

The cloak of incompetence: representations of people with intellectual disability in film

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Introduction

At the half-hour mark of *Tropic Thunder*, Robert Downey Jr's character Kirk Lazarus teaches Ben Stiller's Tugg Speedman a lesson about Hollywood and the Oscars. Lazarus and Speedman, both actors, discuss Speedman's interpretation of a person with intellectual disability in one of his films: *Simple Jack*. Lazarus argues that Hollywood does not like portrayals of people with intellectual disability that are too realistic. Taking this approach leads to actors going home "empty-handed" on Oscar night, he tells Speedman. In his argument, the key part of which is reproduced below, Lazarus refers to four films: *Forrest Gump*, *Rain Man*, *Being There*, and *I am Sam*. The portrayals of people with intellectual disability and the depiction of their lives in these films, and to a lesser extent in *Tropic Thunder* itself, are the focus of this article.¹

Lazarus's Argument

Excerpt from *Tropic Thunder*

S: Ben Stiller as Tugg Speedman

L: Robert Downey Jr as Kirk Lazarus

L: Hats off for going there, especially knowing how the Academy is about that shit.

S: About what?

L: You're serious? You don't know? Everybody knows you never go full retard.

S: What do you mean?

L: Check it out. Dustin Hoffman, *Rain Man*, looked retarded, act retarded, not retarded.

Count toothpicks, cheat at cards. Autistic, sure. Not retarded.

Then you got Tom Hanks, *Forrest Gump*.

Slow, yes, retarded, maybe, braces on his legs.

But he charmed the pants off Nixon, and he won a Ping-Pong competition.

That ain't retarded.

Peter Sellers, *Being There*. Infantile yes. Retarded no.

You went full retard, man.

¹ *Being There* and *Forrest Gump* are adaptations of novels. A comparison of film and novel would be interesting, but this article focuses exclusively on the films.

Never go full retard.

You don't buy that?

Ask Sean Penn, 2001, *I Am Sam*.

Remember? Went full retard?

Went home empty-handed.

In this excerpt, the insistent use of the “r” word is offensive and unacceptable of course, and has in fact stirred up a lot of controversy.² It can be partly attributed to Stiller’s “maximalist” style, as Manohla Dargis describes his brand of humour in her review of the film.³ But while the terminology used is objectionable,⁴ Lazarus’s cynical appraisal of the Academy, and the criteria for securing an Oscar, is quite correct, even if not accurate—Hoffman and Hanks did win the Best Actor Oscar for their respective performances as Charles Babbit and Forrest Gump, but Sellers, nominated for Best Actor in the 1980 Academy Awards for his portrayal of Chauncey Gardiner, did not get the prize.⁵ However, as Moyer (among others) comments, playing a sick or disabled role has been a sure-fire way of winning an Oscar, especially since *Rain Man*.

Furthermore, many Oscars have gone to actors depicting characters with very severe disabilities, including Al Pacino, who won the Best Actor Oscar for *Scent of a Woman*, Marlee Matlin the Best Actress Oscar for *Children of a Lesser God*, Hilary Swank (*Million Dollar Baby*), Daniel Day Lewis (*My Left Foot*), and Eddy Redmayne (*The Theory of Everything*). The talent of these actors is not being doubted here. What is at issue rather is the fact that their portrayal of people with very significant disabilities did not put the Academy off awarding them their Oscars, and perhaps even induced the award. To use Lazarus’s terminology, Al Pacino depicted a “fully” blind man; Hilary Swank, Daniel Day

² Disability activists protested Stiller’s depiction of Simple Jack and against the liberal use of the “r” word and other offensive terms. See, for example, Jill Egle’s video *Can We Talk, Ben Stiller?* (available on YouTube). The protests were particularly vocal in the US, where people with intellectual disability and their allies had, when *Tropic Thunder* was released in 2008, been campaigning for many years for the term “mental retardation” and its derivatives to stop being used, as attested by David Goode.

³ Stiller is the director, co-producer, co-writer and co-star of *Tropic Thunder*.

⁴ Without excusing the offensiveness of the language used, this scene needs to be considered within the context of the film being a rather unsophisticated send-up of the Hollywood film industry.

⁵ Incidentally, the Oscar that year was won by Dustin Hoffman for *Kramer vs Kramer*, a film linked to *I Am Sam* in that Sam delivers a courtroom speech straight out of Hoffman’s script.

Lewis, and Eddy Redmayne depicted people with a “full” mobility impairment; and Marlee Matlin a woman who is “fully” deaf (as she is in real life). The problem, then, is not the severity but the nature of the disability. What we can gather from the dialogue above is that Hollywood and the Academy are more comfortable with representations of people with physical and sensory impairments than those of people with intellectual disability. So, what is it about Sean Penn’s performance in *I Am Sam* that makes Ben Stiller single it out in the script of *Tropic Thunder*? More importantly, why is it Sam’s story, and Penn’s interpretation of his character, that is spoken of so negatively when it is actually the one that best reflects the lived experience of people with intellectual disability? Answers to these questions need to be explored within the context of prevalent cultural constructions and portrayals of intellectual disability.

The Social, Cultural, and Historical Context

The image referenced in the title of this article is borrowed from Edgerton’s book *The Cloak of Competence*, published in 1967, in which he presents his interpretation of life after deinstitutionalization for people with intellectual disability. At the time, Edgerton argued that they tended to put on a “cloak of competence” to pass off as normal. It was only later that Edgerton rethought his interpretation. In 1986, he argued that the lives of persons with “mental retardation,” as they were called then, are also affected by systemic factors and that his research subjects were in fact competent enough to adapt to their new environment outside the institution.

Intellectual disability is therefore not static, but an ever-changing phenomenon whose interpretation varies within different sociocultural and historical contexts. Rapley analyzes the evolution of the definitions of intellectual disability issued by the American Association on Mental Retardation (which is now called the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disability [AAIDD]).⁶ The continuous changes, the sometimes vague descriptions, the explanations of intellectual disability in terms of what it is *not*, and the increased focus on the importance of environmental supports show, Rapley

⁶ See <http://aaidd.org/intellectual-disability/definitionfortheurrentdefinition>.

argues, that intellectual disability is much more of a social construct than a fixed, clearly diagnosable disorder. But the intricacies of discussions about the complex and multi-faceted nature of intellectual disability are not widely appreciated. As Dan Goodley argues, the difficulties encountered by persons with intellectual disability in their daily lives are more likely to be attributed to the nature of cognitive impairment, which is assumed to be static, than to the impact of socially created disabling barriers, which are complex and dynamic. Historically, the films analyzed in this article cover three decades, from 1979 to 2008. For many people with intellectual disability living in the US, where these films were produced, as well as other countries, these were decades that brought huge improvements to their quality of life, especially through deinstitutionalization, the increased recognition of their right to be included in society, and the rise of the self-advocacy movement (Dybwad and Bersani).

But the focus on cognitive impairment, rather than on socially created disabling barriers, persists. It comes across most potently in the treatment of the right to life. This right is denied to many who would be born with Down syndrome and other conditions, a practice which is rightly decried by many people with Down syndrome and their families.⁷ In connection with the indifferent reaction to the tragic and entirely preventable death in a care facility of her son Connor Sparrowhawk, Sara Ryan writes:

Learning-disabled people who die unexpectedly without family are very unlikely to have their deaths properly investigated. They simply don't count. (157)

Consequently, the insights into the nature of intellectual disability and of the significant role that environmental and sociocultural factors play in the abilities and competences that people with intellectual disability develop, as well as in the difficulties they face, do not seem to have percolated into the general culture. The latter tends to be dominated by very negative perceptions of what it means to live with an intellectual disability, to the extent that such a life is not necessarily seen as one worth living.

The Cloak of Incompetence

⁷ This is highlighted in Sally Phillips's 2016 BBC documentary *A World Without Down's Syndrome?*.

In this article, I argue that the treatment of characters with intellectual disability in the films discussed largely continues to reinforce these negative cultural constructions of intellectual disability. It is for this reason that Edgerton's image of the cloak of competence is being extended to, and in effect reversed into, the cloak of *in*competence. Rather than assuming that it is people with intellectual disability who don a "cloak" that makes them look more competent than they are (as Edgerton had originally assumed), what is being argued here is that persons with intellectual disability have a cloak foisted on them which casts them as incompetent people. Apart from being an item of clothing, a cloak (of whatever nature) also has the figurative meaning of hiding and concealing. What is being concealed here are the competencies, abilities, and humanity of people with intellectual disability, and the sociocultural factors that contribute to the nature of intellectual disability.

People with intellectual disability are therefore metaphorically cloaked in incompetence, because it is wrongly assumed that the difficulties they face can be explained as being a direct result of their cognitive impairments, and that none of these difficulties are created through social and cultural factors. To the extent, then, that these difficulties are seen as an inevitable and unalterable part of intellectual disability, the cloak can be said to be latent. Thus, it is latent not in the sense of being inert or dormant, but in the sense of its existence not being acknowledged by the dominant culture, because the role which that very culture plays in creating disabling obstacles remains concealed.

It is, of course, a fact that people with intellectual disability have difficulties with intellectual functioning and with developing conceptual, social, and practical skills, as set out in the AAIDD definition cited above. But an understanding of intellectual disability should not stop there. It should also take other factors into account, including negative perceptions of intellectual disability and the extent to which people with intellectual disability can develop their abilities and competences once they are provided with the right support, as mentioned in the AAIDD document. The cloak of incompetence therefore also represents the double bind in which people with intellectual disability find themselves. They are presumed to be incompetent while lacking the support they need to further their personal and social development.

The negative perceptions of intellectual disability represented by the cloak of incompetence extend into the films being analyzed here. Significantly, they play an important part in the Lazarus-Speedman dialogue presented earlier. The characters with

intellectual disability referred to by Lazarus, in his criticism of Speedman's portrayal of Simple Jack, are mostly used as props for the narrative, as vehicles that help move the plot forward in a specific direction. As seen below, with the exception of the eponymous character in *I Am Sam*, they are not portrayed as persons in their own right, even when they are the purported protagonists of the film.

In this regard, Lazarus is right to single out Penn's portrayal of a person with intellectual disability in *I Am Sam* from those in *Being There*, *Rain Man*, and *Forrest Gump*. Lazarus is also right in what he says about the Academy's view of these portrayals. What needs to be challenged is his conclusion that the portrayal of people with intellectual disability is more acceptable in the other three films than it is in *I Am Sam*, and the suggestion that Sellers, Hoffman, and Hanks are the actors to emulate.

There are of course many other films that include characters with intellectual disability. This article focuses on the four mentioned by Lazarus in Stiller's script within the context of *Tropic Thunder* being a critique of Hollywood and its vicissitudes. The next section synthesizes the most relevant aspects of these films.

The Four Protagonists and Their In/Abilities

The four protagonists on whom the analysis in this article centres are: Chauncey Gardiner (played by Peter Sellers in *Being There*), Raymond Babbit (Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*), Forrest Gump (Tom Hanks in the eponymous film), and Sam Dawson (Sean Penn in *I Am Sam*).

Chance was raised in Washington DC in the home of a rich man and is the gardener there until the man's death. His name, Chauncey Gardiner, is the one mistakenly given to him by the Rands, the rich and influential couple in whose house he ends up living after he is forced to leave his original home by the man's inheritors. His life remains undocumented until he has to leave the only house he has ever called home. Chauncey's intellectual disability is inferred through what he says, how he behaves, and the clothes he wears, as we see later. He is wrongly presumed to possess an extraordinary wisdom. For example, his comments about gardening and his confession about not reading the papers are not taken in the literal sense in which they are meant but are misinterpreted as unusually profound and refreshingly honest observations about the American economy and the press.

Raymond was taken to live at an institution when his brother, Charles, was a baby. After a long weekend driving across America with his brother in their late father's vintage Buick, Raymond returns to live to the institution. He is described as an "autistic savant."⁸ Raymond insists on sticking to certain routines and displays a prodigious photographic memory, especially with numbers. This extraordinary ability enables him to count cards and win big at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, to the delight of his debt-ridden brother. But, as his brother Charles comments, "He's just inherited \$3 million dollars and he does not understand the concept of money. It's fucking poetic, don't you think?" In one of the final scenes, Raymond does not answer questions about his own life reliably, replying yes both when asked if he wants to stay with his brother and if he wants to return to Willowbrook.

Forrest is the only character we meet from childhood. We follow his various escapades as he becomes involved in the most significant events in American history from the 1950s to the 1980s. At the end of the film, he is back in his family home, living with his son. Early on, we learn that Forrest's IQ is seventy-five. At school, he is rejected and taunted by everyone except Jenny, who remains his friend throughout life and eventually becomes the mother of their child. Forrest's extraordinary abilities are not really consistent with a diagnosis of intellectual disability, as wryly observed by Kirk Lazarus, in the excerpt quoted above.

Finally, Sam is an adult with intellectual disability who is literally left holding the baby from a relationship with his lodger Rebecca, who leaves him shortly after giving birth to their daughter Lucy. The most specific reference to Sam's intellectual disability comes from Lucy's teacher when she tells him that he has the intellectual capacity of a seven year old, Lucy's age at the time. His job is bussing restaurant tables and when he is promoted to making coffee, he fails miserably. His difficulties with acquiring skills ordinarily associated with adulthood, and especially with parenthood, lead the court to place Lucy in foster care.

Only Sam is shown as not having any extraordinary abilities. The difficulties he encounters in everyday life are not glossed over, even if they are underpinned by the sentimental tone of the film, as seen later. But he is also shown to be resourceful, especially in his bid to get Lucy back: he enlists the help of a brilliant lawyer, and eventually takes on a

⁸ Nowadays, he would be described as having "savant syndrome."

job as a dog walker, which enables him to earn additional income with which he rents a flat in the area where Lucy is living with her foster parents, and to engineer “accidentally” meeting Lucy while walking the dogs. The film is mainly about Sam’s legal battle to get Lucy back and upholds his right to be a father to Lucy.

Un/Challenged Assumptions

The summaries show how, in *Forrest Gump*, *Being There*, and *Rain Man*, characters with intellectual disability are made more acceptable by being given extraordinary abilities. In this regard, they resemble supercrips, albeit only to a certain extent. Schalk’s synthesis of the use of the term *supercrips* includes “compensation for the perceived ‘lack’ created by disability” (74), a description that fits Chauncey, Forrest, and Raymond well. In her critique, Schalk rightly calls for disability studies scholars to fully engage with the meanings of the term and avoiding using it as a shorthand for criticizing disability narratives that do not fit within their schema of what such narratives ought to be. That said, the highlighting of extraordinary abilities in disabled persons in these films (especially unlikely ones like Forrest’s) only serves to reinforce received misconceptions about the nature of intellectual disability, that often go unquestioned, as discussed earlier. The failure to see the extent to which intellectual disability is socially and culturally constructed, as argued by Rapley and Goodley among other authors, means that perceived incompetencies and inabilities are misconstrued as being immanent and immutable, that is as a cloak of incompetence that originates entirely from having a cognitive impairment. Its sociocultural origins go mostly uncontested, and the cloak therefore remains latent.

The difficulties with contesting the sociocultural nature of intellectual disability are witnessed to some extent in *Rain Man* and to a larger extent in *I Am Sam*. In *Rain Man*, Charles makes a short-lived attempt to challenge the judgements of various professionals that his brother would not be able to live outside the institution, as he develops a meaningful relationship with Raymond over the course of a few days. But his is a lonely, and short-lived, struggle to take on the establishment. Admittedly, his own self-centred money-minded behaviour does not do him any favours in trying to win his argument. Nor is he helped by his lack of awareness of the deinstitutionalization process, which was well

underway at the time that *Rain Man* was produced and which is not mentioned in the film.⁹ In fact, the films being analyzed here do not refer to the disability-related historical and political context of their time. Even *Forrest Gump*, which provides its viewers with a potted recent history of the United States makes no reference to the disability rights movement, as if this was not a development of historical significance.¹⁰ And *I Am Sam* fails to place its narrative within the current social context of the struggle of people with intellectual disability to be supported to live their lives in the community, including as parents, on a par with others.¹¹

On the other hand, the plot of *I Am Sam* turns on the attempt of Sam and his lawyer to get the court and the Department of Child and Family Services to see Sam as having the competence to raise Lucy himself, albeit with support. The film thus takes a critical attitude toward taking at face value the diagnosis of its central character having a mental age of seven. Challenging this concept is also in line with the critiques put forward by Rapley, among other authors, of the use of tools that purportedly measure a person's intellectual functioning. But no such critiques are considered by the Department or by the court. Sam's accomplishments are ignored, and his childlike behaviours and cognitive limitations and failings are taken as evidence against his ability to be a competent father to Lucy. The way that assumptions about people with intellectual disability go unquestioned in these films can also be seen in their treatment of the sexuality of the main characters. The idea of persons with intellectual disability as sexual beings creates unease, as Azzopardi-Lane argues. The most common stereotype associated with these persons however is that of asexuality, as Parchomiuk says. This stereotype is used in *Being There*, *Rain Man*, and *Forrest Gump*, but not in *I Am Sam*. Chauncey, Raymond and, to a large extent, Forrest, are all uninterested in sex. The treatment of Forrest's (a)sexuality is perhaps the most interesting of these three. When he is given a copy of *Playboy* magazine, he shows no interest in the nude pictures. Nor is he aroused when Lieutenant Simms picks up two

⁹ See Mansell and Ericsson's account of deinstitutionalization in Scandinavia, Britain, and the USA.^[11]^[10] This development is described well in Shapiro's *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement*.

¹⁰ This development is described well in Shapiro's *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement*.

¹¹ The difficulties encountered by parents with intellectual disability are well documented in the research literature, most recently by Theodore et al., in their article "'We Want to Be Parents Like Everybody Else': Stories of Parents with Learning Disabilities."

women, one for each of them. His lack of sexual urges stands in stark contrast to those of Simms, a double amputee. It is very much the person with intellectual disability who is portrayed as asexual. Thanks to Jenny, Forrest eventually has a brief sexual awakening. Forrest loves Jenny, he even asks her to marry him; he protests that "I'm not a smart man but I know what love is," but there is no indication that he is interested in her sexually. In fact, when she goes to his bedroom, he is highly embarrassed and it is very much Jenny who takes the lead in their one sexual encounter. On the other hand, while we never get a direct perspective on Sam's sexuality, the whole film is built on the consequence of his sexual relationship with Rebecca. In the early scenes of the film, we learn that she became his lodger after being rendered homeless. The birth of Lucy tells us that she was also his sexual partner, even if she did not see herself as his partner.

Sam does behave in a childlike manner in some scenes, with the seven-year old Lucy taking on the role of the adult. This quality is reinforced by the behaviour of his friends, all of whom have an intellectual disability, behaviour that helps the Department of Child and Family Services win the case for Lucy to be taken into foster care. Significantly, Sam's lawyer, who has never lost a case and who (unlike Charles in *Rain Man*) has so many resources at her disposal, fails in challenging assumptions about Sam's inability to be a good father and securing his right to retain custody of Lucy. It is only the foster mother's change of heart that returns the child to her father and provides the film with its happy ending.

Embodiments of Intellectual Disability

One of the critiques that is levelled against the static view of intellectual disability is that what purports to be a clear diagnosis is not, and can never be, an accurate measurement of a person's cognitive abilities and limitations, a critique that is also sustained by Stephen Murdoch. The basis of these critiques is the fact that intellectual disability, or even cognitive impairment, is not something that can be directly observed. Filmmakers get around this issue by using visual cues to mark their characters' intellectual disability. The use of these cues in the four films is significant and are mainly of two types: uncoordinated body movements and odd clothing.

As in the case of many people with intellectual disability, all four characters show evidence of poor motor coordination. In the opening scene of *Forrest Gump*, Forrest sits on

the bench with his toes turned inwards. The first flashback shows him being fitted with leg braces as a child (from which he is later miraculously freed when he is chased by some boys). His speech, in terms of articulation and in the words he uses, is childlike throughout the film. Peter Sellers's idea of displaying Chauncey's intellectual disability is of giving a wooden performance (but one for which he nonetheless received an Oscar nomination). Raymond shuffles, does not make any eye contact, and also speaks in a childlike manner. As for Sam, his unclear speech and ungainly movements also mark him out as having an intellectual disability.

Furthermore, Sam, Raymond, and Forrest all have unfashionable haircuts and wear drab and ill-fitting clothing, which seem to be *de rigueur* markers of having an intellectual disability in many films. In the case of Chauncey, he is always very elegantly dressed. But, significantly, his suits still mark him out as different. In one of their many futile attempts to dig up information about Chauncey, White House staff discover that these suits were made in the 1920s, and his underwear in the 1940s. Smartly turned out he may be, but only in a very outdated way.

Chauncey never changes his suits, but for the other three characters, there are instances in the films where they wear smart clothes, that is, outfits that are designed for them not to be marked out as people with intellectual disability. In these scenes, rather than questioning the assumption of inherent incompetence as being an inevitable consequence of congenital cognitive impairments, the characters' presumed incompetence (marked by their odd and unfashionable clothing) is hidden under a more socially acceptable style of clothing. Therefore, instead of exposing the cloak of incompetence as a creation originating from prevalent cultural misconceptions and prejudice, it is masked by having the characters wear clothes that make them look smart.

In *Rain Man*, when Charles wants to conceal his brother's autism (so that he does not draw attention to his illicit card counting in the casino), he gets them both a fashionable haircut and matching shiny new suits. Forrest's various adventures mean that he wears different clothes—as ping-pong player, soldier, boat captain, and so on. It is in the intermittent scenes on the bench, when Forrest is telling his life story, that we see him in his “intellectual disability” outfit. The flashbacks eventually catch up with the present day. In contrast to the outfit he wears while recounting his life story, in one of the very last scenes of the film, Forrest wears proper length trousers, and clean brown suede shoes. Given the

emphasis that he makes on shoes when he starts recounting his life story, the change is significant. Forrest Gump is not a child anymore— fatherhood has turned him into a grown man. Sam wears a suit for his big day in court to testify in his own defence. But that is also the day when he starts making coffee after his promotion at Starbucks. He ends up arriving very late in court, with coffee splashed all over his shirt, tie, and jacket. The sheen of respectability and competence that the suit lends him is superimposed by a layer of coffee stains that highlight his incompetence.

Thus, in these films, ill-fitting and unfashionable clothing is used to signify innate incompetence, with characters wearing smart clothing when they need to appear more competent. This technique also points to the latency of the cloak of incompetence. The veracity of the characters' presumed incompetence and the factors that lead to it are not questioned. Consequently, instead of uncovering the misconceptions that prevail regarding the incompetence of people with intellectual disability, the factors that give rise to these misconceptions are further hidden in these films. The exception of course is *I Am Sam* who, as we have seen, takes a multi-faceted approach to portraying life with an intellectual disability. Sam is presented as being both incapable of making coffee in a high-pressure environment (ending up with coffee stains all over his smart suit) and as having the right to raise his own child.

These different aspects of having an intellectual disability are portrayed by Sean Penn in a performance that Lazarus offensively calls "going full retard." But of the four portrayals considered by Lazarus in *Tropic Thunder*, it is Penn's performance that is the most true-to-life. Yet, in the real world, it is this performance that denied him an Oscar.

Un/Realistic Portrayals

Hall calls for literary analyses of characters with intellectual disability and/ or autism "as powerful cultural metaphors, and as embodied, individual ways of being in the world" (106). As can be seen from the foregoing discussion, it is only with Sam that both aspects of this analysis can take place, as he is the one whose character is rounded and developed. Needless to say, filmmakers are under no obligation to ensure that their characters and narratives are a direct reflection of reality. After all, the nature of reality is very much up for discussion. And even films based on actual events present dramatized narratives. As Etan

Coen, cited by Bradley, comments ironically with reference to *Fargo* “You don’t have to have a true story to make a true story movie.” And, in the case of allegorical films like *Forrest Gump* and *Being There*, one can expect the characters, especially the protagonists, to be larger than life.

However, unrealistic depictions of disabled people can be problematic, especially when they become firmly lodged in the popular imagination. No character embodies this problem more potently than Raymond Babbitt. *Rain Man* is for many people the reference point for autism. Dustin Hoffman’s portrayal of a person with savant syndrome is realistic insofar as there are people on the autism spectrum who have exceptional gifts in one area while experiencing significant developmental difficulties in other areas, but they are exceptions.¹² But, many who write about people on the autism spectrum have to start by distancing themselves from the Rain Man character. To take three recent examples, John Williams’s account of his autistic son’s life is called *My Son’s Not Rainman [sic]* (as are the related blog and show); a research paper on the identity of people with autism by Andrea MacLeod, Ann Lewis, and Christopher Roberston is titled “Why should I be like bloody Rain Man?!” a quotation taken from one of their research participants; and Darold A. Treffert’s article on “The Autistic Savant” for the Wisconsin Medical Society starts with a reference to *Rain Man*.

The authenticity of Raymond’s tantrums is also doubtful. Given the sheltered routine-bound life that Raymond is used to at Willowbrook, where he has been living for decades, he responds remarkably well to the new stimuli and experiences on the road trip across the breadth of America. He throws only a few tantrums, which die out quite quickly. They heighten the drama but not to the extent of getting in the way of Charles’s plans and the film’s plot. Besides, the tantrums never really turn ugly: Raymond’s autism-related behaviour is very much sanitized. As Chrissie Rogers states, “it is fine to be different but not difficult” (82). The toning down of the potentially difficult aspects of Raymond’s behaviour further highlights his savant abilities—the cloak of incompetence may still be there but there is nothing untoward in it to distract the viewer from Raymond’s abilities. Sam’s autism, on the other hand, leads to several situations that cause difficulty to those around

¹² It is estimated that 10% of persons with autism have savant syndrome (see https://www.autism.com/understanding_savants).

him, especially to his daughter Lucy. One such scene is when he finally yields to her wish to go to a different diner from their usual one but throws a tantrum because he cannot have pancakes served exactly the same way as in the other diner. Lucy is clearly embarrassed and, as in several other scenes, adult-child roles are reversed, with Lucy taking care of her father.

However many merits *I Am Sam* has in the portrayal of the lived experience of people with intellectual disability, it also has its flaws. Many reviewers have criticized Nelson for the plot's overt sentimentality, among them Owen Gleibermann and A. O. Scott. *I Am Sam* is in fact quite unapologetically sentimental, with the DVD jacket describing it as "tear-jerker of the year." Siebers also criticizes the film, writing that:

it is difficult to agree that the film portrays disability accurately because accuracy does not lie only in the performance of actors but in the overall narrative structure and plot of films. (115)

The film's flaws are best summed up by the succinct review on Rotten Tomatoes: "Not only does the manipulative *I Am Sam* oversimplify a complex issue, it drowns it in treacle."

However, the film has the merit of affording Sam a role which draws on the lived experience of intellectual disability. While the depiction of this experience can be described as anodyne, Penn's portrayal of Sam is one which allows it to come through to a much greater extent than Sellers's, Hoffman's, and Hanks's respective performances. And yet, it is the latter which are held by Lazarus as performances to emulate, as ones that do not put the Academy off awarding the Best Actor Oscar.

A Tool for Others' Self-Improvement

It was earlier argued that Forrest, Chauncey, and Raymond are given extraordinary abilities in order to make their intellectual disability and their incompetence more palatable and less uncomfortable for the viewer. Another aspect of this approach is the characters' ability to provide the people around them with the possibility of becoming better persons, a trait that these three characters also share with Sam. We see this ability in the over-interpretation of Chauncey's artless comments and the conspiracy theories that the lack of information about him engenders, which serve to show up the artifice and pretentiousness of people in power

and in the media. Eve Rand also confesses to have become a better person for having met Chauncey. Forrest provides both Jenny and Lieutenant Dan Simms with a means for redemption. Raymond's main purpose in the narrative seems to be that of making his brother a better person. It is thanks to the few days he spends with Raymond that Charles learns that there is more to life than hustling your way through it, with little regard to the effect that your behaviour has on those who love you. Sam too has a beneficial effect on the people around him. Both Rita Harrison and Lucy's foster mother learn a lot about parenting when they witness Sam and Lucy's love and loyalty to each other.

While these effects are not malevolent, they are not effects that affirm the characters' humanity. If for Chauncey, Raymond, and Forrest, their redeeming feature is that they are mere vehicles for other people's self-improvement, the implication is that they are not human beings in their own right, reinforcing the tendency to see disability "as something that happens to a person and thus as not a natural part of the human condition" (Michalko 5). The cloak of incompetence foisted upon them therefore also has a dehumanizing effect. The fact that it is Penn's interpretation of Sam's more rounded character that is singled out for criticism in Lazarus's argument and spurned by the Academy shows what a long way yet our societies need to travel to come to accept disability, and especially intellectual disability, as an ordinary part of the human experience.

Being (Less Than) Human

The problematic treatment of *I Am Sam* in *Tropic Thunder* is further compounded by the parallel that is drawn with Ben Stiller/Tugg Speedman's portrayal of a person with intellectual disability in *Simple Jack*, the performance over which Speedman is taken to task by Lazarus. Stiller's grotesque performance is a travesty, even within the context of the satire that is *Tropic Thunder*. To put this performance on the same level as Sean Penn's in *I Am Sam* is offensive. The analogy draws on a false equivalence and is also dehumanizing. Rarely have comparisons been more odious than this one.

In the dialogue preceding the excerpt presented above, Speedman talks about watching people with intellectual disability and "all the retarded stuff they did" when preparing for *Simple Jack*. This part of the dialogue is a send-up of method actors; Kirk Lazarus (Robert Downey Jr in blackface) comes across as pompous and pretentious. But

people with intellectual disability also end up being targets in the joke, and while method actors have a high sociocultural standing which enables them to withstand sarcasm, for people with intellectual disability sarcasm downgrades their already precarious social status. Speedman's dismissive way of referring to uncoordinated bodily movements is echoed by Gliebermann, in his review of *I Am Sam*. He accuses Penn of doing "the mincing, mushmouthed, look-what-a-dork-I-am impersonation of a 'moron' that kids tend to perfect in second grade." Behaviours often associated with having an intellectual disability are thus reduced to childish antics.

The idea that intellectual disability robs someone of their claim to personhood and even to being a full human being has been challenged by many authors, among them the contributors to Eva Feder Kittay and Licia Carlson's edited collection on *Cognitive Disability and its Challenge to Moral Personhood*. This idea is used very clearly in *Tropic Thunder* itself. Speedman declares that, in order to play Simple Jack, he had to lose himself: "I was like 'Wait a minute, I flushed so much out, how am I gonna jumpstart it again?'" Using a colloquially cool turn of phrase, he thus suggests that being a person with intellectual disability results in having something less than other human beings. This idea is also expressed by Charles Babbitt in *Rain Man* when, in a moment of frustration, he tells Raymond, "I think this autism is a bunch of shit. You can't tell me that you aren't there somewhere."

The claim of people with intellectual disability for personhood and for being considered to be fully human is constantly undermined, whether in fact (as with Connor Sparrowhawk's death) or fiction. Charlie Gordon in Daniel Keyes's science fiction novel *Flowers for Algernon* (and Ralph Nelson's film adaptation *Charly*) protests that he was as human when he had a low IQ as during the brief period when he developed an extraordinary intelligence following experimental brain surgery. There is no simple equivalence between intellectual disability and cognitive impairments. Stigma, prejudice, misconceptions, and dehumanizing attitudes are also part of the experience of having an intellectual disability.

Thus, rather than seeing the cloak of incompetence for the cultural construction that it is, incompetence is assumed to be innate and an attempt is made to cloak it with extraordinary abilities that make the characters in question more complete, and therefore also more human. Being childlike, asexual, naïf, and dependent on others mark the

characters in question as not fully adult. At best, they are adolescents and, as Michalko writes, “[t]here is a sense of ‘incompleteness’ surrounding adolescence and one of ‘completeness’ for adulthood” (76).

Conclusion

To return then to the questions posed earlier in this article, what is it about Sean Penn’s performance in *I Am Sam* that singles it out from that of the other three actors? Despite the fact that it is his performance that is most true-to-life out of the four mentioned by Lazarus and the one that best affirms the humanity of a man with intellectual disability, it is singled out not for praise but for criticism. And while criticism to its filmic qualities may be justified, one cannot ignore the fact that, in his performance, Penn draws on aspects of having an intellectual disability that challenge fixed ideas of normalcy and show more “difficult” aspects of diversity, to quote Rogers again. But perhaps it is precisely the authenticity and affirmation of Sam’s story and Penn’s performance that make them unpalatable for Hollywood. Even more unpalatable is the idea that the claim of people with intellectual disability to being full members of the mainstream of society has yet to be truly accepted.

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