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# *Sherlock*: The Three-Pipe Problem

Sonia Boué

The BBC's *Sherlock* (2010–2017), starring Benedict Cumberbatch in the title role, was a “global TV phenomenon” according to David Batty, writing in *The Guardian*, in 2015. That it became subject to some intense scrutiny about the neurological status of Cumberbatch's iteration of Arthur Conan Doyle's legendary detective is indicative of its merrymaking with certain well-worn autism tropes. Indeed, *Sherlock* proved the catalyst for a discourse about autism within popular culture, played out in articles and blog posts. The question being: was Cumberbatch's *Sherlock* autistic?

Ill-equipped to comment, as noted by autistic advocate Maria Scharnke in 2020, the actor himself asserted it would be unfair and disappointing (for autistic people) for autism to be associated with a such “high functioning” character. An actor capable of such catastrophic ableism would be unlikely to give a nuanced or convincing performance of a lived experience of autism. What we witnessed in *Sherlock* was brilliantly entertaining caricature.

The *Firestorm* article “*Sherlock* does not have Asperger's or Autism” draws on interviews with four anonymous psychiatrists. It argues the producers of *Sherlock* made excellent TV, but perpetuated the myth that we are generally “anti-social, child-like geniuses.” The harm herein lies in the global exposure of *Sherlock*, and our persistent misrepresentation in the absence of countervailing information about autism to lend accuracy or nuance. As autistics we may thus identify with elements of *Sherlock* while understanding that this prime entertainment franchise is, in a wider sense, a dagger to the heart. The images presented on the next page reflect this paradox. They were originally made as process works in commissioned response to the Arts Council England-funded *Flow Observatory*, *Kongress Survey*, created to research the barriers to ND (neurodivergent) people in the Arts. Notably, the majority of respondents identified as autistic, often with multiple overlapping ND diagnoses.

While the *Firestorm* article suggest *Sherlock* is a poor representation of autism due to a lack of research, my photographs (in direct contrast) are

informed by a lived experience of autism, and the perspective of hundreds of autistic creatives in the UK. I focused on responses to the following:

Question 11: Is there anything positive you'd like funders or organizations to know about being a Neurodivergent creative? Does being Neurodivergent help with your creativity?

The *Kongress Survey* provided a myriad of personal narratives, from which (viewed *en toto*) patterns could be discerned. We emerge as natural problem-solvers, who pay exceptional attention to detail and display a tendency to think at an unusually profound level.

Yes! Reading the survey through an autistic lens, I had entered my 'mind palace', the patterns within the detail winking at me like lights on a runway. The ultimate Sherlock signifiers, his deerstalker cap and pipe appeared in my mind's eye as I hastily scribbled three-pipe problem in the margin. It takes an autistic to solve a three-pipe problem. My photographs quickly followed. Anxiety of falling into a cultural booby-trap, of sorts, was soon overcome by the idea of "owning" a stereotype. Tricky perhaps, but I am also tired of second-guessing non-autistic audiences.

The ubiquity and persistence of these Holmesian signifiers within the collective psyche is due to the enduring popularity of a work of fiction, which has in turn become a global brand. Thus, the deerstalker cap and pipe alone have come to embody Holmes' cerebral powers. My photographs assert the autistic viewer's identification with the attributes that support Sherlock's professional capabilities, while dismissing anti-social traits as irrelevant. I coattail on the shorthand, while fashioning it as my own.

## References

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*A Three-Pipe Problem* (2021). Digital photograph.



*In Deep* (2021). Digital photograph.



*A is for Autism (2021). Digital photograph.*

**Sonia Boué** is a multiform artist who writes about autism and art. She is a leading consultant for neurodiversity in the arts, and she creates Arts Council England funded projects exploring autistic leadership and inclusive models of practice. Boué also participates in a variety of community arts projects and carries out visual research in academic contexts. Her latest Arts Council England project is called *Neurophototherapy*, which explores playful unmasking for late-diagnosed creatives. *Neurophototherapy* can be found on Instagram @s\_boue and [www.soniaboue.co.uk](http://www.soniaboue.co.uk).