

## Greta Garbo, an unlikely autistic role model

*After reading over three hundred biographies of famous historical and present day figures, I have only come across three who might have actually been autistic: a pianist: Glenn Gould, a painter: Paul Cézanne, and a film actress: Greta Garbo, and the autisticness of each of these is open to question. In each case they struck me as being separate from their peers in a way that reminded me of autism, rather than due to choice or general temperament. Strangely, they do not generally appear on other people's lists of famous autistic people (with the exception of Gould). Perhaps this is because they were on the whole quieter and more low-key than some of the examples other people suggest. They also appear to have been more isolated.*

*I discuss Greta Garbo here.*

### Greta Garbo: basic biography

Greta Garbo (1905–1990, born Greta Gustafsson in Stockholm, Sweden) was a film star in Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s known for her mysterious reclusiveness. After some modelling and one short comedy role, she trained at the Royal Dramatic Academy in Stockholm, did two serious films in Europe (*Gösta Berlings Saga* (*The Saga of Gösta Berling*), Sweden 1924); and (*Die Freudlose Gasse* (*The Street of Sorrows*, *The Joyless Street*), Germany 1925) that made her a star there, then moved to Hollywood under contract with MGM, where she did 10 silent films and 14 talking films. Most of her Hollywood films were commercial schlock, but towards the end a few of them had artistic merit: e.g. *Queen Christina* (1933), *Anna Karenina* (1935), *Camille* (1937), and the comedy *Ninotchka* (1939). Roles dried up for her after *Two-faced Woman* (1941), and she spent the rest of her life in retirement. She was known as the Swedish Sphinx (Reisfield and Dance, 2005; Paris 1995) and exemplified the exotic-ness of a Europe most Americans knew nothing about. Critics loved her beautiful, sensitive, expressive face, and a generation of film actresses imitated her glamorous remoteness. (Payne 1976/2002; Paris 1995)

### What was she like?

Garbo was always something of a loner. As a child she liked to go off by herself and daydream. As an adult she treasured her privacy and spent a lot of time in solitude, going for long walks alone or with select companions. She was natural and straightforward, not caught up in Hollywood superficiality like many actors/actresses were accused of being. She liked wearing practical clothes and little or no makeup and liked the outdoors and nature, but she was not an athlete per se. She was easy to get along with as long as people left her alone. She did not get involved with causes. She was not sophisticated, and was made fun of when she first arrived in Hollywood for her naivety and gawky clothing. In her retirement, some jet setters objected to her lack of fashion sense.

Her homes were impersonally furnished, and in some places she only used the bedroom. She did keep a collection of trolls under the sofa in New York in old age, rearranging them periodically.

She was sensitive to both noise and light, needing ear plugs and sunglasses, but she had no fear of heights. Her health was delicate — she had to go home and go to bed early when she was working, to keep up her strength. She suffered from insomnia when younger, though in retirement she was sometimes too lethargic to get out of bed for days.

Almost everyone describes her as shy and insecure. As a child she'd hide under the kitchen table and had to be coaxed out. She lurked outside the stage door of a neighbourhood theatre until actors spoke to her — one encouraged her to apply to theatre school. As an adult she rarely went out, and then usually only to familiar places with familiar people. If an unexpected stranger showed up, she'd just get up and leave, and if an unexpected stranger had gotten there before her, she wouldn't even sit down — she'd just go. She rarely entertained at home, and then only casually and for few people. She would also get worked up about making decisions over even small things, but she was decisive once she knew what the plan was. She did enjoy socializing, though, when she knew everyone and felt safe with them, and could be funny and outgoing at these times. And as a child in familiar surroundings, she'd been a natural leader, acting as the eldest when she was the youngest of three siblings, and leading amateur theatrics with a school friend.

Some people considered her to be childlike and egoistical, but they put up with it because they found her so fascinating. Her friends were highly protective of her, and I personally found myself feeling protective of her while reading biographies of her as well: one reason may be that people could be quite judgemental and hostile towards her because she was different. It is one thing to call someone shy, distant or aloof, another thing entirely to call her an egoist, as some do.

### **Her work life**

As a teenager she worked for a short while in a series of barbershops in her neighbourhood, then worked at PUB department store. Her sister may have helped her get this job through references. At PUB, she got the chance to do print and film modelling, as well as working at the hat counter. After two years she quit her PUB job to take a small role in a film, *Luffar-Petter (Peter the Tramp)*, that she had gotten after the producer-director-star came into the store. From there, she auditioned at the Royal Dramatic Theater Academy, something an actor who saw her hanging out at the theatre stage door suggested she do. Mauritz Stiller recruited her from the school for a role in his *The Saga of Gösta Berling*, and took charge of her in general from that point, taking her to Germany where she made *Die Freudlose Gasse*. Louis B. Mayer recruited her after seeing her in *Gösta Berling*, and she and Stiller went to MGM in Hollywood together. As long as MGM produced her films, she worked and was generally very successful, making 24 films in Hollywood in addition to the three she made in Europe. When MGM stopped offering her roles, she stopped working.

At MGM, she became well known for her shyness on set. She did not generally socialize, even though she was friendly to some, but preferred to sit alone away from the others between takes. She would often call out "Not in!" when someone knocked on her dressing room door for a visit. She insisted that only those people who were absolutely necessary be on the set when she was working, and her sets had screens set up so she wouldn't see the technicians while she was on camera (both policies initiated by supportive crew). If anyone tried to snoop, and she knew about it, she'd wait until they were removed from the set before beginning work. She preferred to have the same people on many of her films: William Daniels was cinematographer on most of her films, Clarence Brown directed her seven times; and Adrian designed nearly all of her costumes after 1927.

According to her colleagues, Garbo was unselfish and artistically giving on camera, not particularly caring what she looked like or who got the most attention in a scene. She always showed up on time, worked hard, and knew her lines, and needed total concentration to work. Her work was psychologically sophisticated by the standards of her time.

Garbo rarely did the kind of publicity that film stars normally do. After the first year, she refused to pose for publicity shots, and she turned down most interviews as well. She didn't sign autographs or answer fan mail either, not really understanding (or claiming not to understand) what these people who didn't know her wanted from her. Instead, she posed for publicity stills, since she had to do something to promote her films. She may have only gone to one film premiere (a friend dragged her), and never attended the Oscars, even for the one she was awarded after retirement. She did not get involved with war work, unlike many other stars who sold bonds or worked at the Hollywood canteen, although she may have been involved as a go-between in intelligence. She was famous for wanting to be left alone.

Unlike many actresses who became famous, she did not have to claw her way up. She was keen, so people opened doors for her while she was still quite young, and she repaid them with success. If she had a serious problem with an assignment, she stayed home until someone gave in. MGM gave her some control over scripts, directors and the cast of her films, and she stood up for a couple of people who needed work, but for the most part she was passive, choosing from what was offered her rather than initiating projects. The only real problem came when MGM stopped offering her roles. She seemed unable to produce her own films, and couldn't get anyone else to get them off the ground for her. In addition, even though she was offered stage roles, she didn't think she could do theatre (theatre school had been different, she said, because it was school). So her career ground to a halt by default. Fortunately by this time she was financially independent and so could afford to retire at age 36.

### **Personal relationships**

In her personal relationships, as in work, Garbo went where she was led. As a child, she often sat daydreaming by herself, but when she played with others, it was with her siblings, children in her

neighbourhood, and children in her school. At theatre school she socialized with a couple of other female acting students instead of hanging out with the larger group. In Hollywood, she initially hung out with a group of European actors and directors, including Mauritz Stiller, her first mentor, and Lars Hanson from *The Saga of Gösta Berling*. She also spent time with her early costar John Gilbert, and occasionally socialized with other colleagues. As most of the European group in Hollywood went back to Europe, she was “adopted” by the European actress/screenwriter Salka Viertel, whom she’d worked with on the set of *Anna Christie*, and who had a weekly salon where Garbo could visit and meet people. On visits home to Sweden, Garbo socialized with people she’d known before leaving, but also with Ingrid “Hörke” Wachtmeister, a countess she’d met through a prince she’d met on the boat back, and she’d stay at Hörke’s country estate where they’d do outdoor things in men’s clothes together.

After her career ended, her social life shifted to New York City and Europe. Through a series of friends, she met George Schlee in the early 1940s, who took charge of her social life until his death in 1964. Cécile de Rothschild took charge of her European social life along with Schlee, and she visited Salka Viertel, now in Switzerland, summers from the 1950s to Salka’s death in 1978. Both Cécile de Rothschild and Salka Viertel set her up with people who they thought could take care of her, Cécile with the art dealer Sam Green, to be a friend for her in NYC after Schlee’s death. She also was long-term friends with Jane Gunther (introduced to her by Schlee), who had a salon in NYC and lived near her. In her final years, she mostly socialized with her niece’s family.

Most of the people she socialized with were family, people she knew through work, or people who “adopted” her, provided her with a place to socialize, and introduced her to other people who in turn adopted her. She rarely had people over at her home, and then mostly one or two at a time for something simple like tea. She was often asked to dinner, and sometimes went, but did not reciprocate, and in general people did not seem to expect her to. She went where other people were going and did what other people were doing, even if she wasn’t keen, because she didn’t know what else to do. She drifted.

What’s more, she might have stayed home all the time, except for the long walks she took for exercise, if her friends hadn’t constantly pushed her into going out and meeting people. When pushed, she could be social, and enjoy herself, as long as everyone was familiar, but it took a push. She never took the initiative herself. And she’d go home right away if she met with unexpected strangers.

In general, her friends consisted of motherly women who took care of her, young lightweight men she could hold her own with, and older father figures who organized her life for her. The men tended to be either gay or safely married. The women, even the lesbian or bisexual ones, seem to have been content to take care of her rather than get involved in an equal relationship. She was rumoured to have been in many sexual relationships with people of both sexes, but it is probable that most of these relationships were chaste. She does not seem to have been particularly sexual, despite her screen image, and may not have been sexually active at all.

### **How was she the same as/different from other film stars?**

In the 1920s and 1930s, Garbo represented the exotic-ness of Europe to Americans. They were surprised after World War II to discover that most Europeans are not so exotic, including modern European film stars. Had they known she was unusual even by European standards, it is hard to imagine what they would have thought.

Garbo was definitely different from other Hollywood film stars. Unlike most stars, who generally publicly enjoyed the money they earned, Garbo was uninterested in the lifestyle of the rich and famous. Her agent had to persuade her to live in more expensive housing, and she ate simply on set. She owned few clothes, did not dress up or go out in public, and lived very simply her entire life.

Except for at the beginning of her career, she avoided almost all publicity apart from publicity photos, which did not involve interacting with strangers. This remoteness from the public fuelled speculation as to what she was really like. They called her the “Swedish Sphinx”, and Garbo-watching was popular right up to her last years.

Garbo was also remote on-screen. There is little or no chemistry between her and other adult actors (though she apparently clicked with child actors) — it is as if she is in her own little world. She was so beautiful that this didn’t seem to bother anyone. *Ninotchka* spoofed her image as the ice maiden. What is interesting is that the character Ninotchka tends to take things literally, miss the point of jokes, and prefer

technical detail to an unusual degree for a woman of her era, similar to some stereotypes of autistic people. It would be nice to know how much she was like this in real life.

Garbo was one of the few female stars whose fans tolerated bad outcomes for her characters. Mary Pickford's heroines had to have happy endings, but Garbo's characters could come to a dire end time after time and fans did not seem to object. And her characters were often outsiders, women in exile. And yet she was extremely popular as a star for many years, far more so than most.

What is really strange about Garbo is how other people talked about her and treated her. Most biographies of film stars agree that while their subjects are clearly more intelligent, more creative, and more talented than the general public (and each other), they are nonetheless regular people — larger than life versions, but still regular people, with regular desires and motivations and lifestyles, just moreso. They are people we can understand. Garbo, on the other hand, was known for her mysteriousness and reticence. One biographer repeatedly compared her to a unicorn, when he wasn't calling her an icon or a goddess or comparing her to Buddha (Payne, 1976/2002). I have never seen any other film actor or other famous person referred to as an otherworldly creature like this in a biography, and I have read hundreds of biographies. Even when people she knew wrote about her, they seemed to have a hard time describing her. She *was* more an icon than a person. It wasn't just a role she played for publicity — to a certain extent she was so remote she really was mysterious.

In all the biographies I've read (300+) the only other person I've seen who received this kind of unwanted attention was T.E. Lawrence, who, like Garbo, fascinated people while wanting to avoid publicity. But, unlike Garbo, Lawrence showed initiative in his professional life, first in archeology, then in military intelligence, then as a writer, before taking up the life of an inconspicuous person. In film, Rudolph Valentino was the first modern actor to inspire a frenzy (his fans tore pieces of his clothing off), but in his case he welcomed publicity (just not the frenzy part of it), and when he first became a star, he cultivated a macho image by walking two White Russian Wolfhounds on the beach to look aloof and tough (he was naturally gregarious). Garbo is unique in this sense, though more like Lawrence than Valentino, who was fairly normal by Hollywood standards.

### **Was she happy?**

Garbo was always unhappy and homesick while in Hollywood, never quite fitting in, and never being very happy with the kind of work on offer, though she did make some better films at the end. She was also unhappy when she discovered that her fame made it difficult to return to Sweden. In retirement she was bored and frustrated, with nothing to do and nowhere to be. Her fantasy of the ideal life was a private home in the country, living a simple lifestyle, perhaps with a friend to offer quiet companionship. But she never achieved this, instead moving restlessly while in Hollywood (eleven times in sixteen years), and travelling restlessly in retirement. Part of the problem was that she was alone. She sometimes lamented to people that she had not married, even though she had never felt safe with the idea when it was possible. Living in the country alone was problematic for practical reasons, so she lived in New York, where it is very easy to live anonymously and alone. Another problem was that with retirement, she had no purpose in life any more, nothing she particularly wanted to do. In Hollywood her goal had been to escape poverty, and she had already done that. Basically, once people stopped pushing her into doing things, she stopped doing anything. And it made her unhappy to be useless. But she wouldn't or couldn't do anything about it. So she spent about fifty years killing time.

Most people who retire young with money find something else to do, even if it's nothing more than a hobby like breeding horses. And usually the ones who drift also get heavily into alcohol or drugs or other destructive activities and die younger. In Garbo's case she wasn't self-destructive, but she wasn't productive either. She just wasn't anything.

Garbo went to a psychologist for six months in 1939–1940. He diagnosed her as suffering from near-pathological shyness, due to her worldwide fame and the pressure that put on her. He encouraged her to face down her fears in order to get past them. His advice does not seem to have helped her.

It's possible, though it's always difficult to be sure, that if she hadn't had significant difficulties with social situations (her "extreme shyness") she might have been able to produce her own films, or have an easier time getting others to produce them for her, and would not have needed to retire. Or perhaps she would

have started some other enterprise, or gotten married, or done something else after her career that would have been productive.

### **Why do I think she was probably autistic?**

- Her relationships seemed to be dependent on who adopted her, e.g. Stiller, D'Acosta, Schlee.
- She worked well in a structured environment, but work dried up as soon as she was turned loose to fend for herself.
- She didn't create a new career for herself once she was set adrift. Instead she drifted and was unhappy.
- The strangeness with which other people regarded her is worth noting.

None of these factors are diagnostic, but together they add up to a very strange picture. In addition, we have her legacy of films, where we can see her remoteness and her lack of chemistry with others.

What else could it have been? She could have been extremely shy, socially phobic, unusually gifted, or just plain introverted. But, unlike most remote people, who generally like it that way, she seemed unusually isolated and unable to actualize her life. She seemed unhappy with both her personal life, and with early retirement. At the same time she seemed unhappy with the work that was available in Hollywood and yet kept working in order to attain financial independence. Had she stayed in Europe she would probably have done more artistically satisfying work, but Hollywood called, and so that's where she went.

Is there anything in her life history that contraindicates a diagnosis of autism? Most autistic people have significant problems with work and/or relationships. But she had a career. How did she manage that? I think her career was possible because people adopted and mentored her. First Stiller made her his protégé, then she signed with MGM and they took care of her for years. When they stopped taking care of her, she stopped working, apparently involuntarily.

### **Why diagnose Garbo?**

Garbo is useful as a possible role model for autistic adults, even if she herself was not actually autistic, because it is possible to see how she could be successful, and how successful she could be, when people provided the kind of structured support she needed to thrive, but how she did not seem to have been able to work at all without it. For those adults with high-functioning autism who would like to work (or who *need* to work, but can't), it gives hope that if workplaces were to provide enough structure (something that seems to be decreasing rather than increasing in the last few decades), then maybe they could thrive too.

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