



“There is nothing Tourettic about the New York City subways” - representation of tics and Tourette syndrome in literature, cinema, and theatre

Natalia Szejko^{1,2}, James Leckman³, Alexander Münchau⁴

1 – Department of Neurology, Medical University of Warsaw, Poland

2 – Department of Bioethics, Medical University of Warsaw, Poland

3 – Child Study Center, Yale University, USA

4 - Institute of Systems Motor Science, Center of Brain, Behavior and Metabolism, University of Lübeck, Germany

Background

Tics and Tourette syndrome (TS) have been widely represented in different arts: literature, theatre, and cinema. In some cases, the artistic vision is based on the personal, real-life experience of the authors, or actors / performers, while in the others it derives from the fictional work.

Methods

We reviewed and analyzed previously released works of art that contained representation of tics and TS.

Results: Literature

1. The first reports date back to the 19th century and could be attributed to Charles Dickens and his novel **Little Dorrit**, in which one of the protagonists, Mr. Pancks, experienced diverse motor and vocal tics as well as obsessive-compulsive symptoms.
2. Similarly, famous 19th century Spanish writer, Benito Perez Galdos, depicted tics in his novel **Angel Guerra**
3. Another book regarding this topic is **Salka Valka** by Islandic writer and Nobel Prize laureate, Halldor Laxness. *Salka Valka* is a story of a young lively girl from a small village in Island who overcomes diverse adversities in spite of being bullied for her hyperactivity and tics.
4. More recent example constitutes **Motherless Brooklyn**, recently adapted as an excellent movie by prominent actor and director, Edward Norton.

Results: Theatre

1. **Theatre of disgraceful people** is a fruit of cooperation between theatre director, Hans-Jörg Kapp, a neurologist, Alexander Münchau, a philosopher, Timo Ogrzal and a performer with TS, Daniel Weber, the latter being the key figure for the play as his tics are directing and structuring the play.
2. Similarly, tics play a crucial role for the construction of another play, **Backstage in Biscuit Land** by a British performer with TS, Jess Thom. In this play, Thom is the main character, and she uses her tics, such as vocalizations, “biscuit” and “hedgehog”, to create a moving vision of her disease.

Results: Cinema

1. **Free-Tic Zone** is a documentary in which three patients with TS are travelling across Europe to the North Cape. They first travel to TS research centers in France in Germany and then across Finland and Lapland. Contemplation of patients’ worries and doubts regarding their life with the disease and current treatment options are the main focus of the film.
2. **Motherless Brooklyn**, on the other hand, is a detective story intercepted by the disease narrative, the narrative of a detective affected by TS.
3. Other films that present problem of TS are **Young and Innocent**, **Alive and Ticking**, **The Tic Code**, **Matchstick Men** or **Vincent Wants to Sea**.

Conclusions

1. Artistic representation of TS and tics is not that **uncommon**
2. It is **an important avenue** for the patients to talk about their problems and fears.
3. In the context of **disability narratives**, these works of art can provide a **cathartic** and **psychotherapeutic** experience that enables achievement of mind/body integration.
4. It opens possibilities to spread **social awareness** about tics and, more widely, initiate discussion about the boundaries of **normality**.
5. On the other hand, dramatic representations of tics and tic-like behaviors in social media may lead to popularization of **misconceptions**.

