



More than Tattoos: Rhetorical Discourse and Autism in *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*

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Abstract

Identity formations inscribed in language are rhetorical constructions. A cultural artifact exemplifying this idea is the movie, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, and its main character, Lisbeth Salander. She displays evidence of “difference” in her on-screen behaviors, although in many instances her difference is a strength, not a weakness. Recently, there has been a proliferation of movie and television characters indicating popular culture’s attempts to define neuro-atypicality. Close analysis shows that the interactions of these characters illustrate a unique emphasis on specific rhetorical phenomena, such as invention, memory, and repetition. The rhetorical phenomena surrounds the idea of difference -- and is encoded with the “different” person both in literature and film. The nature of the coding essentializes characteristics of identity not accurately reflective of difference, but there has been some progression in recent artistic endeavors. This is seen in *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Lisbeth exemplifies some of the concerns people have about representation, either filmic or descriptive that rely on specific rhetorical strategies to either compensate or survive. In addition, Lisbeth is a new breed of character where the difference is not a deficit but also strength. Studying these particular strategies is informative and relevant to both audience notions of difference as well as creation of identity.

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Lisbeth Salander, the principal character of Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, represents a woman of contrasts. Stieg Larsson’s narrator describes her as “someone who seems ‘out of place’ and yet the ‘ablest investigator’ (28) her business associate had ever met. She is a perfectionist, possessing “unique gifts,” (28) “imagination,” (28) but a seeming lack of protocol. The reader’s initial impression of Salander is one of estrangement, furthered by her numerous tattoos, piercings and died raven black hair,

“looking as though she had just emerged from a week-long orgy with a gang of hard rockers” (39). She is unconventional, “conventional work hours were anathema to her and she had a talent for irritating the other employees” (40). Other people constantly misjudge her essential gifts. Armansky, her employer, is shocked when she delivers report after report with zero grammatical errors, perfect judgment, and a unique take on the subjects she is investigating. Her differences are reflected in her employer Armansky’s comment that he “had taken her for stupid, maybe even retarded” (41). Salander is certainly portrayed as a conflicted character: she possesses qualities that solve crimes but drive people to distraction in the process.

Recent research comments more on the character Salander’s early childhood trauma as a cause of her behaviors. Her rape at a young age, discovered in a later novelistic rendition, is significant; it actually goes hand in hand with her on-screen behaviors. However, trauma may not be the only explanation for Lisbeth’s behaviors. Salander is an important character for discussions of difference because of the dialogic interactions, both positive and negative, representing rhetorically discursive notions of difference.

One such example of difference, in this case, neuro-atypicality, is autism. Autism is a potentially severe neurological condition affecting social functioning, communication skills, reasoning, and behavior (Fundukian 166). It is a spectrum disorder; the symptoms and characteristics of autism can present themselves in a variety of combinations, ranging from extremely mild to quite severe. It is a neurological disorder affecting a person’s ability to communicate and form relationships. Individuals with autism have deficits in social interaction, communication, and understanding (166). Autism was first described by Leo Kanner in 1943. The children of the study had some unique abilities and did not seem to be emotionally disturbed or mentally retarded. He invented the category “early infantile autism”- (sometimes called Kanner’s syndrome) to describe these children (167). Hans Asperger made the same discoveries in the same year, describing children with a unique behavioral profile. He used the term autism to describe them.

Autistic people have deficits in three key areas: social interaction, communication, and reasoning (168). Social interaction is the ability to interact, both verbally and nonverbally, with other humans. Social cues such as facial expressions and tone of voice are problematic. They seem isolated. Autistics use language in unusual ways, by echoing the comments of others (echolalia) or use phrases inappropriately (168). People with autism often use pronouns such as I, me, and you incorrectly. In addition to problems developing speech, individuals with autism have problems understanding the purpose of speech and lack motivation for reciprocal communication (168).

Autism is on the rise. Alice Park writes in *Time* magazine that:

According to the latest estimate, released on Thursday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1 in 88 children in the U.S. has an

autism spectrum disorder (ASD) — a nearly 25% increase from 2006, when the rate was 1 in 110, and a stunning 78% increase since 2000–02, when the CDC first began tracking the disorder and estimated the rate at 1 in 150 children. (np)

Diagnosis of autism and other mental illnesses have grown exponentially over this period. A diagnosis is a medical determination based on specific verbal, visual, and physical factors. Changes in the climate of disability signal a change in the persuasive power of disability to induce action on the part of parents, society, etc., a recognition sparked by greater attention paid to it in popular culture.

Recently, it has become much more hip to be disabled, different, autistic. Numerous television shows and movies with autistic characters exist today. Autistic characters such as Abed in NBC's *Community* and Sheldon of CBS's *The Big Bang Theory* display logical minds, extreme skill sets in specific areas, and socially awkward behaviors. These characters have comedic value, because they are so hopelessly formal, unusual and quirky. Otto Wahl notes that mental illness has often been a source of humor. It is in the content of comedian's jokes, as well as the basis for television shows and movies (29). He goes on to say that comedy portrayals also tend to portray mental illness as primarily involving little more than specific comical oddities that individuals manifest repeatedly (29). In addition, the characters are a breed apart. They see through different eyes, experience things a different way. Although some of these portrayals succeed more than the alternative idea that mentally ill people are savage and inhuman, these views contribute to a reification of special codes surrounding the rhetorical image and language of autism, replicating images and aspects hard to remove.

Filmic views of autism congeal politically and socially, such as in the seminal 1988 film *Rain Man*. Some key scenes from the movie indicate Charlie's (played by Tom Cruise) attitude towards Raymond Babbitt's (played by Dustin Hoffman) autism. Raymond's ideological manifestations of difference, distrust, confusion, and breakdown of communication towards his brother are symbolic of anxiety experienced between neurotypical and neuro-atypical individuals:

Raymond: *Gotta get my boxer shorts at K-Mart.*

Charlie: [Pulls over, gets out of the car and yells] *WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE WHERE YOU BUY UNDERWEAR? WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE? UNDERWEAR IS UNDERWEAR! IT IS UNDERWEAR WHEREVER YOU BUY IT! IN CINCINNATI OR WHEREVER!*

Raymond: *K-Mart!*

Charlie: *You know what I think, Ray? I think this autism is a bunch of shit! Because you can't tell me that you're not in there somewhere!*

Raymond: *Boxer shorts. K-Mart!*

Charlie blames Raymond for having autism; the condition acts as a lead weight around Raymond's neck, affecting their familial bond. The repetitive use of Kmart is symbolic of the repetitive nature of autistic verbalizing. Raymond is officially "named" autistic in this passage after Charlie has been informed by Dr. Bruner, Raymond's physician. Raymond acts out his role as autistic savant throughout the film. Cruise's character contends that there is a real person underneath the image of the autistic self, thus, autism somehow covers over the "real" person beneath. Charlie also accuses Raymond of repeating himself on purpose, as if the autism is a choice behavior and Raymond is making the wrong one. It is clear from the passage that the two men communicate at two different levels, with the final judgment going to Cruise. Cruise, the normal brother, gets to define the abnormal brother, who lives out an existence tied to a name with serious social consequences. The naming is out of Raymond's control.

Another string of quotations is revealing of the specific nature of autism in the context of the film. It reduces autism to a series of quirks that, while true in the description, do not fully reveal the nature of the disability:

Charlie: *Who took this picture?*

Raymond: *D-A-D.*

Charlie: *And you lived with us?*

Raymond: *Yeah, 10962 Beachcrest Street, Cincinnati, Ohio.*

Charlie: *When did you leave?*

Raymond: *January 12, 1965. Very snowy that day. 7.2 inches of snow that day.*

Charlie: *Just after Mom died.*

Raymond: *Yeah Mom died January 5, 1965.*

Charlie: *You remember that day. Was I there? Where was I?*

Raymond: *You were in the window. You waved to me, "Bye bye Rain Man", "Bye bye."*

Charlie questions Raymond about his absence from the family home, and the viewer sees the latter's remarkable memory for numbers. Thus, another component of autism is layered into the description of the Hoffman character, that of memory. From a rhetorical standpoint, memory is one of the five important canons, serving as a springboard for the persuasive aspect of speech. Speakers use devices called *topoi* in order to record and remember speeches. Thus, autism is a rhetorical phenomenon due to its insistence upon memory.

A crucial aspect of the intersection of memory and autism is usage. In ancient times, rhetors used memory devices in order to appear before public assemblies, utilizing tropes in order to perform deliberative rhetoric. In the above scene, Hoffman's character utilizes memory in a forensic fashion, invoking memories of a past with his brother prior to his departure. The autistic mindset deeply inscribes the rhetorical notion of memory.

This rhetorical display influences viewer's memories. In the *Rain Man* movie, people cite quotations from Hoffman's character rather than those of Charlie. Viewers remember Hoffman because of his rhetorical construction, comprised of his personality, his behaviors, and interactions with his brother. Because of the nature of his interactions, autistic behavior becomes topoi, a kind of remembering that viewers ascribe to disability in general.

Portrayals link the implicit nature of disability with the explicit. Many of these representations inscribe discursive behaviors, including those of current medical practices, sexual preferences, historical constructs and memories of past performances. Dr. Bruner started the chain reaction when discussing Raymond's condition with Charlie. In other words, Dr. Bruner had ideas of autism and autistic behavior prior to Charlie's interactions with his brother, and Raymond had ways of being, seeing, and reacting since birth with the condition. Audience reception comprises the conglomeration of all of these factors. Not all of these ideas are consciously developed; some engrain themselves within the public psyche through a combination of rhetorical factors that maximize the impact of specific notions of autism. In the film, Raymond's repetitive behaviors, oddity, and Charlie's ascriptions of blame are lasting, as well as Dr. Bruner's medical diagnosis.

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, a film created twenty years after *Rain Man*, has significant differences in tone, characterization, and presentation. While *Rain Man* is a buddy film built around the antics of Raymond, *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is a serial murder mystery with a forthright, strong woman as the chief detective. Raymond is severely autistic, and the diagnosis is a major part of the plotline, while Salander acts strangely but is never outed in the film. Reaction to autism is explicit in *Rainman*, with Charlie's disgust with Raymond's antics and desire to normalize him, Salander acts from principles of trauma and her disgust with larger political structures is apparent. The differences in the two films main characters drive different discussions of difference. The latter character can achieve incredible feats despite her image, her antisocial behaviors, and the impressions she creates, while Raymond scores big at the casino and becomes Charlie the hustler's best friend in the process. Both have incredible memories that allow them to function at high rhetorical levels, but both also have interpersonal deficiencies that cause social problems, including inability in speaking, emoting, and guessing others' behaviors. Both become economically viable, one by taking money at the casino, the other by stealing it from an industrialist. Both possess great knowledge and questionably adhere to legal boundaries. They seem as morally flexible yet dangerous because of their special abilities. Despite many differences, both characters possess rhetorically essentializing qualities characteristic of the standard definition of autism, as the common person understands it.

Reception of disability and difference, once ossified in portrayals of stereotypical characteristics (like in *Rain Man*), is changing somewhat, as

exemplified by that of Lisbeth Salander. Kenneth Turan of *The Los Angeles Times* calls the film “too frigid” (1). He believes Fincher misses the development of Salander, whom he describes as “one of the most unlikely, idiosyncratic, and compelling crime fighters to hit the scene since Sherlock Holmes” (1). He goes on to say that the character of Salander, “antisocial when she’s not downright furious, a sullen 24 year old computer hacker with more piercings than friends, is fierce, furtive and feral. You never want to get in her way” (2). This glib review has numerous implications for disability studies. Turan is a pop critic of a major Los Angeles newspaper, analyzing a major motion picture. While the injection of the words fierce, feral, and antisocial all inflect a certain negative element into the description, you cannot say that these adjectives aren’t refreshing when it comes to describing difference. Salander certainly has agency; she is on the attack, full of anger at society’s wrongs; she wants to correct the imbalance of justice she perceives from the outset of the film. Turan’s review properly indicates Fincher’s and Larsson’s image of a powerful woman, one that may be able to exert more agency because of her difference.

Films as social constructions “play” on socially established interpretations of disability. They depend on the image of the disabled person to give order and meaning to the world of ability. For example, Cruise needs Hoffman to “come out” and interact “normally” in his movie speech. Implied is the idea of change to normalcy. What remains is the choice of imitation by the autistic person or frustration. Consequently, identity confusion leads to failure in speech and communication to overcome differences. The result of the rhetorical breakdown between “normal” and autistic people results in consequences for the autistic person, such as name calling, imprisonment and the like. Neurotypical individuals create, view, and write about film—therefore, it is likely that rhetorically coded messages about difference will be transmitted. It takes conscious effort, as well as advocacy, to change these cultural instantiations.

Yet recently there has been a move away from the old ways of seeing. Characters like Lisbeth Salander represent, as the young autistic boy Oskar Schell did in the movie *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, a new attempt by authors and filmmakers to represent difference in light of both the plot and societal shifts. For Jonathan Saffron Foer, Schell represented a shell-shocked youngster post-9/11, an everyboy for the American 21st century. Salander represents a way for the author and director to provide massive amounts of agency to a female character otherwise neglected and cast aside because of her background. As in many descriptions characters of “difference” are compelling – it is now time to make the compelling somewhat realistic as opposed to formulaic.

Rhetorical discourse is the act of persuading audiences to believe something; in addition, discourse acts as a reflection of power dynamics in popular culture, which is ever-changing. In their study of disability, Hollywood

movies, and the construction of discourse, Michael Hayes and Rhonda Black argue that “In Hollywood films disability is extricated from its concrete manifestation as a physical or mental condition and treated as a cultural sign” (114). In other words, the idea of disability is not just the state of being disabled; it is much more than that. Disability is an example of socio-cultural forces that create an image in the culture that is relatively stable, which is problematic, because the disability, its causes, and manifestations are inherently unstable. Autism is the fulcrum point in this discussion, because it rests in the middle of past disability ascription and new and ever-evolving cultural phenomena. It looks different among different sorts of people. While some that suffer from autism are mute, others, like those with Asperger syndrome, might be highly talkative. While Salander could be looked at as disabled, she is also powerful. Hayes and Black discuss the aspects of social discourse through the signs of disability. They state:

When read across the different movies the signs of disability can be coalesced into what Foucault calls a discourse. Discourses are socially produced ways of talking about an object that situate the object within socially produced relations of power...In Hollywood films the discourse of pity articulates disability as a problem of social, physical and emotional confinement. The disabled character's thwarted quest for freedom ultimately leads to remanding the character back to the confines of a paternalistic relationship of subordination. (114)

Hayes and Black's analysis extends to Salander in a number of respects. First, the two previous critics see her as an outsider. Even comments about Salander's fierceness, a buzzword for powerful femininity, devolve to feral, or wolf-like. Yet she also possesses discursive qualities of power and agency, the flip-side of “difference,” because through difference one can become anyone, do anything, due to the freedom that comes from being ensconced in a paternalistic hierarchy. This idea seems contradictory, but it is really not. An example would be the freedom that prisoners have. Although the physical aspect of freedom is not present, most people don't care what prisoners are doing while in prison. They escape notice, and therefore have degrees of freedom and agency not present in regular society. The same can be said of people with difference, people like the character Lisbeth Salander.

Salander suffers from objectification and the discourse of disability in both the text and the film, *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* but turns the watching around on others. Laura Mulvey's discussion of the male gaze in cinema is applicable to the way in which films construct autistic people. Salander as both female and different; there is an additional theoretical complication; she is also a watcher herself, and we watch her. She becomes a meta-discursive act of watching that turns Mulvey's ideas around. Salander gains power back from this rendition, because she is in as much control of the gaze as we are. As a

result, she becomes empowered through aspects of her difference even as autism is the defining characteristic of her difference.

Salander watches throughout both the novel and the movie. Initially, she enters the office of her employer, who has hired her to dig up dirt on Mikael Blomkvist. She rummages through his computer files, violating his privacy with her computer as a weapon. In a later scene, Salander taps into wiring in the private home of Hans-Erik Wennerstrom, the tycoon. She is able to look into the lives of anyone she wants to. She has the power to watch people, like the audience and the director. After she has invaded his identity, Blomkvist invades Salander's identity by breaking into her apartment to confront her over his discovery that she has hacked into her life. She will take a paycheck to do this work because of her moral flexibility or her anger toward society. Her autism is a reason for her anger and confusion. She represents something not typically seen—an unabashed voyeur who lives vicariously through the lives of those she watches. She gazes at others because she has the ability to do so, and her abilities flow directly from her disability. Therefore, her disability is visible, effectively, in her detective role, while she watches neurotypical dysfunctionality in terms of crime, sexual predation, and character defects.

Mulvey's work brings in the concept of audience reception in film, Salander and other characters portray different versions of disability/difference. Salander is extremely able at hacking computer files, which she can direct at evil people and good people alike. She also proves an able detective in solving the murder case. Ability is not just a lack of disability, but the ability to function in a world that is not clear-cut. Ability is morally neutral. Given the nature of those with autism, fuzzy moral stances are anathema. Salander has a strong sense of right and wrong, and acts on these ideas. The authorities disable her because of her disability. Even the abilities of Salander consist of spying and deviance, which causes suspicion of her. Difference is the defining characteristic.

Salander in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* resides in the category of rhetorical discourse people in the text and movie call different. This idea implicit with the actions, speech and notions of autism, because mechanisms compensatory in order to function acceptably in neurotypical society. Salander either compensates or rejects normative standards. Normally, deviating from normative behaviors has consequences in the social system. Differences trigger our collective reading and viewing in this way, and Salander is no exception to this rule. In Foucault's rendition, the panopticon serves as a disciplinary technique far superior to the strongest torture, because of the secret knowledge possessed by the watcher. What critics know about Salander comes from other sources of information—reception, previous biases, past interactions, movies, political cartoons, etc. The important distinction is about people like Salander prior to her arrival in the film. Difference, in this case autism, acts like residue in the portrayals. The ideology of Foucault applies outside of cinema and text.

Autistic people create normative violations so audiences can situate themselves in the hierarchy of normativity.

Society disciplines Salander because of her differences. She is a ward of the court, declared mentally incompetent after burning her father nearly to death. In one of the initial scenes in the movie, she must report to her social worker in order to receive money to survive. Her interaction with him already sets up a power vacuum. He is a member of the state government and she is seeking his help. He reads her list of crimes back to her, informing the audience of her criminal status. He asks her for sex and is complicit in wrongdoing. She complies in order to receive her money. Salander is sexualized and violated in the office of her protector. The justification for his actions is her criminal status and his own form of deviance. Yet his deviance is covert and marked by the law. She responds later in the film by tasing him and tattooing “I am a rapist pig” on his chest. Audience members vicariously participate in revenge against authority, but must recognize the authority figure and participate in his suffering.

Salander is always seeking to gain independence from paternalistic authority, only to have it snatched away. She embezzles three billion dollars. Salander needs to break laws in order to gain a measure of freedom for herself. Social workers and law enforcement officials judge her appearance and behavior, which is defiant and strange. She acts and dresses in alternative ways to signal her rejection of the status quo or to declare her independence from authority. In return, these authorities deem her dangerous and potentially insane. Her only ally is Blomkvist, a convicted libelist, who has no legitimate allies but needs her criminal assistance to regain his professional image and exact revenge on Wennerstrom.

Salander is largely silent throughout *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. She often ignores people or refuses to comment, spurning social niceties. She is rude, caustic and odd, but with unknown motives. For example, authority figures mar Salander’s life experiences by bullying, blackmail and sexual violation. The anger engendered by these conflicts further alienates her from the status quo, but at the same time empowers her to do that which others cannot, or will not do. She reacts by exacting revenge on the rapist and on the industrialist. While tying him up, she says, “I am insane, say it.” Tattooed, on the floor, nude and crying in agony, he relents.

However, despite some limitations, what Lisbeth has at her disposal is a certain freedom attained by her designation as “different.” Therefore, she is able to access certain languages (computer files) outside the realm of legality and authority, because she has already been marked as a criminal. Her best rhetorical response is to punish the wicked and graft, with the tattoo gun, language to define others. Yet she will always remain on the outside looking in. While Blomkvist clears his name with her assistance and returns to his normal life as an editor, Lisbeth stands in an alleyway holding a present she will never be able to give him.

The discourse here is that people with differences can deviate from authority, and are free of the system, while remaining in it at the same time. Only by living outside the system, can there be any survival. For example, Lisbeth steals billions of dollars from an industrialist because she is technically able to do so and she acts on emotion in order to assist her friend Blomkvist. Lisbeth actually comes to rely on deviance, realizing it is an avenue of freedom given her constrained circumstances. The money she steals will enable her to live free from the constraints of society and its rules. In order to be successful, one must live outside of rules and norms. However, since not all autistic people have computer hacking gifts, this leaves them with limited access to the freedom Lisbeth gains.

The fact that Lisbeth Salander is a rhetorical construction is not a commentary on any textual or filmic variant. It underlines the principal concern that autism is rhetorical. Paul Heliker and Melanie Yergeau comment:

Here then, is the first way that autism is rhetorical: we are being swamped by a massive increase in fundamentally uncertain yet persuasive discourse. Let us recall Aristotle's ancient distinction between the necessary and the contingent: the proper domain of rhetoric, he wrote, is not the realm of the necessarily true, certain, or stable, but rather the realm of the contingent, possible or probable... we need to shine a bright and insistent light on how brazenly rhetorical any utterance, especially any highly visible utterance, about autism really is—and equally important, on how rhetorical any silence about neurotypicality really is. (486)

Rhetoric is based on communication in social interaction. Kenneth Burke writes that “the basic function of rhetoric is the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents” (41). Autism also has in common with rhetoric, a focus on language in the social realm, albeit a disabled one. Primarily, autism has at its core common features including impaired social interactions, impaired verbal and nonverbal communication, and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior. Psychiatrist Jim Corder states that, “Each of us is a rhetorical creation. Out of an inventive world (a past, a set of capacities, a way of thinking) we are always creating structures of meaning and generating a style, a way of being in the world” (152). Therefore, autism is a way of being in the world through language, through invention, structure and style (487). Corder continues, “Every utterance belongs to us, exists in, issues from, and reveals a rhetorical universe. Every utterance comes from somewhere (its inventive origin) emerges as a structure, and manifests itself as a style” (141). In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, the style is one of violence, vengeance, and distance, but also one of tenderness, empathy, and intelligence. Rather than focusing on past rhetorical constructions, it is time to think of new ones.

Significant to this commentary is the interpersonal, contested nature of rhetoric, and the ontological status of the autistic person. Since autism is an ever-changing, ever-expanding network of diagnoses and descriptions, the idea of autistic behavior is constantly moving and changing. Yet medical evidence is often static, referencing the scientific status of autism over the real. Often missing is the autistic person's commentary on his/her autism.

The significance of Stieg Larsson's and David Fincher's creations of Lisbeth Salander is an opportunity for potential reimagining of a person of difference. In this way, competing notions of ability and disability coexist. Because of the constraints imposed by rhetorically coded notions of disability through reception, as well as historical moments, political intrusions, and popular cultural transmissions, this project is difficult. So engrained are some notions of autism, rhetorically acted out through text and film through repetition, memory, imitation, and agonistics, that tropes of speech code themselves as autistic, attaching the subject to the language. However, since fundamental rhetorical aspects like memory and imitation are the basis of persuasion, autistic codes prove themselves valuable at the basic levels of persuasion. In *Rain Man*, Raymond's memory serves him and his brother well despite the traditional definition of eloquence. Salander's memory and agonistic attitudes provide a moving component of the filmic action, saving Blomkvist and defeating the disciplinary hierarchy that has imprisoned her. Despite Salander's struggles, she battles for recognition through the reality of autistic rhetoric, and in fictional and filmic representations, we have the opportunity to acknowledge and value alternative forms of speech and persuasion so vital to a diverse culture.

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