

“Much More Than You Know”: *The Accountant*, Autism, and the Double Empathy Problem

By Tom Gardner

One of the most recent and notable depictions of autism in film is *The Accountant* (2016), directed by Gavin O’Connor and written by Bill Dubuque. The film’s protagonist, Christian Wolff, played by Ben Affleck, is an autistic savant who works as an accountant for various criminal organisations, aided by his supreme mathematical abilities and expert fighting skills. Dubuque’s screenplay is ostensibly well-researched and three-dimensional, furnishing Wolff with a host of common autistic behaviours, such as a desire for routine and noticeable stimming, however it is not without its faults. Whilst other writers and reviews have picked up on some of the more obviously questionable aspects of this film, such as its reinforcement of the savant stereotype (Berlatsky, 2016) and its connection to the correctly criticised organisation Autism Speaks (Haagaard, 2016), what hasn’t been explored is *The Accountant’s* relationship with the double empathy problem – and the issues of viewing autism solely through the eyes of the neurotypical.

The double empathy problem is a theory by Dr Damian Milton, an autistic researcher, which challenges the now-debunked (Bercovici, 2023) (but still widely held) opinion that autistic people have an impaired theory of mind, or what Milton calls the ability to “comprehend and predict [others’] behaviour” (Milton, 2018). What he instead seeks to explain is that any perceived empathy and communication issues related to autism are “not due to autistic cognition alone, but a breakdown in reciprocity and mutual understanding that can happen between people with very differing ways of seeing the world”. In other words, *most* neurotypicals will find it difficult to understand and sympathise with *most* autistic people and vice versa, with both parties often having significantly less trouble with those of the same neurotype. This is due to the observation that “those with similar experiences are more likely to form connections”. It is important to note that Milton’s theory never denies that an autistic person and a neurotypical can have a deep emotion bond, but instead seeks to highlight autistic people’s relationship with wider society: from impacting their ability to access and navigate public services to, as this essay seeks to explore, how they are portrayed in popular media.

In *The Accountant’s* closing scenes, Dubuque (who is not autistic) shows a theoretical understanding of the double empathy problem. The audience are taken to a Neuroscience Centre, where a doctor is encouraging a family to accept their autistic child for who they are. He caps off what is essentially a brief summary of the goals of the autism rights movement with the following words: “Maybe your son’s capable of much more than you

know. Maybe, just maybe, he doesn't understand how to tell us, or we've not yet learned how to listen". Whilst this is indeed a positive sentiment, in practice the makers of *The Accountant* struggle to demonstrate a true understanding of Milton's theory, and multiple elements of the film – such as the story, characterisation and dialogue – often end up inadvertently highlighting the double empathy problem, instead of consciously exploring it.

Firstly, Dubuque's participation in the double empathy problem becomes evident when one assesses the impact Wolff's autism actually has on his actions as a character. When analysed, the role autism plays in the actual story of *The Accountant* is rather minor. If one were to remove Wolff's autism and were to return to producer Mark William's initial pitch regarding "a financial thriller [centred] on a fast-talking accountant" (Rottenberg, 2016), the core of the film would play out exactly the same, without impacting its overall quality as a piece of action cinema. As for Wolff's character, he could still be extremely good at mathematics, as many neurotypicals are, and his domineering father could still be keen to train him in martial arts (in order to protect Wolff from potential bullies, as his military background moves them from location to location). His social and sensory differences do not actually influence any of the major events in the film – and therefore fail to show the all-encompassing nature of autism, and how it theoretically affects an individual's every decision. More understanding screenplays, such as Erica Milsom's *Loop* (2020) (based off a story by Milsom, Adam Burke and Matthias De Clercq), place their autistic characters in positions where their autistic traits and behaviours directly impact both the story and other characters. For example, at a key plot point in *Loop*, Renee experiences a sensory overload, which not only causes her and Marcus to lose control of their canoe, but also forces Marcus to explore how he can accommodate her needs. This then results in a progression of story, character, and an emotional payoff – as the two end up becoming close friends. In *The Accountant*, however, any part of Wolff's character which could ostensibly progress the story is actually overshadowed by a more prominent reason. For example, when Wolf is upset with unexpectedly having to abandon his audit, a feeling which he puts down to his autism, he is already aware that some of Living Robotics' money has been stolen and that people are dying – two arguably more generic reasons to drive him to get to the bottom of the mystery. In other words, simply furnishing an autistic character with widely accepted autistic traits (such as a discomfort with uncertainty or poor eye-contact) is not enough to create a truly autistic character. Instead, like any other dramatic character, their actions and personalities should directly impact the story and the world around them. After all, autistic behaviours are human behaviours, and should not be trivialised or treated as anything less than that.

The double empathy problem is also revealed through the way Dubuque's characters interact. For example, when Wolff describes his difficulty "socialising with people [he] doesn't know" (despite the fact that he "want[s] to"), and how he has a hard time "abandoning tasks", Dana (played by Anna Kendrick) attempts to relate with a story about her younger self trying to "belong" by pursuing the materialistic goal of a prom dress. She then emphasises her point by reassuring him that "we are all trying to fit in". Whilst it is hard to deny that Dubuque has good intentions, comparing his communication differences

to her one-time desire to be seen a certain way by her peers highlights a lack of understanding of the overwhelming position that feeling unable to connect with the majority society can put someone in. By then trying to comfort Wolff with the notion that the rest of the world is experiencing similar problems, Dana (and Dubuque) effectively minimise the autistic experience. Whilst there is possibly an interesting parallel to be drawn between the struggle to meet neurotypical standards of communication and (in the case of Dana's anecdote) the pressure many young women feel under to meet society's expectations of them, the filmmakers do not help their overarching goals by drawing this parallel, as ultimately the two issues are separate and equally difficult for an 'outsider' to fully and authentically empathise with.

One often-cited (Haagaard, 2016) problem with *The Accountants* depiction of autism regards the scenes in which Wolff can be seen deliberately over-stimulating himself, as a way of trying to combat his sensory sensitivity. In part misguided by his father, who believes that he must prevent Wolff from becoming a "victim", Wolff spends periods of time forcing himself to endure strobe lighting and loud music, until (at one point) he engages in self-injurious behaviour. Whilst the filmmakers never explicitly endorse such methods, these scenes expose the double empathy problem through the way the filmmakers fail to fully appreciate the autistic sensory experience. Firstly, in practical filmmaking terms, Wolff's sensory overload is observed entirely from the outsider's perspective, minimising the audience's ability to understand the impact of such an experience, and therefore empathise with it. Films that are more successful in this aspect often use shots from the autistic character's perspective – such as Pixar's *Loop*, directed by Erica Milsom. In *Loop*, the audience are invited to share Renee's overwhelming experience through a POV shot that whips around her environment. Similarly, in *The Reason I Jump* (2020), director Jerry Rothwell pairs POV shots with unique sound design to imitate both the comforting and discomforting aspects of the autistic sensory experience. This method is perhaps the most effective way neurotypical filmmakers have managed to transport the audience into the mind of an autistic character (although it is of course still a long way from accurately representing the energy-draining state of sensory discomfort that many autistic people experience). Likewise, Wolff's sensory sensitivities are not given the full attention of the filmmakers, who are inconsistent with the details of how they impact him. For example, it is made clear that Wolff does not like bright lights. Yet, in the scene where he hyper-focusses for seemingly hours upon end in order to analyse Living Robotics' books, he is located in a brightly lit office and surrounded by glass panels that back onto an equally illuminated corridor. It is extremely doubtful that someone who has such light-sensitivity would be comfortable enough to adequately focus in such a location, and therefore indicative of filmmakers who have not properly thought through the autistic experience, especially an aspect which runs through every activity one partakes in.

In conclusion, despite being a mostly acceptable depiction of autism – through the use character traits and an overall positive outlook on the condition – when *The Accountant* is viewed through the lens of Dr Damian Milton's theory of the double empathy problem, Wolff's character can be seen as a symptom of neurotypical society's misunderstanding of

the autistic experience. When this subconscious, yet fundamental, misunderstanding is projected onto a piece of media through the neurotypical perspective, it runs the risk of reinforcing unhelpful attitudes towards autism, and therefore alienating those it seeks to empower.

Thankfully, there are solutions to this problem. Most importantly, autistic co-production should be encouraged at every phase of a film's creation, to ensure that the final product is well thought-out and real, as opposed to simply well-meaning. Although the makers of *The Accountant* did collaborate (Rottenberg, 2016), the most famous name linked to the film is Autism Speaks, an American organisation which many autistic people feel extremely uncomfortable with, due to its misuse of funds, (ironically) excluding autistic voices, and fearmongering tactics (Medina, 2021). Seeing as Disabled creators are underrepresented and underfunded in the film industry (Alexiou, 2020), it is not unfeasible that audiences would feel more comfortable with seeing more Disabled writers, directors and actors working to share their own stories, rather than have them being told by those without the same depth of experience, and therefore more susceptible to the double empathy problem. This is not to say that neurotypicals should not be able to tell autistic stories, simply that autistic stories are, more often than not, being told by neurotypicals in an industry where Disabled people are statistically among the most under-represented groups (Alexiou, 2020) and therefore being denied a proper platform or voice. Thankfully, the success of openly autistic actors and filmmakers such as Sir Anthony Hopkins, Daryl Hannah and David Byrne prove that acceptance of autistic talent is indeed possible, however an extreme uptake in funding and resources will be needed for this to happen on any meaningful level across the film industry and finally allow the neurodivergent community to feel appropriately seen and heard.

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