

**PART 4**  
**Feature Films**





# Co-Disability in Fictional Films about Autism: from Barry Levinson's *Rain Man* (1988) to Marc Rothemund's *Weekend Rebels* (2023)

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**Abstract** This article applies the concept of 'co-disability' to two feature films whose protagonists are affected by autism spectrum disorder: the U.S. American drama *Rain Man* (1988) by Barry Levinson and the German tragicomedy *Wochenend-rebellen* [Weekend Rebels] (2023) by Marc Rothemund. Both films are analysed with regard to how they depict the impact that living with a disabled person has on their nondisabled relatives. There are clear differences between the two films: *Rain Man* focuses entirely on the sibling relationship between the two male protagonists and otherwise ignores the family context, while *Weekend Rebels* puts precisely this family context (parents, siblings, grandparents) at the centre of attention. Beyond the individual case, however, this difference also reflects a historical shift away from a perspective that tends to fixate on autism as a singular phenomenon towards a more clearly system-oriented view. In fact, the current demand to place greater emphasis on the phenomenon of co-disability in research correlates with increased attention to this topic in cinema itself. The film *Weekend Rebels* is therefore quite representative of a broader development in recent years, not least because it also shows sensitivity to the intersectional dimension of the issue.

**Keywords** autism spectrum disorder – co-disability – family – movie – tragicomedy

[I]t is unduly prescriptive and censorious to draw up narrow criteria of what constitutes 'correct' imagery, and this only serves to limit artistic creativity. (Shakespeare 1999: 170)

## 1 Introduction: The Relevance of the Co-Disability Concept

The contributions in the present volume deal with 'families with disabled children', 'expanded disability', 'relatives of people with disability' or, in short,

what Susanne Hartwig has aptly termed ‘co-disability’.<sup>1</sup> The terminology may vary, but the subject to which these terms refer is the same: the role of family members and relatives of people with disabilities. In what follows, I will also be concerned with this subject, specifically within the medium of feature films. While feature films about all kinds of disabilities have become increasingly numerous in the last years and have long since attracted the attention they deserve not only from Disability Studies but also from Literary, Film and Media studies, the phenomenon of ‘co-disability’ has, to my knowledge, never before been the explicit focus of a dedicated study, even if it has not gone entirely unmentioned (and how could it?).

The question of how the role of family members and relatives is portrayed and evaluated in films about people with disabilities inevitably differs from the standpoint of Disability Studies to that of a perspective more oriented towards film dramaturgy and film aesthetics. How is the phenomenon of co-disability presented from these two perspectives, and to what extent do they complement or contradict each other? As with other media representations of disability, their diversity allows for only very limited generalizations. For family members, too, it is by no means the same whether a person is visually impaired or has Down syndrome. In this essay on the representation of co-disability in feature films, I will therefore limit myself to the example of films about autism. And ‘autism’ itself is merely an umbrella term for a range of individual manifestations of autistic characteristics, which today are understood as parts of a continuum known as ‘autism spectrum disorder’ (ASD).

Autism first came into the focus of a mass audience in Barry Levinson’s fourfold Oscar-winning U.S. American feature film *Rain Man* (1988). Levinson’s film soon came to be regarded as “the foundational text in cinematic representations of autism” (Murray 2008: 245) and as “the public’s primary definitional text for autistic spectrum disorders” (Baker 2008: 229). This influence is still evident in one of the most recent cinematic portrayals of autism, the highly successful German tragicomedy *Weekend Rebels* (*Wochenendrebellen*, 2023) by Marc Rothemund. The protagonist of this film, ten-year-old Jason (played by the nondisabled Cecilio Andresen), who has been diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, once teases his father (Florian David Fitz) by pretending to compulsively count all the corn kernels on his plate. When he sees his father’s puzzled expression, he responds with the words “I’m joking, Dad, I’m not Rain Man” (00:36:03). Regardless of how realistic such a self-reflective film comment might sound coming from the mouth of a ten-year-old boy, it clearly shows

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1 See the introduction to this volume.

the extent to which Levinson's *Rain Man* has become a touchstone in popular culture.<sup>2</sup>

A comparison between the paradigmatic portrayal of autism in *Rain Man* and the more recent film *Weekend Rebels* makes it particularly clear that the current call to place greater emphasis on the phenomenon of 'co-disability' in research indeed correlates with heightened attention to this issue in cinema itself. In this respect, *Weekend Rebels* is likely quite representative of a broader development in recent years. This is what makes it so analytically productive in our context.

Juxtaposing the two films allows us to trace the historical shift from a perspective focused primarily on autism as a singular phenomenon toward a more distinctly system-oriented view. At the same time, the concept of 'co-disability' offers itself as a heuristic tool that helps to shed greater light on certain dimensions of the lives of disabled people that have so far been overshadowed by a focus on the disabled individual alone.<sup>3</sup> The notion of co-disability is system-oriented in the sense that it refers to family members and relatives of people with disabilities who are not themselves disabled and thus occupy an intermediate position between the disabled individuals with whom they live and the larger group of nondisabled people who do not share this experience of cohabitation.

From this arise two aspects that will now be discussed—more briefly in the case of *Rain Man* and in greater detail in the case of *Weekend Rebels*: the relationship between the relatives of autistic individuals and the persons with autism themselves, and the relationship of those relatives to the broader non-autistic world. Thereby, we must always bear in mind that in both cases, the representation of autism operates within the medical and discursive boundaries and possibilities of the conventional feature film, aimed primarily

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2 This reference is something one either identifies with or distances oneself from. In the German comedy about disability *Die Goldfische* [The Goldfish] (2019) by Alireza Golafshan, one of the protagonists, the autistic character Rainer Schnellinger (Axel Stein), is nicknamed "Rainman". At the same time, Jason's remark humorously corrects the cliché established by *Rain Man*, which equates autism with the relatively rare special form of savant syndrome (the relevant figures vary between 1–2% and 10%). As Anne-Marie Callus also observes: "But, many who write about people on the autism spectrum have to start by distancing themselves from the Rain Man character" (Callus 2019: 189). She refers, among other things, to John Williams' account *My Son is Not Rainman* (2016), which already takes up this aspect in its very title.

3 However, Mark Osteen also points out, using autism as an example, that this dimension has always been present in the numerous accounts of parents and siblings of people with autism (cf. Osteen 2008a: 17–25).

at mass appeal and audience entertainment. With regard to *Weekend Rebels*, it should also be noted that it is a comedy, more precisely a family comedy. Comedy, in turn, is the cinematic genre that in recent years has most frequently and most successfully addressed the topic of disability (cf. Tschiltschke 2020: 402).

The principal reason for this certainly lies in the fact that the genre of comedy, with its conventionally happy ending and its privileging of particular laughter-inducing devices such as comic effect, humour, irony, satire, and so forth, is especially well suited to alleviating the widespread fears and inhibitions that nondisabled audiences harbour with regard to the subject of disability, while at the same time offering, in an entertaining and unobtrusive manner, insight into the lives of and with disabled people. The price to be paid for this, however, consists in comedy's characteristic tendency towards simplification, appeasement, and trivialisation.

## 2 The Focus on the Brother in Barry Levinson's *Rain Man* (1988)

Exactly thirty-five years lie between the films *Rain Man* and *Weekend Rebels*. The narrative of disability established by *Rain Man* was indeed highly effective and entertaining, but it also received significant criticism from the field of Disability Studies. As much as the film was praised for raising public awareness of autism on a broad scale for the first time ever, it was also accused of popularising a misleading image reduced to the special case of savant syndrome.<sup>4</sup>

The plot of *Rain Man* is so well known that it shall only briefly be recalled here. The film combines the genres of the buddy movie and the road movie with the character cliché of the 'supercrip'.<sup>5</sup> At its center is the story of two very different brothers, Charlie Babbitt and Raymond—"Rain Man"—Babbitt. Charlie (Tom Cruise) is a self-centered yuppie and luxury car dealer from

4 On the positive and negative effects of the film, see Sacco (2022: 61–63). In Germany, the film was perceived as a "gift" from the perspective of people who deal with autism. In the May 1989 issue of the journal *Autismus* [Autism], published by the "Bundesverband 'Hilfe für das autistische Kind'" [Federal Association "Supporting the Autistic Child"], it was stated with gratitude: "Dustin Hoffman [...] has truly conveyed autism" (original text: "Dustin Hoffman hat [...] wirklich Autismus vermittelt", 1989: 3). I would like to thank Herbert Schwaab for drawing my attention to this important journal.

5 See Grebe (2013) and Tschiltschke (2020: 395, 400), among others, on the alliance between road movies and disability issues.

California who is in financial trouble. His older brother Raymond (Dustin Hoffman) is autistic and lives in Wallbrook, a residential home for the mentally disabled.

An inheritance matter prompts Charlie to kidnap his brother from the residential facility and set out with him on a road trip to California. Over the course of the journey, he learns to be considerate of his brother's quirks, but also exploits his special abilities to his own benefit. The character of Raymond fully conforms to the staging of autism as spectacle, the emergence of which Anthony D. Baker describes as follows: "With the combination of the autistic character's mysterious idiosyncrasies and special talents, autism becomes a spectacle" (Baker 2008: 231). Among Raymond's numerous idiosyncrasies are his fear of flying and his refusal to leave his room when it is raining, while his talents include an extremely strong photographic memory and a special gift for arithmetic.

At first glance, Raymond Babbitt's life situation offers no grounds at all for applying the concept of co-disability. Raymond appears to have no contact with his relatives and seems to be well cared for at Wallbrook. His mother has long since died, his younger brother Charlie knows nothing of his existence, and his father Sanford dies at the beginning of the film. Thus, the last family ties are severed. The near-total absence of the family environment is also one of the main points of criticism raised against *Rain Man*. Anthony D. Baker, himself the father of a child with autism, regrets, for example, that Barry Levinson's film suppresses the crucial importance of parents, family, and the domestic environment in favor of dramatic requirements. This may, in some cases, foster the prejudice that autism arises from parental neglect and heighten the feelings of guilt among relatives. Furthermore, he argues that the idea that an outsider, in this case Raymond's brother Charlie, could unpreparedly take over the care of an autistic individual and then, within just a few days, claim, as Charlie does, "I made a connection" (01:56:32), is misleading and downright dangerous.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, *Rain Man*, due to its reliance on the genres of the buddy movie and the road movie, is based on a "fish-out-of-water plot, the water being the safe environment created [...] by caring families or specialised institutions" (Baker 2008: 238). The removal of the protagonists from their accustomed contexts—Raymond's as well as Charlie's—is the very precondition for the story to

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6 See the chapter "Parental absence" in Baker (2008: 237–239) for more details.

unfold and for the focus to rest entirely on the relationship between the two brothers.<sup>7</sup>

At this point, the concept of co-disability comes into play—and in quite an unexpected way—for it soon becomes clear that the brothers are not as different as they first appear. In his inability to express emotions and show understanding for others, in his fascination with details, and even in his manner of speaking, the ‘neurotypical’ Charlie soon reveals obvious similarities with his ‘autistic’ brother Raymond.<sup>8</sup> A conversation between Charlie and his girlfriend Susanna (Valeria Golino) in the car on the way to Palm Springs makes this evident right at the beginning of the film, when Susanna asks her uncommunicative boyfriend: “Can you include me in some of your thoughts?” (00:05:53).

The fact that the autistic character of Raymond and his Oscar-winning portrayal by Dustin Hoffman are at the center of *Rain Man*’s attention should not obscure the point that, functionally speaking, the story is tailored to the nondisabled antihero Charlie, who, as in a fairy tale, must undergo a series of trials in order to become a better person in the end.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, the disabled person—as is so often the case in films about people with disabilities—becomes “a test for the others, an aid to their emotional development” (Seeßlen 2003: 35).<sup>10</sup>

Exemplary of these trials, at the very beginning of their journey together, is Raymond’s adamant refusal to take the aeroplane or to use the highway, forcing them instead to drive along country roads to Los Angeles. Being compelled to accommodate Raymond’s habits, Charlie’s inability to attend to his urgent business matters fills him with helpless rage: “I think this autism is a bunch of shit. You can’t tell me you’re not in there somewhere” (00:54:25–00:54:32) (Figure 7.1).<sup>11</sup>

7 The separation of the autistic character is one of the components that, according to Baker, make up “The autistic formula” (Baker 2008: 231–234), the typical plot pattern followed in the portrayal of people with autism in mainstream cinema.

8 Daniel Sacco goes into this in more detail: “*Rain Man*, it would seem, may simply be a story of two autistic men, neither of whom sees himself that way, forming a deeply felt connection” (Sacco 2022: 70).

9 Dustin Hoffmann’s performance also contributed in no small part to the fact that a certain, not necessarily universally valid idea of people with autism could get established (cf. Checa 2018: 181).

10 Original text: “[wird] zur Probe für die anderen, zur emotionalen Entwicklungshilfe”.

11 A similar scene had previously appeared in *Paris, Texas* (1984), directed by Wim Wenders, in which the film’s autistic protagonist, Travis (Harry Dean Stanton), likewise refuses to board a flight to Los Angeles in the presence of his brother Walt (Dean Stockwell), with the result that the two brothers are obliged to make the journey by car.



FIGURE 7.1 “I think this autism is a bunch of shit.” (*Rain Man*, 00:54:28)

Charlie has to learn that he can only move forward if he responds to his brother’s needs. Yet to the extent that he takes care of him, Charlie also develops his own capacity to show emotions—culminating in a spontaneous embrace of his brother, which, however, provokes strong irritation in Raymond (01:37:37).

Nevertheless, this rapprochement cannot be entirely separated from the satisfaction Charlie derives from the financial gain he achieves in the casinos of Las Vegas by exploiting Raymond’s extraordinary cognitive abilities in gambling. At this point, cinematic dramaturgy triumphs over any realism oriented towards the lives of people with disabilities. By the end, Charlie has changed to such an extent that he not only regains the favor of his girlfriend, but also utters, to the psychologist (Barry Levinson) who is to decide Raymond’s future, the quintessentially American declaration: “This is my family” (01:54:55).<sup>12</sup>

After Raymond has fulfilled his therapeutic function towards his brother, he returns to the professional care of the nursing institution, in which, according to the conviction of all those involved—and probably also of the public opinion at the time—he is considered best placed.<sup>13</sup> The “spectacularisation of autism” (Baker 2008: 234) reduces the autistic person to what he does or

12 The legendary and relentless American film critic Pauline Kael commented on *Rain Man* in her review for *The New Yorker* with the words: “it’s a piece of wet kitsch” (Kael 1989).

13 However, Anne-Marie Callus points to “the deinstitutionalization process, which was well underway at the time that *Rain Man* was produced and which is not mentioned in the film” (Callus 2019: 185).

means for others. Without his superpowers, Raymond would likely be nothing more than a burden to his brother and would lose his both cinematic and—in the eyes of the audience—even his right to social existence. The possibility that Charlie Babbitt might change his own life in order to take greater care of his disabled brother is never even considered. The traditional image of masculinity that he embodies does not allow for such a role. Nor is it questioned in the film, apart from the criticism levelled at him and his behaviour towards Raymond by his girlfriend Susanna, who, as a woman, is characterised as warm-hearted and sensitive. However, this behaviour is explained by his individual disposition and not by his gender role. Gender issues remain implicit in the film. At the end of *Rain Man* stands the exclusion of the autistic person from society.

### 3 The Focus on the Family in Marc Rothemund's *Weekend Rebels* (2023)

It is precisely in this respect that the German tragicomedy *Weekend Rebels* takes a different approach. Like many films about people with disabilities, this film derives much of its credibility from the fact that it is based on a true story. In this case, it is the autobiography *Wir Wochenendrebellen* [We Weekend Rebels] (2017) by Mirco von Juterczenka and his autistic son Jason, which was preceded by a blog of the same name that received a prestigious German media award (Grimme Online Award).<sup>14</sup> Both also make a brief cameo appearance in the film (00:39:44). In search of a favourite football club for Jason, father and son visited football stadiums throughout Germany and beyond, applying a strict set of criteria that included points such as sustainability, accessibility, and fan culture.

The film retains this basic idea as well as the first names of the original characters. In the film, Jason is ten years old and has a baby sister named Lucy (Florina Siegel). His father Mirco works as a supervisor for a fast-food chain and is away almost the entire week. Their mother Fatime (Aylin Tezel) is a housewife and takes care of the children. The grandparents, Mirco's father Gerd (Joachim Król) and his wife Manuela (Petra Marie Cammin), are frequent guests at the small family's single-family home in the North Rhine-Westphalian town of Haan. *Weekend Rebels* also draws to some extent on

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14 Cf. Lingenhöhl (2018) and the interview with Mirco and Jason von Juterczenka (Scheler 2023).

the ‘supercrip’ stereotype, as Jason is exceptionally intelligent and passionately interested in astrophysics. In addition, similar to the well-known Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, who has also been diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, he is deeply engaged with issues of climate change and environmental protection.

The reviews of the film were predominantly positive. As the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* put it: “A particularly good film. One that embraces being different as something special—without glossing over how painful it can all be” (Matzig 2023: 17).<sup>15</sup> Particular praise was given to the realistic, both empathetic and unsentimental portrayal of Asperger’s syndrome and the challenges it presents in everyday family and school life.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, the film impressively succeeds in allowing the audience to share Jason’s subjective perception. When Jason, overwhelmed by external stimuli, panics or feels threatened by the proximity of other bodies, the film employs staccato editing and distorted camera angles. The soundtrack then features crackling sounds reminiscent of high-voltage electricity, and the ambient noises become excessively loud. Entering the school grounds is staged like a gauntlet run between threatening sources of noise. The film thus adequately illustrates the self-description that Jason once gives to his father. When they hear the song “War Inside My Head” by the American punk band Suicidal Tendencies, he explains to him, somewhat precociously—as in his reference to *Rain Man*: “A song about me” (01:05:15).

That the film is also set within the milieu of football, stadiums, and fan cultures, with all the accompanying stadium anthems, fan chants, emblems and mascots, of course serves to attract as large an audience as possible to the cinemas, especially in Germany. But there is more behind this choice than just marketing strategy: football and its milieu, with its intense emotions, unbridled physicality, deafening noise, constant rule violations, outbreaks of violence, and the confined space of each stadium, simultaneously form the greatest possible contrast to the character of a person with autism, who is focused on logic, order, distance, control and separation.

It is precisely the stadium anthems, which emphasise the collective and communal experience, that underscore this with tragic irony. For example, on the legendary South Stand of Dortmund’s Westfalenstadion, known as ‘The Yellow Wall’, the chorus “You’ll Never Walk Alone” (00:58:28) is sung. In contrast, the father’s comment is all the more disillusioned when he sees his

15 Original text: “[E]in besonders guter Film. Einer, der das Anderssein als Besonderssein umarmt – ohne zu verschweigen, wie weh das alles tun kann.”

16 The review by Frank Münschke (2023) is somewhat more critical.

son, completely fixated on himself, stoically riding up and down in a station lift—a kind of allegory of his existence: “He will ride in his lift for the rest of his life. And all we can do is ride with him” (01:18:37).<sup>17</sup>

This quote reveals that family members and relatives have a completely different status in *Weekend Rebels* than in *Rain Man*, a status that corresponds much more closely to the concept of co-disability than is the case in its American predecessor. In *Weekend Rebels*, the focus is at least as much on family members and the social environment as it is on the disabled character and the phenomenon of his disability itself.

Right at the beginning, the film makes it clear through the words of a doctor (Milena Dreißig)—in a message addressed simultaneously to both the parents and the audience—how to recognize the Asperger’s syndrome that Jason has, and what impact it will also have on his parents and on his peers: “Asperger’s is not so easy for neurotypical people like us to understand. But what I can tell you is that your son may have a completely different perception than we do” (00:02:05–00:02:10).<sup>18</sup> The brief medical introduction by the doctor, who sets the perspective of reception, ends with the categorical statement that clears up any misunderstandings: “Autism is a disability and cannot be cured” (00:02:55).<sup>19</sup>

At the end, the film returns once more to the educational and informative tone of the beginning. After the credits, there is a kind of ‘package insert’, a sequence of four title cards, which appear one after the other and read as follows: “1 in 100 children is autistic” (01:40:35),<sup>20</sup> “Autism is described as a spectrum because the abilities and needs of autistic people are individual and diverse” (01:40:39),<sup>21</sup> “How limiting autism is depends, not least, on the autistic person’s environment” (01:40:46)<sup>22</sup> and “Many autistic people and their families suffer from prejudice and discrimination on a daily basis. Understanding, acceptance and support help people with autism to thrive and live a

17 Original text: “Der wird ein Leben lang in seinem Aufzug fahren. Und alles, was wir dabei tun können, ist mit ihm zu fahren.”

18 Original text: “Asperger ist für neurotypische Menschen wie uns nicht so leicht zu verstehen. Aber was ich Ihnen schon mal sagen kann, ist, dass Ihr Sohn eine ganz andere Wahrnehmung haben kann als wir.”

19 Original text: “Autismus ist eine Behinderung und nicht heilbar.”

20 Original text: “1 von 100 Kindern ist Autist\*in.”

21 Original text: “Autismus wird als Spektrum beschrieben, denn Fähigkeiten und Bedürfnisse von Autist\*innen sind individuell ausgeprägt und vielfältig.”

22 Original text: “Wie einschränkend Autismus ist, hängt nicht zuletzt vom Umfeld der Autist\*innen ab.”

fulfilling life" (01:40:52).<sup>23</sup> Here, the film explicitly and emphatically highlights the role of the environment and the shared impact on the relatives of people with disabilities.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.1 The Relatives of Autistic People and the Person with Autism

In a first step, let us ask what picture the film paints of the family's life with an autistic child. After receiving the doctor's diagnosis, the parents promise each other: "We will make his life as good as possible. We'll give him everything he needs" (00:03:06).<sup>25</sup> This self-imposed commitment is the yardstick by which the further course of events is measured. It quickly becomes clear that Jason's behaviour puts his family under considerable stress. At four o'clock in the morning, he wakes his mother to lecture her about the possible collapse of the universe. He advises his younger sister Lucy on the rules of etiquette to be observed at the table. Even the slightest deviations from these rules trigger intense states of agitation in him.

Soon, the small family heads—true to dramaturgical convention—toward its first crisis. Fatime accuses her husband Mirco of not understanding their son's needs, of being at home no more than four days a month, and of leaving her alone with Jason's upbringing: "Mirco, I'm at the end of my tether" (00:19:31).<sup>26</sup> Mirco defends himself by arguing that he has to go to work in order to meet his family's financial needs since his wife's earnings as a translator are not sufficient. The grandparents, present during this quarrel, play a supportive role by putting forward "separation" and "role reversal" as alternative solutions to the conflict. These suggestions, however, remain purely rhetorical and are not pursued further as the plot develops.

That Mirco enjoys his work because it allows him to escape the pressure of domestic problems is not only an accusation made by his wife, but also a fact that emerges from a longer sequence of parallel editing in which his own daily routine is contrasted with that of his wife (00:04:04–00:16:24). Another accu-

23 Original text: "Viele Autist\*innen und ihre Angehörigen leiden tagtäglich unter Vorurteilen und Diskriminierung. Verständnis, Akzeptanz und Unterstützung helfen autistischen Menschen, sich zu entfalten und ein zufriedenes Leben zu leben."

24 The educational mission of the film is also evident in the fact that accompanying materials for school lessons are made available on the website "wochenendrebell": [https://wochenendrebell.de/wp-content/uploads/Wochenendrebellen\\_Schulbegleitmaterial\\_Unterricht.pdf](https://wochenendrebell.de/wp-content/uploads/Wochenendrebellen_Schulbegleitmaterial_Unterricht.pdf) [28/10/2025].

25 Original text: "Wir werden ihm sein Leben so gut wie möglich gestalten. Wir geben ihm alles, was er braucht."

26 Original text: "Mirco, ich bin am Ende meiner Kräfte."

sation made by his wife, that he always argues that he only has to work more temporarily in order to have more time for his family later on, is likewise confirmed by the construction of the plot. In fact, his very understanding female boss (Leslie Malton) offers him the chance to take over her office position if he can first overcome one final professional challenge. Although Mirco fails at this task, it is not due to incompetence but because he has to take care of Jason. For that reason, he is ultimately rewarded with a promotion, according to the film's ideological construction.

Yet the film no longer shows how the newly gained free time and a possible redistribution of tasks between the spouses would actually affect family life. And finally, the very accusation that Mirco does not care enough for his family is, in the eyes of the audience, already refuted by the fact that more than half of the film shows him visiting stadium after stadium with his son, contributing in his own way to his empowerment with paternal patience and love. Only when, at the dramatic climax of the film, he finds himself caught in an irresolvable double bind between the demands of his son and his professional duties, and Jason accuses him of preferring work to spending time with him, does he respond, exasperated: "Do you know what? Yes [...]. Because everything is easier than being with you, Jason" (01:15:23).<sup>27</sup>

Despite—or precisely because of—these crises, Mirco's personality also changes for the better through the intensive contact with his disabled son, as becomes clear over the course of the plot. He is now prepared to no longer give absolute priority to his work and to devote himself more to his family than before. Similar to *Rain Man* and many other stories about people with disabilities, here too the person with a disability provides a kind of 'development aid' to people without disabilities.

We can conclude that the conflict over consideration for the needs of the autistic child in *Weekend Rebels* is situated within a strongly stereotyped family context. Of course, this is hardly surprising in a comedy film. At the same time, however, this conflict also bears an undeniable connection to social reality in Germany, as, for example, the studies of the German sociologist Jutta Allmendinger demonstrate (cf. Allmendinger 2021). On the one hand, we have the mother, Fatime, who has renounced her own professional self-fulfillment, performs unpaid care work, sacrifices herself for her family, takes responsibility for household and child-rearing, and strives to secure for the best possible education for Jason.

On the other side stands the father, Mirco, who is often absent, earns the money, cultivates professional contacts, pursues his career, has a plan for

27 Original text: "Weißt Du, was? Ja [...]. Weil alles einfacher ist, als bei Dir zu sein, Jason."

everything, would even be content with a special needs school for Jason, sees visits to the stadium as a “father-son thing” (01:32:20) and establishes contact with the university, where Jason is to take part in taster courses in astrophysics. The gender-typical task of the mother is to transport Jason and his little sister to this appointment on her cargo bike. The grandparents in this family constellation assume the role of supporters and all-understanders, with the interesting detail that grandfather Gerd shows such great understanding for Jason partly because his own father apparently already displayed autistic traits.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.2 The Relatives of Autistic People and the Non-Autistic Environment

In the context of co-disability, what matters is not only the relationship between the relatives of autistic people and the individuals with autism themselves, but also the depiction of the relationship between the relatives of autistic people and the non-autistic environment. Here, too, *Weekend Rebels* provides a number of insightful examples. Time and again, the parents Fatime and Mirco are compelled to act as advocates for their autistic child in interactions with others. They plead, mediate, explain, apologise, defend, and protect, sometimes quite literally creating a shield around their son with their arms when crowds become too dense.

Typical of the concerns shared by many parents of disabled children is the reflection voiced by Fatime in a moment of contemplation, wondering who will stand by her son after her death: “It’s also about what happens when we’re no longer there. When there’s no one left to form a bubble around him” (01:22:18–01:22:27).<sup>29</sup> Another example of the parents’ commitment, and in particular of Jason’s mother’s dedication to her son’s inclusion, is the conversation with the headmistress of Jason’s school (İlknur Boyra), who laments his lack of willingness to integrate and suggests that the child be transferred to a special needs school (00:16:20–00:17:33).

The father’s domain, in turn, is supporting Jason in his attempt—already doomed to fail on the first try—to join a football club as a player (00:46:28–00:48:38). The greatest inclusion programme, however, is undoubtedly the stadium visits. Here, too, the father has to step in and explain to the stewards when Jason suffers a panic attack at Borussia Dortmund’s stadium and begins

28 Jason’s sister Lucy is still too young to play an active role in the family constellation, for example by supporting and defending her brother or even being angry and jealous of him.

29 Original text: “Es geht doch auch darum, was ist, wenn wir mal nicht mehr da sind. Wenn keiner mehr da ist, der ‘ne Luftblase um ihn bildet.”

to behave conspicuously: “My son is autistic! He is autistic!” (00:57:43)<sup>30</sup> (Figure 7.2)



FIGURE 7.2 “My son is autistic!” (*Weekend Rebels*, 00:57:44)

In two scenes, the difficult situations that relatives of disabled people can encounter in public are conveyed particularly vividly. In both cases, the relatives—once the mother and once the father—are exposed to a strong sense of embarrassment or social shame. This feeling arises from the fact that, in their efforts to meet the needs of their disabled child, they come into conflict with prevailing social norms. They are confronted with these norms by outsiders who lack the necessary understanding of the situation, either because they fail to recognise or refuse to acknowledge that the source of the norm violation is a disabled person, and consequently accuse both the disabled individual and their relatives of inappropriate behaviour.

In the first scene, Jason throws a tantrum because his usual seat at the bus stop is occupied by an elderly woman (00:10:32–00:12:19). She does not know Jason and therefore, understandably, cannot comprehend his behaviour. Instead, she indignantly accuses his mother of being one of those parents “who let their bully children get away with everything” (00:10:54).<sup>31</sup> Only when Fatime, also upset, explains that Jason is autistic does she reluctantly give up her seat.

The second episode takes place when Jason is sitting with his father in the dining car of a train on their way to a football match (00:30:59–00:34:13). Because the pasta he ordered mixes with the sauce on his plate, he bursts into loud cries, prompting a fellow passenger to intervene. Turning to Jason’s father, she admonishes: “Hello, you need to show him boundaries”

30 Original text: “Mein Sohn ist Autist! Er ist Autist!”

31 Original text: „[...] die ihren Tyrannenkindern alles durchgehen lassen.”

(00:33:46),<sup>32</sup> and scoldingly adds: “A real dictator, the little one” (00:33:56),<sup>33</sup> which in turn upsets Jason’s father.

#### 4 Conclusion: Co-disability and intersectionality

As the analysis of the film *Weekend Rebels* shows, the concept of ‘co-disability’ is well suited for focusing on the relatives and family members of disabled people, a group that has so far received relatively little attention in cinema. Moreover, the concept aligns with a cinematic trend that gives this very group greater prominence in films about disability. As the comparison with *Rain Man* demonstrates, the concept is also applicable to older representations of disability. However, this observation must be qualified in the case of *Rain Man*, since Barry Levinson’s film focuses entirely on the sibling relationship between the two male protagonists, and autism is largely instrumentalized for dramatic purposes.

In contrast, *Weekend Rebels*, also using autism as an example, places a stronger focus on the familial context (parents, siblings, grandparents). In this way, the film succeeds in conveying, in a vivid and nuanced way, that living with a disabled person can be as much an intellectual and emotional enrichment as it can involve negative experiences such as being overwhelmed, helplessness, despair, and social ostracism. If, however, there is one criticism that can be made of this film—apart from its slight tendency to heroize the parental figures—it is the fact that it largely affirms the model of the middle-class nuclear family with its traditional division of roles between men and women, without—or only minimally—questioning, criticizing, or examining how this model might constrain and shape the coexistence of disabled and nondisabled people. The societal and political dimensions of the issue are hinted at only briefly, for example when it comes to the father’s job and the compatibility of work and family life, a topic that plays no role at all in *Rain Man*. At the very least, this highlights that co-disability always possesses a pronounced intersectional aspect, while at the same time revealing that there is still plenty of scope for further, perhaps more progressive, portrayals.

32 Original text: “Hallo, Sie müssen ihm Grenzen aufzeigen.”

33 Original text: “Ein richtiger Diktator, der Kleine.”

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