

**Does A Picture Speak A Thousand Words? The Representation of the Deaf
and Hard of Hearing in Cinema.**

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) in Animation. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the representation of the Deaf and hard of hearing community in film, analysing from pre-twenty first century film and the emergence of stereotypes of deafness to the modern day and the advancements that have been made in deaf representation. Investigating the depictions of Deaf individuals and their experiences over a century the author invites readers to reflect on how deaf, disabled and marginalised individuals are portrayed in media and explore how such depictions can be improved upon.

Through close analysis and cross examination of twentieth century films such as *Children of a Lesser God* and twenty first century films like *Sound of Metal* this body of work explores the developing representation of deafness over time, the impact of these representations on both Deaf and hearing audiences and the role of cinema in shaping societal perceptions of deafness. Drawing on disability studies and film studies the research aims to examine whether cinema reflects a shifting cultural attitude towards disability.

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Introduction

With over 1.5 billion people globally living with hearing loss (as per the WHO at the time of writing) the Deaf and hard of hearing (HoH) community is an extensive and nuanced one imbued with many cultures and languages. This thesis adheres to the contemporary usage of a capital D to differentiate cultural Deaf identity from audiological status as a deaf person¹, using ‘Deaf’ and ‘deaf’ as two separate descriptors throughout. Much like the hearing world the deaf community in each country has its own language: American Sign Language (ASL), British Sign Language (BSL), Irish Sign Language (ISL) and many more. However due to communication barriers and a lack of sign language knowledge amongst the hearing population deaf people are often ostracised from many aspects of society, and this work aims to examine both the inclusion and exclusion of the Deaf community in regard to the medium of cinema. Disability in general is widely underrepresented in cinema, with communicative disability even more so. *Inequality in 1,300 Popular Films*, a study by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, found that only 2.3% of all speaking characters across the 100 top grossing films of 2019 were depicted with a disability, and only 28.4% of those had a communicative disability.²

This thesis is inspired in part by seeing Krasinski’s *A Quiet Place* (2018), Marder’s *Sound of Metal* (2019) and Heder’s *CODA* (2021) be released during a relatively short time frame and noting that I’d never seen this many popular films featuring deaf main characters before. It inspired me to delve further into the factors behind this upturn in deaf representation and also to educate myself on deaf representation previously and the developments that happened between then and now. The thesis was also inspired by the increased ostracisation of deaf people from society during the COVID-19 pandemic. Working in a customer facing environment during the height of the

¹ Kirk VanGilder, “Biblical Tradition, References to Deaf in” in *The Sage Deaf Studies Encyclopedia* ed. Genie Gertz and Patrick Boudreault (London: Sage, 2016), 73.

² Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, *Inequality in 1,300 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBTQ & Disability from 2007 to 2009*, California: USC Annenberg, 2020, https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-inequality_1300_popular_films_09-08-2020.pdf

pandemic where masks were mandatory, my colleagues and I would often serve deaf customers who were struggling to communicate due to the masks inhibiting their ability to lip read, or hard of hearing customers who found it difficult to hear us through masks and plexiglass shields. Research indicated that deaf and hard of hearing people experienced great difficulty communicating during the pandemic, and that both early and late onset deaf people reported missing more information and feeling more disconnected from society than HoH people.³

In the following chapters I will explore the history of deaf representation in film from the twentieth to twenty first century examining both the positive and negative impacts it had on the Deaf community. As with any marginalised group there is a tendency to be represented on screen as a stereotype or trope, such as the “black best friend” archetype prevalent in cinema and television throughout the 90’s and early 2000’s. The “black best friend” often didn’t have a storyline of their own and existed to “be



Fig 1. Cher and her ‘black best friend’ Dionne (*Clueless*, 1995)

³ Eva Gutierrez-Sigut, Veronica M. Lamarche, Katherine Rowley *et al.* “How do face masks impact communication amongst deaf/HoH people?,” *Cognitive Research Journal* 7, 81 (September 5, 2022), abstract.

black and to be friends with the hero.”⁴ Minority characters are often created to ‘tick the box’ for diversity and to provide context for the protagonist, to subconsciously explain to the viewer what kind of person the protagonist is. Such is often the case with deaf characters in media: rather than their character being self sufficient they exist as a testament to the ‘goodness’ of the protagonist who’s kindness, tolerance or helpfulness is exemplified by the disabled character. In horror cinema the deaf character often exists as a plot device, their peril heightened due to their inability to hear imminent danger and thus provoking deeper fear in the audience.

Throughout this thesis I will examine films that conform to such tropes of deafness as well as those that offer an accurate insight into the Deaf experience, and consider the factors that may have led to such representation - time period, involvement of the deaf community in the film process, etc. In Chapter I: Pre Twenty First Century Representation I will investigate the depiction of deafness from the advent of cinema. “Literary, film and television images [of deaf people] have been historically negative and stereotypical”⁵ and this chapter seeks to determine the origin of such negative representation through examining many elements including societal views at the time, the involvement of the deaf community on and off screen and the birth of stereotypes while also documenting positive representation of the time period and the factors that made it successful. Chapter II: Deafness in Modern Cinema will delve deeper into different representations of deafness as more films about deafness are made, examining them through various lenses such as theme, intersectionality, and the involvement of Deaf cast and crew. This work aims to establish if significant change in the representation of deafness in film has occurred over time, the catalysts for change, and what work remains to be done by the film industry to ensure authenticity of Deaf stories.

⁴ Maurice Mcleod, “Why the black best friend has had its day,” *The Guardian*, June 2, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/global/commentisfree/2015/jun/02/why-black-best-friend-had-its-day-david-oyelowo>

⁵ John S. Schuchman, *Hollywood Speaks: Deafness and the Film Entertainment Industry* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 4.

Chapter I
Pre Twenty First Century Representation

*It is with ecstasy that he walks now upon the earth grown almost an Eden,
in which sound has not yet been created.*

- Marcel Proust

Silent Cinema

From the dawn of cinema deafness has been represented onscreen, and American Sign Language (ASL) is the “first known language, predating any spoken language, to have been recorded on film.”⁶ During the silent film era filmmakers were, albeit unintentionally, catering equally to both deaf and hearing audiences as films relied solely on gestural action rather than dialogue to convey character interaction. French film theorist Michel Chion proposed that silent cinema be renamed “deaf cinema”⁷ as there was sound, it just could not be heard. Without sound filmmakers relied on visual allusions to sound, such as smoke emitting from a gun to represent that it had been fired rather than the sound of a gunshot. These visual phenomena allowed deaf and hearing audiences alike to follow the action in its entirety.

Another visual tool used was the intertitle, predecessor of the subtitle, which Chion calls “a luxury of silent cinema” as it “situates the film as smarter than the characters.”⁸ This was a tool that would later be recreated in sound cinema through the use of a narrator, a separate entity from the cast who comments on the story, often with a sense of irony. The use of intertitles allowed the audience of the silent film a greater insight into the plot, conveying information that was difficult to portray without sound or showing the passage of time, amongst other uses. In fact the use of visual allusions and intertitles in lieu of sound was so effective that when sound cinema arrived “people found sound redundant with respect to the sound they had

⁶ Patti Durr, “Deaf Cinema” in *The Sage Deaf Studies Encyclopedia* ed. Genie Gertz and Patrick Boudreault (London: Sage, 2016), 157.

⁷ Michel Chion, *Film, A Sound Art*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 3.

⁸ *Ibid.* 15.

dreamed of.”⁹ This meant that during the early film era Deaf people were able to participate “on a comparatively equal basis with their hearing peers” until the arrival of sound cinema in the early 20th century.¹⁰

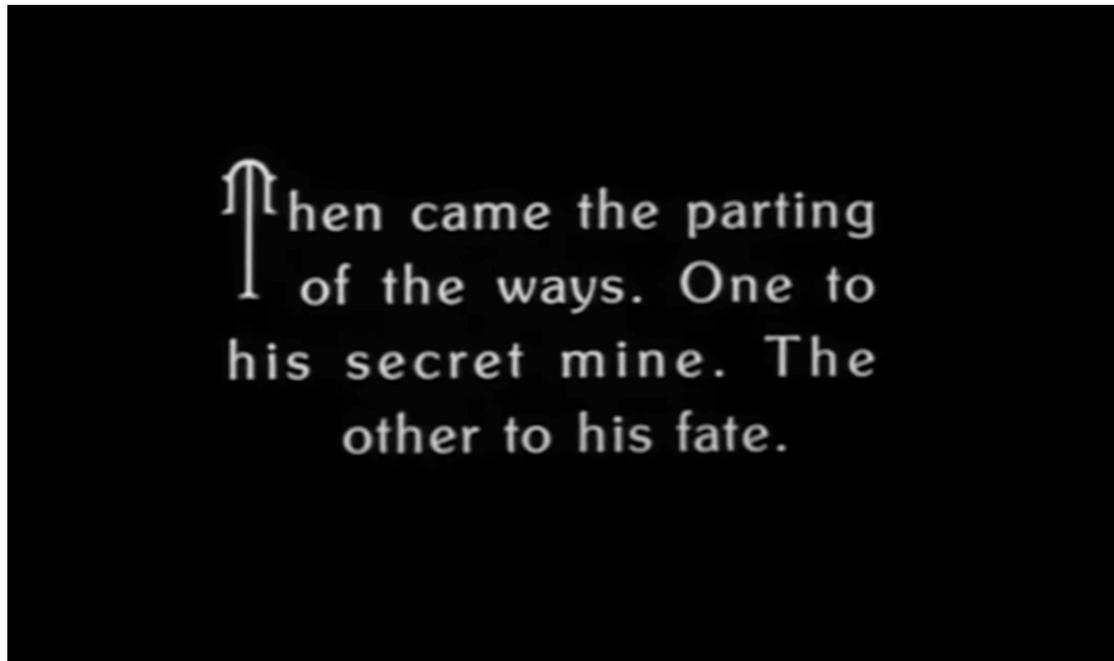


Fig. 2 Example of an intertitle from Charlie Chaplin's The Gold Rush (1925)

The silent era is referred to as the “golden era” of cinema within the Deaf community for this reason, and also because motion picture technology allowed far more comprehensible explanation of sign language and allowed the deaf and hearing viewer a visual understanding of how ASL worked. This proved essential for the community as the silent film era occurred in tandem with a widespread campaign against sign language which included legislation to ban sign language from being taught or used in schools. The Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf, or “Milan Conference,” was comprised of deaf educators most of whom believed in oralism - the education of Deaf students through lip reading and speech rather than sign language.¹¹ The conference ruled in favour of oralism and sign language education

⁹ Ibid. 17.

¹⁰ Schuchman, *Hollywood Speaks*, 21.

¹¹ David A. Stewart and Akamatsu C. Tane “The Coming of Age of American Sign Language,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 19, no.3 (1988): 241-42.

was subsequently banned in schools in America and several European countries. Through the medium of cinema the deaf community was able to spread knowledge of ASL and other sign language dialects in a time period that opposed its existence.

Unfortunately despite its unwitting inclusion of the Deaf community as an audience many films of the silent era were made at their expense, with deafness serving as “the visual banana peel over which the characters figuratively stumble in the plot.”¹² Deaf characters in silent film were predominantly gag characters used for comic relief, where the deaf individual is portrayed as bumbling and clueless. Such films include silent era star Charlie Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush* (1925) and *The Circus* (1928) which respectively feature deaf characters who misunderstand Chaplin and hilarity ensues. Buster Keaton, another predominant figure of the silent era, co-directed *The Navigator* (1924) with Donald Crisp in which the protagonists, stranded on a deserted ship, encounter a group of deaf sailors who misunderstand them leading to chaos. Trailblazers such as Chaplin and Keaton perpetuating these negative stereotypes of deaf individuals was extremely harmful for the Deaf community as the popularity of their work meant these bumbling, helpless deaf characters were being screened to audiences worldwide and moulding their perception of deafness.

The emergence of sound technology began the Deaf community’s exclusion from cinema as both audience and actor as they could no longer understand the dialogued films or “talkies”, nor participate in them as they now required speaking roles. It has been said that deaf people are “natural actors” due to their “use of facial expression and their comfort with body language”.¹³ During the “deaf cinema” era several deaf actors had large roles in mainstream films as there was no need for dialogue, however when the “talkies” arrived this changed. Instead the deaf community began to see themselves represented on screen by hearing actors, in films that were inaccessible for them to watch. John S. Schuchman, hearing son born in 1938 to two deaf parents,

¹² Miriam Nathan Lerner, “Narrative Function of Deafness and Deaf Characters in Film,” *M/C Journal* 13, no.3 (2010)

¹³ John S. Schuchman, “The Silent Film Era: Silent Films, NAD Films, and the Deaf Community’s Response.” *Sign Language Studies* 4, no. 3 (2004): 233.

writes that the films he grew up with as a boy “did not contain enough large action movements to enable a deaf person to follow the story.”¹⁴ With the transition from gestural acting to more nuanced acting heavily supported by dialogue, deaf people were slowly becoming ostracised from the viewing experience which negatively impacted both the community and representation of the community in film. Without being able to understand or participate in the films being produced, how were deaf people to ensure their culture was being accurately represented? This widespread exclusion of the deaf community from any part of the filmmaking process led to several problems that would persist for years to come: hearing actors portraying deaf characters, deafness reduced to tropes and stereotypes and subsequently a deep misunderstanding of deafness within the public.

Emergence of Tropes and Plot Devices

The end of “deaf cinema” largely saw the end of the deaf community’s autonomy over their onscreen representation, and until the late 1960’s “both the movie and television industries excluded the use of deaf actors in performances that featured a deaf character.”¹⁵ Deaf characters were mainly portrayed by hearing actors who often played the role based on their preconceptions of deafness without any involvement from the Deaf community. Their use of ASL was “often abysmal”¹⁶ rendering all efforts of the silent era to educate the populace about sign language futile. The erasure of the community from their own stories proved extremely harmful as worldwide perception of deafness was now being influenced by deaf media written by hearing people who, uneducated on the intricacies of the culture, boiled deafness down to tropes that could be used to fit their film’s agenda. The hearing community began to use deaf characters as plot devices, or “vehicles to inspire pity, awe, sexuality, or mystic insight.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Schuchman, *Hollywood Speaks*, viii.

¹⁵ Schuchman, “The Silent Film Era,” 235.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Durr, “Deaf Cinema,” 157.



Fig. 3 “What you can’t hear could kill you” - the ‘deaf woman in peril’ trope exemplified (*Hear No Evil*, 1993)

Pity was the most commonly used trope, with deaf characters either used to heighten the severity of the situation or to prove the heroism of the protagonist. This is exemplified particularly in horror films, where deaf characters are used to heighten the sense of fear as the character cannot hear the approaching danger, and to make the audience empathise more with the character as they are seen as ‘weaker’ or more vulnerable. “Thrillers with deaf characters typically put a deaf woman in peril”¹⁸ and this device is used

frequently even to this day to create a heightened sense of suspense as the character has two perceived ‘weaknesses’ - she is a woman and she is deaf. In *Hear No Evil* (1993, Robert Greenwald) the thriller’s tension is derived from the main character Jillian’s deafness as she attempts to escape a corrupt cop turned killer. She is reliant on her boyfriend who teaches her which things cause loud noises so that she can mask her movements from the killer. Jillian is played by highly accoladed Deaf actress Marlee Matlin, who was the first Deaf person to win an Academy award.¹⁹ Although

¹⁸ Miriam Nathan Lerner and Edna Edith Sayers, “Film: Deaf Characters” in *The Sage Deaf Studies Encyclopedia* ed. Genie Gertz and Patrick Boudreault (London: Sage, 2016), 412.

¹⁹ Stephen C. Baldwin, *Pictures in the Air: The Story of the National Theatre of the Deaf*, (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1993), 53.

the film ranked #6 at the box office²⁰ it received negative reviews from critics due to its poor plot.²¹

The film is contradictory in its representation of deafness, faring well in certain areas and falling short in others. Jillian's deafness is portrayed realistically, likely due to the casting and involvement of Marlee Matlin. Jillian and her hearing friend's communication through ASL is translated by her friend for the audience's benefit, a clever way to incorporate ASL in a time where subtitles weren't widely used. Her communication with her boyfriend, who does not speak ASL, is largely lip reading and Jillian replying in short sentences, the strained interactions an accurate representation of the communication barrier often present between Deaf and hearing counterparts. Where the film falls short is more in its premise itself - the portrayal of a 'helpless' woman, reliant on a man to save her from danger, who's helplessness is exacerbated by her disability. Matlin described some scenes playing the role "terrifying" as she had to really image herself "alone in the dark, not knowing where [she] was and unable to hear the 9-1-1 operator on the phone."²²

Matlin's response to the role exemplifies the problem with using deafness or disability in general to raise the stakes in a horror or thriller - while it serves as shock value for the hearing audience the deaf or disabled viewer is forced to contemplate the reality of being in a dangerous situation with physical or cognitive limitations which can prove upsetting or traumatising. Matlin said she had "a hard time snapping out of it, even after the director yelled 'cut.'"²³ Marlee Matlin was one of few Deaf stars at the time and was highly praised for her acting, described to act "the same way the stars of

²⁰ "Hear No Evil," Box Office Mojo by IMDbPro, last accessed March 14, 2023, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r14199974401/weekend/>

²¹ Lawrence Cohn, "Hear No Evil," *Variety*, March 28, 1993. <https://variety.com/1993/film/reviews/hear-no-evil-2-1200431644/>

²² Rose Eichenbaum, *The Actor Within: Intimate Conversations with Great Actors*, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 195.

²³ Ibid.

the silent era did - she acts with her eyes, her gestures.”²⁴ Her film debut was Randa Haines’ *Children of a Lesser God* (1986) where she starred as the female romantic lead, Sarah. The film uses the same device as *Hear No Evil* in lieu of subtitling, with the male romantic lead James voicing translations of Sarah’s signing. It depicts the romance between Matlin’s character Sarah and James, a hearing character portrayed by hearing actor William Hurt.

The plot follows Sarah and James as they try to navigate a romance with their communication differences as James struggles to accept Sarah’s signing and wishes for her to be a speaking deaf person. This exemplifies a real world struggle of many Deaf people who sign but are or feel pressured to speak due to hearing individuals or the hearing community as a whole. The film “broke ground in its scenes set in a deaf school and at a Deaf party”²⁵ as deaf representation was few and far between at the time, so to have a film with a deaf protagonist played by a Deaf actor and representation of life within the Deaf community was monumental. The audience is “ushered into the world of disparate philosophies of deaf education, a controversy of which general audiences may not have been previously unaware”²⁶ and the film overall is highly successful in educating the audience on real world deaf issues, one of the most successful examples of its time and a testament to involving Deaf people in media about deafness. Matlin attributes her ability to “use [her] deafness to enhance [her] acting” to her access to things “people don’t usually pay attention to”, such as reading people through their eyes, body language and energy rather than their words, and that “[her] eyes are [her] ears.”²⁷

²⁴ Paul Attanasio, “Children of a Lesser God,” *Washington Post*, October 3, 1986. https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/childrenofalessergodrattanasio_a0ad57.htm

²⁵ Lerner and Sayers, “Film: Deaf Characters,” 411.

²⁶ Lerner, “Narrative Function of Deafness and Deaf Characters in Film.”

²⁷ Eichembaum, *The Actor Within*, 193.

Matlin was awarded the Best Actress Oscar for the role, breaking ground as both the youngest woman and first Deaf person to receive the award²⁸, in a great feat for the Deaf community and Deaf women in particular. While this should have opened doors for Deaf actors and actresses, Matlin still struggled with being typecast “even more narrowly than speaking actors are” with one director, Nancy Meyers, telling her “I have a hard time believing that the audience will see you as anything other than Marlee Matlin - deaf person” and being told that they were afraid to cast her as “the character in question had thoughts of suicide, and so Meyers feared that people would make the assumption that all deaf people contemplate suicide.”²⁹ This is a common problem that hinders intersectionality in media, especially during this time, as directors avoid casting people of a certain race, colour, creed or ability as anything outside of their associated tropes in fear of being accused of trying to paint the entire minority with the same brush in relation to any negative traits the character might have, when in reality it is often typecasting to tropes and stereotypes that cause the most damage and prevent minorities being represented as well-rounded individuals.

“Every element of a film is a device, but when the plot hinges on one character being deaf, the story succeeds because of that particular character having that particular condition”³⁰ and most deaf characters of the time existed to serve this function.

Another example of such is mystery thriller *Suspect* (1987, Peter Yates) which features hearing actor Liam Neeson as Carl Wayne Anderson, a homeless and deaf Vietnam veteran. Anderson is framed for a murder he did not commit, and his status as an unhoused and disabled individual is a catalyst to the plot as it renders him less capable of defending his case. While Neeson portrays Anderson as a “fully fleshed-out and powerful character”³¹ the film is described to have “plot holes the size of

²⁸ Eichenbaum, *The Actor Within*, 191

²⁹ Ibid. 192.

³⁰ Lerner, “Narrative Function of Deafness and Deaf Characters in Film.”

³¹ Sheila Benson, “Plausibility becomes ‘Suspect’ in Drama,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 22, 1987. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-10-22-ca-15675-story.html>

Manhattan potholes”³² which is arguably the fate of many a film that hinges on a plot device to carry the storyline.

The use of the ‘deaf woman in peril’ trope or any deaf character as a plot device in a horror or thriller is not only used to heighten the suspense of the film but also proves fundamentally harmful to the public’s perception of disability. Almost all portrayals of deafness in this era occur in media that is “utilising suspense” and it is “no small wonder that the immediate attitudes towards disability are considered negative communication barriers.”³³ Byrd and Elliot propose that “the anxiety levels of the audience have to be considered, since the greater the anxiety the more likely the attitudes are negative towards the stimuli eliciting the anxiety”³⁴ and one can deduce that the representation of the deaf in anxiety-inducing films from the advent of cinema fuelled the public’s misconceptions of deafness to an even greater level than before which deaf media of the twenty first century would then have to undo. Similarly the lack of Deaf cast and crew in telling deaf stories led to widespread misinformation and pigeon holing of deaf characters into specific tropes and stereotypes with little room for expansion beyond these roles and cemented these stereotypes in the public psyche. However at the close of the century, with the Deaf rights movement and the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990³⁵ there was an upturn in both films featuring Deaf characters and the involvement of Deaf cast and crew, alongside a positive shift in the public zeitgeist regarding disability. These factors were fundamental to the increased deaf representation that the twenty first century would bring.

³² Ibid.

³³ Timothy R. Elliot and Keith E. Byrd, “Media and disability,” *Rehabilitation literature* 43, no. 11-12 (1982) 353.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Richard K. Scotch. "Models of disability and the Americans with Disabilities Act." *Berkeley J. Emp. & Lab. L.* 21 (2000): 213.

Chapter II
Deafness in Modern Cinema

“Society continues to lack a basic understanding of [disabled] individuals, and everyday interactions between physically disabled and non-disabled persons are typically strained, inhibited and awkward.”

- Paul C. Higgins

While pre-twenty first century film offered little insight into Deaf community and household, bar a few exceptions, things began to change with the shift into the new century and we began to see insight into deaf culture peppered into mainstream film of all genres albeit often in the form of minor characters. The early 2000’s saw an uptake of films with deaf minor and major characters, and the late 2010’s and early 2020’s in particular saw an exponential growth in films with Deaf or HoH main characters and a rarely seen before insight into the daily lives of the Deaf community. “Some analysts have asserted that the increasing number of disabled citizens [...] has resulted in more positive film images since the late 1970s”³⁶ and this could certainly be the case. With medicine constantly evolving and providing a previously unforeseen quality of life and life expectancy for people born with a disability and an increasing amount of people becoming disabled from war, work, inability to access healthcare and other external factors “the number of people with disability are dramatically increasing.”³⁷ With an increasing amount of disabled people and a heightened societal interest in social justice and equality it is no surprise that there has been an upsurge of films with disabled protagonists since the turn of the century. Deafness became far more common onscreen, with many being introduced to the concept of deafness from a young age through children and family media.

The 2007 family film *Bratz* (dir. Sean McNamara) features a deaf character, Dylan, who explains how he ‘hears’ music by feeling the vibrations of the bass. Introducing such concepts in children’s media means children grow up with an awareness of

³⁶ Schuchman, *Hollywood Speaks*, 4.

³⁷ World Health Organisation, “Disability,” 2 December 2022, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health>

disability and it becomes more familiar to them leading to a lesser chance of them being prejudiced when they are older. One of the main characters falls in love with Dylan which teaches children that falling in love with someone with a disability isn't 'wrong' and may encourage them to be more open minded with whom they engage in platonic and romantic relationships later in life, and simultaneously teaches disabled children that they are equally as worthy of love as their hearing peers. In 2022 Apple TV+ released the animated children's series *El Deafo* which centres on a young girl who loses her hearing and navigates her adjustment to school and her hearing aids through her superhero alter ego 'El Deafo', encouraging children to find the hero within. Similarly *No Ordinary Hero: The SuperDeafy Movie* (2013, Troy Kotsur) tells the story of young boy Jacob who is a deaf child in a hearing school and finds solace in the TV program SuperDeafy about a deaf superhero.

The increase of deaf characters in children's media is a crucial and positive step forward for both the Deaf and hearing communities as it teaches the importance of celebrating our differences from a young age and encourages deaf children to take pride in themselves and their abilities. George Gerbner's cultivation theory³⁸ proposes that in the modern day in an environment so dominated by television, and by extension film and media at large, societal perceptions of a subject can be traced back to the most frequent television portrayals of said subject. With this in mind it is imperative that children are exposed to positive media representation of disability, and of different identities as a whole, at a young age in order to develop and nurture an understanding of those who are different to them as their world views are likely to be formed by the media they consume.

In the 2021 Marvel blockbuster *Eternals* (dir. Chloé Zhao) the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) introduced its first deaf superhero, a character called Makkari who can move at superhuman speed. This was a monumental occurrence for the Deaf

³⁸ George Gerbner, "Cultivation analysis: An overview," *Mass communication and society* 1, no. 3-4 (1998) 175-94.

community as it represented deafness to Marvel's enormous worldwide audience peaking a worldwide interest in sign language³⁹ and also gave deaf children a superhero who looked like them to look up to, similar to what *Black Panther* (dir. Ryan Coogler) did in 2018 for the black community.⁴⁰ Makkari's character is female and played by Lauren Ridloff who is a woman of colour, providing much needed representation for female and POC (people of colour) members of the Deaf community. With the Deaf community being an underrepresented group in itself, there is little to no representation for female and POC deaf people who are even more marginalised. A study conducted by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative on inequality in film found that "the majority of characters with disabilities in [films released in] 2019 were males (67.6%), White (66%), and 40 years of age or older (59.6%)."⁴¹ With the study being as recent as 2020 it is evident that a great deal remains to be done in terms of female, POC and LGBTQ representation of deafness onscreen as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Bullying, Isolation and Depression

Despite the increase in deaf and HoH films being produced, there are still recurring themes that affect the deaf community negatively. A great quantity of recent films depict the deaf/HoH character being bullied, depressed or isolated from their community. Although deaf people can of course be subject to bullying and depression it is arguably not constructive to the community or to the general viewer to have deafness linked with sadness in such a way, where almost every film that centres them contains tragedy. In Bradley Cooper's 2018 directorial debut *A Star Is Born*, his

³⁹ Jennifer Bisset, "Marvel's Eternals deaf superhero causes massive spike in sign language interest," CNET, November 11, 2021, <https://www.cnet.com/culture/entertainment/marvels-eternals-deaf-superhero-causes-massive-spike-in-sign-language-interest/>

⁴⁰ Precious Mayowa Agbabiaka, "'Young black people can be heroes too': the campaign to send kids to see Black Panther," *The Guardian*, February 9, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2018/feb/09/black-panther-challenge-kids-race-identity-empowerment>

⁴¹ Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, *Inequality in 1,300 Popular Films*.

character Jackson Maine suffers from rapidly worsening tinnitus which affects his career as a country rockstar. His alcoholism worsens due to the decline of his career which leads to rehab and untimely death by suicide in the film's harrowing ending. The film provides a distressing insight into the effects late onset hearing loss can have on a person's career and psyche, framing Jackson's tinnitus as paramount to his problems. Similarly in Darius Marder's *Sound of Metal* (2019) drummer Ruben's hearing is mostly lost and ruins his career. He is a recovering addict and gets referred to a shelter for deaf recovering addicts as his girlfriend is worried he will relapse due to his hearing loss. However he secretly sells all his belongings while in the shelter to afford cochlear implants, desperate to hear again, which results in his removal from the community as its members do not view deafness as a disability and do not approve of his insatiable desire to hear again. Both of these films, although a very raw and real insight into the effects of hearing loss, ultimately portray deafness as a life ending and career threatening deficit, although *Sound of Metal* does convey that deafness is not a handicap and the members of the deaf community are happy to exist as such. Both films were highly acclaimed and provide an evocative insight into living with hearing loss but unfortunately neither has a happy ending, as films centring deafness so rarely do.

The root of depression and isolation in deaf persons can often be attributed to bullying and ostracisation from their peers. When encountering a deaf person, “[hearing people] are faced with the dilemma of either acknowledging the disability or ignoring it entirely and pretending that it doesn't exist” writes Nanci A. Scheetz. “Instead of relating to the person as an equal with mutual respect and understanding, the interaction may be clouded with insecurities and inappropriate mannerisms.”⁴² According to Plato ignorance is the root of all evil, and certainly in most cases it is ignorance that leads to bullying and discrimination. When it comes to discrimination against the Deaf community ignorance is a key factor: discrediting sign language as a

⁴² Nanci A. Scheetz, *Orientation to Deafness*, (Needham, Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, 1992), 4.

form of communication, the inability to empathise with the difficulties of missing a major sense, mocking the way deaf people speak due to lack of understanding, etc.

A recent example of the latter in mainstream media is *Love Island 2022* contestant Tasha Ghouri, the reality tv show's first deaf contestant who was born completely deaf but now uses a cochlear implant. Tasha was subjected to endless bullying and mockery on social media from the show's fanbase due to her 'deaf accent' and her sensitivity, despite her sensitivity being a result of growing up with a life altering disability, and she received an undeserved barrage of online hate that many speculated would not have been received if it weren't for her disability. Even other contestants on the show mocked and bullied Tasha to the point where she "was ready to quit *Love Island*"⁴³ and one cast mate in particular uploaded videos mocking Tasha⁴⁴ and her accent after leaving the show. Her inclusion in the show was monumental for the community, being the first deaf person and second disabled person to be cast, but also



Fig 4. Tasha Ghouri wearing her hearing aid on Love Island Season 8, 2022.

⁴³ Kat O'Connor, "Love Island's Tasha was ready to quit show over Luca and Dami's behaviour," her.ie, accessed February 22, 2023, <https://www.her.ie/celeb/love-islands-tasha-quit-562623>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

displayed with resounding clarity that a deep stigma around the deaf community still exists in mainstream society.

In an episode where the contestants' families came in to visit Tasha and her father signed 'I love you' to each other in a touching moment, and since leaving the villa Tasha has been a strong spokesperson for the Deaf community and advocate for the use of British Sign Language.⁴⁵ With the show averaging 2.7 million viewers⁴⁶ during her season, it comes as no surprise that since being in the villa Tasha has inspired many young viewers to embrace their disability and become more confident⁴⁷ and is a testament to the overwhelming importance of representation and intersectionality in media.

The treatment of deaf people in reality and reality media transfers to fictitious media, and bullying is a common theme throughout films about deafness. In Sian Heder's *CODA* (2021) the titular CODA stands for Child of Deaf Adults and centres the life of 17 year old Ruby who is the only hearing member of her family. Ruby, while not even deaf herself, is subjected to bullying at school with peers mocking deaf accents and sign language repeatedly. Her brother Leo, who is deaf, is also met with discrimination when attempting to go for a beer with some hearing counterparts only to be mocked for using ASL and called a freak. The Japanese animated film *Koe no Katachi/A Silent Voice* (Naoka Yamada, 2016) depicts the bullying of a deaf student, however this time focusing on the bully and the consequences he must face for his behaviour. The protagonist Shōya becomes isolated from his peers due to bullying deaf student Shōko, and *Koe no Katachi* takes the viewer on Shōya's journey to

⁴⁵ Bonnie McLaren, "Love Island's Tasha: 'A little sign language goes a long way'," *BBC News*, September 7, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-62812834>

⁴⁶ "3.4 Million Watch Love Island Final," ITV Media, accessed February 22, 2023, <https://www.itvmedia.co.uk/news-and-resources/34-million-watch-love-island-final>

⁴⁷ Nisha Mal, "Student with rare deafblindness finds love after being inspired by Love Island's Tasha Ghouri", *Wales Online*, February 3, 2023, <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/real-life/student-rare-deafblindness-finds-love-26151564>

redeem himself and right his wrongdoings as he is haunted by his past. The film was highly accoladed and praised⁴⁸ due to its sobering and powerful view of bullying and the impact it has on both parties. Depicting Shōya's exclusion from his community and contemplation of suicide sends the very strong message that bullying people with a disability is unacceptable. Such representation of deafness and bullying is uncommon in animation which makes *Koe no Katachi* even more poignant.

Diversity

Although the representation of deafness onscreen has increased tenfold in recent years there are still numerous issues that arise with how the community is portrayed, with one of the most pressing being intersectionality - as touched on previously with reference to *Eternals*. Intersectionality can be defined as an investigation of the following:

“how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytic tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age - among others - as interrelated and mutually shaping one another.”⁴⁹

The Annenberg Inclusion Initiative reports that “in terms of demographics, characters with disabilities also skewed male, White, and older”⁵⁰, a statement that rings true in regard to deaf characters. Out of the recent popular films with a deaf or hard of hearing main character, most are male - Jackson from *A Star is Born*, Ruben from *Sound of Metal*, Baby from *Baby Driver*, etc. Almost all are white as well, with the

⁴⁸ Serena Rei, “A Big Movie Hit - Anime Movie ‘A Silent Voice’ Wins Animation of the Year,” Ani.me, May 17, 2017, <https://ani.me/posts/2956-A-Big-Movie-Hit-Anime-Movie-A-Silent-Voice-Wins-Best-Animation-of-the-Year>

⁴⁹ Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality*, (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), ch. 1.

⁵⁰ Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, *Inequality in 1,300 Popular Films*.

exception of Ruben who is played by Riz Ahmed of Pakistani origin. Female Deaf representation unfortunately still frequently conforms to the aforementioned “Hollywood deaf-themed movies featuring tragic deaf women being rescued by hearing people.”⁵¹ John Krasinski’s highly accoladed *A Quiet Place* (2018) and *A Quiet Place Part II* (2020) broke ground by being “the first of its kind within the modern horror genre for how little spoken dialogue it actually has.”⁵² This is because the film’s premise involves a family fighting to survive in a world overrun by blind monsters who hunt with their sense of hearing. The reason the family are able to



Fig 5. Regan talking to her father in ASL (A Quiet Place, 2018)

survive for so long is because they have a deaf daughter, Regan, and thus can communicate through ASL eliminating the need for speech. The film is remarkable in the amount of silence it contains with most dialogue communicated through ASL with subtitles for the viewer, and only the most action packed scenes contain much noise at

⁵¹ Teresa Blankmeyer Burke, “Sound of Metal,” *The Philosophers’ Magazine* 92, (February 4, 2021): 110.

⁵² Tatiana Tenreiro, “Why John Krasinski & Emily Blunt’s New Horror Movie Is Unlike Anything You’ve Seen,” *Bustle*, March 30, 2018, <https://www.bustle.com/p/is-a-quiet-place-a-silent-movie-the-horror-film-is-unlike-anything-youve-seen-8657554>

all. Having two such highly grossing films almost entirely in ASL is a remarkable feat for the representation of deafness to the general public, however it is unfortunate that as the only film of such calibre with a female deaf character it falls within the horror genre.

In a similar vein, *Hush* (2016, Mike Flanagan) features a female protagonist, Maddie, who is deaf and mute which allows her to fall victim to a killer who happens upon her woodland cabin. The film's suspense relies on Maddie's inability to hear things such as her friend being murdered, the killer entering her home and so forth. These films fall under the "emergent category of 'sensory horror' films, in which characters are prevented in various ways from seeing, hearing or speaking."⁵³ Such horrors rely on an "uneven adversarial relationship" in which the protagonists are operating with a lack of sound or vision which places them instantly at a disadvantage to their antagonist. This creates what Cameron refers to as "heightened spatial dimension, playing on characters' and audiences' anxiety regarding the location of the threat", where "sound itself becomes a source of terror and anxiety."⁵⁴ Similarly to *A Quiet Place*, *Hush* features very little dialogue, with less than 15 minutes of its 1hr 27m runtime containing dialogue. The film is heavily reliant on sound and lack thereof but unlike *A Quiet Place* does not contain any sign language or subtitles, opting to let the visuals take precedence.

The 2009 horror *Orphan* (dir. Jaume Collet-Serra) also features a deaf female character, Maxine or "Max", adoptive sister to the titular orphan. As Regan does in *A Quiet Place* Max communicates with her family through ASL which is translated through subtitles for the audience. The murderous orphan adopted by Max's family, Esther, takes advantage of Max's deafness in order to manipulate her but her ability to be manipulated is attributed to the fact that she is a young girl rather than that she is

⁵³ Allan Cameron, *Visceral Screens: Mediation and Matter in Horror Cinema*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 158-59.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 170.

deaf. The film received mixed reviews, including “outrage from the adoption community, which says it promotes negative stereotypes about orphans”⁵⁵ and outcry over the film’s tagline “it must be hard to love an adopted child as much as your own”, which was later changed to “I don’t think Mommy likes me very much” due to backlash and boycotting.⁵⁶ Despite this controversy *Orphan* fared well in its representation of deafness. It presented Max as a layered character, provided insight into Deaf family life and culture and managed to portray ASL naturally without it feeling like a plot device. Although the aforementioned films were mostly successful in their portrayal of deafness Deaf female representation is unfortunately still scarce outside of the horror genre.

Intersectionality in deaf media also falls short regarding the representation of people of colour, or POC. The concept of intersectionality “refers to the interactivity of social identity structures such as race, class, and gender in fostering life experiences, especially experiences of privilege and oppression.”⁵⁷ Once identified as part of a certain demographic, individuals are expected to conform to preconceived societal ideals pertaining to this demographic and thus when an individual falls into more than one minority group they are often underrepresented in media due to the perceived complexity of portraying multiple social identities. Many hold the belief that “disability like race is a socially constructed notion”, and that “despite the seeming arbitrariness in which labels and categories are placed upon certain populations, doing so creates a pervasive divide.”⁵⁸

⁵⁵ “Adoption Groups Angry with ‘Orphan’ Stereotypes,” *SFGATE*, July 12, 2009, <https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Adoption-groups-angry-with-Orphan-stereotypes-3225116.php>

⁵⁶ Susan Donaldson James, “Adoptive Parents Say ‘Orphan’ Exploits Fears,” *ABC News*, May 28, 2009, <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/story?id=7702341&page=1>

⁵⁷ Ahir Gopaldas, “Intersectionality 101,” *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* no. 32 (2013): 90.

⁵⁸ S.J. Wright, “Diversity: Disability and Deaf Studies” in *The Sage Deaf Studies Encyclopedia* ed. Genie Gertz and Patrick Boudreault (London: Sage, 2016), 305.

As a result examples of Deaf POC in mainstream media are few and far between, possibly due to directorial inability or unwillingness to portray an authentic representation of both Deaf and POC cultures. *Baby Driver* (2017, Edgar Wright) features hard of hearing protagonist Baby, who has a deaf foster father played by CJ Jones, a black American actor. The film shows an insight into life in Deaf/HoH households with the pair communicating in ASL and watching subtitled tv, however the Deaf POC representation is limited to the few scenes Baby's father is in. As mentioned above, *Sound of Metal* features Pakistani actor Riz Ahmed as protagonist Ruben. While Hollywood and western cinema falls short in representing Deaf POC world cinema fares slightly better, in particular Asian cinema and predominantly East Asian. Eastern Asia uses many sign languages that can be classified into two main groups: "sign languages derived from Japanese Sign Language and those derived from Chinese Sign Language."⁵⁹ A stand out example of Deaf Asian representation is the 2002 South Korean thriller *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (dir. Park Chan-wook) features deaf-mute protagonist Ryu, portrayed by South Korean actor Shin Ha-kyun. Ryu communicates through sign language and the film is reportedly the first film to have a sex scene using sign language.⁶⁰

Casting Deaf Actors and Team Members

Intersectionality onscreen is directly influenced by intersectionality offscreen, and the rise in representation of deafness over time is correlated to the involvement of Deaf cast and crew. By casting Deaf actors, involving Deaf crew members and consulting with Deaf organisations a film can ensure it represents deafness authentically and positively. "Deaf people are disabled more by their transactions with the hearing world than by the pathology of their hearing impairment" and the "social image of deafness is still marked nowadays in too many countries not only by a deeply rooted

⁵⁹ Akio Suemori, "Deaf History: Eastern Asia" in *The Sage Deaf Studies Encyclopedia* ed. Genie Gertz and Patrick Boudreault (London: Sage, 2016), 218.

⁶⁰ "Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance: Trivia," IMDB, last accessed February 15, 2023, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0310775/trivia/>

pathological stigma by also by negative stereotypes and prejudiced attitudes toward the deaf.”⁶¹ With cinema being one of the world’s most popular media and the increase in films centring deafness the Deaf community have a larger platform than ever to share their stories with the hearing world and negate the harmful stereotypes created by earlier film and media.

In *CODA* Ruby’s deaf mother, father and brother are all portrayed by Deaf actors including Marlee Matlin as the mother. Matlin was the first Deaf actor to be approached for the film and “put [her] foot down” regarding the casting of hearing actors for deaf roles, stating “I can’t see any actor putting on the costume of being deaf. We are not costumes to put on, not any longer.”⁶² In particular scenes Troy Kotsur, who played her onscreen husband, was “so wickedly surprising in American Sign Language improvisation” exemplifying “precisely why the authentic casting in “CODA” was so exceptional.” Matlin describes the film as “extra special because this movie highlights authentic representation of characters and shows what might typically happen in deaf peoples’ lives - how they live, how they work.”⁶³ *CODA* was highly accoladed and received a 94% score from Rotten Tomatoes⁶⁴ in a testament to the success of well rounded representation of a community. The film was praised for various ways it depicted its Deaf characters as multifaceted individuals who “exist beyond their deafness”, including the writing of Deaf characters “that are small business owners and leaders in their fishing community, with depth and nuance that

⁶¹ Irma M. Munoz-Baell and M. Teresa Ruiz, “Empowering the Deaf. Let the Deaf Be Deaf.” *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 54, no.1 (January 2000): 40.

⁶² Bryan Alexander, “‘We are not costumes’: Why Marlee Matlin put her foot down, insisting ‘CODA’ cast deaf actors,” *USA Today*, August 12, 2021, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/movies/2021/08/12/coda-marlee-matlin-fought-star-deaf-actors-lauded-film/5563441001/>

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Rotten Tomatoes, “CODA”, Fandango Media, last accessed February 28 2023, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/coda_2021

rival and even exceed that of their hearing counterparts.”⁶⁵ Deaf writer Sara Novic also praised the film’s portrayal of sexuality within the deaf community, saying “I liked that these characters were sexual beings - deaf and disabled people are often neutered or virginal in movies and books, and that’s extremely boring and inaccurate.”⁶⁶



Fig 6. Deaf actors Matlin and Kotsur in a humorous scene about their characters’ sex life (CODA, 2021)

Sound of Metal fares similarly in depicting a raw and real insight into becoming deaf, living with deafness and the Deaf community, likely due to the casting of “a broad spectrum of Deaf people or those who have grown up in the signing Deaf community.”⁶⁷ This includes Deaf actress Lauren Ridloff as a school teacher in the deaf community and CODA (Child of Deaf Adults) Paul Raci as the director of Ruben’s group home. The involvement of Deaf team members ensured the

⁶⁵ David Oliver, “Deafness isn’t a monolith’: Deaf communities praise, criticise new Apple TV+ movie ‘CODA’,” *USA Today*, August 17, 2021, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/movies/2021/08/17/coda-movie-deaf-communities-praise-criticize-new-film-apple-tv/5550394001/>

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Blankmeyer Burke, “Sound of Metal,” 110.

authenticity of subjects in the film that would prove educational to a hearing audience who did not have a previous understanding of the Deaf community. These include Ruben's anguish adjusting to his new life, how a signing Deaf community functions and the difficulties faced by those who become deaf later in life such as choosing whether to get cochlear implants or rely solely on signing. The latter is a "longstanding debate in deaf education, whether it is best to adapt to the larger mainstream society with partial access to language or whether a flourishing life is best lived in a community where one has complete access to language, albeit in a smaller community."⁶⁸ The exploration of this debate on such a large platform allows the hearing audience a greater understanding of deaf communication and may dissolve preconceptions of deafness by explaining the language barrier between the two communities.

Despite casting Deaf and signing actors *Sound of Metal* received some backlash from the Deaf community regarding the casting of hearing actor Riz Ahmed as Ruben which exemplifies a much larger topic of content within the film industry. When casting disabled characters or characters of any identity wherein there is a transitional period there is much debate regarding whether casting an actor of that identity may do more harm than good when they have to play a "before" version of the character. Films *The Theory of Everything* (2014, James Marsh)⁶⁹ and *Me Before You* (2016, Thea Sharrock)⁷⁰ both received backlash due to their casting of able bodied actors to play disabled characters. Both star characters that are quadriplegic but feature scenes before the character becomes paralysed which prompts the difficult question of whether it is better to sacrifice the "before" part of the story in order to

⁶⁸ Ibid. 111.

⁶⁹ Rob Crossan, "Eddie Redmayne's awards are not good news for disabled people," *The Telegraph*, February 11, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/11400980/Eddie-Redmaynes-awards-are-not-good-news-for-disabled-people.html>

⁷⁰ Rebecca Sun, "Me Before You Storyline Sparks Criticism from Hollywood's Disabled Community," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 6, 2016, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/me-before-you-storyline-sparks-899779/>

cast a disabled actor or to cast an able bodied actor in order to provide the “before” perspective.

Additionally there is the question of whether casting a disabled actor who is physically capable of such scenes may be re-traumatising as they have to relive their life pre-disability. The same issue arises with portraying the transgender community in media as any pre-transition scenes can potentially harm the mental health of the transgender actor. *Orange Is The New Black* star Laverne Cox’s twin brother played her character in pre-transition scenes as series creator Jenji Kohan did not want to traumatise her by having her play a man.⁷¹ The discussion around having marginalised actors play roles in which they have to revert to their previous selves or playing roles that do not align with their current physical form or abilities is a very complex and nuanced one, and it’s often difficult to derive the correct course of action. This unfortunately comes into play with certain deaf roles, such as Ruben in *Sound of Metal*, where a portion of the film takes place prior to the character becoming deaf - for example if the actor has a ‘deaf accent’ and cannot speak as a hearing character would, or if the Deaf actor became deaf later in life rather than being born deaf and having to relive their hearing loss onscreen may be re-traumatising.

There is also still much scope for improvement in regard to casting Deaf actors for roles in films that are not *about* deafness. The “economy of visual storytelling in an

⁷¹ Kimberly Potts, “‘Orange Is the New Black’ Star Laverne Cox on Her Twin Brother’s Surprising Role on the Netflix Series”, *Yahoo!*, August 21, 2013, https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/bp/-orange-is-the-new-black--star-laverne-cox-on-her-twin-brother-s-surprising-role-on-the-series-232519980.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xILmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAGtkOFQY-t2RcDdNIEoRTuIMtdeNZRx8PlwJxS99Pnz24euX72uX3dz0rJVHPsXqerIk29KXE_Ix-y44GxA7V2gc5d64gNs7t-jXusIDw6DpZLi-17SpqBCcFAgn9aF6D8dZmca0B1JG0tDPLJYUMI5D_GqqplqIS_QxS6x2a3CW

ableist culture”⁷² results in a lack of disabled characters in stereotypical roles such as the best friend or family member of the main character as “in an ableist culture disability cannot just *be* - it has to *mean* something.”⁷³ Upon seeing a character with a disability the audience expects the plot to involve it, whether as a tragic backstory for the character or an element of the plot going forwards. For film, and society as a whole, to unlearn ableism disabled people must simple be allowed to *be*, dismantling the legacy of eugenics and allowing a space for the disabled that does not revolve around pity or their disability. “The greatest measure of equality is to be accepted on one’s own merits with no special attention to differences or deviations from whatever is deemed ‘the norm.’”⁷⁴

⁷² Lennard J. Davis, “The Ghettoization of Disability: Paradoxes of Visibility and Invisibility in Cinema.” In *Culture – Theory – Disability: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*, edited by Anne Waldschmidt, Hanjo Berressem, and Moritz Ingwersen, Transcript Verlag, 2017, 44.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Lerner, “Narrative Function of Deafness and Deaf Characters in Film.”

Conclusion

“Like society at large, Hollywood refuses to acknowledge and thereby depict the scope and nature of the problem of deafness.”

- John S. Schuchman

The representation of deafness in cinema has varied greatly over the years and has been repeatedly critiqued, especially in earlier film, for perpetuating deafness as a weakness and painting deaf characters as reliant on hearing counterparts for survival. Films with deaf characters frequently succumb to tropes such as the ‘deaf woman in peril’ or using the deaf character as an object of pity or as context for the main character. Another point of contention is the inauthenticity of the Deaf community’s culture and experiences, with 68% of Deaf viewers in a study conducted by the National Research Group (NRG) reporting that it is generally obvious when a Deaf character has been written by a hearing person.⁷⁵

As ascertained by this work negative portrayals of the disability stemmed from the silent era’s use of deaf characters for comic relief, framing the Deaf as bumbling and helpless. As film progressed in the twentieth century this stereotype began to dissipate in tandem with the Deaf rights movement and a series of bills passed that promoted the rights of Deaf and other disabled persons.⁷⁶ However the stereotype of the helpless deaf person was not completely erased from the public stage and transformed into the ‘deaf woman in peril’ trope used repeatedly in horror and thriller films in the later half of the twentieth century. This time period also birthed various other tropes such as the ‘deaf character as context for main character’ and ‘deaf character as a plot device.’ Although representation was increasing as more deaf characters appeared on the big screen, they were often in the form of these tropes and were not written or played by members of the Deaf community. Albeit slow, progression towards more positive and accurate representation of the community was beginning to happen synchronously with changing societal views. Marlee Matlin’s work was a beacon of positive representation amidst the tropes and stereotypes, particularly *Children of A Lesser God* which was released at the height of the campaign for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990.⁷⁷ Although certain tropes were being discarded and Deaf characters and actors were becoming more frequent there was still much to be done with regard to positive and accurate representation of the community.

⁷⁵ National Research Group, The state of Deaf representation in media and entertainment, 2022. <https://www.nrgmr.com/our-thinking/the-state-of-deaf-representation-in-media-and-entertainment/>

⁷⁶ Susan S. Lee, “Collective Identity, Learning and the Deaf Rights Movement,” *Critical Disability Discourses* 3, (September 12, 2011): 9.

⁷⁷ Michael T. Smith, “Disability on Film: A Exploration of Film Codes’ Obstructiveness in *City Lights* and *Children of a Lesser God*,” *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 10 no. 3 (2021), 73.

With the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 which outlawed discrimination towards the Deaf community, employment opportunities for the Deaf increased remarkably as did societal attitude towards disability. This thesis determines that deaf representation in film increased exponentially during the 2000's, which also saw a significant rise in films with Deaf main characters such as *CODA* and *Sound of Metal*. This wave of films with Deaf main characters saw overwhelmingly positive results for deaf representation as many featured a previously unseen insight into aspects of the Deaf experience such as Deaf family life, Deaf communities and the experience of becoming deaf. Another improvement was the increased casting of Deaf cast and crew, likely a direct result of the ADA. With the involvement of Deaf cast and crew across most of the films with deaf characters, particularly from the 2010's onward, Deaf stories were finally being told and signed authentically on the big screen. However as discussed there is still scope for improvement in the involvement of Deaf actors such as casting them for roles that don't revolve around their deafness and dismantling the notion that in media "disability is allegorical - it has to stand for something else."⁷⁸

One of the most underdeveloped area of deaf representation is its intersectionality. Unfortunately an under-explored topic in Deaf Studies itself, intersectionality is described as "a crucial next step forward for the field, exploring how Deaf people's experiences are shaped by the multiple cultural constructions inherent in individual and group interactions."⁷⁹ As discussed in Chapter II most films that centre deaf individuals feature those who are white and male, with very limited representation for Deaf women, Deaf members of the LGBTQ community and Deaf people of ethnic or religious minorities. As members of multiple minority groups Deaf women, LGBTQ individuals and POC are marginalised even more so than the white, straight Deaf man and in order to depict a truthful representation of deafness to both the hearing and Deaf community films must strive to embrace "the rich diversity and intersectionality in the Deaf world."⁸⁰ As intersectionality becomes increasingly valued in society and in cinema it is hopeful that that same value can be extended to intersectionality in the representation of the Deaf community in the same way their representation has been a reflection of society thus far.

⁷⁸ Davis, "The Ghettoization of Disability: Paradoxes of Visibility and Invisibility in Cinema.", 44.

⁷⁹ H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray, "Deaf Studies" in *The Sage Deaf Studies Encyclopedia* ed. Genie Gertz and Patrick Boudreault (London: Sage, 2016), 276.

⁸⁰ Genie Gertz and Patrick Boudreault, "Introduction" in *The Sage Deaf Studies Encyclopedia* ed. Genie Gertz and Patrick Boudreault (London: Sage, 2016), 305.

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