses (even when they are not explicitly named as such) writing, “the

public perception of the literary character may reshape and inform how autism is defined as a social construct” (Freeman Loftis, 2015 24-24, see also Freeman Loftis, 2014 as cited in Bertilsdotter Rosqvist & Nygran, 2023). Critical perspectives abound, but many draw upon portrayals of autistic white men, with less analysis of media around autistic women, and trans or non-binary people. While many speculate that famous characters such as Anne of Green Gables, or Jess from *New Girl* are autistic, very few movies explicitly name neurodivergence.

It is even more difficult to locate an autistic representation that is not white. One exception to this is Pixar’s animated short, *Loop*, or *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, which, in its novelty, illustrates the lack of examples until very recently. Furthermore, with diagnosis (both self and formal) rates rising, the construct itself rooted in the raced and gendered biomedical model is increasingly revealed as an ever-shifting landscape, making liminality itself a defining feature of this conversation. These conversations are critical when we ask about how neurotypicality, as connected to other dominant systems, informs our statements of value (Manning, 2020).

As a late-diagnosed autistic white woman, I am interested in the shapes of this liminality which assumes certain vulnerabilities while obfuscating others; as well as how the intersections of race, disability, and gender formulate how vulnerabilities are supported or neglected. As a feminist scholar, centering embodied and situated knowledge means reading divergently into absences to see what else is there. While I search for the ‘what else?’ I also am cautious to not assume I can step outside of modernity. As Grewal & Kaplan (1994) note this tendency is based on “first world” masculinist lenses that seek a false objectivity and inevitably leave many behind. Neurotypicality, therefore, from my situated perspective in the modern era, is inexplicably connected to other dominant systems.

To note: McDermott’s theorizing of the neurotypical gaze is impelled by Mulvey’s (1975) male gaze. Like Manning (2020), I do not seek to separate my critique of neurotypicality from whiteness (and following Maria Lugones’ (2007) theorizing on the colonial/modern gender system, I understand race and binary gender as inextricable parts of the same system of modernity). Therefore, I define a neurodivergent or neuroqueer(ed) (Walker, 2021; Yergeau, 2018) analysis as moving inherently in opposition to or in excess of

(Manning, 2020) the colonial/modern gender system. This is not to deny the importance of knowledges outside these systems that should be centered and cultivated (as Lugones might say, those “off the map”). However, when I critique neurotypicality or disrupt it, I cannot leave behind the engagement of these other structural intersections. It is from the understanding of how this space of il/legibility shapes a fluctuating and epistemically incomplete understanding of the vulnerabilities of autistic women that I turn to the film *Sharp Stick* (2022) as a launch point for this investigation, asking:

How do ideas around disability, race, and gender contribute to the legibility and illegibility of neurodivergence, allowing the coding of Sarah Jo as autistic to emerge and just as quickly recede? And how does autistic women’s contingent positioning play into representations of vulnerability, agency, and sexuality?

In the analysis that follows, I argue that in *Sharp Stick*, the dominance of the linear Plot (which I intentionally capitalize to show its hunger for dominance) caters to the neurotypical gaze, perpetuating societal expectations, while a neurodivergent perspective challenges this norm by valuing divergent elements, inviting a critical examination of characters and narratives that extend beyond conventional Plot-centric analyses.

Background

Sarah Jo, the protagonist of *Sharp Stick*, lives with her sister and mother, who she stands apart from in her sexual experiences. She takes on a position for a family who has a disabled child. Following her mother’s advice, Sarah Jo asks if the father, Josh, finds her beautiful, which eventually prompts an unfolding affair and her sexual exploration. The story culminates in her being rejected by Josh as he supports his pregnant wife, and her undergoing a transformation facilitated by her intense interest in sex and the fandom of a porn star introduced to her by Josh. The Plot of *Sharp Stick* engages a sexual awakening dependent on the characterization of Sarah Jo, as sexually naive. At 26, the explanation given is that she had a hysterectomy at 15, but many reviewers noted inconsistencies (Horton, 2022). She is surrounded by characters that espouse sexuality and, nine years later, a hysterectomy would not explain her lack of experience.

These critics argued it seemed plausible that Sarah Jo was meant to portray an autistic character. It seems they were not wrong— Amy Gravino (2022), an autistic sexuality consultant, reported that Kristine Froseth, who plays Sarah Jo, approached her to consult on the role. Gravino, aghast at the way the script depicted autistic women, was then “ghosted.” She claims the problematic autistic coding of the character remained, with a new denial. As Gravino (2022) tweets, the film presents ethical questions that require care. It would be harmful to promote more limiting tropes about autistic women and their sexual or relational vulnerabilities, but as there are elements of any stereotype that are true to life, greater nuance in the portrayal of such topics could benefit autistic people.

The stereotypes to which Gravino refers are not wholly groundless. Autistic women’s sexuality is often positioned as unquestioningly vulnerable and characterized by sexual violence at a rate higher than the general population (Cazalis et al., 2022). The reasons for this are only partially understood in the literature. However, the stasis of infantilization of neurodivergent individuals, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, systematically stifles any impetus to further understand the factors to account for these vulnerabilities in more complex ways that do not instead underwrite further protection and surveillance (for more on this see: Starke et al. 2016). These sentiments that uphold the status quo contribute to a dearth of deeper scholarship in this area.

Yet, instead of embracing this opportunity, Dunham (writer, director, producer, and actor of *Sharp Stick*) backed away. According to official statements, this is not a movie about a neurodivergent woman (Horton, 2022). Without an explanation of autism, some critics called the film incoherent and illegible. As Mullis (2018) points out, many creators are leery of explicitly claiming autistic coding (even if the community embraces the character as “Autistic headcanon”). This cycle of recognition and retraction in film is common. However, if analysis of the gap itself is a generative practice, as Mullis (2018) claims, then an analysis of *Sharp Stick* should prove productive, both in where I find affinity and recognition of Sarah Jo, and in naming the absences and the missed opportunities.

Theoretical Framework

Rosqvist et al. (2022), drawing upon McDermott's (2022) analysis of the television show *The Bridge* have suggested a reading practice that centers neurodivergent subjectivities. Likewise, in this article, I employ McDermott's framework of the neurotypical gaze as an intervention to the loop that Hacking describes. McDermott identifies three facets of the gaze including the "pleasure of looking, the fixative power of the gaze, and its inward focus" (p. 59). McDermott argues that the neurotypical gaze "fixes" autism (as distinct) and then finds pleasure in viewing autism, relying on cultural tropes or creating a fetishized portrayal. McDermott uses Berlant's conceptions of love and desire to reframe these as narratively and culturally produced, which afford the opportunities to think otherwise beyond "neuroconventional" love acts into invitations outside of this.

Accordingly, my reading of the film through my autistic subjectivity interrupts the neurotypical gaze as "natural" by naming it to decouple it from the "default" interpretation. I draw upon McDermott's (2022) concepts to analyze the mechanics of the gaze's epistemic violence in replicating the decentering of autistic subjectivities. To accomplish this, I note where *Sharp Stick* fetishizes the autistically-coded main character, demonstrating through the analysis of film techniques how the director attempts to stimulate pleasures of looking derived from objectification, which also rests on cultural scripts of previous characters (McDermott, 2022). Then, I seek places where the film might offer invitations to think otherwise; to weave my neurodivergent imaginings, affinities, wonderings, and countergaze throughout the analysis (which is one of an infinite amount of potential neurodivergent counter readings).

Opening Scene

Sharp Stick opens with blurred focus and percussive non-linguistic vocals, akin to being born. As an autistic viewer, my eyes often travel away from tracking the Plot and into textural details, making this a particularly engaging shot. The viewer must search the field of view for anchors, inviting what might be considered an autistic view. As the camera pans vertically, rack focus shifts onto brown manicured dancing hands. Read this way, the hands seem sensual and sensory, but not sexual. The hands seem like they may

even be stimulating. The music shifts and the camera continues to pan down but we are abruptly positioned as voyeurs [i.e. we gave ourselves over to the “pleasure of looking” (McDermott, 2022) but before we knew what or who we were looking at] by the way the camera moves down Treina’s twerking body. Her body fills the field of view, but her face is hidden at first.

The first gaze in *Sharp Stick*, therefore, is a male gaze, which I, as a neurodivergent white woman, was seduced into taking on by the very same sensibilities of my perception (a neurodivergent gazing) that have created my marginalization, even if for a brief moment. We later find out this is Sarah Jo’s adopted sister, Treina who is making a monetized video. While she is the subject of the opening shot, framing the entire film, she is not the main character. In watching this I felt a bit manipulated. I was drawn in by light, dancing hands, and percussive vocals, and then realized I was taking part in objectification of Treina’s body. The song, “Trader Joe” by Jungle Pussy, features lyrics that connect to the Malibu setting, but feature a black artist calling on cultural references of whiteness. In centering these lyrics of blackness appropriating whiteness, Dunham foregrounds an aspect of the white imagination wherein false equivalences are drawn that normalize appropriation of black culture. We are given no time to process what just occurred, a strange bait-and-switch that works off of quick music changes and quick camera cuts. It is important to begin the analysis here to demonstrate how the neurodivergent coding of Sarah Jo and the portrayal of contingent vulnerability in this film emerges through slippage enabled by music and camera techniques; and against the backdrop of uncritical tropes of race, disability, and gender.

Sarah Jo’s status is framed as less agentive as she appears first in these opening shots not directly, but in mirrors and gazing at Treina. Mirrors, windows, and cameras are a symbol used throughout the movie to indicate the tensions between objectifying gazes, self-awareness, legibility, and, by extension, what and to whom the person in the mirror is positioned as vulnerable to. The camera cuts from Treina to Sarah Jo (who is filming Treina) and back again. It is clear they are inhabiting the same space, but Treina can take up more space and tell Sarah Jo what to do. Perhaps one could argue that Sarah Jo, therefore, is agentive. After all, she is safely gazing behind her phone, while Treina is vulnerably performing— but why must her gaze depend on the objectification of her black sister? Sources claim that

Taylor Paige, who plays Treina, expressed reservations at taking on the role, feeling that it was “written as a white person.” If Paige’s instinct was correct, this could explain why race functions more as a secondary foil for the other characters throughout the film, than an identity that is meaningfully engaged in depth. This sets up the Plot for both Treina and Sarah Jo’s sexual experiences to emerge in counterpoint to one another, making each portrayal of vulnerability unique and explaining Plot lines that thread attempts at solidarities that counter stereotypes of vulnerability.



Treina (Taylor Paige) in the opening scene of *Sharp Stick*

McDermott argues that the neurotypical gaze “fixes” autism (as distinct) and then finds pleasure in viewing autism, relying on cultural tropes or creating a fetishized portrayal. The opening scene attempts to “fix” Sarah Jo as constrained and childlike in relation to Treina, and Treina as the racialized and sexualized other in relation to Sarah Jo. While Sarah Jo does not have the agency to express her embodiment like Treina, Treina risks exploitation in her digital media pursuits. This contrast between Sarah Jo and Treina is reinforced by their clothing. Treina is dressed in a tight-fitting pastel crop top and sweatpants, sporting a belly button ring, while Sarah Jo is dressed in a jumper and turtleneck, indicating her modest childlike nature [fitting with the conclusions of Starke et al. (2016)]. As I watch, I feel curious about

the clothing. Perhaps instead of Sarah Jo's clothes being read as childlike and constraining her further, we can understand them as evidence that she does not need to comply with the neurotypical norms of dress. Autistic clothing choices are usually liberating to autistic people, even if the neurotypical gaze deems them "childlike." But then we might ask, why would Treina's sweatpants be less childlike and adultified? The music and the characters' actions instruct me that this is how I am "supposed" to interpret the scene through the dominant neurotypical racialized gaze, but what if instead Treina, too, is dressing for comfort?

The disconnect manifests into a communication breakdown demonstrating the ways the Plot works by following a neurotypical gaze. Treina asks Sarah Jo if she is "even listening," to which Sarah Jo belatedly answers in a formal tone, repeating some of Treina's words. This appears to make it echolalic and illegible to Treina, even though it is an accurate answer. While Dunham hints at double empathy (Milton, 2012) by showing the accuracy of Sarah Jo's response, she focuses on tension rather than fully showing one side or the other; clinging to the liminality of her vulnerability. This exchange is positioned as not worth investigating by Treina. Instead, it is the weirdness that causes exasperation, which is a common experience that speaks to the liminality of autistic people who are not explicitly read as autistic. Rangan (2017) notes that not having the ability to (or refusing to) interface and translate into neurotypical speech can result in a loss of humanitarian consideration and dehumanization. The breakdown calls on this loss by engaging portrayals of autistic communication as simply failed neurotypical communication, but avoids naming disablement or auditory processing issues. Here, an autistic perspective may have shown what other elements in the room Sarah Jo was instead focusing on and in conversation with, creating an opportunity for a more epistemically rich portrayal of Sarah Jo's subjectivity. As I watch, I wonder what she is thinking at this moment, but we do not have access to her inner monologue until the end of the film when she is behind a screen once again, but in a wholly different way.

We are next introduced to a character who serves to illuminate our understanding of how the sisters' dynamic interplay of vulnerabilities works. Sarah Jo and Treina's mother, Marilyn, enters. (We later find out that Sarah Jo is her biological daughter and Treina is adopted.) She scolds Treina for her attire and instructs her to "grind more." Sarah Jo tries to defend Treina,

signaling a people-pleasing disposition, but also an attempt at solidarity with Treina. Marilyn asks Sarah Jo if she has located a tenant as part of her duties, and sings tauntingly at her to evict him. Sarah Jo complies, despite her obvious discomfort, indicating Marilyn's exploitation of her. Treina, meanwhile, still operating as a foil for Sarah Jo's character, is exploited differently— a task Sarah Jo enables by filming. The scene shifts to them at the kitchen table, Sarah Jo is eating yogurt and looking fearful while Treina and Marilyn smoke marijuana to Khia's "My Neck, My Back."

This table scene invites viewers to think about Sarah Jo's tendency to go against the grain as an affordance, showing Sarah Jo's ability to focus on positive aspects of life despite social tensions. I notice that while this scene intends me to infantilize Sarah Jo with her yogurt eating, in contrast to her family's joint-smoking to salacious tunes, at the same time, something is asymmetrical, alerting me to a spot of potential analysis. The depiction of Sarah Jo's fearful people pleasing contradicts her behavior of not partaking in the smoking of the joint. If she was afraid (remember she is 26) would she not have done what the others were doing and succumbed to peer pressure? Eating yogurt here is in defiance of norms. Sarah Jo is operating at a register that can disregard a lot of the unnecessary social tensions created by others, and instead operate on her values and principles. For instance, while she may also be people-pleasing by delivering the eviction notice, she also does it based on her autistic sense of loyalty and honor. Furthermore, on her way to evict the tenant, she is shown basking in the sun and suspending her fears.

Some autistic people may indeed be conflict-averse in certain contexts, especially as a trauma response. Still, equally as many of us do not have the same anxieties about confrontation as neurotypical norms would assume. We do find out this proclivity for exploitation foreshadows what is to come in the movie, and again leads to a central tension that drives the Plot forward. Yet, what we can turn our gaze to value moves otherwise: This also can be interpreted as a strength, and the film's resolution does attempt to draw upon it. As much as a vulnerability, this courageousness to counter the norm is equally a trait that can lead one to contribute great acts of bravery when witnessing injustice, or "risk-taking" that is only perceived as such by neurotypical onlookers. To autistic characters, these may be an inevitable result of living out and fiercely protecting one's values.

Meeting the Family

The exploration of neurodivergent characterization goes beyond the intersections of race and sexuality, delving into a somewhat fraught and distinctive connection with visible disability. Puar (2012) writes about how notions of disability have evolved from the disability rights movement, led by those who are “visibly disabled.” This not only erases invisible disabilities but reinforces binary notions of disability (i.e. one is either disabled or not), a notion that Dunham exploits to drive the Plot forward. Without the ability to be read as such, Puar (2012) argues, one is read as not disabled and is not granted a political voice. This framing helps illuminate the liminal status of neurodivergence in the film. The liminality (not quite disabled, yet not quite “normal”) has the effect of making the audience question Sarah Jo’s comprehension and capacity for subjectivity, therefore calling into question her humanity, vulnerability, and political agency as core elements of the Plot.

As the scene unfolds, we are introduced to the family assigned to Sarah Jo through her “Children with Developmental Differences” class. This introduction sets the stage for how power, vulnerability, and difference shape the central conflict in the movie: That is, Sarah Jo’s involvement with Josh, a married man and Zach’s father, and his eventual rejection of her, leading to her self-discovery. Sarah Jo, presumably sensing a kinship with disabled individuals, actively seeks solidarity by taking on the responsibility of supporting Zach for her class. However, her preoccupation with Josh often functions to prohibit these potentially productive relationships from developing enough to impact the events, or for them to serve as a community for Sarah Jo; they unfurl around the Plot, but ornamentally

This introductory scene where we meet the family demonstrates how Sarah Jo enacts those bids for a relationship and how Josh, or her preoccupation with him, intervenes. The scene opens with a two shot of Sarah Jo contentedly coloring at a table with Zach, a white child with Down syndrome, to demonstrate some affinity. Even though Sarah Jo is 26, we understand her as a child in this shot, positioned along with Zach and enjoying the same activity. As the scene unfolds, Josh is negotiating care tasks with Heather, his pregnant wife, as she rushes to leave for work. Unlike Treina’s relationship with Sarah Jo which was complicatedly mediated by mirrors and digital media, Zach and Sarah Jo’s is seemingly simpler. Instead of being *behind*

a mirror or window, they are *in front* of a large picture window looking out onto the Malibu landscape, indicating the potentiality of the expanse presented by their relationship. Like her relationship with Treina, Sarah Jo's connection with Zach has the potential for solidarity that ultimately remains underdeveloped in the film. By showing Sarah Jo enjoying analogous activities and perspectives as Zach, her character is seen as adjacent to disability, but not exactly bearing the same type of vulnerabilities. Likewise, Zach, as a child with Down syndrome is of course neurodivergent, and yet their relationship does not yield a type of solidarity that is taken seriously by the unfolding Plot.

Much of the scene cuts from two shots of Zach and Heather inhabiting an adjacent room to two shots of Zach and Sarah Jo coloring; showing that their worlds interface, but Zach and Heather are the adults, and Zach and Sarah Jo are the children. Yet, in her portrayal of Sarah Jo, Kristine Froseth attempts to subtly challenge the neurotypical gaze that frames Sarah Jo as childlike. While Zach and Heather negotiate, Sarah Jo smiles to herself as if she is relieved to not be caught up in the dynamic of their obligations, while at the same time looking suspiciously at the dynamic as she astutely senses the dysfunction and Josh's insincerity. The message of the affordances of not buying into normative values and the liberation that comes with it are reflected in Sarah Jo's smirk.

Heather leaves for work and Josh joins Sarah Jo and Zach at the (children's) table. Even though Heather as a pregnant woman is disabled by the legal definition, she is not portrayed as such nor as more vulnerable, but instead as self-centered and inconsequential to the rest of the characters. At this point, Heather's capacity to have children does not grant her an empathetic reading in the film and instead communicates child-rearing as a narcissistic pursuit. This is in contrast to Sarah Jo's hysterectomy and inability to have children. Heather leaves and Sarah Jo makes a bid for affinity again, attempting to laud Heather, perhaps looking for solidarity in the shared experience of a liminal disability. "I wish I knew what it was like to be that busy," she remarks. However, Josh shuts down this attempt saying, "She's fucking awful," asserting his power as the patriarch of the family. Interestingly, earlier in the scene, Josh too is positioned like a child, fooling around as Heather pleads with him to take her seriously. One might think this is akin to Sarah Jo's liminality, but rather it is an exercise of privilege as a white cis

man. Due to his identities, he can be a child without being positioned as vulnerable; he can use childishness when it is convenient to him to gain favor but leave it when it is not convenient for him, as we see with what comes next—Josh redons his playful attitude, cues up hip-hop, and begins to dance; announcing it's Zach's favorite song. The camera zooms in on Josh prompting Zach to dance. Zach stands up and walks over to grab Sarah Jo's chair. They surround Sarah Jo as she laughs and cowers as Josh exclaims "Oh you want Sarah Jo to dance?" He then leads Zach, saying, "Oh you want me to dance with Sarah Jo?" and Zach pushes them together. He touches her and she says no and laughs as he says of Zach, "What the man wants he wants."



Sarah Jo (Kristine Froseth), the autistically coded protagonist of *Sharp Stick*

This scene shows Josh utilizing tropes about disability as childlike and innocent and the fetishization of blackness via hip-hop as a cloak for white masculinity to maintain power while attempting to make its mechanics of oppression invisible. Josh is shown ventriloquizing Zach to disguise any indication his desire to dance with Sarah Jo and to prevent appearing predatory, while Zach's appropriation of black culture allows him to hide the white masculinity he uses to coerce Sarah Jo. While most audiences may experience some discomfort with this scene of Josh forcing her to dance, the director suggests that some might disarm their criticality of Josh as predatory, as he hides behind using Zach as an "innocent" sexual surrogate.

The audience may be uncomfortable, but, similarly to the opening scene with Treina, we are not given time to process this. We are quickly shut out from remaining in view of the room. As the camera swings outside the room from left to right and onto the other side of the picture window, we take in the beauty of the Malibu landscape through a wide-angle shot indicating that an expansiveness has been created through Josh and Sarah Jo dancing together. Through the ending on the expansive landscape, Dunham indicates that the audience is to focus on the possibility of this relationship and set aside their own discomfort or desire to protect Sarah Jo from Josh. In watching this I do not feel the expanse of the landscape, I feel dissociation out of empathy for how Sarah Jo's clear "no" was not listened to. I also shut out from the scene of a character I was invested in. Sarah Jo was coloring with Zach and enjoying herself and suddenly it seems she is being read as easily manipulated, even by Zach, when in reality she is coerced and her initial refusal was ignored. Why must she be confronted with navigating this situation, or letting them touch her body, even though she says no at first? We are not allowed to stay with her in the shot as it swings outside. Suddenly, I am a voyeur looking at the characters dancing through the window. I do not feel the expanse of possibility, instead, the landscape seems to symbolize dissociation from the lives of the characters inside.

Turning Point: Self-Discovery in *Sharp Stick*

The film's turning point occurs when Josh rejects and verbally abuses Sarah Jo following Heather's discovery of their affair. Distraught, Sarah Jo flees home, passing Treina in a kiddie pool who shouts after her. In a departure from the opening scene, Sarah Jo moves freely, while Treina is seemingly stuck. Treina calls after her yelling, "Bitch, are you deaf?" harkening back to the opening scene's communication breakdown, but naming potential disability more explicitly now. However, this time we know she is neither deaf nor an enigma; we know why Sarah Jo does not respond, as she is occupied with taking charge of her life after Josh. While Sarah Jo and Treina will come together later in the film, with some semblance of mutual understanding, and return to their roles of assisting each other in their sexual exploits, they never fully align or have the level of relationship that it seems like they both would draw strength from. The film misses the opportunity to complicate the representation of neurodivergence. The Plot, driven by the neurotypical gaze feeds off of narratives of overcoming naivete and childishness by

enacting sexuality to move forward. The question becomes, now that Sarah Jo has realized Josh does not have her interests at heart, what will she do? I relate to the sense of disorientation that the scene portrays as she traverses the dissonance of realizing that those who affirm your sense of self and neurology can also betray you.

We follow Sarah Jo into her bedroom as she slams the door behind her. Filled with angst, she stands before a mirror. The frustrated love song playing mirrors her inner turmoil regarding Josh. An over-the-shoulder shot of her inspecting her hysterectomy scar invites the audience to empathize with her as she struggles to undress, and glimpse into her subjective experience. By seeing her back and her image in the mirror, the director communicates that Sarah Jo has a split self wherein she does not know parts of herself (reinforcing the ideas of autistic women as lacking self-awareness as central to the conflict), but also this is one of the few scenes where Sarah Jo acknowledges the mirrors directly. Instead of her eyes averted from the mirror, she looks directly at herself, implying that she is gaining self-awareness. Sarah Jo's gaze, for a moment, becomes the Plot. She continues scraping at her scars as if to remove them. The director uses a low-angle shot that signifies her uncovering her power, but the dark lighting casts an eerie horror effect. We hear her breathing heavily, and a motif of piercing piano plays, signifying the way her scars intrude on her ability to have agency. An ominous bass note interjects and the scene then cuts to her in the shower curled in the fetal position with her face hidden.

Given the horror-like quality, perhaps the neurotypical audience may anticipate blood or injury next, but from an autistic perspective, one might understand this scene to be the beginning of finding ways to self-soothe. Underwater, she becomes unreachable to the voyeuristic neurotypical gaze. Water flows over Sarah Jo's body, the camera on the opposite side of the glass, conveying a sense of defeat in the events at hand, perhaps, but I also know the submersion into the water means she is finding sensory relief. It is in this the current changes and Sarah Jo gains more agentive actions. To the neurotypical gaze, which always seeks to have full access to the autistic subjectivity, this is anxiety-producing as it projects its narrow understanding onto her angst and coping mechanisms. For many autistic people externalized distress may indicate a turning point. Often these moments, while distressing, are the signposts of the beginning of relief from the daily

bottled-up emotions of navigating a neurotypical world. The subsequent scene confirms this reading.

Sarah Jo lies in bed in the dark, then sits up, opening her laptop. A hopeful tone chimes, foreshadowing resolution. She searches for Vance Leroy, her favorite porn star (introduced by Josh in a prior scene). The gaze has shifted as she is safe behind the screen, but this time not in an enabling way as when she was filming Treina. Instead, she is conducting her own project. This turning point is accompanied by a significant shift: an audible inner verbal monologue from Sarah Jo as she writes to Vance. This is the first time we hear Sarah Jo's inner monologue; in proceeding opportunities for this the director cuts to close-ups of her silently attempting to process what another person is saying, but her thoughts and reactions are absent or delayed, without inner explanation. She talks about taking charge of her life as flashbacks foreground her sensory acuteness until she suddenly recalls screaming. "Like me, you have a scar," she says to Vance, coping with this flashback. From there, Sarah Jo's fandom carries her forward on her path to healing. She tells Vance why she is the best fan and spills her reflection on what happened with Josh, retelling it as an agentive and intentional part of her path of self-discovery, "I am not someone who is destined to find love so when it appears in my path, I have to take it." She is shown scraping a step with a sharp stick and remembering more complexly the bad parts and resolving to never have it happen again. "I must execute a plan."

The scene shows Sarah displaying a type of autistic resilience in which she seeks to understand the root of her trauma through internet research. Upon initial observation, many might think that this means she has simply made an equal substitution, shifting from the object of the neurotypical voyeur gaze and instead becoming the consumer and the voyeur, taking part in objectification as a source of power. Yet it quickly becomes clear it is more than this—Sarah Jo is shown crossing out "Children with Developmental Differences" on her notebook and relabeling it "Vance Leroy," as she professes her connection to him. It seems she has finally found the person she can access solidarity with, underscoring the significance of digital literacies for many autistic individuals to find both relief from being the object of the neurotypical gaze and to find solidarity online.

Sarah Jo then is shown entering into a flow state and undertaking a methodical exploration of sexual experiences. She digs through the trash, wearing a bucket on her head to take a picture and then posting her offerings of sex acts on an online portal. A montage shows her cutting and pasting an alphabetical construction paper list on her wall of various sex acts. Dunham attempts to show a resolution here via what is presumably an attempt to show a neurodivergent way of loving by depicting her engaging in fandom, “asking honest questions,” and making her alphabet bucket list of sex acts. However, the sign on the wall and her checklist of acts, instead of drawing upon actual experiences of autistic communication needs by kink-affirming communities (Pearson & Hodgetts, 2023), turns her methodical sexual quest into somewhat of an isolated childlike comedy, instead of an opportunity to transform into an expert. Sarah Jo becomes redeemed by being depicted as a version of Treina in the first scene, ripe for online consumption and invulnerable.

Furthermore, Dunham continues to center cisheteronormativity and allosexuality in this resolution. Sarah Jo is only shown entertaining men she meets online and no one of other genders. As a higher percentage of autistic people are queer as compared to the general population, this move is more in keeping with neuroconventional (McDermott, 2022) Plot lines than actually understanding the plethora of experiences of neurodivergent sexuality. Additionally, other than a few comedic encounters and a scene of Treina teasing her about having an itchy crotch while she eats yogurt, there is a minimal acknowledgment of the real vulnerabilities that might be related to her subsequent endeavor of meeting strangers online, which seems negligent to ignore in a film that centers intimate vulnerability in so many other ways.

The monologue attributes these characteristics not to neurodivergence, but to her hysterectomy, calling the viewer’s attention back to the title of the film. She explains that she was able to anticipate “this would just be a sharp stick,” and that this is her power. That is, to “beat them to it in my mind” before her body is harmed. I find this portrayal of seeking invulnerability through creatively categorizing and organizing a schema to be highly relatable, as well as the portrayal of the monotropic flow state that goes with it. It may be unfortunate that the topic is prompted by a trauma that comes out of cisheteronormativity and its connections to the absurdity of normativity, but to some extent, this can also be true to life. As McDermott

(2022) writes, neuroconventional love is viewed as natural despite it consisting of cultural acts. Sarah Jo does not come to this experience in this way, and it shows her creating her neurodivergent method for gaining agency and experience with these realms. Sometimes passions are born from pain points. Hyperfocus seems fruitful as Sarah Jo awakens the next morning and is shown stimming happily in the sun by herself, indicating that she has disconnected her sexuality from Josh and has opened a portal into seeking her happiness. Here, I appreciate how the Plot has become harnessed by a neurodivergent interest, even while it weaves noncommittally in and out of a caricature and does not fully convey the passion, excitement, and expertise I would hope. Still, it is a beginning and the gaze has loosened.

Conclusion

Sharp Stick raises critical questions about the representation of neurodivergence, particularly within the context of sexuality, vulnerability, and the neurotypical gaze. The film, analyzed through the theoretical framework introduced by McDermott (2022), reveals the way the portrayal of neurodivergent characters may invite and inspire agentive analyses, but often the tensions established that drive the plot forward are contingent upon legibility of the neurotypical interpretation. Within the film, Sarah Jo's interactions with her surroundings, and the introduction of characters like Zach, contribute to the emergence of a liminal version of neurodivergence and its ambivalent relationship with disability.

Meanwhile, the contrast between Sarah Jo and Treina emphasizes the importance of a more nuanced and accurate representation that engages race, but not as a foil. Many scenes involving the exploitation of neurodivergent coding underscore the vulnerability often imposed upon autistic people, particularly women and non-binary people. The turning point, however, where Sarah Jo rejects societal norms and seeks solace in the digital realm, challenges conventional narratives about love and relationships and can be seen as an unraveling of the hold of neuroconventions (McDermott, 2022), and perhaps where the real story begins as the portrayal of Sarah Jo engaging with online content and reclaiming her agency through a fandom lens introduces a unique perspective on neurodivergent sexuality. However, the film's redemption narrative through cisheteronormativity raises questions about the depth and authenticity of the representation—

The attempt to link Sarah Jo's empowerment to a checklist of sex acts, presented in a lighthearted manner, risks oversimplifying the complexities of neurodivergent sexuality. This limited exploration of non-heteronormative experiences and the potential vulnerabilities associated with online encounters may contribute to a stereotypical and incomplete portrayal.

As an autistic ADHDer, I have been long told I am looking in the "wrong" places when I watch a film, at least according to most of my viewing partners. "Did you catch what happened there?" they ask. "Yes," I lie and hope they are satisfied. It's not that I am not watching. I am reflecting on the symbolism in the color scheme, or appreciating the cinematography (which of course prompts me to research the viewing location). "Did you catch what happened there?" always abruptly reminds me that my divergent attention style is not enjoying the movie "properly." Often, I miss key elements of the Plot. The dominance of the Plot, I have concluded is a product of the catering to the neurotypical gaze which must move forward, linearly, and in whatever ways that keep neurotypical viewers oriented.

Regardless of Dunham's transparency about her intentions or creative process, then, autistic scholars can conclude that neurodivergent restorying of films and their characters may therefore involve downplaying aspects of the film such as the attachment to the linear Plot over all else, that are typically prioritized as an epistemic mode of counteranalysis. Instead, perhaps we look at the points where characters diverge or complicate the plot. In the case of *Sharp Stick* this may even make parts incoherent, as critics contended. Instead, we might ask, what else is there? In essence, *Sharp Stick* invites viewers to a conversation to critically examine societal expectations, representations of neurodivergence, and the complexities of navigating relationships. The film underscores the need for more nuanced, authentic portrayals that move beyond stereotypes and challenge the neurotypical gaze, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of neurodivergent experiences.

Editor's Note: As a practice, the author of this piece capitalize identities (i.e. "Autistic," "Black") when emphasizing cultural significance or membership to a political community. The journal, for consistency, represents these identities in the lower case.

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