Communications Undergraduate Journal
2026, Vol. 4, No. 1, page range: 55 – 79
THESIS | cujournal.ie

Seen, Not Heard: Examining how the Deaf Community are represented in Twenty-First Century Film

Alyson Stewart[1]

[1]*School of Communications / Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland*

Abstract: *This article examines how Deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) people are portrayed in twenty-first century films, focusing on accuracy, cultural sensitivity, and ongoing industry barriers. Using George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, along with the ideas of symbolic annihilation and the burden of representation, it explores how screen portrayals influence public understanding of marginalised communities. The study analyses five films – Read My Lips (2001), Sweet Nothing in My Ear (2008), Listen to Your Heart (2010), Sound of Metal (2019), and CODA (2021) – chosen for their strong audience reception and central Deaf characters. Each film is examined in terms of casting and production choices, character portrayal, and overall narrative. The findings show clear progress toward more authentic representation, especially through the increased use of Deaf actors and sign language. However, several issues remain. Many stories are still told from a hearing perspective, intersectional identities are rarely explored, and deafness is often framed through a medical lens rather than a cultural one. The article argues that more Deaf-led, agency-focused storytelling is needed to challenge stereotypes and move beyond tokenistic representation.*

Keywords: *Deaf Representation, Cultivation Theory, Symbolic Annihilation, The Hearing Gaze, Deaf Gain, Film*

Acknowledgement

This article is dedicated to my father, who has always provided a voice for the voiceless. His years of dedicated service to the Irish Deaf community as the National Manager of Sign Language Interpreting Service in Ireland have inspired this research study. I am not a member of the Deaf community and have little to no Irish Sign Language (ISL). If I communicate with a Deaf person, I do so in my first language (English), not theirs (ISL). I look at these movies with a hearing person's eyes and ears. However, I do recognise in practice that Deaf people experience "systematic exclusion" and "extreme marginalisation", and this study aims to investigate whether this is the case in cinema.

Introduction

This article explores how Deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) individuals are represented in 21st-century films. This research aims to investigate whether the Deaf Community is being appropriately and accurately portrayed, and to highlight areas within the film industry that prevent this. Furthermore, this study will analyse whether representation has positively progressed or regressed over the 21st century. George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory (1969), with particular emphasis on his concepts of 'The Burden of Representation, 'Mainstreaming', and 'Symbolic Annihilation,' will form the basis of this study's theoretical framework to showcase the importance that accurate media portrayals of minority groups have on our society.

Deafness is a worldwide disability affecting over 103,000 people in Ireland alone (Irish Deaf Society, 2024), making this research necessary. The Deaf community is multifaceted, with its own language (and in each country, much like the hearing world). There are also many different types of Deafness. Some are born deaf, have lost hearing later in life, or are hard of hearing (Krentz and Sanchez, 2021, p. 127). Similarly, some Deaf people use hearing aids, have cochlear implants, speak vocally, and others use sign language as their primary form of communication. Lacking a complete understanding of the complexity and diversity of the Deaf community can result in significant cultural misunderstandings. Cinema was one of the first areas where both DHH individuals and those with

hearing were treated the same. This was due to 'The Silent Film Era' from the late 1880s to the 1920s, during which deaf actors excelled in a medium that celebrated physical action (Schuchman, 1988). However, since the "talkies" were introduced in the late 1920s, cinema has forgotten to include DHH actors. Hearing actors began to play silent and vulnerable deaf characters who depended on hearing characters for survival (Foss, 2014, p. 427). This study's working hypothesis suggests that DHH representation and casting will increase in the 21st century, subsequently rejecting these harmful stereotypes.

To achieve the study's objective, relevant literature will be examined to provide a film analysis guideline. An extensive textual analysis will also be conducted on all films (excluding documentaries and animated films) released between 2000 and 2024 that feature a Deaf or hard-of-hearing (DHH) character. For practical reasons, this number will be reduced based on two main deciding factors: an IMDb average user rating of 6.0 or higher, and a requirement that Deafness play a central role in the movie's narrative. As a result, this study will analyse five films: 'Read My Lips' (2001), 'Sweet Nothing in My Ear' (2008), 'Listen to Your Heart' (2010), 'The Sound of Metal' (2019) and 'CODA' (2021). Each film will be qualitatively assessed with questions that fall into three categories: 1. Casting and authenticity, 2. Character Representation, 3. Narrative and storytelling.

While this study aimed to include all films (excluding documentaries and animation) released between January 1st, 2000, and December 31st, 2024, it acknowledges some may have been missed. Additionally, analysing only five films out of twenty-four years limits the study's scope, making it challenging to capture the full diversity of Deaf representation across time, genre, culture, and context. Consequently, the findings may not fully reflect broader trends in 21st-century cinematic portrayals of Deafness.

Literature Review

> *"Representation cultivates a sense of opportunities and life chances. It contributes to our conceptions of who we are and how we relate to others and the world". George Gerbner (1996, p.29).*

Cultivation Theory

George Gerbner developed Cultivation Theory in the early 1970s. This theory tackles the long-term effects of television on viewers. It posits that television doesn't reflect the real world but instead constructs an artificial reality that emphasises specific issues based on the interests and agendas of those controlling the media. Over time, the continuous exposure to TV, coupled with a lack of direct experience with various issues, creates an increasingly artificial world that gradually feels more real to its viewers (Mosharafa, 2015). According to Gerbner, those who watch increasing amounts of visual media are predicted to show increasing divergence of perceptions of reality away from the known picture of the social world and towards the 'television' picture of the world, which conforms to oversimplified stereotypes of minority groups (McQuail, 2010, p.495), like the Deaf Community.

Individuals make their own selection of materials to cultivate personal images, tastes, views, and preferences. But they cannot cultivate that which is not available. They rarely select what is scarcely available, seldom emphasised, or infrequently presented. A culture cultivates not only "patterns of conformity but also alienation in its own image" (Gerbner, 1977, p. 204). This is precisely why representation matters. Although this theory is dated (limitations of which will be explored later on), its core arguments remain relevant and applicable to media forms beyond television. Scholars such as Labeeb (1985, p.11) argue that "TV dramas, films, and series may have a stronger cultural impact than serious programs, studies, and seminars". Modern media has acquired such a central

place in our daily lives that it dominates our 'symbolic environment', substituting its message about reality for personal experience and other means of knowing the world (McQuail, 2010, p. 495).

This study will focus on four of this theory's main concepts: Mainstreaming, Symbolic Annihilation, The Burden of Representation, and Resonance. This theoretical framework will show the importance of what type of messages and images are shown and how these affect society's perception of marginalised groups, supporting the need for accurate representation of those rarely seen in cinema.

Mainstreaming

The mainstream can be thought of as a relative commonality of outlooks and values that exposure to features of the television world tends to cultivate (Gerbner et al. 1986, p. 30). As people consume more of the same media content, they tend to adopt similar viewpoints, attitudes, and beliefs, regardless of their differences. This homogenisation of outlooks is a process called mainstreaming. It suggests that heavy television viewers (those who watch 4 hours or more) tend to develop a more uniform worldview shaped by the messages portrayed on TV (Gerbner, 1979, p. 216). This concept is the "strongest and most consistent explanation for the variations in the strength and direction of television's influence on viewer conceptions" (Gerbner et al. 1986, p. 31). The concept has also been applied to similar studies relevant to this article. Mainstreaming has been found to explain differences within-group patterns regarding the cultivation of sex-role stereotypes (Morgan, 1982; Signorelli, 1979) and views of racial and sexual minorities (Gross, 1984; Gerbner et al., 1986, p.37).

Resonance

Resonance occurs when the media's portrayal of the world closely aligns with the viewer's real-life experiences. When this happens, the effects of media consumption are amplified, making the media's messages even more influential (Gerbner et al., 1980, p .10). It predicts that direct experience will moderate the cultivation effect, such that individuals with more direct experience will be more strongly influenced by television exposure than those with less direct experience (Shrum, 2001, p. 191). This concept is applied to this study, as it sheds light on how the Deaf Community may feel when watching films that attempt to represent them. Unlike the hearing world, DHH individuals may receive a "double dose" of cultivation because what they see on the screen resonates with their lives (Shanahan and Morgan, 1999, p. 156).

Symbolic Annihilation

Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation. Symbolic annihilation refers to "the media's underrepresentation of portraying certain groups" (Klein & Shiffman, 2009, p. 56). George Gerbner coined the term to describe the "absence", "condemnation," or "trivialisation" (Tuchman, 1978, p.14) of a particular group in the media. It highlights how poor media treatment can contribute to social disempowerment and how symbolic absence in the media can erase groups and individuals from public awareness. By rarely showing DHH individuals, the media systematically dispense simplistic imagery and messages associated with the deaf community and, therefore, send a symbolic message to viewers about the societal value of them.

In Gerbner's work on Violence in Television Drama: Trends and Symbolic Functions (1972), he links Symbolic Annihilation to the casting of actors. He writes about how the fictional world of cinema reflects not life but purpose. He argues that "where people are not born but created to serve a purpose, they do not behave like real people; they act out the purposes for which they were created". This further emphasises the importance of casting Deaf Actors for Deaf roles. This study aims to build on existing literature that agrees with Gerbner's argument that no other actor can accurately depict a Deaf person's life and struggles better than one who has lived it (Wolfe-Webb, 2021, p. 16).

The Burden of Representation

Representation in visual media gives a group its sense of public identity, importance, and relevance. However, leaving one person, or in this case, a character, as the 'token person' for a diverse community is detrimental to shaping a well-rounded public opinion. The 'burden of representation' refers to the "disproportionate pressure placed on underrepresented groups to serve as their entire group's sole or primary representatives in the media and society" (Gerbner, 1979, p. 216). As noted by Bjørnsen and Knudsen (2016, p. 206), this burden can manifest in various ways, including accepting and conforming to expectations, experiencing pressure, adopting specific roles, or deliberately rejecting these expectations altogether.

Like fictional characters, minorities are made, not born. Gender, race, class, ethnicity, age and disability define society's power structure. Their portrayals affect how we see ourselves and each other. This ties into this study as when DHH individuals are represented in the media, there is a 'burden' placed on them to represent all members of the community (e.g. people born Deaf who use Sign Language, Deaf people who lip-read, Deaf people with cochlear implants, CODAs (Children of Deaf Adults), and Hard of Hearing people that use hearing aids) accurately.

Limitations

It is important to note that although Cultivation Theory supports the aims of this article and helps in understanding its significance, it does have some limitations. Above all, this theory is old as it was conceptualised over sixty years ago when television was the predominant form of media and entertainment. In the 21st century, we now encounter a much more complex media environment, filled with interactive, algorithmic and user-driven platforms. However, the theories, arguments, and concepts mentioned above can still be applied to more complex forms of media.

Morgan and Shanahan (2010, p.340) commented on its 'genre-specific cultivation'. They argued that Gerbner lumps together all 'viewing' into one undifferentiated mass, which doesn't consider the complexity of individual differences and other social and psychological factors that can shape people's beliefs and behaviour. Lastly, Gerbner's theory assumes that audiences are passive consumers who absorb media messages without much critical engagement or interpretation. However, this view has been challenged by scholars from the active audience tradition (e.g., Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model), who argue that people actively interpret media content and do not passively accept it as the truth. Keeping these limitations in mind, the core ideas of this theory remain relevant and applicable to this study.

Pre-21st Century Background

> "To be deaf is not to not hear for most profoundly deaf people, but a social relation, that is, a relation with other human beings, hearing and deaf".
> Douglas Baynton (1996, p.24)

In the past, film's portrayal of Deafness reflected the unique nature and place of this disability in society. Dating back to Aristotle (384–322 BCE), DHH individuals were considered outcasts in society (Power, 2006, p. 513). They were also typically mislabelled as "deaf-mutes" or, even worse, "deaf and dumb" (Baynton, 1996, p. 15). However, for the first time, cinema was a bridge between the hearing and deaf worlds, where both groups were treated equally. This was due to the Silent Film Era, which lasted from the mid-1880s to the late 1920s. During this time, deaf actors excelled in a medium that celebrated physical action, utilising their natural talent for exuberant facial expressions and subtle body language. This also allowed the Deaf community to sit in cinemas and enjoy films with their hearing peers (Schuchman, 1988). However, since the "talkies" were introduced in the late 1920s, cinema has forgotten to include DHH actors at the same rate they used to (Wolfe-Webb, 2021).

According to Schuchman (1988), the dominance of able-bodied individuals in the film industry has hindered portraying a vibrant, self-sufficient Deaf community. Deaf characters, when included, are typically depicted as reliant on hearing individuals and framed as figures of pity. Common inaccuracies in these portrayals include unrealistic proficiency in lip-reading, rapid mastery of sign language, and an oversimplification of manual communication (Safran, 1998, p. 475). To give some sense of what is being referred to here, the Films "Johnny Belinda" and "Children of a Lesser God" are famous examples of how deafness was represented before the 21st century.

Johnny Belinda (1948)

Johnny Belinda (1948) is a monumental cinematic achievement, nominated for 12 Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Story and Cinematography. This classic drama tells the story of a kind doctor, who volunteers to tutor a deaf-mute woman (played by a hearing actor), but scandal begins to swirl when his pupil is raped and falls pregnant. Although this film helped bring visibility to Deaf issues, it is also a product of its time, contributing to inaccurate representations, particularly regarding authenticity and avoiding stereotypes. Schuchman (2004, p. 235) commented on its use of sign language as “abysmal” and “wooden,” lacking in emotion because the actors were not part of the Deaf community in any way.

Regarding stereotypes, the film relies on a “tragic” narrative, where Belinda’s deafness is seen as a burden to be overcome rather than a natural part of her identity. This reflects outdated views on disability. Furthermore, it unintentionally promotes the idea that Deaf individuals are inspirational solely for existing and adapting, a common trope criticised today. Given the success of this film, its sometimes abhorrent misuse and misrepresentation of American Sign Language (ASL) and Deaf Culture were detrimental to society's perception of the deaf community. This contributed to these narratives being continuously circulated within the film industry.

Children of a Lesser God (1986)

Children of a Lesser God (1986) was a milestone in Hollywood’s portrayal of Deaf individuals, opening doors to greater Deaf representation and dialogue about Deaf culture. It helped challenge stereotypes and highlighted the importance of accessibility and inclusion in media. The film remains influential in discussions about authentic casting and representation in the entertainment industry. The narrative centres on the relationship between Sarah, a Deaf character played by Marlee Matlin, and James, a hearing character portrayed by William Hurt. The film explores their attempt to sustain a romantic connection despite their communication differences, as James’s discomfort with Sarah’s use of sign language and his desire for her to be a hearing person who speaks.

This highlights the real-life challenges faced by many Deaf individuals who communicate primarily through sign language yet are often pressured by hearing individuals or broader societal norms to conform to spoken language. For example, the oralism tradition in Irish education of Deaf individuals. The film was groundbreaking for its time, particularly as it showed scenes in a Deaf school and community, which were rarely shown in mainstream media. Featuring a Deaf protagonist played by a Deaf actor and authentically representing aspects of Deaf culture marked a significant milestone in cinematic representation. It offers valuable insight into the lived experiences of the Deaf community and remains one of the most impactful examples from its era. Nevertheless, the narrative is primarily through James's hearing perspective, requiring audiences to understand Sarah primarily through his voice, thus reinforcing the hearing gaze (McGuinness, 2023, p. 27).

Importance

Understanding how deafness was portrayed before the 21st century is essential for contextualising its modern representations. By examining these earlier depictions, we can better appreciate the progress made, recognise lingering stereotypes, and more critically assess how current portrayals challenge or

reinforce past narratives. This historical lens provides the foundation necessary to evaluate the evolving visibility, authenticity, and empowerment of Deaf voices in 21st-century media and society.

Relevant Literature

"Nothing About Us, Without Us"
James I. Charlton (1998).

A lot of research has been produced on 'Digital Divides' and disability visibility, but insufficient attention has been given to Deafness. This study aims to build upon contemporary literature, such as Chang and Golos's (2025) work on the Portrayal of Deaf characters in Korean movies; Hamilton and Egbert's (2024) focused research on The Misrepresentation of American Sign Language and Deaf Culture in Mainstream Film Media; and Foss's (2014) Study on Constructing Hearing Loss or "Deaf Gain?" Voice, Agency, and Identity in Television's Representations of d/Deafness. Furthermore, this section will highlight the key points shared by the various authors, which will guide the content analysis and discussion.

Deaf Identity & Terminology

One of the main points scholars have emphasised in literature is that most Deaf people do not see themselves as 'disabled' and often take pride in their Deaf identity (Masterson, 2024; Wolfe-Webb, 2021; Krentz & Sanchez, 2021; Langbroek, 2023). According to Krentz and Sanchez (2021, p. 126), deaf people have "turned to representation as a means of empowerment to be recognised and understood." A necessary distinction is also made between the capitalised 'Deaf' versus the lowercase 'deaf'. Deaf, with a capital D, refers to individuals who are "pre-lingually deaf" and typically communicate in sign language as their first language (Wolfe-Webb, 2021, p.5). They identify as members of Deaf communities that are part of a "linguistic and cultural entity" (Avon, 2006, p. 189). The words "deaf" (with a lowercase d) and "hard of hearing" refer to anyone with varying levels of hearing loss (Chang and Golos, 2025, p. 11).

Sign Language as an official language

Sign Language (SL) is not a visual translation of English; it is its own language, with complex grammar, syntax, structure, and cultural significance (Hamilton and Egbert, 2024, p. 3). It can express every emotion and preposition, enabling users to "discuss any concrete or abstract topic as effectively and grammatically as speech" (Avon, 2006, p. 187). Studies have shown (Avon, 2006; Wolfe-Webb, 2021; Foss, 2014; Valentine, 2001; Krentz and Sanchez, 2021) that film depictions of SL fail to recognise this. Communication between d/Deaf and hearing characters in films also impacts messages about the use of sign language. Negative representations can reinforce the myth that deaf people cannot speak or that all deaf people use sign language.

Foss (2014, p. 441) notes that hearing characters often misuse ASL grammar when speaking and signing simultaneously. In her study of Deaf depictions on entertainment television, she proved this statement, using the TV show CSI as an example. In one scene, the hearing character Grissom signs and says, "I want to help you," using the direct, literal signs: "I-want-help-you.". However, in ASL, this message is conveyed through the sign "help" with movement. Additionally, Chang and Golos (2025, p.9) examined the portrayal of Deaf characters in Korean cinema. They commented on how the misrepresentation of Korean SL can negatively affect how Deaf adolescents view communicating through sign language. They gave the example that Deaf youth may believe that Deaf people should be able to understand spoken languages only through lip reading. Moreover, the ease and accuracy of lip-reading portrayed in cinema may explain why many people overestimate this ability as a communication strategy.

Models of Deafness

As mentioned previously, there are many different types of Deafness, but these can be categorised into two models (Chang and Golos, 2025; Wolfe-Webb, 2021; Foss, 2014). The first is the Medical model. Under this model, deafness is viewed as a deficiency, and it argues that Deaf individuals are dependent on hearing people. Furthermore, this model depicts Deaf individuals as having a disability that needs to be "fixed". It encourages integration into the hearing world, assisted by hearing aids or cochlear implants, to be considered 'normal' (Wolfe-Webb, 2021, p. 6). Foss (2014, p.443) argued that "the dominance of the Medical Model in the past has greatly restricted the Deaf community". These inaccurate representations have led to harmful, discriminatory and stereotypical views against DHH individuals and fuelled the failure to recognise Sign Language as an established language.

In contrast, the second model is the 'Cultural Model'. This model views Deafness as a cultural identity, not a disability. It highlights the strengths of Deaf individuals, sign language, and their community. Moreover, it promotes acceptance, pride, and empowerment within the Deaf community. Regarding film representation, Deaf characters are portrayed as confident and independent people who 'happen to be deaf.' Under the cultural model, hearing loss can be reappropriated as "Deaf Gain" instead of just "hearing loss" (Foss, 2014, p. 428). Langbroek (2023) conducted a study, 'Exploring d/Deaf and Disability Representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Here, she praised their film Eternals (2021), not only for introducing Marvel's first Deaf superhero, Makkari, played by Deaf actress Lauren Ridloff, but also for its emphasis on Deaf Gain. Langbroek explained that her narrative is not defined by her being deaf. Instead, "her deafness is just one of her many pieces and qualities" (p. 19).

Stereotypes

A stereotype is a harmful, oversimplified generalisation about a group. Deaf Studies have shown that the most common stereotypes of DHH characters on our screens are isolated, depressed, vulnerable and victimised (Chang and Golos, 2025; Wolfe-Webb, 2021; Masterson, 2024; McGuinness, 2023; Foss, 2014; Valentine, 2001; Krentz and Sanchez, 2021; Langbroek, 2023). These damaging stereotypes go with the Medical Model of Deafness. They perpetuate the "disabled body" as "inferior," threatening disability activism and the acceptance of people with disabilities as "whole" and capable of independence (Foss, 2014, p.438). Similarly, Krentz and Sanchez (2021, p.125) argue that societies sometimes interpret not speaking as a signal of "lower intelligence or of not being fully human".

In Chang and Golos's (2025) study of Korean films, their sample of movies typically portrayed Deaf characters as needing to be fixed and socially isolated due to their deafness. Lip reading was also noted as the primary form of communication in five out of six analysed movies. Furthermore, Deaf characters were overwhelmingly portrayed from a medical perspective, particularly as beings who need to become more like hearing people or be helped by hearing people. McGuinness (2023) also commented on how "a great quantity of recent films depict the DHH character as being depressed or isolated from their community" (p. 23). She gives an example of Bradley Cooper's A Star Is Born (2018), in which the main character is a musician whose career and life are threatened due to their hearing loss.

Narrative Tropes

A trope is a recurring element or device in storytelling, often used as a shorthand for a particular theme or character type. Deaf Studies have shown that the most common narrative tropes are Deaf characters in 'peril' (specifically women), 'perfect speaker', needing a 'fix' or being used as a 'dramatic device'. When a trope is applied to represent an entire community or, as McGuinness (2023, p.8) puts it, "Minority characters created to 'tick the box' for diversity", it diminishes individuals and leads to feelings of self-doubt. This impacts those who share that identity and affects those whose

understanding of the identity is shaped solely by these narrow representations (Wolfe-Webb, 2021, p. 16).

In Wolfe-Webb's (2021, p. 15) study on Deaf representation in mainstream film, she explains that the “perfect speaker” trope is evident in films when Deaf characters are praised for speaking well instead of using Sign Language. This leads the audience to believe that the primary goal of a Deaf person should be to talk. Similarly, the “perfect lip reader” can be seen when DHH characters can follow every conversation, especially without direct eye contact. Fictional narratives often misrepresent cochlear implants as a cure for deafness and provide inaccurate depictions of the implantation process. Contrary to film depictions, cochlear implants significantly improve hearing but do not restore it. Additionally, potential candidates undergo an extensive screening process followed by months of post-implantation therapy, which is also often overlooked (Foss, 2014, p. 439).

Deafness is also used as a dramatic device to heighten tensions and engage the audience's attention. In horror cinema, deaf characters often serve as plot devices; their peril is heightened due to their inability to hear imminent danger, which provokes a more profound fear in the audience. Similarly, they are also conceived as dramatically vulnerable, as seen in McGuinness's (2023) study on the horror Film Hush (2016). Often, films assume that Deaf characters cannot speak or have a voice; this leads to the character being ‘doubly disabled’ in a hearing society. Not only is the character contrived to be unable to sense danger, but also unable to communicate it readily to others (Valentine, 2001, p.720). Here is where the victim trope emerges. The silence associated with deaf characters is a storytelling choice made by hearing creators, not a reflection of real deaf experience. This silence is used to emphasise isolation or internal struggle, reinforcing the idea of the deaf person as being cut off from the world. Films also tend to burden deaf characters with extra tragedies or challenges, using their disability as a metaphor for perseverance or inner strength (Valentine, 2001, p. 720).

Film Casting and Production

The issue of casting non-deaf actors in d/Deaf roles has been a long-standing problem in the film industry. It creates a vicious cycle of “exclusion, limiting their opportunities to gain experience and exposure in the industry” (Langbroek, 2023, p. 17). Hamilton and Egbert (2024, p. 3) argue that casting producers should actively seek out deaf actors due to the “flawless facial expressions” they've gained from learning sign language. Studies also show that hearing actors portraying DHH characters often appear superficial or stereotypical. For example, Wolfe-Webb (2021, p. 16) refers to the slang term “cripping up,” which describes representations where abled people take on disabled roles. This leads to the perpetuation of stereotypes, as the actor feels the need to emphasise the stereotypical traits expected of a Deaf person.

‘The Hearing Gaze’

Similar to film theorist Laura Mulvey’s concept of the ‘Male Gaze’, which defines how women are often portrayed in film from a male, heterosexual perspective, where they are seen as passive objects for the pleasure of the male viewer, Hamilton and Egbert (2024) and Valentine (2010) speak about ‘The Hearing Gaze’. This describes how films often revolve around a hearing-centric narrative, regardless of whether DHH characters are present. It can be seen in the film's technical aspects and how DHH characters communicate. For example, a film can show a strong favour for its hearing audience if the camera angles cut off signs, or when representations are not captioned.

‘Communicative tools’ like the ‘inner voice’ of deaf characters, made audible by a hearing actor's voice-over, are another feature added so a hearing audience can understand the thoughts and motives of DHH characters. This inner voice emphasises the inwardness and social isolation of the character for a hearing audience, where only inner thoughts are heard (Valentine, 2001,p.721). According to Avon (2006, p. 190) and Foss (2014, p. 430), the 'hearing' centre of understanding can

also be seen when looking at film titles, e.g., Hear No Evil (1993), Dead Silence (1997), and Trapped in Silence (1999). These examples highlight the power struggle between deafness and hearing, and using titles with words like 'trapped' further reinforces the idea that deafness is a condition to be escaped from or cured of.

Moreover, 'The Hearing Gaze' can be seen in accessibility for obtaining films. Access to cinema viewings and movie releases plays a significant part in representation, as it shows which audience is being catered to. According to Wolfe-Webb (2021, p. 13), "theatres don't prioritise accessibility in their schedules and viewing options". They often "offer captioned screenings at inconvenient times, like weekdays or school hours, and use uncomfortable or ineffective technology like caption glasses". These limitations make it difficult for individuals and families to enjoy movies together. Even popular streaming platforms, like Netflix or Hulu, often fail to make many Deaf films accessible to the general hearing audience (Hamilton and Egbert, 2024). Ultimately, regardless of how "positive" or "accurate" a Deaf character or narrative may appear, if presented in formats inaccessible to Deaf audiences, such representations perpetuate exclusionary assumptions about whose experiences are valued both within and beyond the text (Krentz & Sanchez, 2021, p. 129).

Intersectionality & Diversity

An emerging theme across literature is the need for more intersectionality within Deaf characters in films (Wolfe-Webb, 2021; McGuinness, 2023; Foss, 2014; Valentine, 2001; Langbroek, 2023). Intersectionality is a framework that examines how different social categories, such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, overlap and shape one another. Studies show that the most common Deaf character to appear on our screens is a straight, white, older man. Female Deaf representation dominates the horror genre, which typically conforms to the "vulnerable, helpless victim" trope (McGuinness, 2023, p. 28; Valentine, 2001, p. 716). Additionally, when Deaf characters appear, they are often defined solely by their deafness, which conveys a limiting view of the multifaceted nature of d/Deaf individuals (Wolfe-Webb, 2021, p. 17). Only through diversity in the roles for d/Deaf actors will films help to counter stigmas about disabilities and promote mainstream acceptance of Deaf culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review outlined that Cultivation Theory offers a critical lens for understanding the long-term influence of media portrayals, particularly in shaping public perceptions of marginalised groups like the Deaf community. The historical overview of pre-21st-century depictions revealed the roots of many enduring stereotypes, and contemporary literature highlighted key areas to focus on when assessing representation in film. These insights collectively inform the analytical framework for this article, which aims to investigate how far 21st-century cinema has come, and how far it still needs to go, in offering respectful and accurate representations of Deaf individuals.

Methodology

This section outlines the research design, data collection and analysis methods, and the rationale behind these choices. Grounded in cultivation theory and guided by existing studies (Foss, 2014; Masterson, 2024; Chang & Golos, 2025), this research employed a textual analysis and cross-examination of 21st-century films to investigate how Deafness is represented.

Sample selection

An extensive study of all films from 2000 to 2024 that featured a DHH character, regardless of their importance to the movie's plot, was curated. This formed the initial sample to choose five main films to analyse in detail. Documentaries and animated films were not included in this list, as documentaries tend to provide a more accurate representation based on facts, and real human actors were also necessary for the study. Using Wikipedia, Google search engines and IMDb (refining search to keywords: 'Deaf', 'movie' and 'release date: January 1, 2000- December 31st 2024'), 161 films were

recorded. For practical reasons, this initial sample was too large and required refinement. This involved a colour coding system based on the two main deciding factors: films that had a lower IMDb Rating than 6.0 and when Deafness was present but not a significant plot element of the film. The most significant observation noted when coding the films was that the majority presented a family with a DHH child who played a minor/non-existent role within the plot. By excluding any film which met these criteria, the final sample to choose from was reduced to 70 films. A full list of all 161 films identified, together with genre classification, year of release, and exclusion coding, was compiled during the research process and is available from the author on request.

The final sample of films was also categorised by genre. Genre refers to classifying a group of films based on shared characteristics. It plays a crucial role in shaping how DHH characters are represented in films, as it influences the roles, traits, and dynamics that characters assume, often reflecting or subverting audience expectations based on the genre's conventions. The 70 films were broken up into five-year brackets, including 2000-2024, to obtain the five films that will be analysed in detail. To avoid sample bias, each film within each five-year bracket was numbered and entered into an online random generator to produce a single number. The corresponding film was then selected for that bracket. This process was repeated for the five-year brackets.

Choosing the final five films in this way allowed for valuable insight into whether Deaf representation in the last three brackets, covering the years: 2010-2014, 2015-2019, and 2020-2024, demonstrated progression compared to the first two brackets, covering the years 2000-2004 and 2005-2009. As a result of this process, the five films analysed are: 'Read My Lips' (2001), 'Sweet Nothing in My Ear' (2008), 'Listen to Your Heart' (2010), 'Sound of Metal' (2019) and CODA (2021). These films were accessed through streaming services, including Amazon Prime Video, Apple+, and YouTube.

Textual Analysis

To analyse each film, a questionnaire was completed on Excel and answered by the author while watching each film. The questionnaire was split into three sections (See tables 1, 2 & 3 in 'Results'). Section one analysed the contributions behind the scenes, including casting actors and production crews for the films. It asked if the actor chosen was d/Deaf, if any members of the production crew were d/Deaf or if any member of the Deaf community was consulted for authentic representation. Section two analysed how Deafness was represented in the character. Here, it investigated whether their Deafness defined their character or if they were multifaceted, if intersectionality was present (e.g., Black and Gay), or if they fell into the stereotypes above. It also analysed how the characters communicated via sign language, lip reading, written words, or verbally and whether they used a hearing aid or cochlear implant. Lastly, it examines the roles of DHH characters within the film, such as protagonist, antagonist, or side character, and how they behaved (either passively or with agency).

The final section of the questionnaire was about how the film's story was told, inspired by the 'Hearing Gaze' mentioned in 'Relevant Literature 2.3'. This section analysed whether Audism was present, and if any of the narrative tropes or models mentioned previously were applied. The use of CC/narration (or lack thereof) for both signed and spoken dialogue was recorded. Furthermore, moments where the film visually or sonically conveyed the Deaf perspective were recorded, such as muffled sound, high-pitched noise, visual storytelling techniques, or silence. Lastly, the film's title and age rating were also noted to determine if they were suitable for young deaf or hard-of-hearing (DHH) individuals.

Limitations

While this study's extensive methodology was designed to ensure rigour and reliability, followed by a great deal of care to minimise bias, some limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, while this study

supports its claims to have researched all the films released between January 1st, 2000, and December 31st, 2024, the author acknowledges that there may still be existing films that are not included. Secondly, only analysing five out of the initial 161 significantly limits the breadth of the analysis. Such a small sample cannot fully capture the diversity of Deaf representation across different periods, genres, cultures, and production contexts. As a result, the findings may not reflect broader trends or variations in how Deafness is portrayed in 21st-century cinema.

Results

The following section introduces the main data and findings obtained throughout this study. Above all, it is important to reiterate that these interpretations of the data come from a hearing person. This section briefly overviews the final sample of films spanning the 24-year time frame, followed by the results of the textual analysis for the chosen five films.

A few recurring storylines were evident from the brief plot summary following each film's name.

Category	**Examples**	**Count**
Deaf Discovery & Identity	*Sweet Nothing in My Ear* (2008); *Sound of Metal* (2019); *The Silent Child* (2017); *This Is Normal* (2013); *All the Silence* (2023)	5
Family Dynamics & CODA Experiences	*The Bélier Family* (2014); *Bori* (2018); *CODA* (2021); *Living in Two Worlds* (2024)	4
Romance Across Hearing/Deaf Boundaries	*Listen to Your Heart* (2010); *Wild Prairie Rose* (2016); *Isa Pa With Feelings* (2019); *Concerto for Abigail* (2024)	4
Misunderstood/Marginalised Deaf Characters	*Silenced* (2011); *Song of Silence* (2012); *The Tribe* (2014); *Akouse Me* (2022)	4
Thriller/Horror Survival, Deaf Protagonists	*The Seasoning House* (2012); *Hush* (2016); *Dawn of the Deaf* (2016); *A Quiet Place* series (2018 &	5

	2021); *Midnight* (2021)	
Teacher-Student Relationships	*The Miracle Worker* (2000); *Black* (2005); *Marie's Story* (2014); *The Silent Child* (2017)	4
Art, Music, and Expression	*Music Within* (2007); *Sign Gene* (2017); *Wonderstruck* (2017); *Dance Together* (2019)	4

Table 1: General Overview of the 70 films

This final sample also showed a significant global representation, including the USA, France, India, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, Iran, and Switzerland. The most common genre noted was drama, with 23 films, followed by Thriller, with 14 films. The least common genres were action and musicals, which only had four films. Avon's (2006) and Foss's (2014) analogies on how film titles reinforce the power struggle between silence and sound, as well as deafness and hearing, are also evident in the final sample. Words that referenced Deafness, such as Silence, Quiet, Ear, Sign, CODA or alluded to Deaf experiences, for example, film titles: Read My Lips (2001), Music Within (2007), If I Knew What You Said (2009), and The Way We Talk (2024), accounted for 25 films, making up 35.7% of the total list.

Results of Textual Analysis

Below are the results of the textual analysis completed while watching each of the five selected films.

Name	**IMDb Rating**	**Year**	**Genre**	**Actor DHH?**	**Production member DHH?**	**Any other DHH involved in the production**
Read My Lips	7.3	2001	Thriller/ Crime	No	No	No
Sweet Nothing in My Ear	6.6	2008	Drama	Yes	Yes	Yes
Listen to Your Heart	6.9	2010	Romance/ Drama	No	No	No
The Sound of Metal	7.7	2019	Drama/ Musical	No	Yes	Yes

CODA	8.0	2021	Coming of age/ Musical	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 2: Casting & Production

Name	**IMDb Rating**	**Year**	**Genre**	**Multi-faceted**	**Intersectionality**	**Stereotypes**	**Comm-unication**	**Hearing Aids present**	**Deaf character role**	**Character behaviour**
Read My Lips	7.3	2001	Thriller/ crime	Yes	No	Vulnerable/ Victimised	Lip reading/ hearing aid	yes	Protagonist	Has agency
Sweet Nothing in My Ear	6.6	2008	Drama	Yes	No	Angry Deaf person	Sign Language	In question	Protagonist	Has agency
Listen to Your Heart	6.9	2010	Drama/ romance	No	No	Isolation/ Victimised	Written /Lip Reads/ Sign Language	No*	Protagonist	Passive
The Sound of Metal	7.7	2019	Drama/ Musical	Yes	Yes	Isolated/ depressed	written/ Sign Language	No*	Protagonist	Aggressive
CODA	8.0	2021	Coming of age/ Musical	Yes	No	Dependent Deaf family	Sign Language	No	Side Character	Has agency

Table 3: Character Representation of Deafness

Name	IMDb Rating	Year	Genre	Deafness Role	*CC* Provided	Narrative Trope	Age Rating	Audism present	Film Title	The hearing Gaze
Read My Lips	7.3	2001	Thriller/ Crime	Central to the plot	No	"Woman in Peril" / "Dramatic Device"	R	yes	yes	No
Sweet Nothing in My Ear	6.6	2008	Drama	Central to the plot	Yes*	"In need of a fix"	PG	Yes	Yes	Yes
Listen to Your Heart	6.9	2010	Romance / Drama	Incidental	Yes*	"In need of a fix"	NR	Yes	Yes	Yes
The Sound of Metal	7.7	2019	Drama/ Musical	Central to the plot	No	"In need of a fix"	R	yes *	Yes	No
CODA	8.0	2021	Coming of age/ Musical	Central to the plot	No	"Hearing saviour"	PG-13	Yes	Yes	No

Table 4: Narrative & Storytelling of Deafness

One limitation observed with this coding framework above is that it does not fully accommodate the progression of character development. For instance, one of the questions asks whether a character uses a hearing aid; however, in several films, this is not a binary 'yes or no' but a decision made gradually over the course of the narrative. Similarly, regarding character behaviour, this is a quality that constantly changes as films progress.

Analysis and Discussion

The following section of this study will examine and critically analyse the findings obtained in the previous section in conjunction with George Gerbner's theoretical framework. Each of the five films will be discussed individually, assessing how the three categories of findings contribute to how deafness is represented. This section also highlights areas that align with previous literature and provide new information. Additionally, this study's limitations, mentioned previously, will be examined further.

Read My Lips (2001)

Read My Lips (translated from the original title, Sur mes lèvres) is a French film that tells the story of Carla, a lonely, hearing-impaired woman who is overworked and underappreciated as a secretary for a construction company, and Paul, an ex-convict who becomes Carla's assistant at work. The pair

develop an uncanny relationship, and Carla uses her lip-reading skills to help Paul rob a nightclub owner. This movie went on to be a massive success. According to IMDb, Read My Lips received nine Cesar nominations and three wins upon its release.

Casting and Production

Read My Lips lacks authenticity in its representation despite its critical acclaim. The film was produced by a fully hearing cast and crew, including the actress portraying Carla, Emmanuelle Devos, who is not Deaf or hard of hearing. Additionally, there is no record of any consultation with Deaf individuals or organisations during production, making it a clear example of Wolfe-Webb's (2021) term "cripping up". Devos had to perform to hearing expectations of what Deafness "looks like", reinforcing Wolfe-Webb's argument that such portrayals often exaggerate or simplify Deaf traits. This poor attempt and its effects are supported by George Gerbner's concepts of 'Mainstreaming'. Since the film reuses harmful stereotypes and inaccurate depictions seen in previous films, as seen in '2.2 Pre 21st Century Background', it contributes to the homogenisation of negative outlooks, as it doesn't accurately portray a deaf person.

Character Representation of Deafness

Carla's deafness is introduced immediately in the film's opening scene, where she puts her hearing aids in front of a mirror. Although her hearing impairment does not hinder her ability to work, we are introduced to a white, straight, and passive character whose life revolves around her work, suggesting a lack of complexity or multifaceted development. This presentation conforms to previously seen stereotypes, as noted in '2.3 Relevant Literature: Stereotypes,' such as the stereotype of the 'isolated, lonely' deaf person. This portrayal aligns with McGuinness's (2023) claim that recent films often depict DHH characters as emotionally or socially isolated.

The only other 'side' we see of Carla's character is a presumed concealed sexual desire. Out of the three times we are brought into Carla's house, two of the scenes are overtly sexualised. One scene shows her trying on high heels while naked, and the other scene shows her standing in front of the mirror wearing only Paul's unbuttoned shirt. These scenes not only sexualise her character but also reinforce the stereotype of the isolated Deaf individual who expresses intimacy only in private. Throughout the film, Carla's character adopts the "victim / vulnerable" stereotype and the "woman in peril" narrative trope. Not only is she a victim of bullying from her colleagues, but she is also a victim of both sexual and physical assault (she was attacked four times throughout the film's 1 hour and 55 minutes duration). Despite developing more agency by the end, these tropes define much of her character's arc.

Carla uses lip-reading and hearing aids to communicate, but her lip-reading ability is highly exaggerated, falling into the "perfect lip-reader" stereotype (Wolfe-Webb, 2021). This film presents many scenes in which Carla lip-reads full conversations from great distances, even when speakers are moving or are turned away from her. This reinforces Chang and Golos's (2025, p. 9) argument that the ease and accuracy of lip-reading presented in cinema can lead to people overestimating this ability to communicate. Moreover, this depiction of deafness may also align with George Gerbner's Concept of 'The Burden of Representation' and potentially promote the message to Deaf viewers that any DHH individual should be able to lip-read, in the first place, and as easily as Carla was showing it to be.

Narrative Framing and the 'Hearing Gaze'

The film effectively uses visual and sonic cues to convey the deaf perspective. The film uses a mixture of muffled/ silence to convey what Carla hears when she takes off her hearing aids. Additionally, it shows how loud music (in the nightclub and Paul's car radio) affects her hearing aids, causing them to ring with a high-pitched noise and causing her discomfort. However, it heavily aligns with the 'hearing gaze', as defined by Hamilton & Egbert (2024) and Valentine (2010). Carla's deafness is portrayed

more as a functional obstacle to be creatively exploited (i.e. her lip-reading helping a robbery) than as a rich cultural identity. Despite the film's limitations, Read My Lips ends on a slightly more empowering note. Carla's Deafness is eventually shown as a source of strength, a narrative shift aligning with Foss's (2014) concept of "Deaf Gain". Her successful solo actions in the robbery grant her agency, offering a departure from her previous passive depictions.

Sweet Nothing in My Ear (2008)

Sweet Nothing in My Ear is based on a 1998 play of the same name written by Stephen Sachs. This film tells the story, mainly through flashbacks during a custody hearing, of Laura, a deaf woman, and Dan, her hearing husband, who face a disagreement about giving their deaf son, Adam, a cochlear implant. Moreover, this film celebrates Deaf culture and Deaf Gain as seen in '2.3 Relevant Literature: Deaf Identity & Terminology and Models of Deafness' and confirms the need for deaf actors to play deaf roles.

Casting & Production

This film included Deaf individuals both in front of and behind the camera. All Deaf characters were portrayed by Deaf actors, including Marlee Matlin, Noah Valencia, Ed Waterstreet, and Phyllis Frelich (who was the first Deaf actor to win a Tony Award). A Deaf production consultant, Linda Bove, was also hired to ensure the film did justice to the Deaf community. Additionally, an interpreter aided in her communication with the cast and crew (Garibay and Slobodnik, 2021). She ensured sign language remained visible on screen and coached Jeff Daniels (Dan) in ASL. According to an interview with Desert Press in 2008, Matlin explained how, despite being deaf, she also relied heavily on Bove as she had never played a character who signed solely in American Sign Language (ASL). This reflects a conscious effort to respect linguistic and cultural differences in the film's portrayal of Deaf life.

Character representation of Deafness

Deafness is represented through several key characters in this film. In contrast to other films, this film depicts the hearing individual in the family as isolated, leading Dan to feel like the "evil hearing man". Laura is a fully developed, multifaceted character who exhibits agency, teaches at a Deaf school and maintains an active social life, enabling her character to embody 'Deaf Gain', directly countering many common stereotypes noted previously in '2.3 Relevant Literature: Stereotypes'. Her son, who turned deaf at the age of four, is presented as having an active and social lifestyle that is unaffected by his deafness. Laura's father, Max, is also instrumental in educating the audience about Deaf Pride and Deaf identity. This aligns with the Cultural Model of Deafness, emphasising that deafness is not a deficiency. Max also explains the difference between Deaf with a capital 'D' and lowercase d. This can be seen in '2.3 Relevant Literature: Deaf Identity & Terminology and Models of Deafness'. Furthermore, all the Deaf characters, and Dan, communicate exclusively through American Sign Language, sharing Hamilton and Egbert's (2024) assertion that ASL is an official language. The use of Deaf actors ensures these portrayals are grounded in real experience and avoids the "cripping up" criticism in both Read My Lips (2001) and Listen to Your Heart (2010).

Narrative Framing and 'The Hearing Gaze'

While the film promotes Deaf culture, it is framed mainly through the hearing father, Dan. His perspective of wanting a cochlear implant aligns with the Medical model of Deafness, resulting in the common narrative trope "in need of a fix". In Dan's plea to win back his child, his lawyer argues for the cochlear implant by citing low employment and literacy rates among Deaf individuals. These statistics shift blame onto the Deaf community rather than acknowledging systemic barriers like inaccessible job markets and misconceptions about Deaf capabilities. Foss's (2014) "Hearing gaze" is seen through how the film translates ASL. The film uses voice-overs instead of closed captions to make sign language scenes accessible to hearing viewers, which reduces Deaf autonomy in storytelling. However, a sign language interpreter was present during the courtroom scenes to sign for the Miller

family and, incidentally, any deaf viewers. Audism was also directly acknowledged. For example, Adam was called an “alien” by a hearing child, and Max recalls how his own father bound his hands to stop him from signing.

The Deaf involvement in this film was especially noticeable due to its detailed portrayal of everyday Deaf experiences. Visual cues replace auditory ones, such as flashing lights for doorbells and alarms, and all on-screen TV’s display captions. It also introduces captioning devices to highlight Deaf access to cinema. The film counters assumptions about Deaf people's relationship with music by showing characters experiencing sound through vibrations. Additionally, this film accurately depicts cochlear implant surgery compared to the poor attempt in Listen To Your Heart (2010). During a scene where the couple discuss the process of the surgery, the doctor explains that the implants don’t cure deafness, and extensive speech therapy is followed, and above all, when removed, their son is still a deaf child. These inclusions reflect George Gerbner’s concept of resonance, as they mirror the lived experiences of Deaf viewers (especially those within a mixed hearing family), strengthening relatability and cultural validation.

Despite its cultural strengths, the film falters in fully resolving the narrative conflict. Its failure to take a definitive stance on the cochlear implant debate leaves the audience potentially unsatisfied. While some may interpret this neutrality as a gesture of fairness, others may see it as a missed opportunity to advocate clearly for the Deaf cultural model.

Listen to Your Heart (2010)

Listen to Your Heart tells the equally heartbreaking and warming story of Danny, a singer-songwriter who falls in love with a deaf girl, Ariana, who inspires him to write songs.

Casting & Production

This film lacks authenticity in its representation. All the main cast and crew were hearing, including Alexia Rasmussen, who played Ariana. Furthermore, there is no record of any consultation with Deaf individuals or organisations during production to ensure Rasmussen’s portrayal of deafness was accurate. Like Read My Lips (2001), this film's lack of deaf involvement makes it a clear example of “cripping up” (Wolfe-Webb, 2021).

Character representation of Deafness

Ariana’s deafness is introduced in an audist manner. In the opening scene, Ariana and her mother go to a restaurant where Danny works. Her mother spoke for her, immediately depicting her as passive and dependent, conforming to Foss’s (2014) stereotypes. Her inability to speak until one hour into the film, due to a presumed embarrassment over her ‘deaf accent’, reflects the false assumption that Deaf people cannot talk and portrays silence as a metaphor for isolation (Valentine, 2001). It also risks confirming Krentz and Sanchez's (2021, p. 125) argument that societies sometimes interpret not speaking as a signal of “lower intelligence or not being fully human.”

Ariana is also portrayed as socially isolated/ lonely. Before Ariana met Danny, she was extremely sheltered from society. At the character's age of twenty-one, she had never drunk alcohol, had never had sex, did not own a phone, nor knew how to drive a car. The background of this character is a very damaging and inaccurate portrayal that does not reflect the multifaceted lives that Deaf people live. Her communication shifts from writing and lip-reading to sign language. Ariana claims her perfect lip-reading skills are due to mainstream schooling (as per her mother's request). Early scenes include an interpreter for Danny (and subsequently as a “hearing gaze” tool for the intended hearing audience), but he unrealistically learns sign language seemingly overnight. This depiction aligns with studies in ‘2.3 Relevant Literature; Sign Language’, where cinema's depiction of sign language fails to recognise its complex grammar, syntax, structure, and cultural significance. Sign language is also

spoken over or cut from the frame, prioritising the hearing audience over accurate Deaf representation.

Narrative Framing & 'The Hearing Gaze'

It's evident in this film that Ariana's deafness is used as a "dramatic device" to heighten tensions and engage the audience's attention. For example, in one scene, Arianna is shown as vulnerable, being nearly sexually assaulted, aligning with Valentine's (2001) "doubly disabled" trope. Moreover, Danny's character develops an incurable brain cancer, which ends in his untimely death. This narrative choice aligns with Valentine's study, in which films often burden deaf characters with additional tragedies or challenges, using their disability as a metaphor for perseverance or inner strength. Above all, the film frames her deafness as something to be "fixed", presenting cochlear implants as a cure, aligning with the 'Medical Model' of Deafness. The film's portrayal of the cochlear implant surgery process was also highly questionable. Ariana received a letter from the "Manhattan School for the Deaf" encouraging her to get the surgery. However, becoming eligible for a cochlear implant is a long and complicated process, followed by months of rehabilitation training, which this film completely undermines. Her sudden transformation post-surgery (shown by her ability to speak and hear perfectly), fast-tracked without rehab, perpetuates harmful myths about cochlear implants. The film ultimately presents hearing as the key to Ariana's success, ending with her acceptance to music school.

Sound of Metal (2019)

Sound of Metal follows a former addict and heavy metal drummer named Ruben, who loses his hearing and enters a deaf community for addicts to adapt to an entirely new way of life. This film stands out from the rest of the sample because it explores the transition from hearing to deafness.

Casting & Production

While directed by hearing filmmaker Darius Marder, Sound of Metal included significant Deaf involvement during production. ASL coach Jeremy Lee Stone was a creative co-director for all Deaf-related aspects. Marder intentionally partnered with Stone to authentically represent Deaf culture, not just ASL (Little White Lies, 2021). This film's diverse characters are played mainly by deaf actors, except for Riz Ahmed (Ruben) and Paul Raci. Raci played a deafened alcohol counsellor who plays a key role in rehabilitating Ruben into his new Deaf life. Although Raci is a hearing man, he is also a CODA (Child of Deaf Adults) whose first language is ASL (Lopez, 2020), bringing authenticity to the role. While Ahmed's casting was debated, in an interview with The Irish Independent, Ahmed defended his position as a hearing man taking on a deaf role:

> "My character is hearing who experiences deaf culture for the first time in the film, and so, to portray that authentically, Darius wanted to cast a hearing actor who's from hearing culture, who is experiencing deaf culture for the first time" (Harding, 2021).

Character representation of Deafness

The protagonist, Ruben, is a complex and multifaceted character: a recovering heroin addict, a successful musician, a person with a troubled family history, and a man in love, portraying a rich, layered personality not solely defined by his deafness. He is also British-Pakistani, making him the only Deaf protagonist of colour within this study's sample. This multifaceted nature of Ruben aligns with the multidimensional nature of the Deaf community as considered in '2. 3 Relevant literature.' After Ruben lost his hearing, he initially communicated using written methods or speech-to-text systems. His progression into sign language is gradual and realistic, shown through scenes of learning ASL from peers and at a school for Deaf children. Unlike other films in the sample, sign language is not instantaneously mastered, reflecting its linguistic complexity. The film avoids reducing deafness to a single trait and shows Ruben's agency, especially in choosing to undergo cochlear implant surgery. However, that decision leads to conflict with the Deaf community, where deafness is seen as a valued identity, not a disability, aligning with the Cultural model of Deafness.

Narrative Framing & 'The Hearing Gaze'

Sound of Metal resists the "Hearing Gaze" for most of its runtime. Sign language is deliberately left uncaptioned for the hearing audience, aligning them with Ruben's initial disorientation. Although this film's positives outweigh its negatives, it does fall into common stereotypes: isolation & depression and narrative tropes, "in need of a fix", ultimately portraying deafness as a life-ending and career-threatening condition. Early on in the film, after Ruben loses his hearing, he exclaims to his girlfriend, Lou, that he needs "a gun in his mouth." This response sends a harrowing message that deaf people are better off dead than trying to live within a predominantly hearing world. This theme of isolation is also seen after Ruben gets his presumed fix - a cochlear implant. In one of the final scenes, Ruben is at Lou's father's birthday party. Here, Ruben is seen struggling to adapt to the new distorted voices around him and opts to stand away from everyone in silence.

This film presents a realistic portrayal of the cochlear implant process and its cost. It follows Ruben from his initial hearing test to the implant's activation, making it clear from the beginning that his lost hearing won't return. Unlike Listen to Your Heart (2010), which glosses over surgery, Sound of Metal includes scenes of the invasive procedure (i.e. footage of the doctors drilling a hole in "Ruben's" ear canal to insert the implant), the four-week silent recovery, and the adjustment period that follows. Above all, the film best conveys the deaf perspective visually and sonically. Ruben's experience is portrayed using high-pitched ringing, muffled tones, and distorted noises, immersing the viewer in his shifting auditory world. Post-implant, these unsettling sounds continue, adding a new set of static, metallic, and robotic sounds, rejecting the idea of a "cure" and showing his ongoing struggle. The film also prioritises accessibility for DHH audiences through detailed captions like [ringing intensified], [insects trilling], and [muffled sound].

Sound of Metal goes beyond tokenism by embedding Deaf perspectives into every layer of storytelling, from sound design to character development to casting. It demonstrates good practice in inclusive filmmaking and resonates deeply with Deaf viewers, amplifying the impact through George Gerbner's concept of Resonance and the "double dose" effect (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

CODA (2021)

CODA is an English-language remake of the 2014 French-Belgian film La Famille Bélier, which notably cast hearing actors in Deaf roles, a contrast that underscores the progress in authentic casting that CODA represents. This film tells the story of Ruby Rossi, a child of deaf adults (CODA) who struggles to balance helping her family's fishing business and pursuing her aspirations to become a singer. This film was monumental for accurate Deaf representation and elevating Deaf talent, winning three Academy Awards, with Troy Kotsur becoming the first Deaf male actor to win an Oscar.

Casting & Production

While directed by a hearing filmmaker, Sian Heder, CODA included significant Deaf involvement in casting and production. The Deaf Rossi family were all played by deaf actors: Marlee Matlin, mother, Troy Kotsur, father, and Daniel Durant, brother. However, Emilia Jones, who plays Ruby, is not a CODA, sparking debate on authentic representation. Furthermore, this is Matlin's second appearance in this study, playing the 'deaf mother role' in Sweet Nothing in My Ear thirteen years earlier. This also sparks debate about why we aren't seeing a more diverse range of deaf actors.

Alexandria Wailes (an American deaf actress, director, and educator) and Anne Tomasetti (Sign Language Consultant) served as the film's Directors of American Sign Language (ASL), who worked closely with Heder to ensure the film's extensive ASL dialogue was accurate and to choreograph signing that fit the screen (Andrew, 2022). In a 2021 interview with The Los Angeles Times, Wailes and Tomasetti highlighted the importance of Deaf involvement in CODA's production. They researched local Deaf culture in Massachusetts, recognising the diversity of sign language

dialects, and consulted Boston's Deaf community for accurate signs, such as those for "crab" or "lobster" (Kaufman, 2021). They also tested fishing gloves to ensure signs remained visible. Director Heder later told CNN how grateful she was for their input, noting how they rearranged the Rossi family's living room on set to reflect a realistic Deaf home, positioning furniture in a circle for clear visual communication (Andrew, 2022).

Character representation of Deafness

CODA presents its deaf characters as multifaceted people who communicate exclusively through American Sign Language. Ruby's parents (Frank and Jackie) and brother (Leo) are portrayed as fully developed, hardworking individuals with jobs, sexual relationships, ambitions, and emotional complexity. However, Jackie has slow character development. Early in the film, Ruby tells her mother she must leave the house. This sends a message to the viewer that Jackie is isolated at home and isn't capable of working in the "real world" like her husband and son. This also perpetuates a gender stereotype that women are less capable than men. Leo faces the most audism in the film, including being ripped off by a fishmonger who gives a better quota to a hearing man, knowing Leo can't negotiate. He's also mocked and called a "freak" by a hearing man in a bar, aligning with the 'victim stereotype' mentioned in '2.3 Relevant Literature'.

Narrative Framing & 'The Hearing Gaze'

CODA resists the "Hearing Gaze" and does not include closed captions over any Sign Language, leaving the hearing audience at a loss for what is being said. Like the Rossi family, the hearing audience relies solely on Ruby to translate for them. As the film progresses, this responsibility takes a toll on Ruby and prevents her from living her life. George Gerbner's 'Burden of Representation', as seen in '2.1 Cultivation Theory', can be applied to Ruby's character as she suffers from being the primary representative for her diverse family. Other CODAs watching this film could also potentially relate to Ruby's feelings, as supported by Gerbner's term 'Resonance'.

Like Sweet Nothing in My Ear (2008), it also shows the more minor details and nuances within Deaf day-to-day lives, such as lights flashing instead of alarms ringing or closed captions shown on the TV in the background. Another comparison between these two films is that both the hearing characters, Dan and Ruby, sometimes feel like the 'outsiders' in their own homes because they can hear. However, CODA's focus on Ruby's perspective presents her as a "Hearing Saviour," suggesting her deaf family depends on her, undermining their earlier portrayal as independent. Ruby's desire to leave for college in Berkeley also implies that her family isn't worth staying for. Furthermore, Ruby is also shown as a lifelong victim of bullying, from starting school with a "deaf voice" to constantly having to defend her family (further highlighting Gerbner's concept of the Burden of Representation).

Lastly, in CODA's final scenes, the audience briefly experiences the world through the deaf characters' eyes. At Ruby's recital, her family's offbeat reactions highlight their reliance on visual cues, for example, delayed applause. Halfway through Ruby's performance, the sound cuts, allowing viewers to gain their perspective. This powerful moment reinforced the family's unwavering support, regardless of their ability to hear her. The film ends on a heartfelt note as Frank asks Ruby to sing again, feeling the vibrations through her throat. This emotional and touching scene ends the film on a positive note.

Summary

The findings presented across casting, character representation, and narrative frameworks reflect a complex and uneven landscape of Deaf representation in 21st-century film. While recent works like CODA and Sound of Metal indicate progress, showcasing Deaf actors, production involvement, and more authentic portrayals, earlier and even some contemporary films continue to rely on reductive tropes such as "in need of a fix" or the "hearing saviour." Authentic casting and behind-the-scenes

representation correlate strongly with more empowered, multi-faceted Deaf characters, yet these remain inconsistently applied. Most films still exhibit signs of audism, the hearing gaze, and minimal intersectionality, undermining efforts toward inclusive storytelling. These patterns suggest that while there is growing recognition of Deaf culture and identity in cinema, substantial gaps remain, particularly in dismantling stereotypes and introducing intersectionality.

Limitations

In addition to the limitations mentioned previously, despite the strengths of this analysis, another limitation may impact the interpretation of the findings. This is regarding audience reception. This study has no audience reception component beyond the IMDb rating threshold of 6.0 and above. This study focuses solely on the films, rather than on how audiences, particularly Deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, received or interpreted these portrayals. As such, it is difficult to determine whether the representations examined were perceived as authentic, respectful, or potentially harmful by those they depict. Nevertheless, this study's focused approach offers an in-depth, nuanced examination of each selected film.

Conclusion

This article investigated how Deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) individuals are represented in 21st-century film, using George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory as a theoretical framework. This framework proved successful in showing how representation on screen matters, not only for the perceptions of the broader hearing public but also for Deaf audiences whose realities may be reflected or distorted through film. Gerbner's concepts of Symbolic Annihilation, Mainstreaming, Resonance, and the Burden of Representation remain highly relevant. Through a detailed textual analysis of five selected films: Read My Lips (2001), Sweet Nothing in My Ear (2008), Listen to Your Heart (2010), Sound of Metal (2019), and CODA (2021), it has become evident that the film industry has progressed over the last twenty-four years. More recent films such as CODA and Sound of Metal stand out for their multifaceted Deaf characters, meaningful involvement of Deaf professionals in production, and efforts to centre Deaf cultural identity. This is in significant contrast to earlier films studied, Read My Lips and Listen to Your Heart, which relied on reductive tropes such as portraying Deaf characters as isolated, in need of fixing, or dependent on hearing individuals, reinforcing the Medical Model and limiting Deaf characters to plot devices or symbols of tragedy.

The study also highlighted an ongoing lack of intersectionality. Despite the growing recognition of Deaf culture, most on-screen Deaf characters remain white, heterosexual, and male. Additionally, the film's age ratings also highlight an area for concern as all of them require parental guidance and deal with adult themes such as violence, addiction or sex. With Gerbner's framework in mind, young children must be exposed to positive media representations of disability. Moreover, the findings suggest that genre plays a substantial role in shaping how Deafness is portrayed, with horror films often casting Deaf women as silent, endangered figures and dramas typically framing Deaf characters as emotionally or socially isolated. This research expands on the narrative and character-focused analysis of existing literature by engaging with the aesthetic and formal dimensions of 21st-century films dealing with DHH characters, including sound design, cinematography, and affect.

Furthermore, the films studied offered new insight, such as how characters became Deaf. For example, in Read My Lips (2001), the Deaf protagonist was born hard of hearing, in Listen to Your Heart (2010), they were born hearing but became Deaf after suffering from Meningitis and in Sound of Metal (2019), the deaf protagonist was born hearing, but lost it due to an autoimmune disease or from constant exposure to loud noise. This point is worth noting as it broadens society's knowledge of DHH individuals. While limited by its small sample size and absence of direct audience reception data, this research affirms that meaningful representation is not just about visibility but agency, authenticity, and respect. Filmmakers must move beyond tokenism to embrace Deaf-led storytelling

to ensure the film industry does not fall back on harmful stereotypes and maintain its positive progression. This requires authentic casting, diverse narratives, and inclusive production practices that reflect the richness of Deaf culture. Only then can film serve as a medium of empowerment rather than marginalisation.

Lastly, this study also provides a foundation upon which future research can be built. This may involve carrying out a study with the same research question (examining how DHH individuals are represented in 21st-century film) but focusing on audience reception studies through interviews with Deaf/HOH individuals regarding how they interpret and respond to Deaf characters and narratives. Another area is to focus on how Deaf characters and cultures are represented in newer media forms, such as social media, to reflect a more contemporary society. Lastly, this study offers the opportunity to conduct a Comparative Analysis of Deaf remakes, like CODA (2021), with their original versions (La Famille Bélier, 2014) to examine shifts in authenticity and inclusivity.

Word count: 11,423 words (excluding abstract, keywords and references)

References

Andrew, S. (2022) 'Best picture winner 'CODA' is just one recent film influenced by deaf creators who are changing the industry', *CNN*. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/28/entertainment/deaf-film-representation-coda-best-picture-oscars-cec/index.html.

Avon, A. (2006) 'Watching films, learning language, experiencing culture: An account of deaf culture through history and popular films', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 39(2), pp. 185–204. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-5931.2006.00228.x.

Baynton, D. C. (1996) 'Foreigners in their own land: Community', in *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 15–36.

Bjørnsen, G. and Knudsen, A. G. (2016) 'Burdens of representation', in *Becoming a Journalist: Journalism Education in the Nordic Countries*, pp. 205–222.

Chang, A. and Golos, D. (2025) 'Portrayal of deaf characters in Korean movies', *The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education,* 30(3), pp. 372–383. doi: 10.1093/jdsade/enaf003.

Foss, K. A. (2014) 'Constructing hearing loss or "Deaf Gain?" Voice, agency, and identity in television's representations of d/Deafness', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 31(5), pp. 426–447. doi: 10.1080/15295036.2014.968603.

Garibay, C. and Slobodnik, S. (2021) 'Hidden gem 'Sweet Nothing in My Ear' (2008)', *The Daily Illini*. Available at: https://dailyillini.com/uncategorized/2021/04/06/hidden-gem-sweet-nothing-in-my-ear-2008/.

Gerbner, G. (1972) 'Violence in television drama: Trends and symbolic functions', in G. A. Comstock and E. Rubinstein (eds.) *Television and Social Behavior. Vol. 1: Content and Control*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, pp. 28–187.

Gerbner, G. (1996) 'The hidden side of TV violence', in *Invisible Crises: What Conglomerate Control of Media Means for America and the World*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, pp. 27–34.

Gerbner, G. et al. (1980) 'The “mainstreaming” of America: Violence profile no. 11', *Journal of Communication*, 30(3), pp. 10–29. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.1980.tb01987.x.

Gerbner, G. (1979) 'Television's influence on values and behaviour', *Massacommunicatie*, 7(6), pp. 215–222.

Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M. and Signorielli, N. (1986) 'Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process', in *Perspectives on Media Effects*, pp. 17–40.

Hamilton, K. M. and Egbert, L. (2024) 'The misrepresentation of American Sign Language and deaf culture in mainstream film media: A call for inclusive representation', *Global Insight: A Journal of Critical Human Science and Culture*, 4(1), pp. 1–9. doi: 10.32855/globalinsight.2024.001.

Harding, L. (2021) 'Riz Ahmed explains his casting in deaf role in Oscar-nominated *Sound of Metal*', *Irish Independent*, 6 April. Available at: https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/movies/riz-ahmed-explains-his-casting-in-deaf-role-in-oscar-nominated-sound-of-metal/40279474.html.

IMDb (no date) 'Feature film, released of 2000-01-01 (sorted by popularity ascending)', *IMDb*. Available at: https://www.imdb.com/search/title/?title_type=feature&release_date=2000-01-01.

Irish Deaf Society (2024) 'About Irish Deaf Society'. Available at: https://www.irishdeafsociety.ie/about/.

Kaufman, A. (2021) 'How Sundance hit ‘CODA’ centred Deaf performers on set', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 August. Available at: https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2021-08-13/coda-film-deaf-sign-language-hollywood.

Klein, H. and Shiffman, K. S. (2009) 'Underrepresentation and symbolic annihilation of socially disenfranchised groups (“out groups”) in animated cartoons', *Howard Journal of Communications*, 20(1), pp. 55–72. doi: 10.1080/10646170802665208.

Krentz, C. and Sanchez, R. (2021) ‘How representation matters’, *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 15(2), pp. 125–132. doi: 10.3828/jlcds.2021.10.

Labeeb, S. (1985) ‘TV Planning in Gulf States. Riyadh, Gulf TV System’. *Communication and Its Contemporary Theories.*3, p.11.

Langbroek, S. (2023) *Abandoned Stereotypes and Persisting Tropes: Exploring d/Deaf and Disability Representation in Phase Three and Phase Four of the Marvel Cinematic Universe*. Thesis. Iowa State University.

Little White Lies (2021) 'Darius Marder: “I wanted to show and capture deaf culture”'. Available at: https://lwlies.com/interviews/darius-marder-sound-of-metal/.

Lopez, K. (2020) *IndieWire*, 8 December. Available at: https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/sound-of-metal-paul-raci-1234598013/.

Masterson, R. (2024) *Signing on Screen: Exploring Deaf Narratives in Film*. Thesis. State University of New York. Available at:

https://soar.suny.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.12648/15016/Masterson_Honors.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

McGuinness, C. (2023) Does a Picture Speak a Thousand Words? The Representation of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Cinema. *Dissertation*. Institute of Art, Design and Technology. pp. 1-45 Available at: https://onshow.iadt.ie/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2023/04/Caitriona-McGuinness_Thesis-1.pdf.

McQuail, D. (2010) *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. 6th edn. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Morgan, M. and Shanahan, J. (2010) 'The state of cultivation', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 54(2), pp. 337–355. doi: 10.1080/08838151003735018.

Mosharafa, E. (2015) 'All you need to know about: The cultivation theory', *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: A Arts & Humanities – Psychology*, 15(8), pp. 1–17. Available at: All you Need to Know About: The Cultivation Theory

Power, D. (2006) 'Googling "deaf": Deafness in the world's English-language press', *American Annals of the Deaf*, 151(5), pp. 513–518. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/26234413.

Press, A. (2008) ''Sweet Nothing' is a test for actors', *Deseret News*. Available at: https://www.deseret.com/2008/4/19/20082932/sweet-nothing-is-test-for-actors/.

Safran, S. P. (1998) 'The first century of disability portrayal in film', *The Journal of Special Education*, 31(4), pp. 467–479. doi: 10.1177/002246699803100404.

Schuchman, J. S. (1988) 'The silent movie era', in *Hollywood Speaks: Deafness and the Film Entertainment Industry*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 20–42.

Schuchman, J. S. (2004) 'The silent film era: Silent films, NAD films, and the Deaf community's response', *Sign Language Studies*, 4(3), pp. 231–238. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/26190747.

Shanahan, J. and Morgan, M. (1999) *Television and Its Viewers: Cultivation Research and Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shrum, J. (2001) 'Mainstreaming, resonance, and impersonal impact: Testing moderators of the cultivation effect for estimates of crime risk', *Human Communication Research*, 27(2), pp. 187–215. doi: 10.1093/hcr/27.2.187.

Tuchman, G. (1978) 'Introduction: The symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media', in G. Tuchman, A. K. Daniels and J. Benét (eds.) *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 3–38.

Valentine, J. (2001) 'Disabled discourse: Hearing accounts of deafness constructed through Japanese television and film', *Disability & Society*, 16(5), pp. 707–727. doi: 10.1080/09687590120070088.

Wolfe-Webb, M. (2021) *Deaf Representation in Mainstream Film: How a Community Should Be Portrayed*. Thesis. Western Oregon University. Available at: https://wou.omeka.net/s/repository/media/4789.

Filmography

Children of a Lesser God (1986) Directed by Randa Haines [Film]. USA: Paramount Pictures.

CODA (2021) Directed by Sian Heder [Film]. USA/France/Canada: Vendôme Pictures; Pathé; Apple Original Films.

Johnny Belinda (1948) Directed by Jean Negulesco [Film]. USA: Warner Bros.

Listen to Your Heart (2010) Directed by Matt Thompson [Film]. USA: Gravitas Ventures.

Read My Lips (2001) Directed by Jacques Audiard [Film]. France: Pathé Films.

Sound of Metal (2019) Directed by Darius Marder [Film]. USA: Caviar; Flat 7 Films; Amazon Studios.

Sweet Nothing in My Ear (2008) Directed by Joseph Sargent [Film]. USA: Hallmark Hall of Fame Productions; CBS.