

A Life With Autism

A review of the film



Temple Grandin

(2010)

Mick Jackson (Director)

Reviewed by

[Donald Oswald](#)

“She became me”; thus Temple Grandin described the performance of Clare Danes in the 2010 HBO movie that recounts Grandin’s life. Grandin is a person with autism, though not exactly representative of the population in many ways. She is a professor in the Department of Animal Sciences at Colorado State University with a particular expertise in the handling and transport of cattle. The film *Temple Grandin* tells the story of how she achieved a level of success that is atypical for individuals with an autism spectrum disorder.

Grandin, as portrayed by Danes (and as seen in real life in her younger years), displays the features that are recognized as core signs of autism spectrum disorders. She is frequently disengaged from social interaction. Her social intercourse is awkward and marked by behaviors that tend to distance others. She has few friends and is mystified by the meaning of nonverbal communication. Her speech is obviously peculiar (and Danes captures Grandin’s prosodic idiosyncrasies with striking fidelity). She is fascinated by topics that

others find uninteresting, and she talks on those topics at length, heedless of others' lack of interest.

However, the main areas of focus for the film are not characteristics that are diagnostic of autism; they are instead features that are sometimes associated with autism but that combine to make Grandin the extraordinary person that she is: the sensory differences that led her to crave deep pressure as a means of calming herself, her love for and empathy with animals, and the visual perceptual differences that allow her to see the world differently and respond creatively.

Sensory differences, although not unique to the syndrome of autism, are increasingly being viewed as an important domain for assessment and intervention among individuals with autism spectrum disorders. A 2009 meta-analysis (Ben-Sasson et al., 2009) located 14 studies that documented increased parent-reported sensory symptoms in individuals with an autism spectrum disorder. Across the studies included in the sample and compared with typically developing peers, individuals with autism spectrum disorders were found to display underresponsivity ("unawareness or slow response to sensory input"), overresponsivity ("exaggerated, rapid onset and/or prolonged reactions to sensory stimulation"), and sensory seeking ("craving of, and interest in sensory experiences that are prolonged or intense"; Ben-Sasson et al., 2009, p. 2).

The film records Grandin's realization of the positive effect of deep pressure on her body (an example of sensory seeking) upon her ability to regulate her affect. Whereas in many individuals sensory seeking leads to a variety of challenging behaviors, the uniqueness of Grandin's mind led her to imagine and create a machine that would provide her with the sensation she sought.

Oliver Sacks, in his 1995 essay about Grandin, explicitly connected her sensory differences with her connection to animals. "It was precisely her sense of the common ground (in terms of basic sensations and feelings) between animals and people," he wrote, "that allowed her to show such sensitivity to animals, and to insist so forcefully on their humane management" (p. 265). Grandin "can have sympathy for what is physical or physiological—for an animal's pain or terror—but lacks empathy for people's states of mind and perspectives" (p. 269). That sympathy is clearly portrayed in the film, as in Grandin's writing. In the film she proclaims, "Nature is cruel, but we don't have to be," and she devoted her professional career to devising animal handling environments that are not unnecessarily cruel.

The ability to identify features of the environment that produce distress in animals, particularly cattle, underlies Grandin's primary contributions to the field of animal management. Her observations of animal behavior and her sensitivity to their experience allowed her to design alternative environments for livestock that reduce pain and distress and improve efficiency in handling large numbers of animals. Closing text in the film notes that over half of the cattle in North America move through stockyards and slaughterhouses reflecting Grandin's humane designs.

Grandin's (1995) book *Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports From My Life With Autism* was an important source for the film. It provides striking descriptions of how she experienced the world and how her visual perceptual strengths allowed her to overcome other challenges and to make her unique contributions. Visual strengths are frequently noted in persons with autism, though rarely are those strengths put to such good use as they have been in Grandin's life.

A model of enhanced perceptual functioning has been proposed to explain the perceptual differences that undergird unusual or savant abilities in some individuals with autism (Mottron, Dawson, Soulieres, Hubert, & Burack, 2006). Mottron et al. (2006) described the phenomenon as "overfunctioning of brain regions typically involved in primary perceptual functions" (p. 27). There is evidence of fundamental neurological differences in how young children with autism process visual information (Vlamings, Jonkman, van Daalen, van der Gaag, & Kemner, 2010), and recent data suggest that visual attention to nonsocial stimuli is increased even in infant siblings of children with autism (Bhat, Galloway, & Landa, 2010). Grandin's savantlike visual perception skills allow her to see and recall seemingly incidental features of the environment, to automatically visualize how equipment functions, and to imagine and construct in her mind new forms of equipment and animal handling environments.

The conclusion of the film documents Grandin's appearance at an autism society meeting as a member of the audience who rises to respond to the speaker, capturing the attention of the parents around her. This ending emphasizes her emergence in recent years as a vocal advocate for people with autism in the United States.

The film dramatically portrays Grandin's triumph over adversity; it does not, perhaps, do justice to the days, weeks, and years of frustration and despair that characterize the lives of even the most capable individuals with autism spectrum disorders. Nonetheless, *Temple Grandin* differs from recent fictional film portrayals of individuals with autism spectrum disorders in its unblinking presentation of Grandin's idiosyncrasies. It provides a clear picture of her social awkwardness and her personal isolation, whereas fictional film accounts (e.g., *Adam*, *My Name Is Khan*, *Mozart and the Whale*) have sought to soften that awkwardness and isolation by emphasizing challenges (but eventual successes) in romantic relationships. In the end, Grandin emerges as a sympathetic character, one who has overcome significant barriers and who has made a positive contribution to society both in her professional domain and in her advocacy efforts.

Temple Grandin is a dramatic presentation of the life of an extraordinary person. The story is well told, and the portrayal is engaging and true to Grandin's autobiographical writings. It offers to professionals and the general public a view of how one individual experiences autism; and it offers individuals with autism a vision of hope and a model of assertive living and constructive advocacy.

References

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