Identification and Representation

Autism narratives serve several important functions, such as representing and educating on autism, as well as serving as models for identification. The impact of autism portrayals in literature, and by extension other media, should not be neglected, especially since such narratives participate in spreading knowledge, stereotypes, and prejudices. Naturally, they also negotiate normality and deviance.

Young Adult Fiction and Normality

In 1985, Dan McAdams proposed his life story model of identity, arguing that "identity itself takes the form of a story, complete with setting, scenes, character, plot, and theme" (McAdams 101). In other words, identity can be considered an evolving narrative. Therefore, if the deviance of an individual is established through negotiation and subsequent labelling, this individual is forced to adapt their life story in order to integrate their deviance. On the other hand, McAdams's life story model suggests closeness to other narratives; if our identities are constructed as stories, we may align them with other stories. Link explored this possibility with regard to normality and normativity, i.e. how literary models serve as guidelines for 'being normal'.

   Erik Erikson theorised that in late adolescence and young adulthood, individuals are confronted with

the problem of identity versus role confusion. It is at this time in the human life course that people first explore ideological and occupational options available in society and experiment with a wide range of social roles, with the aim of eventually consolidating their beliefs and values into a personal ideology and making provisional commitments to life plans and projects that promise to situate them meaningfully into new societal niches … . (McAdams 101–02)

Identity is meant to provide 'unity and purpose' to an individual's life and to integrate their self-understanding synchronically and diachronically (McAdams 102, cf. Chapter 4.2). According to Link, throughout life individuals keep ricocheting between normality and deviance, whenever reality and goals come into conflict with each other.

Two circles, which symbolise the 'real' and 'idealised self', can take up different distances to each other on a horizontal line. A maximum distance, at which there is no longer any intersection, is called 'alienation'; if the circles approach each other and intersect until they largely coincide, 'normality' arises — in between lies 'neurosis'. If we project this schema into time, the result is the logbook of a life's journey, which presents itself as a curve between normality, neurosis and madness/alienation. Such ideas turn the subjects into managers of their growth — they can register deviations towards neurosis as such and take corrective measures (especially therapy) against them. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 405, own translation)[1]

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1   Zwei Kreise, die das 'reale' und 'idealisierte Selbst (self)' symbolisieren, können auf einer horizontalen Linieverschiedene Distanzen zueinander einnehmen. Eine maximale Distanz, bei der es keinerlei Schnittmenge mehr gibt, heißt 'Irrsinn/Entfremdung' ('alienation'), nähern sich die Kreises an und schneiden sich bis zur weitgehenden Deckung, so entsteht 'Normalität' — dazwischen liegt 'Neurose'. Projiziert man dieses Schema in die Zeit, so entsteht daraus ein Fahrtenschreiber der Lebensreise, die sich als Kurve zwischen Normalität, Neurose und Irrsinn/Entfremdung darstellt. Die Subjekte werden durch solche Vorstellungen zu Managern ihres growth gemacht — sie können Abweichungen in Richtung Neurose als solche registrieren und adjustierende Maßnahmen (besonders Therapie) dagegen ergreifen. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 405)

I understand McAdam's theory of identity as a sufficient overlap of the ideal and real self, whereby the ideal self is derived from the idea of normality. Here, Link suggests authority over one's own degree of normality or deviance, implying that individuals strive to be normal or wilfully choose deviance. Keckeisen, on the other hand, links deviance to power or lack thereof, even hinting at arbitrariness. Possibly, both instances occur; individuals are to a certain degree able to navigate their selves in regard to normality or deviance, and once they integrate their decisions into their life story, they become their identity.[2] However, if their deviance is negotiated for them, they may be forced to adapt their identity to integrate this alleged/outwardly perceived part of their selves. For example, a patient at a psychiatric facility who considers themselves completely normal is still forced to accept the label and its consequences (e.g. being locked up). Unless they accept their deviance and consequently transform their ideal self, they will suffer from alienation. In other words, if our real selves are labelled deviant, we generally have to adapt our ideal selves in order to meaningfully integrate our self-understanding.

Obviously, Link assumes that individuals will naturally strive towards being normal. Consequently, he theorises the existence of templates for 'normal' lives: "There is the underlying idea of a normal life curve whose direction, speed and energy must be managed" (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 405, own translation).[3] Such live curves can be considered idealised stencils, according to which we align our own. Eventually, "the field of personality psychology began to look beyond the vicissitudes of the single, narrowly defined trait to explore broader issues of central concern for human lives" (McAdams 100).

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[2]   Again, identity is the dia- and synchronic integration of self-understanding into a psychological niche, thus providing unity and meaning (see also Chapter 4.3).

[3]   Überall liegt die Vorstellung einer Normal-Lebenskurve zugrunde, deren Richtung, Tempo und Energie zu managen sind. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 405)

> As personality psychologists began to turn their attention to people's lives, they found notions such as 'story' and 'narrative' to be especially useful in conveying the coherence and the meaning of lives. (McAdams 100)

One may easily conceptualise Link's 'live curves' as narratives; coherent stories that align events and decisions to form identities. Equally, a subject's own life story may be more or less congruent with these ideal templates. Link suggests:

> Art and literature provide … 'application templates', i.e. discursive complexes that can be selectively assimilated by subjects (e.g. through positive or negative identification …). (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 41, own translation)[4]

At any time, a subject can thus check their lives against fictional ones that portray (idealised) normality or deviance. In reality, the fact that we have all been institutionalised by society and its norms will naturally affect our idealised selves, thus reinforcing normalities. However, life stories are a process and may be re-adjusted if significant changes occur. Late adolescence or young adulthood is an especially difficult phase to identify and align one's life story and goals. According to McAdams, only in adolescence or young adulthood will individuals develop an identity in the form of a life story as they re-align their selves towards goals and in accordance or discordance with social norms and rules. At this stage,

> identity becomes a problem when the adolescent or young adult first realizes that he or she is, has been, or could be many different (and conflicting) things and experiences a strong desire, encouraged by society, to be but one (large, integrated, and dynamic) thing. (McAdams 102)

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4   Kunst und Literatur stellen … 'Applikations-Vorlagen' parat, d.h. diskursive Komplexe, die von Subjekten (z.B. durch positive oder negative Identifikation …) selektiv assimiliert werden können. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 41)

While the intermediary discourse may be concerned with normalities and 'normal' life curves, literature conjoins life curves with life stories, due to its story-telling nature. Here, individuals have a plethora of life curves to choose from, which reflect society's understanding of normality and deviance (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 408). However, literature also has the power to renegotiate templates offered by society and its different aspects of normality by questioning rules and authorities.

Young adult fiction in particular tends to be conflict-oriented (Weinkauff and Glasenapp 84), with current texts thematising "excerpts of adolescence in situations of 'confrontation of the protagonist with society and its rites'" (Preusser 99, own translation).[5] Traditionally, the environment was considered 'completely normal' whereas the protagonist bore the potential for conflict, which was eventually solved by the protagonist aligning themselves with society. Historically, young adult fiction thus played an important role in socialisation, or, indeed, indoctrination, by steering the individual towards a normative life curve. However, the diversity of topics has since lessened the 'indoctrinating' aspect; there is no canonical set of values and knowledge in a pluralised society. Some even argue that young adult fiction nowadays offers too many life curves to be recognised as an important resource for socialisation (Weinkauff and Glasenapp 223). On the other hand, society is now more pluralised and diversified than ever before. While this makes it harder for adolescents and young adults to build their identity, I do not believe that young adult fiction, in all its medial forms, plays no role in socialisation anymore, just that it is less directed.

> If one considers that the adolescent individual moves in a field of tension between conformist and non-conformist behaviour, which he or she repeatedly reflects on as such, the question of the concepts of normality constructed in youth literary texts becomes virulent: Is social

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5   Aktuelle jugendliterarische Texte … thematisieren stets Ausschnitte des Heranwachsens in Situationen der 'Konfrontation des Protagonisten mit der Gesellschaft und ihren Riten'. (Preusser 99)

tolerance – if not recognition – of one's own person even worth striving for? In which spectrums of normality do the protagonists locate themselves? Which appearance, which behaviour, which way of life corresponds to social expectations of normality and to what extent? And finally: What understanding of normality does a text reveal by positioning itself in relation to the previous questions and what 'specific normalistic form(s) of representation' are used? (Preusser 99, own translation)[6]

In Chapter 3.3 I elaborated on dynamic characters and the criteria which I applied to determine whether a character has undergone change. The criteria could essentially be reduced to the idea that the impact of stereotypes was lessened. This, then, could potentially be read as my underlying wish that autism portrayals should be aimed towards (learned) conformist behaviour as the solution. Additionally, most criteria I identified in relation to the stereotypes are disparaging and ostracising, which could again be read in terms of normality and deviance. In my analysis regarding dynamism, I merely considered the most prominent stereotype for each character, i.e. the most defining conflict. With the exception of *The State of Grace*[7], these were either the stereotype 'Childlike' or the stereotype 'Robot'. Since young adult fiction in particular is concerned

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6   Berücksichtigt man, dass sich das heranwachsende Individuum insofern in einem Spannungsfeld von angepasstem und unangepasstem Verhalten bewegt, das es selbst immer wieder als solches reflektiert, wird die Frage nach in jugendliterarischen Texten konstruierten Normalitätskonzepten virulent: Ist die gesellschaftliche Toleranz – wenn nicht sogar Anerkennung – der eigenen Person überhaupt erstrebenswert? In welchen Spektren von Normalität verorten sich die Protagonisten selbst? Welches Aussehen, welches Verhalten, welche Lebensweise entspricht inwiefern gesellschaftlichen Normalitätsvorstellungen? Und schließlich: Welches diesbezügliche Normalitätsverständnis legt ein Text mit der Positionierung zu den vorangegangenen Fragen offen und welche 'spezifisch normalitische(n) Formen der Darstellung' finden dabei Anwendung? (Preusser 99)

7   This novel explicitly toys with the alien trope but is aimed towards awareness and acceptance. Here, Grace can be considered dynamic because she can make her peace with being different, not because she becomes 'normal'.

with coming-of-age and the threshold of adulthood, these portrayals do not differ much from those portraying neurotypical individuals, except perhaps that the protagonist is met with different challenges that stem from their autism. Secondly, whenever character portrayals were dominated by the stereotype 'Robot', they mostly struggled with communication. Therefore, their growth stemmed from reducing the communication barrier, thus reducing prejudices and fostering awareness within their own community. Instead of reinforcing ideas of normality, such portrayals renegotiate deviance by lessening stereotypes.

Indeed, "YA fiction is ... a fundamentally didactic genre" (Donner), which likely facilitated diversity and inclusive portrayals, thus serving representative and educational functions. Among other aspects, literature helps

> in the taking of the other's perspectives. It helps groups to counter prejudices and stereotypes, and to come to some understanding of the experiences, needs, and concerns of differently situated groups. (Dahlberg 118)

Consequently, literature not only offers templates for 'normal lives' that an individual can use to rebalance their own, but it also fosters understanding for others. Here, literature is a form of representing minorities; it is the opposite of an idealised normality, yet simultaneously normalising otherness. Autism narratives aimed at young adults thus serve two main purposes: they represent a minority and are intended to foster awareness and understanding, but they also supply autists with life curves that could serve as application templates. Unsurprisingly, this led to a debate over how such characters should be portrayed in order to educate others and also serve as identification models for autists in real life.

'Realistic' and 'Good' Portrayals

On behalf of the representation of autism and with a nod toward disability studies, some scholars set out to identify 'good' or 'accurate' portrayals, assuming they equalled 'positive' or 'realistic' representation, which in turn was critically apprehended by autism activist and scholar Robert Rozema.

> In a recent study of juvenile and young adult fiction, Dyches, Prater & Leininger (2009) suggest two central measures for evaluating such works: portrayals of individuals with disabilities must be both realistic and positive. To be considered realistic, a book must depict the characteristics of the disabilities accurately, in keeping with current professional practices and literature. Books with positive portrayals must characterize an individual with disabilities in some or all of the following ways:
> (a) realistic emphasis on strengths rather than weaknesses
> (b) high expectations
> (c) making positive contributions beyond promoting growth in other characters
> (d) becoming self-determined
> (e) being given full citizenship in the home and community
> (f) expanding reciprocal relationships. (Rozema 26)

These criteria are based on Mary Ann Dyches's and Tina Prater's *Developmental Disability in Children's Literature* (2000), which has since been used in several studies that focus on the portrayal of disabilities in children's literature (cf. Dyches & Prater, 2005; Dyches, Prater, & Cramer, 2001; Larson, Whitin, & Vultaggio, 2010; Leininger, Dyches, Prater, & Heath, 2010). When assuming that "[r]ecognizing disabled people's role in public life … begins with imagining their practice of citizenship outside of the norm" (Bumiller 982), these criteria seem very comprehensive. However, one should be cautious when applying them. First of all, the guidelines by Dyches and Prater were published by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), a non-profit organisation "dedicated to improving educational outcomes for individuals with exceptionalities, including dis-