Media Criticism

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Everything produced by the media has a message. Every song, television show or article a person views is portraying a specific type of message. According to the “Simplified Model of Media and the Social World” there are four components to media: users, technology, industry and content (Croteau & Hoynes, 2019). All of these components work simultaneously within the social world to produce messages within the media (Croteau & Hoynes, 2019). Television shows in particular can try to represent a group of people, a lifestyle, a specific person and so on. The show Atypical from Netflix represents a white, nuclear family of four with a son on the autism spectrum. This particular show is noteworthy because it is attempting to represent multiple different things. It depicts a white family of four in which both parents work, two teenagers who attend high school, one of which is a rebellious female and the other is a male on the autism spectrum (Rashid & Jann, 2017). This show is telling the viewer not only how a white nuclear family functions but also how people on the autism spectrum behave and how the family reacts to such behaviors. The particular episode of Atypical being discussed is the first one titled “Antarctica”. The representation displayed in this show is important because it not only tells the viewer how a white nuclear family functions, but also shows what it is like having a person on the autism spectrum within the family, which is a strong and somewhat controversial message.

As previously mentioned, there are many things being represented in the first episode of Atypical. One of the more obvious representations the show depicts is what a white nuclear family looks like in today’s time. During the duration of the first episode, there are a few master shots in which the home and a family member is shown. There are multiple times when the viewer gets to see both the outside as well as the interior of the family home. These shots provide the viewer with how a family of this kind should live. The home itself is a stereotypical middle-class home. It appears to be in a nice neighborhood, not a mansion but not very small either and is decorated with photos and many other motifs (Rashid & Jann, 2017). From the surface, the home makes the family look like they have everything together and they all get along, but that is not the case. It is evident within the first episode that there are relationship issues among the family members. For example, before the show is even five minutes in, the viewer begins to notice strained relationships. When the family is eating dinner at the dinner table (another stereotype of how a middle-class functions) there are several medium shots of each family member (Rashid & Jann, 2017). The dialogue back and forth seems to be tense and defensive. Another example of strained relationships in this show is when the mother (Elsa) and the daughter (Casey) are the kitchen discussing how Casey punched a girl in the face at school (Rashid & Jann, 2017). The mom is scolding Casey telling her what she did was wrong when then in a three shot, the dad says, “Casey and I are cool, you’re always going to be the bad guy with her” (Rashid & Jann, 2017). This representation of a seemingly “perfect” middle class family in a nice home and neighborhood is skewed with the relationship issues within the members. Also, these issues are kept within the home in hopes of portraying to other people that the family does not have problems. For instance, at no point in this episode does a family member open up to someone outside of the family about what is really going on. Even in the scene with Elsa and the bartender, Elsa says she loves her life and does not provide much details to the actual reality of it (Rashid & Jann, 2017). This representation of a middle class, white family is telling the viewer that on the surface everything seems fine when in actuality the family is dealing with a lot of interpersonal relationship problems.

This representation of a white, nuclear family is important because it not only communicates how a family of this type behaves but also with one of the members being on the autism spectrum. One of the main aspects of this family is conflict. Conflict between members of the family as well as conflict against the public. The previous examples mentioned of this family having strained relationships mostly had to do with differing of opinions and certain family members advocating for others. However, there are even more examples of conflict presented in this episode. Some of the sources of arguments or tense relationships present in this episode comes from Sam, the son on the autism spectrum. One example of this is when the parents are talking about Sam in a closet and they have conflicting opinions over him dating and growing up in general (Rashid & Jann, 2017). The dad wants to back off and let Sam experience life for himself and the mom feels the need to keep watching over and guiding him (Rashid & Jann, 2017). This relates back to the thesis in how the family struggles with how to let Sam grow up. The differing of opinions also causes relationship issues within the family. Implying that families that have members on the autism spectrum are almost at a loss at how to raise them properly and this in turn causes conflict among family members. This particular message is fairly strong because it is saying that all parents with autistic children will most likely have differing opinions on parenting styles and this strains the closeness of the family.

It is evident that there are many conflicts presented in this one episode of Atypical. However, this episode not only shows conflicts among members within the family but also how the family functions with Sam. As previously mentioned, the character Sam on the show is on the autism spectrum. “Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by communication difficulties, social impairment and fixated interests along with repetitive behaviours” (Habib, Harris, Pollick, & Melville, 2019). Sam from Atypical pretty much matches the above definition of autism spectrum disorder. During the first episode (“Antarctica”), Sam is seen to have trouble gaging nonverbal communication, social cues, and has trouble relating to people his age and effectively communicating with them (Rashid & Jann, 2017). Also, Sam is obsessed with penguins and Antarctica (Rashid & Jann, 2017). As one can see, being on the autism spectrum greatly impacts a lot about an individual. Meaning, a family would have to operate differently if it has a member on the autism spectrum. This adaption of behavior is also represented within this episode. A viewer can tell how each member of the family adapts to Sam’s behavior. For instance, Elsa (the mom) is very controlling over Sam. She feels as though she still needs to protect Sam as much as she can. Her excessive amount of concern for Sam is seen when she says (during a medium shot) that every time the phone rings she thinks Sam has gotten hurt or is in trouble (Rashid & Jann, 2017). She is obviously having a hard time letting Sam grow up and be more independent because she still thinks he is not ready. However, Elsa’s response is not uncommon because due to the impairments people with ASD have, they are more dependent on their family for support and this in turn can cause more stress on the family members (Habib et al., 2019). This constant state of stress and uncertainty is prevalent throughout the whole episode when it refers to Sam. This episode also highlights the parent’s extra attention on Sam from their lack of attention to their daughter. It is obvious the parents are much more hands off when it comes to their daughter when compared to Sam. The daughter is seen to have more freedom and autonomy over her decisions than Sam is.

It is quite obvious that the family in Atypical functions differently due to Sam being on the autism spectrum. Relating back to the thesis, this episode is implying that there are not only many conflicts within a family that has someone on the autism spectrum, but also a lot of stress and uncertainty. Furthermore, this stress is not only coming from the mom but from every member of the family. An example of this is when the parents are at dinner and the dad (Doug) is telling Elsa how Sam’s abnormal behaviors cause him stress (Rashid & Jann, 2017). Doug even mentions “You’re not the only one in the family who has an autistic kid Elsa” (Rashid & Jann, 2017). With the compilation of the medium and two shots along with the non-diegetic sound, this scene becomes more intense and the viewer can feel the emotions from the parents. It is indisputable that these conflicts among the family members also result in added stress. This stress comes from worrying about Sam’s wellbeing to not being able to relate to him. The constant trying of the family members to connect with Sam is shown and the viewer can see how this causes each family member stress. Therefore, this episode is implying that all families with members on the autism spectrum experience this stress, which may or may not be true.

Not only did this episode showcase how the family functions with Sam, but it also shows the viewer how Sam feels within his family. As previously stated, Sam is on the autism spectrum and his behavior patterns can make it harder for him to communicate and connect with others. In fact, “The maladaptive behaviors of children with autism may result in social isolation and decreased opportunities for inclusion with their typical peers at school…” (Hall & Graff, 2012). It is no question that Sam feels like an outcast at school, but the same logic could be applied to how he feels within his own family. After Sam had a particularly awkward and embarrassing experience with a girl, he tells Casey and her friend “I wish I was normal” (Rashid & Jann, 2017). It is obvious that Sam knows his behaviors are not like his friends or family, but he does not know how to change them. Moreover, instead of Sam going to his parents and explaining what had happened, he decides to cry in his room alone (Rashid & Jann, 2017). This scene entails a one shot of Sam along with sad non-diegetic music and the viewer can really feel his sense of hopelessness and isolation (Rashid & Jann, 2017). The fact that Sam attempted to repress his feelings and keep them away from his family is an example of maladaptive behavior. If these behaviors are not altered, they can have long lasting implications on the person on the spectrum as well as his or her family (Hall & Graff, 2012). Another example of Sam feeling like an outcast within his own family is when he tries making an online dating profile. His sister Casey tries to help him, but Sam says how Casey does not like any of his responses and is putting information in his profile that is not true (Rashid & Jann, 2017). This is showing how Sam recognizes his answers are not “normal” but let’s Casey take over anyway. Sam will repeatedly let other members of his family make decisions for him simply because he does not understand why he is wrong.

This episode not only showed the viewer how the family functions with Sam but also how Sam feels in his family. According to the thesis, the first episode of Atypical, titled “Antarctica” shows what a white nuclear family looks like and how it functions with someone on the autism spectrum. Sam being the family member on the autism spectrum, his behaviors and feelings in the show are very important to the thesis. As previously stated, Sam is depicted as an outcast within the context of his peers as well as his family. This representation of people on the autism spectrum being social outcasts is a pretty strong message. It is implying that all people on the spectrum feel like Sam. The feelings of confusion and isolation seem to embody Sam on a daily basis. The show depicts Sam in a constant state of questioning himself and trying to figure out why he is not normal. All of these feelings of uncertainty contribute to how he feels within his family. He wants to be independent but also wants to do things correctly which most of the time requires assistance from others. Sam is almost depicted as being helpless in this episode due to his abnormal behaviors. Sam’s whole persona in this episode is communicating to the audience that that is how people on the autism spectrum act. When in fact, people on the autism spectrum can have different symptoms with varying intensities (Hall & Graff, 2012). Meaning that not every person on the autism spectrum will behave like Sam. However, the depiction of Sam in this episode is telling the viewer that is how all people on the autism spectrum behave. The fact that autistic people are being portrayed as helpless and dependent might upset some viewers. This show is communicating a very strong message to its viewers saying how Sam’s behaviors (since he is on the autism spectrum) are justifiable within his own family.

In conclusion, the first episode of Atypical is portraying very strong messages to its viewers. It not only communicates how a white nuclear family appears and functions but also how one would behave with a member on the autism spectrum. In addition to this, the episode also informs the viewer on how people on the autism spectrum act and behave. With all of this taken into consideration, the “Antarctica” episode of Atypical has multifaceted messages. It tries to communicate difficult and somewhat controversial topics in a lighthearted and comedic light. The comedy aspects of the show provide a little bit of a distraction to the viewer from the more powerful messages. Meaning, one could enjoy the comedy component of this show while absorbing the real messages subconsciously. There are most likely parts of the show that some viewers would disagree with. For instance, the representation of both a white nuclear family and people on the autism spectrum. However, this episode is still important to view and analyze because it does provide some awareness of people on the autism spectrum. For those who are unfamiliar with the condition, they could learn more about the perceived realities of the autism spectrum while enjoying a funny show. Even though media representations will never fully encompass reality because they will always highlight certain aspects and neglect others (Croteau & Hoynes, 2019), it is still important to recognize the messages within representation. Overall, the messages about family life and the life of people on the autism spectrum are very notable messages in which this show tries to communicate. With the representation this episode of Atypical attempts to communicate, there is room for improvement but also for accomplishment. Going forward Atypical (and the media in general) should try to portray different versions of white nuclear families. For instance, the media should show families of this nature in lower socioeconomic statuses, have a member with chronic health conditions and so on. The media has normalized white nuclear families living in nice neighborhoods with white picket fences, when that is not actually the reality in many cases. In order to better represent families of this kind there should be more variety in their lifestyles. This would help bring a more well-rounded image of white nuclear families and not just the one everyone is used to seeing. Furthermore, to better improve the representation of people on the autism spectrum there needs to be more attention to it by the media. In order for people to understand the autism spectrum they need to see it. The show Atypical is one way of going in the right direction. It provides the viewer a glimpse as to what people on the autism spectrum could be going through. Even though no representation is perfect, having some kind is better than nothing at all. Lastly, with Atypical in mind, they could create a more in depth understanding of the autism spectrum disorder by having another character on the autism spectrum but with different behaviors from Sam. This would help show how being on the autism spectrum can look different from person to person. No representation by the media will ever be as good as reality, but shows like Atypical are a step in the right direction.

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