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# The Nerd as the Other

A case study on the representation of nerds in  
*The Big Bang Theory* and *Beauty and the Geek*

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# 1. Introduction

From the 1840ies to the 1940ies the American freak show was a common and respected form of entertainment (Bogdan 2). These sideshows, as they were also called, displayed people with physical and mental disabilities on stage - at that time commonly referred to as "freaks" - who showcased their condition and performed songs and dances. In Victorian society where belonging to the norm was the ultimate objective, these sideshows were an opportunity to look and marvel at "the other". When looking at these performers, people in the audience could secretly fantasize about how life and especially sexuality might be for these freaks. On the other hand, freak shows also served as a clear marker of boundaries. It was clear to the audience that everything they saw on stage after they paid their dime was a representation of what was considered to be "the other", "the freakish" and "the abnormal". In that freak shows functioned as a hardener of the "normal" and "other", the "us and them" dichotomy. Eventually, the intended thought to be triggered in the audience was "these people look strange and stunning, but I'm glad I'm not like them".

By the middle of the 20th century freak shows had come out of fashion and were considered a morally reprehensible form of entertainment. As of today, the freak show is more or less extinct (Bogdan 2). But did society really lose its fascination with looking at people who are different? In this paper I argue that this is not the case and that the format of the freak show has just transformed itself and that nowadays the focus has shifted to presenting other groups of people as "freaks". I will take up the freak show discourse of stylizing people as "the other" and take a closer look at the way how nerds are represented in popular culture. More precisely I will analyze how the figure of the nerd is constructed in two popular American TV formats - the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* and the reality show *Beauty and the Geek* - with special focus on masculinity, sexuality and norms of social interaction.

The first part will give an overview of the tradition of the freak show and the ways in which freaks were represented. This will be followed by an overview of who is conventionally considered to be a nerd and how these stereotypes are molded together to create nerd characters in popular culture. The description and analysis of the two above mentioned TV formats will give examples of these stereotypical representations. Finally, I will connect back to the freak show in order to uncover the parallels and differences between the depictions of freaks at sideshows and those of nerds on TV.

## **2. What exactly was the "freak show"?**

The term "freak show" denotes a tradition that emerged in the United States of America in the 1840ies and lasted approximately until the 1940ies (Bogdan 2). As a convention most freak shows displayed different kinds of human curiosities, as these people were also sometimes called. Most of them were either in some way physically or mentally disabled or (allegedly) originated from far-away places in the world (6). Bogdan defines the freak show as "formally organized exhibition of people with alleged and real physical, mental or behavioral anomalies for amusement and profit" (10). Prominent examples for freaks with physical disabilities were the Lilliputian Tom Thumb, the so called "Armless Wonder" Charles Tripp (photographs of both to be found in Adams 116) or the siamese twins Chang and Eng (Dennett 316). Additionally, people with extraordinary body size or weight or people with a lot of hair and also "exotic" people and "made-freaks", such as heavily pierced or tattooed people, were exhibited as freaks.

Freak shows entertained people, left them in awe and most of all "represented what the audience was not - the Other, someone excluded from mainstream society for being different" (Fahy 2). With all these freaks the focus of attention was mostly on their physical condition and the stories of their origin. Apart from performing on stage, human curiosities also appeared in movies (most notably in Tod Browning's film *Freaks* from 1932) and were regularly

photographed. Freak photography in fact helped to establish the special quality of a sideshow performer. It was common practice to stylize the photographs of freaks in the convention of the family portrait of the time. Props such as upholstered chairs and embroidered curtains as afterimages often appeared in these portraits (compare Garland Thomson 6, Adams 116-7). But it was exactly this placing a person with physical deformities in a familiar context that made the otherness so explicit. Another notable strategy was the juxtaposition of freaks who featured opposing qualities to emphasize the condition of the other (Adams 115). In that manner Lilliputians were put next to giants and fat ladies next to skinny tall men (Adams 118). Sometimes freaks were also photographed next to able-bodied "normal" people or in settings with clear dimensional references (Garland Thomson 8).

From today's perspective freak shows appear to be morally intolerable. The discourse about freakish bodies and disability remains but it has shifted from the domain of entertainment to the domain of medicine. Physical deformity and mental disability is no longer represented as something to laugh and marvel at but viewed as a pathological condition. However, as I will argue in the following, the practice of presenting certain groups of people as "the other" has not vanished. Instead the setting and the targeted groups have changed. Dennett argues that the freak shows of the 19th and early 20th century have in a way survived in today's TV talk show formats. In her opinion the focus of "attention shifts from physical to psychological freakishness" (320-1). She suggests that when watching a talk show the viewer also marvels and stares at the people who are being presented and at the same time has this "inner monologue" of "I'm so glad that's not me" (Dennett 320). Taking up on this line of argumentation I want to show that the practice of exhibiting "inept" behavior and psychological conditions for the entertainment of the audience also applies to the representations of nerds in reality shows and sitcoms.

### 3. On nerds

#### 3.1. Nerd stereotypes

Before I go into a detailed analysis of the two TV formats I want to address the question of what exactly constitutes a nerd and which qualities are attributed to this particular stereotype? Previous studies on "nerdiness" have detected similar features of the nerd identity (Quail, Kendall, Bednarek), which I will briefly summarize here. Commencing by taking a look at aspects of race, gender and sexual identity it becomes apparent that the prototypical nerd is a white, male, heterosexual person (Quail 460).<sup>1</sup> A nerd is a very intelligent and often studious person that shows great interest in science with the most nerdy fields being mathematics, physics, chemistry, engineering and computer science. This interest is also reflected in their choice of entertainment: Nerds adore comics and science fiction movies and literature. Also, the stereotypical nerd sits in front of the computer a lot, loves to play video games and makes scientific jokes that only his peers understand. To the extent that nerds are intelligent and passionate about the things they like, to the same extent they act awkwardly in social situations. Nerds lack the ability to read their interlocutor's facial expressions and emotions, are unable to recognize irony and sarcasm and notoriously fail to lead basic small talk. Furthermore, nerds have no interest in sports whatsoever and tend to be physically unattractive. They have no fashion sense and wear horn-rimmed glasses, T-shirts with jokes related to science, and dress in colors that do not match. As a seemingly logical result of this social awkwardness the prototypical nerd is sexually inactive, unmasculine and a virgin.

#### 3.2. Nerds on TV

When taking a look at various TV programs one will soon discover that the figure of the nerd is a commonly appearing type in various mediums of popular culture. Especially sitcoms and movies appear to increasingly feature this

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<sup>1</sup> Based on this categorization I will deliberately only speak of male nerds from now on and therefore only use the male pronoun.

character. Examples of nerds in Sitcoms are Steve Urkel in *Family Matters* (1989-1998), Moss and Roy in *The IT Crowd* (2006-2010) and Sheldon, Leonard, Howard and Rajesh in *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present). Prominent Nerds in movies are Lewis and Gilbert in *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984) and the character of facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg in the *The Social Network* (2010). Furthermore, reality shows have recently started to explicitly cast nerds as participants. Examples for American reality TV formats that prominently feature nerds are *Beauty and the Geek* (2005-2008) and the very recent *King of the Nerds* (2013).

### 3.3. The hip/square dialectic

To emphasize the characteristics of the nerd and to establish him as an outsider, the nerd on TV is often contrasted with a hip person. On the one hand, this can be another boy or man who is socially skilled, good looking, not as clever as the nerd but sexually active. The other possibility, the one which is prevalent in the examples presented in the forthcoming analysis, is to contrast the male nerd with a woman. These women tend to be beautiful, interested in fashion and going out but mostly do not know anything about science. They are, however, very skilled and easy-going in dealing with social situations and feature an extroverted personality. Quail analyzes this relationship between the norm-representing person and a nerd as "the other" along the lines of a "hip/square dialectic" (461). She argues that "[t]his dialectic serves to construct both halves – the hipster and the square or nerd; without its counterpart, each loses its meaning". This hip/square dialectic is also exemplified in *The Big Bang Theory* where the nerds are contrasted with the beautiful girl from next door, and *Beauty and the Geek* where the nerd/beauty dichotomy serves as an inherent design feature of the show.

## 4. *The Big Bang Theory*

In the first season of *The Big Bang Theory*, an American sitcom (which as of January 2013 is in its sixth season) the main characters are four nerds and a

beautiful woman. The nerds are the two flatmates Leonard and Sheldon, the first one being an experimental and the second one a theoretical physicist, and their two friends aerospace engineer Howard and particle astrophysicist Rajesh. Across the hall of Leonard and Sheldon's apartment lives the beautiful waitress and aspiring actress Penny. The sitcom portrays the lives and relationships of these five characters in their homes and at their workplaces.

#### **4.1. The scientists and the beautiful waitress**

The nerdy characters are portrayed as intelligent but socially inept brainiacs. They are all highly proficient in their fields, love to play video games and regularly adorn their conversations with references to science, comics or science fiction. When looking in more detail at how nerds are constructed in *The Big Bang Theory* it is most useful to take a closer look at Sheldon, who is the most nerdy of the four guys. Sheldon is a highly intelligent man with an IQ of 187 who obtained his first PhD at the age of 16 (The Big Bang Theory Wiki). He works as a theoretical particle physicist at the California Institute of Technology and has focussed his research on string theory. Sheldon is very convinced of himself and never misses an opportunity to show people around him (including his boss and his friends) that he feels intellectually superior to them. In contrast to his extraordinary knowledge in various fields of science, he has extreme difficulties in everyday life and social situations. Sheldon is unable to recognize the emotions of other people and has great trouble in understanding irony and sarcasm, which is why he is also perceived as being affected by Asperger's Syndrome (The Big Bang Theory Wiki). Furthermore, he is obsessed with order and cleanliness and has a strictly planned schedule for each day of the week, including leisure activities. Sheldon also shows symptoms of obsessive compulsive disorder (The Big Bang Theory Wiki) in that he firmly refuses to let anyone sit in his spot on the couch or that he is totally uncomfortable with Penny sleeping on their couch, because he is concerned that his strictly planned morning routine could be disturbed by her presence.



Penny is in many aspects the exact opposite of Sheldon. She is portrayed as the beautiful girl next door, who works at the Cheesecake Factory and is mostly interested in going out and meeting friends. She often does not know what her nerdy neighbors are talking about and is not really interested in learning about it either. Although Penny is not exactly intelligent, she is the one who represents the norm of an American woman in her twenties, and possibly the one that the audience can most easily identify with. In *The Big Bang Theory* her character serves as an amplifier of the nerds' qualities in that she through her reactions makes their awkwardness obvious. Also, when taking a closer look at when the audience laughs, it is mostly not after things she said but after utterances of one of the nerdy characters. Penny also represents the norm when it comes to sexuality. She is the one who is sexually active and who represents the woman that the nerds ought to desire. In contrast to the nerds who seem to have a hard time in getting dates (in case of Leonard) or who are not interested in women at all (in case of Sheldon) she is the one who is sexually attractive and active. In the field of sexuality it also becomes apparent how inextricably linked nerdiness is to being sexually inactive. Leonard is the one who shows interest in women, who even manages to have sex with a colleague and who repeatedly tries to attract Penny's attention. All this contributes to him being perceived as less nerdy than Sheldon who has absolutely no interest in women and repeatedly pisses Penny off.

#### **4.2. Nerds and masculinity**

Sheldon and Leonard's nerdiness is often negotiated in the fields of sexuality and masculinity. There are various scenes where they fail to live up to the picture of the masculine man. In the first episode Penny asks Leonard to pick up her TV from her ex-boyfriend's apartment, because they just broke up and she wants to avoid seeing him. Sheldon joins Leonard in going to Penny's ex's apartment but he does not understand why Penny wants them to pick up the TV instead of her. Leonard explains to him:

- Leonard: [...] There's some kind of dispute between Penny and her ex-boyfriend as to who gets custody of the TV. She just wanted to avoid having a scene with him.
- Sheldon: So we get to have a scene with him?
- Leonard: No, Sheldon, there's not going to be a scene. There's two of us and one of him.
- Sheldon: Leonard, the two of us can't even carry a TV. [laughter]

(Big Bang Theory Transcripts)

Here Sheldon's statement that they are unable to carry a TV suggests that they are physically weak and therefore cannot live up to the masculine standard of being strong and able to protect a woman from potential threats. The notion of them being weak also comes up in the second episode where Leonard and Sheldon contemplate about how to carry furniture up to Penny's apartment despite the fact that they do not have "any measurable upper body strength" (Big Bang Theory Transcripts). Back at the scene where the two try to get Penny's TV: As soon as they arrive at the building they talk to Penny's ex through the intercom and request the TV. Penny's ex just tells them to "get lost" and Sheldon immediately wants to retreat but Leonard convinces him to stay by making an analogy to string theory. However, they do not have a clue about how to get into the building, despite having a high IQ. Finally, when two girls arrive and push all buttons on the intercom, the door buzzes open and Leonard and Sheldon slip inside.

[Scene: Outside the apartment. Leonard knocks. A very muscular man opens the door.]

- Penny's ex: Yeah? ["woohoo" in the audience]
- Leonard: I'm Leonard, this is Sheldon.
- Sheldon: From the intercom. [laughter]
- Penny's ex: How the hell did you get in the building?
- Leonard: Oh. We're scientists. [laughter]
- Sheldon: Tell him about our IQ. [laughter]

Scene: Outside the apartment building. Leonard and Sheldon exit. They are not wearing trousers. [Leonard is wearing boxer shorts, Sheldon is wearing a white slip.] [laughter]

Sheldon: Leonard.  
 Leonard: What?  
 Sheldon: My mom bought me those pants. [laughter]  
 Leonard: I'm sorry.  
 Sheldon: You're going to have to call her. [laughter]

(Big Bang Theory Transcripts)

In this scene Sheldon and Leonard are constructed as the ones who have failed to stand up against a more masculine man. Penny's ex-boyfriend is the embodiment of the strong, sexually active, hyper-masculine man which Leonard and Sheldon have to face in getting the TV back. If the two had succeeded in getting the TV from this "muscleman", they would have proved themselves worthy of engaging in a sexual relationship with Penny, as they would have defeated Penny's former sexual partner. Since they do not succeed, they prove exactly the opposite. Despite their high IQ they are not able to capture the booty and therefore fail to prove their masculinity. Also when Penny's ex is seemingly astonished about their ability to get into the building, they immediately bargain away their advantage. The utterances "We're scientists" and "Tell him about our IQ" are meant as sincere threats by the two, however Penny's ex is not impressed by that at all. Instead he takes away their pants, which defaces them and puts them up for ridicule.

## 5. *Beauty and the Geek*

The American reality show *Beauty and the Geek* brings a group of "geniuses" and "beautiful women" together in a mansion where they have to work in geek-beauty-duos to fulfill different tasks. The tasks are designed in a way that the beautiful, socially skilled but academically impaired women and the intelligent but socially and physically awkward nerds have to deal with a subject that they themselves are not familiar with but which their partners are assumed to be experienced in. The team which shows the greatest willingness to learn from each other and succeeds in the most challenges will win a large amount of money. This TV format first aired in the U.S. in 2005 and where a total of five seasons were produced (IMDb). After the huge success in the U.S. the show has

aired in 21 different countries all over the world, with the most recent adaption in on the German TV channel Pro7 in January 2013 (Prosieben). The following analysis will refer to the first season aired in the U.S. in 2005.

### 5.1. Establishing dichotomies

*Beauty and the Geek* claims to be a social experiment which tries to investigate whether "beautiful women can turn geeks into social superstars" and if "a group of geeks can help these women become more than just a pretty face" (*Beauty and the Geek* ep 1 part 1/3). These lines lay out exactly what the show is about: dichotomies. And these dichotomies are hardened in many of the design features of the show. When the participants are introduced, short sequences of their castings are shown. The nerds are shown saying things such as "I attempted to get drunk once in my life", "I lived the first part of my life sort of purely between here and here" while pointing at his throat and part and "yes, I'm a virgin" (*Beauty and the Geek* ep 1 part 1/3) which establishes them as people who do not take part in the social convention of drinking alcohol and as sexually inactive people. The women on the other hand are introduced with utterances such as "I like everything that is expensive", "I was the most popular kid in high school" and by acknowledging that they do not know the answers to questions such as "Where is Russia?", "How much is a silver dollar?" or "Who is secretary of state?" (*Beauty and the Geek* ep 1 part 1/3) which assigns them to the stereotype of the stupid but beautiful and popular woman.<sup>2</sup>

The show takes place in a mansion and after the introductory casting sequences each beauty arrives individually in a sports car, whereas the nerds are packed together in two mini coopers. When they are finally out of their cars, each nerd is shown in an interview again which hardens the stereotypical nerd features of intelligence and lack of sexuality even more: "My IQ is 150, I do believe that I'm smarter than 99 percent of the population", "I'm a member of Mensa, an

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<sup>2</sup> The representation of women in this reality show is certainly worth its own paper, however, to stay with the topic I will focus on the representation of the nerds here.

organization that takes the top 2 percent of intellectual individuals", "I haven't had a date in over a year, because I'm so busy with the Dukes of Hazzard Fan Club I have trouble meeting women" and "There is one thing in the universe that we can be sure of, I will probably never get laid" (Beauty and the Geek ep 1 part 1/3). The first time the women get to see the nerds, their reactions range from shocked at first, to "he is sooo sweet" towards the end. Both reactions show that they do not consider them to be attractive or potential sexual partners. On the contrary, these utterances construct the nerds as unalluring and in need of help. Also, the challenges aim at showcasing the ineptness of both women and men in the respective other field. In the first season the beauties have to build a model rocket, change a tire and the air filter of a car and answer questions about geography whereas the nerds are tested in giving a massage, picking outfits for their beauties and dancing in front of an audience. Teams get to know about the challenges in advance and have a certain amount of time to prepare for their tasks. These trainings are also featured in the show. When the beauties teach the nerds how to dance, the focus is on how awkward their movements look like and how stunned the beauties are by the fact that the nerds have hardly any experience in dancing.

## **5.2. A sexually active nerd?!**

At some point one of the beauties falls for one of the nerds. When she is questioned about this she points out that "he's hot" (Beauty and the Geek ep part 3/3) which puts him in the position of being a potential sexual partner. From this point onwards he is no longer the unattractive nerd but the intelligent and good looking man who evolves towards the norm of masculinity. On the other hand this romance could also be compared to the marriages and love stories between freaks with contrasting qualities. Back then it was the fat lady who got married to the skeleton man, now it is the superficial beauty that falls in love with the socially awkward genius. This romance is, as with marriages among sideshow performers, also heavily discussed in the show in that other participants get to express their opinions about this affair. This example once again illustrates how nerdiness is inextricably connected to being viewed as an

individual who does not engage in any kind of sexual relationship. When taking a look at representations of nerds on TV it seems that every time a character acts out a nerdy stereotype he is lowering his chance of successfully engaging in a sexual act with a woman. On the other hand, when a nerd for some reason does get close to a woman, or when a beautiful woman openly expresses that she finds him attractive and therefore signals the possibility of an relationship with that man, it seems that he moves away from the nerd stereotype.

## **6. Comparing representations of freaks and nerds**

One very striking similarity between the display of freaks in sideshows and the representation of nerds (or other characters) on TV is related to production and the ends of these forms of entertainment: both aim at making money. To achieve that both the owners of sideshows and the producers of TV programs have to make sure that their format is appealing to the mainstream and that it attracts a lot of visitors and audience. Therefore, both sideshow performers and nerds are presented in a way that gives the spectator something to marvel and to laugh at. This is achieved by representing the subjects in a way that emphasizes their special condition. In case of freaks this was their physical or mental disability and the tricks they could perform, in case of nerds the characters conformity to the nerdiness stereotype is showcased.

As with freaks in sideshows, the representations of nerds in sitcoms and reality shows claim to a certain extent that they are depicting authentic characters. However, this alleged authenticity is relatively easy to deconstruct. Sitcoms are written by screenwriters and the people who represent nerds in sitcoms are actors, which means that they embody and play the nerd, they know how to act like the stereotype, they have internalized the way a nerd speaks, behaves and lives but they do not necessarily have to be nerds in real life. Reality shows, however, claim to feature "real" people and suggest that they show what these people are doing in an unfiltered and unmediated way. But when looking more

closely it also becomes apparent that there is a great deal of mediation in reality shows. Participants are featured in a way that is meaningful for the show, and that underlines the ends of the show. If a show is called *Beauty and the Geek* the representations of the participants will focus on the nerdiness of the men and the beauty and lack of knowledge of the women and both sides' process of learning from each other, as this is the declared goal of the show. So the viewer does not get a comprehensive picture of who these people are but only the part of their personality that fits into the script of the show, which is a representation of how these people fall into the nerd cliché. In the end both sitcoms and reality shows want to attract and please as many viewers as possible and therefore broadcast everything which yields them as much money as possible.

### **6.1. A side note on nerds and popularity**

One might argue that nerds have become more socially accepted over time and that they are viewed more positively today than they have been 30 years ago (compare Torggler 125). Also, as technology and science play an increasingly important role in society and people's everyday lives, it seems reasonable that those who are proficient in these fields are respected and treated with dignity. However, it must not be forgotten that representations in popular media always show a smoothed picture of a stereotype, which means that mass culture establishes a tamed version of a nerd that can be safely watched on TV. When it comes to individual social interaction it might be doubted that people who are classified as nerds are treated with more respect. Even though it has become "cool" to be knowledgeable in the realm of computers, watch science fiction movies and wear horn-rimmed glasses, the essence of the nerdiness cliché remains incompatible with mass culture. As long as the norm is to be downright extroverted, very considered about one's looks and constantly on the hunt for a sexual partner, it will be regarded as awkward by the mainstream if someone tends to be introverted, is passionate about a certain subject matter rather than one's appearance and finds it difficult to make contact with people outside of their own peer group. To sum up, it has maybe become more prestigious to

acquire the gadgets of nerd culture, but the character of the nerd remains in a position where he is excluded from the masses.

## 7. Conclusion

This analytical case study on the representations of nerds in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* and *Beauty and the Geek* has made explicit by which means nerds are constructed as "the other". Inspired by representations of disabled people in the American freak show tradition, the analysis has shown that nerds deviate from the norm as they do not correspond to hegemonic forms of masculinity. In *The Big Bang Theory* the two scientists Leonard and Sheldon are constructed as nerds through their conversations and references to nerdy pop culture but also by the fact that they are physically weak and cannot stand up to a masculine man. The reality TV show *Beauty and the Geek* presents the male participants as nerds in that their intellectual qualities and sexual inactivity are highlighted and reveals via a romance between a beauty and a nerd, that being sexually attractive is not compatible with the stereotype of a nerd. Another strategy that is employed in both TV formats is to contrast the male nerds with beautiful women, which suggests that the women are the norm and the nerds are the other.

As the scope of this paper had to stay rather limited, the conclusions presented here can make no claims of being representative for all depictions of nerds on TV. It would be interesting to do a similar analysis from a diachronic perspective to investigate whether the depiction of nerds has change over time and if so how. Lastly, the representation of women alongside of nerds could also be a fruitful area of future research.



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