

Theorising the neurotypical gaze: autistic love and relationships in *The Bridge* (Bron/Broen 2011–2018)

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ABSTRACT

In popular media, autistic subjectivity is most often produced through the lens of the neurotypical gaze. Dominant understandings of autism therefore tend to focus on perceived deficits in social communication and relationships. Accordingly, this article has two primary concerns. First, it uses the Danish/Swedish television series *The Bridge* (Bron/Broen, 2011–2018) and critical responses to the series as examples of how the neurotypical gaze operates, concentrating on the pleasures derived from looking at autism, how autism is ‘fixed’ (Frantz Fanon, 1986) as a socially undesirable subject position, and the self-interested focus of the gaze. Second, it analyses key scenes from the series to expose and challenge the dominance of the neurotypical perspective in scholarly accounts of autistic sexuality and relationality. Using Lauren Berlant’s (2012) work on love, I argue that the non-normative ways of being constructed by the series do not fit easily within neuroconventional frameworks of love and desire. Consequently, autistic expressions of love are rendered both undesirable and illegible to the neurotypical gaze. The article therefore offers a flexible framework for understanding how the neurotypical gaze functions across cultural and academic spheres and gives vital insight into how autistic love and relationships are narratively constructed.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I theorise the neurotypical¹ gaze, primarily concentrating on the pleasures of looking at autism, how autism is figured as a socially undesirable subject position and the inward focus of the neurotypical perspective. In addition, I examine how the neurotypical gaze constructs normative ideas about love and sexuality. To illuminate the key facets of the neurotypical gaze, I analyse scenes from *The Bridge*,² a Danish/Swedish television series featuring protagonist Saga Norén, a talented police detective who exhibits many of the stereotypical traits associated with autism—she does not understand jokes, speaks bluntly and often with ‘excruciating honesty’.³ I also examine the centrality of the neurotypical gaze in several recent scholarly interpretations of the series, which focus heavily on perceived deficits regarding Saga’s sexuality and her capacity to relate to others in meaningful ways. Through my readings of the series, I argue that existing scholarship omits, dismisses and pathologises autistic and non-normative forms of sociality. For although it is fair to say that the series prioritises a neurotypical perspective, it is important to acknowledge that *The Bridge* also offers a complex

construction of autistic subjectivity and autistic expressions of love and sexuality.⁴

To challenge the neurotypical assumptions in these interpretations, I draw on autistic perspectives of the series, including James McGrath’s analysis in *Naming Adult Autism: Culture, Science, Identity*⁵ and an article by journalist Rosemary Collins, titled ‘Saga Norén, the Autistic Superwoman of “*The Bridge*”’,⁶ as well as offering my own analyses that provide vital insight into autistic forms of love, care and relationships.⁷ These insights are especially important within the context of the long-standing public fascination with autism, one which shows no sign of waning as the number of works featuring autism in some capacity continues to grow. This ranges from explicitly identified characters such as Julia in children’s television programme *Sesame Street*⁸ and Symmetra in the video game *Overwatch*⁹, to autistic-coded¹⁰ characters like Maurice Moss (*The IT Crowd*)¹¹ or Newt Scamander (*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*).¹² It also includes a growing genre of works authored by autistic creators (Laura James’ autobiography *Odd Girl Out: An Autistic Woman in a Neurotypical World*, 2017; and Joanne Limburg’s poetry collection *The Autistic Alice*, 2017) and the classic literature that disability studies scholar Julia Miele Rodas argues use linguistic features associated with autism, for instance, repetition and monologue in the novel *Frankenstein* (Mary Shelley, 1818).¹³ Given the ever-increasing visibility of autism in popular culture,¹⁴ and the tendency for neurotypical perspectives¹⁵ to dominate discourses about autism, it is therefore imperative that non-autistic people recognise their own potential deficits in understanding when it comes to autistic sociality and expressions of love.

Accordingly, I use cultural theorist Lauren Berlant’s work in *Desire/Love*,¹⁶ to argue that because autistic expressions of love and care do not always correspond to neuroconventional frameworks, they are often prone to misrecognition by neurotypical spectators. As Berlant observes, modern narratives use romantic love ‘normatively—as a rule that legislates the boundary between a legitimate and valuable mode of living/loving and all the others’.¹⁷ Similarly, John Swinton notes that our dominant narratives about love are created by neurotypical people, and therefore tend to value neurotypical ways of relating to one another. In this case, neurotypical love is the most legitimate and valued, and it is perceived as reflective of ‘true humanness’.¹⁸ Berlant’s approach is to criticise both the pursuit of love itself as a dominant cultural norm, as well as analysing the normative expressions it takes. In



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doing so, Berlant promotes a shift from thinking about love as an individual psychological state or desire, to instead considering it as something culturally and narratively produced. Through this framework, we can begin to see that because neurotypical ways of loving are typically produced as the most socially legitimate, autistic love is not only figured as undesirable, it is often not even recognised as a form of love in the first place.

Ian Hacking posits a potential reason for this lack of recognition, observing that 'there is a partial symmetry between the autistic and the non-autistic. Neither can see what the other is doing. The symmetry is only partial because we have an age-old language for describing what the non-autistic are feeling, thinking and so on, but are only creating one for the autistic'.¹⁹ Part of the project of creating language to describe autistic interiority and subjectivity includes recent scholarship and activist writing which seeks to understand autism within what academic and activist Nick Walker calls the 'neurodiversity paradigm'.²⁰ This model recognises that autism, as well as other variations of neurology such as schizophrenia and dyslexia, are part of human diversity, rather than a medical pathology which must be cured or otherwise remedied. On his website *Neurocosmopolitanism*, Walker describes how the 'pathology paradigm' has dominated academic and professional discourse on autism. 'At the root of the pathology paradigm', Walker argues, 'is the assumption that there is one "right" style of human neurocognitive functioning', with any variations and divergences constructed 'as deficits, damage or "disorders"'.²¹ By contrast, the neurodiversity paradigm proclaims this way of thinking to be 'a culturally constructed fiction'.²² Within the neurodiversity paradigm, accounts detailing autistic difference in communication styles are now beginning to emerge.²³

For instance, in *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*, Melanie Yergeau argues that rhetoricity, or the ability to use language to construct meaning and identity functions 'as a precondition for humanness or personhood'.²⁴ By contrast, autism is characterised in opposition 'with language, humanness, empathy, self-knowledge, understanding and rhetoricity'.²⁵ Detailing how intensive behavioural interventions such as Applied Behavioural Analysis use rhetoric against autistic subjects, Yergeau observes that clinical practice works to 'seek out deviant behaviours and affectations and attempt to straighten them' with the intention of replacing them with 'the logics and rhetorics of normalcy'.²⁶ In this way, neurotypical forms of rhetoric and relating to others are constructed and perceived as the only acceptable form of communication and discourse.

The Bridge offers an illustrative example. On the one hand, Saga is constructed as an undoubtedly heroic figure. Yet at the same time, her autistic traits also make her appear (to a neurotypical spectator) as tragically unable to relate to others or to love and be loved. For example, *Guardian* critic Stuart Jeffries finds it unfathomable that anyone would love Saga, asking:

what's to love? Saga Norén is many things—superb cop, unwitting critic of bourgeois social mores, my role model with a couple of caveats [...] no-fuss sex partner—but someone whom one loves? It seems unlikely.²⁷

Jeffries sums up the (neurotypical) perception of the autistic heroine: admirable in many ways, but, crucially, not a candidate worthy of love. Just as heteronormative culture mandates that heterosexual desire is the 'right and proper kind'²⁸ of sexuality, neuronormative culture asserts similarly restrictive boundaries when it comes to the kind of person considered acceptable to love. After all, within the neurotypical model, (most) autistic

subjects are not intelligible as truly human. Instead, as Yergeau argues, a perceived inability to use language and relate to others in socially acceptable ways means autistic subjects are persistently constructed as failing the conditions of personhood. For this reason, autistic subjectivities, forms of relationality and expressions of love are not socially valued or desirable, or perhaps even legible, to a neurotypical interlocutor or spectator.

THE NEUROTYPICAL GAZE

In this section, I draw on Laura Mulvey's influential theory of the male gaze to identify and outline key characteristics and functions of the neurotypical gaze.²⁹ In 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema',³⁰ Mulvey analyses the relationship between looking and pleasure, arguing that classic Hollywood cinema encourages spectators to identify with the gaze of the active male hero and objectify the passive female heroine. Using psychoanalysis, Mulvey exposes how patriarchal ideologies are reproduced by formal and narrative conventions which make the male gaze appear to be a natural reflection of reality rather than a constructed fiction. I use Mulvey's theory as a reference point to analyse how neurotypical social conventions are produced as normative in both fictional and scholarly work about autism. First, I will discuss the pleasures derived from looking at autism, before moving to examine how autism is 'fixed'³¹ as a socially undesirable subject position, and finally, shedding light on the inward turn of the gaze.

Looking at autism

In her examination of how Hollywood cinema constructs female sexuality and suffering as a source of aesthetic pleasure, Mulvey highlights the enjoyment and gratification derived from looking at objectified images of the other. Along similar lines, I wish to draw attention to the pleasures of looking at autism. As the examples listed earlier suggest, there is a fervent cultural appetite for narratives and images of autism. Some of the most enduring narrative tropes, figures and fantasies flooding our cultural imaginary include overcoming impairment, the alien outsider, the child narrator, savantism and the detective.³² However, Stuart Murray coins the term 'witnessing' to explain that when we look at such images, we are not truly capable of 'seeing' autism, as there are simply too many cultural, social and historical meanings attached.³³ 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 ever-shifting coalescence of signs, signifiers, tropes and aesthetics that make reference to it.

Saga's character descends from a long line of autistic-coded detectives, from the Victorian era's Sherlock Holmes to contemporary examples like *House's* Gregory House³⁴ and Lisbeth Salander in Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* series (2005–2008).³⁵ One of the primary pleasures of this cultural fantasy is the autistic detective's extraordinary ability to solve mysteries. However, another fundamental aspect of our fascination lies in what the autistic detective does *not* know; that is, how to follow and fit in with social convention. As such, two key sources of aesthetic pleasure in *The Bridge's* first two seasons are the instruction in and transgression of social rules. Both are bound up in the relationship between Saga and her Danish detective partner, Martin, who initially finds Saga difficult to work with, though they eventually become close friends.

Male/female partnerships are a staple across various genres, from action thrillers like *The Pelican Brief*,³⁶ to the long-running science fiction detective series *The X-Files*.³⁷ Critic Robert

Shrimley describes the premise of popular Nordic Noir crime narratives such as *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo/Mån som hatar kvinnor*,³⁵ *The Killing/Forbrydelsen*³⁸ and *The Bridge* as dependent on 'a less-talented male partner whose primary purpose seems to be to emphasise the heroine's strangeness, rather than her brilliance'.³⁹ Indeed, Martin's character plays a key narrative role in both highlighting Saga's peculiarity and trying to temper it by teaching her social rules. While Saga and Martin are equals in the professional sphere, this instructive dynamic suggests, first of all, that there is a correct way to behave socially, and second, that Saga falls short and must therefore be taught by an older male colleague how to conform to social codes and behaviours.

An imbalance of power within a male/female duo is often seen in the trope of an older male mentor teaching a younger or less experienced female character—for instance, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,⁴⁰ where although Buffy has special abilities as the chosen one, her training and education in early seasons is overseen by her Watcher, Giles. However, it is clear in *The Bridge* that Saga does not require instruction because she is younger or has less professional experience than Martin. Rather, the narrative is premised on Martin offering unsolicited advice, thus occupying a paternal role which positions Saga as 'the child who does not know the rules of the symbolic order yet'.⁴¹ A similar dynamic can be seen in the US television series *Bones*,⁴² which features the crime-solving duo FBI Special Agent Seeley Booth and forensic anthropologist Dr Temperance 'Bones' Brennan whose character has autistic traits much like Saga's. For instance, Sonya Freeman Loftis notes that:

While [Brennan's] savant skills help her to solve crimes, some of her autistic traits limit her abilities as well: it is difficult for Brennan to relate emotionally to other people and to understand what they are thinking—the other characters perceive her as so emotionally disengaged that she is sometimes compared to a sociopath.⁴³

One point of interest here is that Brennan's male partner Booth complicates the dynamic outlined by Shrimley as he frequently praises Brennan's 'amazing' ability to observe details gleaned from examinations of victims and crime scenes. On the one hand, Booth's narrative role is that of Brennan's equal, and he often emphasises her brilliance. At the same time, Booth's character performs a similar function to Martin's—he instructs Brennan in how to relate to her coworkers and often provides explanations of the nuances of criminal, political and social motivations that Brennan is unable to intuitively understand.

The first two seasons of *The Bridge* are rife with invitation for the (neurotypical) spectator to enjoy the comedic pleasure of watching Saga transgress social etiquette. A typical example occurs in a scene where Saga eats dinner with Martin and his family. When asked if she would like the recipe, Saga says, 'No, it wasn't tasty',⁴⁴ rather than politely pretending she enjoyed the meal as social niceties dictate. Regarding such instances, Collins writes that 'one of the many jarring and thrilling things about watching *The Bridge* is that I can only intellectually understand why other viewers find these Saga moments funny'.⁴⁵ It is revealing that, as an autistic spectator, Collins perfectly understands the narrative function of these scenes, yet they do not make her laugh. Conversely, Schwartz and Kaplan comment that:

usually Martin laughs out loud when Saga exceeds the social codes and the spectator tends to laugh with him, which makes it very clear and significant that Martin's gaze is synonymous with the spectator's gaze (225).⁴⁶

Social transgression, then, is designed to generate affective pleasure for a neurotypical viewership, not an autistic one.

While Schwartz and Kaplan are right to point out that Martin's character is aligned with the presumed normative gaze of the spectator, they also claim that 'every time she fails to do what is expected from her the spectator laughs out loud and thereby castrates her potency'⁴⁷ both as a competent detective and as a figure of identification for the audience. This interpretation falls prey to what autistic scholar James McGrath calls 'a frequently problematic assumption regarding certain manifestations of autistic individuality, which overlooks the existence of autistic agency'.⁴⁸ Rather than cast Saga's social transgressions as failures, we might view them as defiance, indifference or even disdain of social convention, all of which McGrath poses as potential autistic responses to 'the judgements of neurotypical others'.⁴⁹

The fixative power of the gaze

In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon lays bare the violence inflicted on the Black subject by the colonial gaze, writing that, 'the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye'.⁵⁰ Here, the dominant gaze has the power to 'fix' a person within a subordinated identity category. For example, the clinical gaze of medical discourse fixes autistic subjects as lacking in empathy, subjectivity, language and sociality. These perceived lacks are further entrenched by fictional works which fuse clinical signifiers with visual techniques and narrative tropes designed to connote autism. We can see the fixative power of the gaze at work in *The Bridge*, which goes to great lengths in its early episodes to construct Saga's character as distinctly other, or 'outside of normalcy'.⁵¹ Multiple scenes are designed to objectify Saga, or else show her social alienation; for instance, she undresses in the office, her colleagues describe her as odd and she is often unintentionally rude.

Furthermore, Saga's otherness is rooted deeply within the series' composition and editing style. By consistently framing her character behind glass and through windows and doors, *The Bridge* creates a dissociated mode of spectatorship. This recurrent aesthetic technique has the double effect of constructing Saga's isolation and detachment from other characters, as well as creating distance between her character and the audience. Visual choices such as these mobilise clinically and culturally fixed traits like 'aloneness'⁵² and withdrawal to produce the figure of the socially alienated autistic subject. It should be noted, however, that this technique is also used with other characters and plays a wider role in establishing the series' distinctive forensic perspective. In this way, the editing style creates a sense of ominous unease consistent with both the genre of detective narratives more widely and the moody aesthetics of Nordic Noir in particular. What this suggests is that while the affective unease and otherness certainly applies to Saga specifically, it also extends to the rest of the fictional world she inhabits and is far from exclusive to her character. That said, the series does frequently communicate a difference and distance between Saga and other characters. We know she is not like them—and she is certainly not like the presumed neurotypical audience.

Difference and distance are further sustained by scholarship on *The Bridge* which both critiques and perpetuates a normative neurotypical gaze. In one instance, Emily Gray suggests that Saga 'is a gifted detective who cannot, because of her way of being, belong to the social world that she investigates'.⁵³ Gray acknowledges the character's abilities but uses coded

language to indicate that while Saga is able to observe and examine the world, her autistic traits prevent her from truly inhabiting it. Janet McCabe takes this line of interpretation a step further when describing Saga as ‘having a body she does not quite inhabit’.⁵⁴ The discursive power of academic speech is used to fix Saga’s character, and autistic subjectivity more widely, as severed from both the body and the wider social world. These kinds of assertions are complicated to unravel, partially because, as I have suggested, there is certainly a significant degree to which the series does construct Saga’s character as being fundamentally at odds with her social environment.

However, I wish to draw further attention here to the language used when discussing Saga’s character. Feminist disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson highlights the importance of using language that ‘calls attention to the hidden norm that lurks behind our understandings of disability, one that makes some bodies seem naturally deficient or excessive and others seem superior’. Furthermore, Garland-Thomson argues that it is sometimes necessary to use ‘precise language that may seem convoluted when talking about disability’, for example, using ‘phrases such as “the traits we think of as disability”, [...] rather than words like “deformities” or “abnormalities”’.⁵⁵ With this in mind, consider Schwartz and Kaplan’s phrasing: “when we are watching Saga we do not learn that her behavior is quite normal after all—on the contrary, it is being emphasized that her behavior is pathological”.⁵⁶ Here, the terms of discourse are set by way of the distinction drawn between what constitutes ‘normal’ and ‘pathological’ behaviour. If one accepts these terms, their position is accurate in principle, for it is fair to say that the series does not suggest Saga’s behaviour is ‘normal’, or that she is like others. As I have shown, it goes out of its way to highlight how other characters perceive Saga as odd, weird and strange compared with her peers.

Following Garland-Thomson, I wish to reframe the terms of discourse established by Schwartz and Kaplan to instead write that when we are watching Saga, at no point is it suggested that her behaviour follows socio-conventional norms. On the contrary, it is often emphasised that Saga’s behaviour is non-normative when compared with conventional social rules and behaviours. Reframing in this way calls attention to the dominant norms of the pathology paradigm and its contention that there is such a thing as a normal brain or way to behave. I recognise this may seem like a matter of semantics. However, it is important to note that the language used by these scholars does not simply and neutrally highlight the series’ construction of Saga as non-normative—it actively constructs her as pathological, thus perpetuating a commonly held understanding of autism itself as a problem. The above examples therefore operate with dual purpose, slipping between a critique of *The Bridge*’s construction of Saga as the other and using language which serves to further entrench that otherness. Moreover, the duality of this type of analysis obscures the centrality of its neurotypical perspective. The fixative power of the gaze is thus enacted at the narrative level—when Saga’s colleagues fail to understand or empathise with her—and then recreated and reinforced by scholarship in which researchers do the same.

The inward turn

A crucial facet of the neurotypical gaze is that while it may look at autism, it rarely sees anything but itself. Considering the long-held assumption that autism is typified by ‘aloneness, solipsism and a turning away from the social world’,⁵⁷ it is

therefore ironic that the neurotypical gaze is in fact turned so firmly inward. Murray offers a relevant case study in his analysis of Rosie Barnes’ ‘Understanding Stanley’ (2002), a series of photographs of her son Stanley, many of which are composed to evoke a sense of his ‘withdrawal and solitude’.⁵⁸ Although the title implies that Barnes wishes to understand her son better, Murray observes that ‘more than anything else, however, her images seem to record her own anxiety and sorrow’.⁵⁹ Murray’s interpretation suggests that Barnes’ gaze is directed inward. Moreover, she uses the visual language of photography and her own written commentary to actively construct Stanley as a figure outside the bounds of normative social engagement. The desire to look and to comprehend is coupled with the photographic fixing of ‘aloneness’ as the primary mode of autistic subjectivity. As a result, these images do not reveal a greater understanding of autistic subjectivity; rather, they present a vision of neurotypical mourning for the perceived loss of normalcy. In other words, although Barnes looks at her son, she sees only herself.

A notable example of this tendency to gaze inward is found in *The Bridge*. As McGrath observes, although the word autism is never explicitly voiced, Saga ‘attracts much comment (and exclusively shared glances) from her coworkers’.⁶⁰ Autism therefore surfaces implicitly and relationally between the glances of neurotypical characters who fix Saga with their gaze, their looking communicating Saga’s otherness to the audience more than anything she says or does. After all, if Saga’s behaviour continued unchanged but her colleagues responded to her with respect and care, the series might articulate difference without resorting to the stigmatising otherness of the gaze. That these glances are shared is especially significant. Having fixed Saga’s otherness in place, her coworkers turn to look at each other, thereby confirming their own sameness at the expense of Saga’s difference. Once again, the neurotypical gaze turns on itself, far more interested in examining and preserving the boundaries of normalcy than in gaining insight into autistic subjectivity and interiority.

Critical scholarship on the series features similarly inward concerns. Murray comments that as a narrative device, ‘autism is endlessly fascinating [...] but never more so than when we might quickly characterise it and use it to look at something else’.⁶¹ McCabe’s analysis of femininity in *The Bridge* demonstrates precisely this tendency to look elsewhere, despite the centrality of autism to both Saga’s characterisation and the series itself. In this case, McCabe severs autism from her discussion of femininity and dismisses it altogether. One of McCabe’s primary arguments is that the lack of an explicit autism diagnosis in the series:

says something important about being a woman in the social world. Given that it is relatively well known that the way autism presents itself in females often makes it more difficult to diagnose, there is also the hint that the true hidden disability is that of being a woman.⁶²

Autism is clumsily interpreted here as a metaphor for the alienation of being a woman in patriarchal culture. At first glance, this falls in line with Garland-Thomson’s argument that ‘Western thought has long conflated femaleness and disability, understanding both as defective departures from a valued standard’ (2002: 6). McCabe, however, is not interested in the intersections between female and disabled subjectivities, nor does she advance any understanding of Saga as an autistic female character. Instead, her use of metaphor neatly erases autism from the discussion by claiming that being a woman is the true disability and therefore ought to take precedence. As Douglas Biklen

points out, ‘metaphor operates as reality’.⁶³ It is therefore especially important to pay attention to the figurative language used here to conceptualise and dismiss autism.

McCabe then goes on to read autism as a narrative device designed to neutralise femininity and circumvent the difference of being female:

her so-called disability allows Norén to travel beyond the ambiguity of difference [...]. As she drives up in her vintage green Porsche and takes control of the situation with her usual bluntness, she emerges as a character able to deliver equality and social justice *precisely because she can do so without recourse to difference*, including gender’ (my italics).⁶⁴

It is astonishingly myopic to describe Saga’s character as ‘without recourse to difference’ and to wilfully ignore the intersections between autism and gender. Garland-Thomson’s observation that ‘feminist theories all too often do not recognise disability in their litanies of identities that inflect the category of woman’⁶⁵ is therefore especially pertinent here. Autism is not understood within either the neurodiversity or the pathology paradigm, and it is certainly not recognised as a lived experience, identity or subjectivity. Instead it is waved away entirely, seemingly essential to the point McCabe is trying to make about gender, yet ultimately made wholly redundant. With glib phrases like ‘supposedly Norén has Asperger’s’⁶⁶ and ‘her so-called disability’,⁶⁷ McCabe refers to and retracts disability, highlighting the multitude of ways autism can be mobilised to generate meaning, while rarely signifying anything much about autism itself. Most of all, we can see clearly the workings of a scholarly neurotypical gaze which looks at autism and seeks to erase it in favour of its own concerns.

AUTISTIC LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

I have suggested that *The Bridge* constructs Saga as a character who does not relate to others in socially normative ways. To explore this further, I will examine how the scholarly neurotypical gaze works to naturalise neuroconventional ideas about love and relationships. Specifically, I argue that the research I analyse misses or altogether discounts the non-normative ways her character does connect with others, most notably the relationship with her detective partner Henrik Sabroe, which I will discuss in further detail below.

First, I will define the term neuroconventional, by which I mean the norms and conventions of neurotypicality. A social example might be the expectation that people in conversation will make eye contact with one another. I use this term as a gesture toward the intersection between ‘real-life’ social rituals and the conventions of fictional genres. Umberto Eco’s famous example captures how saying “I love you” to a partner is inflected by genres like the romance novel:

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her “I love you madly”, because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still there is a solution. He can say “As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly”. At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly it is no longer possible to talk innocently, he will nevertheless say what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her in an age of lost innocence.⁶⁸

Here, Eco explains how our expectations of social rituals and acts of care are shaped by culture. As I will discuss, Saga’s

expressions of love are non-normative at both the social and the generic level. However, that is not to say they do not exist at all.

A person or character’s legibility depends on their adherence to normative social conventions. For a person (their way or being, or style of communication) to make sense, they must fit within the ideological framework structuring their broader society. For instance, to be socially intelligible within the framework outlined by Yergeau and Swinton, one must use language and relate to others in socially normative ways. By contrast, using language and relating to others in ways which fall outside the zone of intelligibility can potentially render an individual illegible.

Damian Milton’s concept of the double empathy problem sheds further light on this idea. Contra to a long history of research claiming that autistic people have empathy deficits or else lack empathy altogether,⁶⁹ Milton argues that any such difficulty ‘is not a singular problem located in any one person’. Instead, any communication difficulties that might arise between autistic and non-autistic individuals are ‘based in the social interaction between two differently disposed social actors’.⁷⁰ Milton suggests that what we term empathy might in fact be:

a convenient illusion, and the phenomenon that people speak of when referring to it has more to do with language and a sense of ‘shared’ cultural meanings/symbols.⁷¹

In other words, empathy is defined less by an ability to cognitively or affectively read the intentions and perspectives of others, and instead has more to do with shared social and cultural convention. Therefore, we might say that the way Saga’s character relates to others does not fit into a neuroconventional framework. This insight is crucial to understanding that without a mutual frame of reference, Saga’s expressions of love and care are perhaps more difficult for a neurotypical majority to recognise.

From pathology to neurodiversity

In this section, I argue that Saga’s expressions of love and desire are certainly non-normative, but importantly, they do exist. Working within the Freudian-Lacanian tradition, Berlant defines desire as ‘a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object’s specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it’.⁷² Further to this, Berlant explains that the psychoanalytic concept of fantasy describes the unconscious wishes we have, and that those wishes are what lead us to invest in things.

This definition is helpful when considering the two main drivers of *The Bridge*’s narrative; Saga’s attachment to police work and her relationship with Henrik. It is evident that Saga invests in things she finds worthwhile, however it is also clear that her investments do not necessarily look conventional, nor do they generate affect in generically typical ways. This is particularly the case for Saga’s sexuality, as opposed to her police work which is legible within the cultural framework of the obsessive cop who works the case to the exclusion of almost all other activities. In addition, her career drive is normative in the sense that Saga’s compulsion to work fulfils the needs of capitalist production, although this investment is questioned in the final episode of the series in which Saga quits her job.

However, Saga’s investment in Henrik is not as legible within neuroconventional frameworks of love and desire. His character is introduced as Saga’s new detective partner in the third season. Their partnership brings a fresh dynamic to the series and, crucially, provides a contrast with the Martin/Saga partnership

which is founded on the differences in their personalities and approaches to police work. There are two significant ways Henrik's character function diverges from that of his predecessor. First, Henrik's narrative role is a supportive partner (in both a personal and professional sense), rather than a mentor or educator. Although solely professional to begin with, their partnership develops into a sexual relationship early in the third season and grows deeper as they form a mutual respect for one another. Most importantly, and by contrast to Martin, who is aligned with the normative gaze, Henrik has some distinctive atypicalities. The hallucinations of his missing wife and daughters and his photographic (eidetic) memory are both types of cognitive difference which serve to align his character more closely with Saga's non-normative subject position.

Henrik's introduction as an equal partner to Saga marks a welcome shift away from the aesthetic pleasures of instruction and transgression I discussed earlier. Furthermore, the narrative function of Saga's instruction transforms entirely in seasons 3 and 4. Over the course of the series, there is always at least one character whose role in the narrative is to correct and educate Saga; however, where in seasons 1 and 2, this disciplinary role is performed by Martin and her boss Hans, in seasons 3 and 4 their instruction is taken up by a comparatively punitive new boss, Linn. Although Linn appears sympathetic to a degree, she has far less patience than her predecessor for Saga's non-conventional way of relating to others. For example, in a scene where Linn limits Saga's investigative powers, she informs her that although Saga had previously conducted the entire investigation when Hans was in charge, 'police intervention requires a great deal of empathy' and since interacting with people is not Saga's strength she will therefore now 'require a joint action plan'.⁷³ In this way, the series signals that Saga's colleagues perceive her communication differences as in need of straightening or normalising.⁷⁴

It is especially significant that the role of educator undergoes a shift from the paternal to the (relatively) punitive. In seasons 1 and 2, the disciplinary role is performed by trusted figures and goes unquestioned by the narrative, thereby tacitly endorsing their instruction. However, the shift to an authoritative figure whom Saga does not trust implicitly invites the audience to question whether such instruction is in Saga's best interests, and if it ought to be performed at all. Ultimately, whether paternal or punitive, these figures all operate as devices to 'straighten'⁷⁵ Saga out by trying to make her behave less autistically and to instead fit in with neuroconventional social codes. The continued inclusion of an instructive figure indicates the continued presence of the neurotypical gaze. Yet it is important to note the radical affective shift which transpires once the spectator is no longer encouraged to take pleasure in Saga's social education but rather to evaluate its necessity.

By contrast, Saga's relationship with Henrik as a social and professional equal is significant precisely because he does not try to alter Saga's way of being in the world and instead offers his support when other characters make attempts at doing so. For instance, he tells Saga, "you're the best [Linn's] got, and she knows it" and "you're too good to stand there doubting yourself",⁷⁶ rather than correcting Saga's behaviour (as Martin had done). The contrasting narrative roles played by Martin and Henrik highlight a shift from conceiving of Saga's character as someone who requires instruction from her social others, to instead someone who requires their understanding. The impetus is no longer on Saga to change, but on her peers to meet her halfway. This signals a discursive transition from the pathology to the neurodiversity paradigm, wherein the view of autism as

an impairment that must be fixed becomes reimaged within a framework of variation and difference.

In additional contrast to Martin's character, Henrik's narrative introduction does not initially establish him as an authoritative figure. In fact, it is only at the very end of the first episode of season 3 that we discover Henrik is actually a police officer too (on the Danish force), and furthermore, that he's volunteering to be Saga's new partner.⁷⁷ Initial scenes featuring Henrik prime the spectator to view him with suspicion; we first encounter him at home with his wife and children before he heads out to a singles night and picks up a stranger. These scenes first create an impression that Henrik is perhaps cheating on his wife, however, a later scene then shows them in bed together while he tells her about his date. Our impression therefore shifts as the series implies polyamory or open marriage—both non-conventional forms of sexuality. However, while it is heavily hinted at, Henrik's cognitive difference is then confirmed later in season 3, episode 6 when it is established that the conversations with his wife and children are hallucinations.⁷⁸ Because the series initially focuses on Henrik's unconventional personal life rather than his detective skills, he is therefore not constructed as an audience surrogate in the same way that Martin's character is.

However, while Schwartz and Kaplan agree that Henrik 'does not laugh at (Saga) or educate her,' they argue that 'he still seems to carry the gaze while Saga remains the object of the gaze'.⁷⁹ Their example is that he nicknames her 'Wiki' because she reels off encyclopaedic facts and explanations. They write, "even though Henrik is just teasing her with her nickname 'Wiki', we as spectators come to understand that she must represent some sort of *otherness*".⁸⁰ That Saga represents otherness is indisputable; however, the reading I have given above suggests that Henrik's character also reads as distinctly other, which I would argue constructs him in a comparable subject position to Saga. Although Henrik is not coded as autistic like Saga, there are numerous ways the narrative marks his non-normative difference. At the same time, there are several ways in which the series sets Saga and Henrik on an equal footing.

For instance, an affinity between Saga and Henrik is established early in season 3, in a scene which takes place while they are looking for a potential suspect in a deserted caravan. The scene is notable for two reasons. One is the reversal of the othering gaze which is typically directed at Saga, for instance, when she makes a faux pas or refuses to bend the rules and it is made clear that other characters find her behaviour unusual. In this example, however, it is Saga who gazes at Henrik because *she* finds *his* behaviour odd. In the first half of the scene, there are three shots from an objective camera perspective: first, an establishing shot of the caravan shows Saga striding towards it while Henrik stays behind. Second, a close-up of Henrik as he stares ahead intently. Third, a reverse shot from behind Henrik, whose back is to the camera (figure 1). Importantly, in this third shot we can see Saga's puzzled expression from the objective perspective of the camera, rather than from Henrik's point of view. This is in contrast to the next shot, which is framed from Saga's point of view, meaning we see her perception of Henrik (figure 2). In other words, the editing pattern shifts between an objective perspective and Saga's—at no point in this scene are we offered Henrik's view. In this instance, the gaze therefore clearly belongs to Saga. It is also significant that Saga is baffled by Henrik's behaviour—when Saga asks why he's staring, Henrik says he is 'Making a sort of map of the area',⁸¹ dialogue which suggests he has a photographic memory, a popular trope in crime and detective fiction connected to cognitive difference and thus operating as an important axis of Henrik's otherness.



Figure 1 The objective perspective of the camera shot from behind Henrik (Thure Lindhardt), showing Saga's (Sofia Helin) puzzled expression as she watches him 'making a sort of map of the area'. *The Bridge*, season 3, episode 2 (Hans Rosenfeldt, 2015).

This too similarly reverses Saga's typical status in the narrative as the object of others' bafflement; although it should be noted that while this scene constructs Henrik as the object of a (mildly) othering gaze, it does not suggest that Saga's perspective is now normative. Rather, when read in relation to the rest of the scene, it functions as a method of affiliating the two characters in their diverging forms of otherness.

The scene also plays an important role in subtly aligning Saga's character with Henrik's through its composition. As they approach the caravan together, a two shot is used, which typically evokes companionship (figure 3), and the following reverse shot through the window of the caravan primarily functions to create tension by suggesting the camera is inhabiting the perspective of the killer who might be hiding in wait (figure 4). However, we quickly realise that the caravan is empty, meaning that this shot in figure 4 actually operates as another example of the series' typical dissociated subject position, which therefore creates a divide between the spectator and the two characters, rather than between the spectator and Saga, or between Saga and Henrik. What these readings demonstrate is that the spectator experiences Saga occupying a different subject position—she takes on the gaze, rather than the being object of scrutiny. As well, we see Saga aligned with her detective partner, rather than set in opposition as with Martin. Henrik's character therefore enables a shifting set of subject relations—both between him and Saga, but also between Saga and the spectator. This early affinity between their characters also plays an important function in forecasting



Figure 2 A shot framed from Saga's perspective, showing the spectator her view of Henrik. *The Bridge*, season 3, episode 2 (Hans Rosenfeldt, 2015).



Figure 3 A two shot of Saga and Henrik. *The Bridge*, season 3, episode 2 (Hans Rosenfeldt, 2015).

the beginnings of the relationship they develop over the course of seasons 3 and 4, which I discuss in this next section.

The neuroconventions of love

While the relationship constructed between Saga and Henrik can certainly be described as atypical, Schwartz and Kaplan dismiss the series' depiction of it entirely, suggesting Saga and Henrik are 'more like siblings playing than grown-up lovers' and that the series frames them 'as somehow incestuous in a number of ways',⁸² although no textual evidence is cited to support these claims. Respectively, both phrases work to construct the relationship as immature and taboo. In doing so, Schwartz and Kaplan subscribe to and perpetuate normative ideas, both that there is a correct kind of sexual behaviour, and, what it should (not) look like. Further to this, they write that 'most important is the fact that their sexual relationship is depicted as polymorphous and focused only on mutual sexual stimulation'.⁸³ 'Polymorphous perversity' is a Freudian term referring to a form of infant sexuality that adults must grow out of, and is also used to describe behaviours outside of socially acceptable norms. Using this term therefore evokes a sense that Saga's sexuality is infantile, a claim which, if there was textual evidence to support it, would reinforce their overall argument that Saga is primarily constructed as childlike.

In addition to pathologising the relationship between Saga and Henrik, Schwartz and Kaplan make related claims regarding desire and sexuality, namely that: 'To Saga, sexuality is not a matter of desire (the desire for something that is constantly being displaced); it is a matter of purely physical needs'.⁸⁴ Along



Figure 4 A reverse shot through the window of the caravan which distances the spectator at the same time as aligning Saga's and Henrik's characters. *The Bridge*, season 3, episode 2 (Hans Rosenfeldt, 2015).

similar lines, Kathleen McHugh writes that ‘for (Saga), looking is professional, sometimes sexual, but not interpersonal or emotional’.⁸⁵ Together these interpretations propose that Saga’s character is/constructed⁸⁶ as someone who lacks the capacity for desire (in the Freudian-Lacanian sense). In line with Yerreau’s observation that autistic people are figured as lacking rhetoric and therefore subjectivity, these comments work to construct Saga as lacking both an adult sexuality and personhood. The implications are that Saga has not advanced beyond a childlike mode of pleasure and attachment, and that her character does not operate according to the logics of desire but is instead driven only by instinctual needs. First, it is important to state that a relationship driven by physical or instinctual need may indeed not be a normative one, yet that does not necessarily negate its meaning or potential significance. However, and perhaps more importantly, these interpretations are not supported by and are in some cases directly refuted by the series.

If desire is the propulsive disparity between our hopes and their potential fulfilment, Berlant argues that love is a fantasy of having our desire reciprocated.⁸⁷ We can see this fantasy of love and the potential for reciprocal desire arise in a scene in which Saga tells Henrik:

When you’re in love, the brain’s reward system releases neurotransmitters, such as serotonin and dopamine. There’s also an increase of the hormone oxytocin. Oxytocin can affect memory and serotonin can cause sleeplessness. But mostly they give you euphoria. I think I’m in love with you.⁸⁸

This clinical declaration is what Michael Gratzke calls a ‘love act’.⁸⁹ As noted above, a common neuroconventional example is the phrase “I love you”. Within our social context, saying “I love you” is intelligible as a valid act of love. Saga’s declaration, however, does not correspond with this framework of intelligibility or validity. It is not as easy to read Saga’s love acts as acts of love. Quite simply, our social context does not straightforwardly allow for such a reading. This is likely because, as Berlant suggests, our cultural expressions of love tend towards the conventional—‘marriage, family, property relations, and stock phrases and plots’,⁹⁰ all of which are rejected by Saga’s character in particular and *The Bridge*’s narrative more widely.

Furthermore, Saga’s declaration is worlds apart from the conventional love acts seen in genres like the romantic comedy. It is neither a leading man rushing across New York city streets to declare his love for a woman, nor is it the archly ironic post-modern expression of love Eco identifies. Rather, Saga’s is a form and expression of autistic love. Because it is perhaps a stereotypical one (relying on encyclopaedic explanations and disavowing all knowledge of neurotypical social cues and scripts), I must stress that this is not the only form and expression autistic love takes; however, it is the primary one constructed by *The Bridge* and plainly contradicts the claims made by Schwartz and Kaplan I discuss above.

In reference to heteronormative culture, Berlant points out that the available language to describe love is often clumsy and that there is a scarcity of neutral terminology for non-normative love, which tends to be described in relation to immorality or monstrosity.⁹¹ In relation to autistic people, love is more often culturally imagined as a coldness, absence or lack of feeling. This can be seen in Henrik’s response which operates as an unequivocal invalidation of Saga’s act of love: “I don’t think you’re in love. Because I don’t think you can love. You have no idea what it is. Now get out”.⁹² The obvious implication is that autism renders Saga incapable of love. However, it is also

worth noting that Henrik’s words are spoken in anger after Saga tells him she has had an abortion. Moreover, Henrik’s cruelty in response to Saga’s abortion aligns with convention, at least within modern/contemporary gender and American television norms. For example, in the television drama *Six Feet Under* (Alan Ball, 2001–2005), Claire tells her ex-boyfriend about the abortion she had several episodes prior and is met with fury.⁹³ It is therefore possible to retain a reading in which Henrik dismisses Saga’s capacity for love (and the subsequent implication that autism is the culprit), at the same time as situating the rebuttal within a familiar framework in which male characters respond negatively to their partners’ abortions.

Although the primary love act is Saga’s declaration to Henrik, the series constructs other acts of care. Two prominent examples occur in the final episodes of the series. Following their break up, Saga intensifies her search for Henrik’s missing wife and children and reunites him with one of his daughters. Saga’s rationale is not made explicit; however, it is significant that she continues the search outside of her usual police work and in spite of Henrik’s increasingly cold behaviour toward her. Most importantly, afterwards Saga asks Henrik if things are okay between them now, indicating that at least partially, her motivation was to resolve their earlier argument.⁹⁴ A similar example occurs when Saga finally proves that her mother had Munchausen by proxy and immediately calls Henrik to tell him. This may appear to be a minor event; however, it is a powerful moment for her character as the series has long established that for Saga, the primary function of verbal communication is to relay factual or otherwise essential information. Therefore, when Saga says to Henrik, “I... just needed to tell someone”,⁹⁵ it is especially significant; both that Saga has a social need and that the person she wants to reciprocate or fulfil that need is Henrik. This phone call is therefore both atypical for her character and demonstrates the strength of her investment in Henrik. Yet, it is clear from the example I have analysed that Saga’s relationship with Henrik is not recognised as a legitimate form of investment in love or desire. This in turn suggests that non-normative ways of being and expression are illegible to the gaze of normative others.

The account I have given of *The Bridge*’s construction of non-conventional love acts suggests, not that Saga is incapable of love, but rather that perhaps a neurotypical audience might not recognise it. This can be seen most clearly in the work of Schwartz and Kaplan, who write about their inability to identify with an autistic character using the collective ‘we’ to refer to the authors themselves and an implicit and presumed neurotypical audience. For instance, it is stated outright that Saga represents ‘a figure or position that we sympathise with but also fail to identify with’.⁹⁶ There is also a failure to consider that this inability to empathise or identify with her character might in fact belong to the authors who instead emphasise that it must be Saga who cannot be identified with, rather than considering that perhaps it is they who are unable to identify with her. I have argued that this failure is a function of the neurotypical gaze, which operates to obscure, deny and diminish autistic subjectivity. As Milton argues, ‘from the position of the non-autistic onlooker, autistic people can seem to have an impaired understanding of social life and other people’.⁹⁷ With this in mind, I suggest that scholarship I have examined shows an equally impaired ability to understand the social and interior lives of autistic characters.

It is worth returning to the idea that autistic spectators are likely to relate differently to Saga’s character. For instance, Collins compares Saga to a superhero, writing that:

a white, non-disabled cisgender man can walk into any multiplex, any week of the year, and see someone who looks like him with a more muscular jawline righteously gun down the bad guys.⁹⁸

However, Collins suggests, if she wishes to see “an autistic heroine—my only option is Saga Norén”.⁹⁹ Within the conventions of the superhero genre, we recognise that the normative male heroes Collins cites are capable of feats beyond the abilities of most men in reality—and we recognise too that is precisely why they are the hero, because they can do things others cannot. Similarly, many autistic subjects cannot always do or say the kinds of things Saga does. For instance, Collins goes on to write that “the words [Saga] says are ones that are in my head, too, even though I’ve learned to stop them from leaving my mouth”.¹⁰⁰ What this indicates is that Collins has learnt to suppress the things she wishes to say, and, importantly, that she does so at least in part because those things are not socially valued. This in turn implies that if Saga’s character knew, as many autistic subjects (including myself) know, that her words and the forms her desires take were not socially valued, she might not say or do those things. The significance of this for autistic subjects is immense. For autistic spectators, Saga’s heroic qualities stem precisely from the autistic traits which neurotypical viewers find at worst bizarre and pitiable or at best sympathetic. Therefore, while the series is created from and constructs a neurotypical, often othering perspective, it is clear that *The Bridge* offers autistic spectators a potent fantasy in which Saga is the hero because she saves the day and catches the bad guys—but most of all, she is heroic precisely because she does these things so autistically.

In conclusion, I have outlined a framework for understanding the facets and functions of the neurotypical gaze across cultural and academic spheres, concentrating on the pleasure of looking, the fixative power of the gaze, and its inward focus. Furthermore, I have argued that existing scholarship on *The Bridge* both interrogates and perpetuates the centrality of the neurotypical gaze. Saga’s character is constructed by and within. My examination of *The Bridge* has shown how a mismatch in social expectation and communication can render autistic characters illegible within normative frameworks of love, desire and relationality in both their fictional social worlds and our own. My approach has therefore been to highlight the nuances of autistic acts of love and care constructed by *The Bridge* with the aim of countering neuroconventional interpretations of the series which read autism as pathological, unknowable and uninterpretable. In other words, I hope to make autistic love and autistic perspectives legible so that they might be more easily recognised by future scholarship.

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NOTES

1. I use the definition of neurotypical outlined by Nick Walker (2014), which is ‘a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of “normal”’. This definition highlights that what is considered a ‘normal’ brain is always socially constructed rather than an objective reality. Further detail can be found in the article “Neurodiversity: some basic terms & definitions,” *Neurocosmopolitanism: Dr. Nick Walker’s Notes On Neurodiversity, Autism, & Self-Liberation* (blog), September 14, 2014.
2. Hans Rosenfeldt (2018), “The Bridge (Bron/Broen)”. Series originally aired in Denmark, 2011–2018 on DR1, Sweden, 2011–2018 on SVT1, and the UK, 2012–2018 on BBC2.
3. Lucy Townsend (2015), “How The Bridge’s heroine became a role model for women with autism,” *BBC News*, December 9, 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/disability-34995327>.
4. The degree to which the series can be said to present autistic love is debatable. On the one hand, the series is written, directed and acted from a neurotypical perspective and therefore presents a neurotypical imaginary of what autistic love looks and feels like. At the same time, Hacking argues that ‘autism narratives are not just stories or histories, describing a given reality. They are creating the language used to describe the experience of autism, and hence helping to forge new ways of thinking about autism’ (2009, 1467). In other words, narratives created from neurotypical perspectives actively construct how we collectively think about and imagine autistic love. It is therefore crucial to acknowledge the series’ perspective in addition to critically examining the narrative construction of autism.
5. James McGrath (2017), *Naming Adult Autism: Culture, Science, Identity* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017).
6. Rosemary Collins (2016), “Saga Norén, the autistic superwoman of ‘The Bridge,’” *The Toast*, June 27, 2016, <https://the-toast.net/2016/06/27/saga-noren-the-autistic-superwoman-of-the-bridge/>.
7. It is worth noting that there is a discrepancy in the material available for analysis. Namely, there are more articles written about *The Bridge* from neurotypical perspectives than there are from autistic perspectives. This imbalance corresponds to the wider discourse on autism. Across different fields, and in both historical and contemporary contexts, research about autism and autistic people has been predominantly produced by non-autistic researchers.
8. Joan Ganz Cooney, Lloyd Morrisett, and Jim Henson (1969–present), 1969–present, “Sesame Street”. Series currently airing in the US on HBO Max (Julia’s character was first introduced to *Sesame Street* in 2015).
9. Jeff Kaplan, Chris Metzzen, and Aaron Keller (2015), “Overwatch”. Video game developed by Blizzard Entertainment.
10. Autistic coding refers to characters who are not explicitly identified as autistic but have attributes associated with autism. For instance, Christa Mullis writes that “we have long associated traits like lack of eye contact, and difficulty with sarcasm and picking up subtle cues, and love of routine, and restless fidgeting or awkward gait, with that type of character” (2018, n.p. italics in original).
11. Graham Linehan (2006), *The IT Crowd*. Series originally aired in the UK, 2006.
12. Yates, David (2017). *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, released in cinema in 2016.
13. Julia Miele Rodas (2018), *Autistic Disturbances: Theorizing Autism Poetics from the DSM to Robinson Crusoe* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2018).
14. Christa Mullis (2019), “Reflection: autistic-coded characters and fans in fandom,” *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (April 2019): 147–156, <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v8i2.495>.
15. When I use phrases like ‘neurotypical perspective’, it is not my intention to assume that the authors whose work I examine are themselves neurotypical—this would be impossible to accurately discern unless they choose to disclose. Furthermore, this kind of speculation (aside from being gauche) is unnecessary. As a result of living in a culture in which autism has been systematically pathologised, autistic people may internalise neurotypical norms and ideologies. Therefore, I argue that it is more important to look at whether research operates according to the logics of neuronormativity, rather than attempting to identify whether or not the author is neurotypical. To use Ian Hacking’s words, I am concerned with ‘texts not people’ (2009, 1468).
16. It is worth noting that psychoanalysis is fundamental to Berlant’s work, which seeks to examine how modern narratives of love are inflected by the dominance of heterosexuality as a cultural norm. I highlight this focus because Freudian psychoanalytic models have been used in some extremely damaging ways throughout the clinical history of autism. For example, Bruno Bettelheim’s highly influential book

- The Empty Fortress* (1967) played a key role in constructing autism as the result of a child's toxic relationship with their 'refrigerator mother'. Although thoroughly discredited, Bettelheim's ideas have enduring purchase in our contemporary understanding of autism (Biklen, 2005; Fisher, 2008; Severson, Aune and Jodlowski, 2008; Nadesan, 2008; Murray, 2008), in particular the characterisation of autistic subjects as 'self-contained, narcissistic and empty' (Bettelheim, 1967, 100). However, although there is certainly no recognition of neurodiverse subjectivity in the Freudian-Lacanian model, the robust tradition in feminist, queer and postcolonial studies of critiquing and redeploying psychoanalysis has much to offer my discussion on love, normativity and narrative convention. This is especially the case for Berlant, who concentrates on psychoanalysis because, as she rightly points out, "the ways in which we live sexuality and intimacy have been profoundly shaped by theories—especially psychoanalytic ones, which have helped to place sexuality and desire at the center of the modern story about what a person is and how her history should be read" (2012, 5). Berlant's work therefore offers a flexible framework through which to interrogate normative conventions of love and analyse socially undesirable forms of love such as those found in *The Bridge*.
17. Lauren Berlant (2012), *Desire/Love* (New York: Punctum Books, 2012), 87.
 18. John Swinton (2012), "Reflections on autistic love: what does love look like?" *Practical Theology* 5, no. 3 (2012): 274, <https://doi.org/10.1558/prth.v5i3.259>.
 19. Ian Hacking, 2009b, "Autistic autobiography," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 364 (2009): 1471, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2008.0329>.
 20. Walker, 2014.
 21. Nick Walker (2016), "Autism and the pathology paradigm," *Neurocosmopolitanism: Dr. Nick Walker's Notes On Neurodiversity, Autism, & Self-Liberation* (blog), June 23, 2016, <https://neurocosmopolitanism.com/autism-and-the-pathology-paradigm/>.
 22. Walker, 2014.
 23. For further exploration of the neurodiversity paradigm, see the Disability Studies Quarterly special issue titled 'Autism and the Concept of Neurodiversity' 30, no. 1 (2010, ed. by Emily Thornton Savarese and Ralph James Savarese).
 24. Melanie Yergeau (2018), *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 6.
 25. Yergeau, 2.
 26. Yergeau, 26.
 27. Stuart Jeffries (2014), "The Bridge recap: season two, episodes seven and eight," *Guardian*, January 25, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2014/jan/25/the-bridge-recap-season-two-episodes-seven-eight>.
 28. Berlant, 20.
 29. There is some affinity between the concept of the gaze and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's work in *Staring: How We Look* (2009), which explores how and why we stare, particularly at disability. However, Garland-Thomson clearly distinguishes between the stare and the gaze. Staring is characterised as 'urgent' and 'intense', a kind of looking that occurs when we see something unfamiliar or disruptive, something we cannot make sense of (3). The gaze, however, is described as an 'oppressive act of disciplinary looking that subordinates its victim' (9), and therefore bears more relevance to the topic of this article.
 30. Laura Mulvey (1975), "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>.
 31. Frantz Fanon (1986), *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986, trans. Charles Lam Markmann), 109.
 32. For further discussion of the tropes found in autism fictions, see Stuart Murray (2008), *Representing Autism Culture, Narrative, Fascination*, Ian Hacking (2009a), "How We have been Learning to Talk About Autism: A Role for Stories," and Sonya Freeman Loftis (2010) *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum*.
 33. Murray, 114.
 34. David Shore (2017), *House*. Series originally aired in the US, 2004–2012 on Fox.
 35. Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* series (2005–2008).
 36. Alan J Pakula (1998), *The Pelican Brief*, released in cinemas in 1993.
 37. Chris Carter (2018). *The X-Files*. Series originally aired in the US, 1993–2001 (Season 1–9) and 2016–2018 (Season 10–11) on Fox.
 38. Søren Sveistrup (2012). *The Killing/Forbrydelsen*. Series originally aired in Denmark, 2007–2012 on DR1.
 39. Robert Shrimley (2014), "A case of Scandi double standards?" *Financial Times*, January 17, 2014. <https://www.ft.com/content/bb89ef60-7e43-11e3-b409-00144feabd0c>.
 40. Joss Whedon (2005), "Buffy the Vampire Slayer". Series originally aired in the US, 1997–2003 on The WB and UPN.
 41. Camilla Schwartz and E. Ann Kaplan (2018), "The female detective as the child who needs to know. Saga Norén as an example of potent yet dysfunctional female detectives in contemporary Nordic Noir," *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies* 48, no. 2 (2018): 226, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ejss-2018-0017>.
 42. Hart Hanson (2017). *Bones*. Series originally aired in the US, 2005–2017.
 43. Loftis, 44.
 44. *The Bridge (Bron/Broen)*, season 1, episode 5, directed by Lisa Siwe, written by Rosenfeldt, aired May 5, 2012, on *BBC Two*.
 45. Rosemary Collins, "Saga Norén, the autistic superwoman of 'The Bridge,'" *The Toast*, June 27, 2016, <https://the-toast.net/2016/06/27/saga-noren-the-autistic-superwoman-of-the-bridge/>.
 46. Schwartz and Kaplan, 225.
 47. Schwartz and Kaplan, 219.
 48. McGrath, 151.
 49. McGrath, 150.
 50. Fanon, 109.
 51. Brett Ranon Nachman and Kirsten R Brown (2019), "Omission and othering: constructing autism on community college websites," *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 44, no. 3 (2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2019.1565845>.
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93. *Six Feet Under*, season 4, episode 1, "Falling into Place," directed by Michael Cuesta, written by Alan Ball (2006) and Craig Wright, aired June 13, 2004, on HBO. For comparable examples in which a male partner responds negatively to a female characters' abortion, see the American television series *Girls* (Lena Dunham, season 4, episode 6, "Close Up") and *Grey's Anatomy* (Shonda Rhimes, season 7, episode 22, "Unaccompanied Minor" and season 8 episode 1, "Free Falling").
94. *The Bridge (Bron/Broen)*, season 4, episode 7, directed by Rumle Hammerich, written by Hans Rosenfeldt and Camilla Ahlgren, aired June 22, 2018, on *BBC Two*.
95. *The Bridge (Bron/Broen)*, season 4, episode 8, directed by Rumle Hammerich, written by Hans Rosenfeldt and Camilla Ahlgren, aired June 22, 2018, on *BBC Two*.
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97. Milton, 2018, 1.
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