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## **Deaf Representation in Mainstream Film: How a community should be portrayed**

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# **Deaf Representation in Mainstream Film:**

**How a community should be portrayed**

**By:  
McKenzie Wolfe-Webb**

**An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for Graduation from the  
Western Oregon University Honors Program**

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## **Abstract**

By portraying sign language and Deaf culture in mainstream films, movies impact the social understanding of this marginalized identity. Showing respect for Deaf people and their culture through improved portrayals and consulting Deaf people during the production process is forever a learning process. Most people get their knowledge of this community through mainstream media, which means that all hearing people could benefit from accurate representations of Deaf culture in film. Portrayals often include sign language and Deaf characters to add intrigue without consultation and choose to exaggerate Deaf tropes of disability without including their cultural behavior, and these overlooked details need to be addressed by hearing and Deaf audiences. By highlighting a minority group, and its language, it is crucial to employ and include Deaf Talent in every step of production. Pointing out these shortcomings can allow for more accountability in future films. Compiling the limited research that currently exists on media presentations of Deaf people and analyzing existing representations will help all people advocate for more authentic portrayals going forward. Research proves that there are specific expectations of how Deafness should be represented, and this collective work will serve to identify those discrepancies and connect them with easily identifiable films with largely hearing audiences. While those involved in the Deaf community are acutely aware of the inaccuracies in the media, there are very few instances where this research has been grouped and presented to hearing audiences with limited backgrounds in Deaf culture.

## **Introduction**

Even if we are watching something purely for entertainment value, the information we view affects our understanding of our world. Mainstream media holds tremendous power over societal expectations of communities, especially when marginalized. If we want individuals to become more informed and unbiased, that work needs to happen in film. That foundation needs to be supported by an overarching understanding of the vocabulary that affects Deaf lives, and background into the connections that Deaf culture has to the film industry. Analysis of portrayals in films that are broadly recognized by large audiences, and have been discussed by hearing and Deaf critics alike, allow us to pinpoint what needs improvement. Compiling multiple films and perspectives in one place allows us to more clearly recognize the recurring flaws in mainstream portrayals. A lack of consultation and Deaf talent is prevalent, leading to inaccuracies in the representation of the Deaf experience. Sign language and Deafness is utilized for intrigue rather than treated with the respect it deserves, misleading hearing audiences on the rich culture of the Deaf community. Having that base knowledge of accurate terminology and cultural significance of film for Deaf individuals and those who use sign language is necessary for future progress in representation, and to make educated decisions on which media to devote viewership towards. When an audience is informed and better recognizes marginalized communities, it allows a larger force to demand accountability and respect in future productions.

## Terminology that Impacts Perspective

### **Capitalization and Meaning**

Whenever you acknowledge and analyze a community, it is crucial to understand the language that should be used and the background context that has framed it. One piece is the difference between Deaf and deaf. These actually hold different meanings in the Deaf community. The use of capitalized Deaf concerns the community and culture and positive feelings of Deafness. It often, but not always, identifies a person that became Deaf before learning a spoken language. This is a proud symbol and identity with big “D” Deaf. Using deaf as a lowercase means the actual symptom, and can be used by people who feel less attached to the community and culture, but still might have a varying level of hearing. Often, this term is used by people who become deaf after being able to speak, and hear for a fairly significant amount of years. This can lead to less acceptance and understanding of the Deaf community, more reliance on hearing aids or cochlear implants, and effort to stay connected in the hearing world. Nonprofit organization SignHealth explains this concept, stating,

The word deaf is used to describe or identify anyone who has a severe hearing problem. Sometimes it is used to refer to people who are severely hard of hearing too. We use Deaf with a capital D to refer to people who have been deaf all their lives, or since before they started to learn to talk. They are pre-lingually deaf. It is an important distinction, because Deaf people tend to communicate in sign language as their first language. For most Deaf people English is a second language, and understanding complicated messages in English can be a problem. There is a very strong and close Deaf community with its own culture and sense of identity, based

on a shared language. (“What Is the Difference between Deaf and Deaf?,” n.d.)

It is important to note this difference.

### **Disability in Perspective**

Disabled is another word that carries a lot of emotion and background. The American Disability Act will provide accommodations to individuals that need them, provided they have a registered disability. However, the language used is limiting, detailing “An individual with a disability is a person who: Has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; Has a record of such an impairment; or is regarded as having such an impairment” (ADA, 1990). This description isn’t always how a Deaf person perceives themselves. As I explained with Deaf versus deaf, Deafness is often a valued identity that a person carries, and labeling it as a disability and something that impairs their ability can be frustrating and ableist. It assumes the level of capability that a person has, and can allow for stereotypes about their experiences, when that person is whole and fully capable. The issue doesn’t lie with the individual, but within how our society was shaped. Some research argues “Our ethical standards for the majority's treatment of Deaf people depend, not surprisingly, on whether our representation of the Deaf-World is that of a disability group on the one hand or an ethnic group on the other” (Lane, 2005). Treatment and understanding lies in the group’s expectations.

A great explanation of this is a story I heard from a teacher in high school, about a society that had only shorter people in the town. They built everything around this norm, so doors and handles were shorter, cupboards were close to ground; everything was built for ease of the people that lived there. However, some tall people arrived, and realized that it was



hard for them to get around in their daily lives, because everything wasn't built to allow them equal access. They had to create specific accommodations to allow them to integrate "normally" into society. This is what it is like for Deaf people, for people who utilize wheelchairs, for many other minorities and communities. While it would seem absurd to our society to label "tall" as a disability, these other groups feel the same way. The only reason they are limited in their daily lives, is because our society hasn't been built to equally include them. This difference is highlighted in this research, "Many scholars in disability studies describe a medical model of disability that is part of the general biomedical approach. In this model, disability is considered an entirely physical occurrence, and being disabled is a negative that can only be made better if the disability is cured and the person is made "normal." Many disability rights advocates reject this, and promote a social model in which disability is a difference - neither a good nor bad trait." (Disabled World, 2019). In this way, disability holds multiple definitions depending on approach.

Because it is built into our society and a recognizable issue, there is power and strength in numbers. People can find power in owning this label. If people proudly hold the label and show the multifaceted experiences of people with a disability, it takes the stigma and barriers away. People are more close to those who might identify as having a disability, and usually less likely to stereotype their experiences if they've seen more variety. Understanding this perspective, some are moving away from the use of "Disability", and moving towards "people with limited or different ability". This includes the terminology of accessible, as in accessible parking spots or ramps. A ramp isn't for "disabled" people, it is simply accessible for all to use. Some are embracing the term and using it to gain

understanding and allow for more normalized treatment, and that needs to be recognized as well. In most situations, it can be left to the person holding the identity to decide what labels they want to use, and it's better to ask than prescribe for people.

### **Identities and Intersectionality**

Growth and change takes place over time, but we as a society want to make sure that we are allowing all individuals to take power over their circumstances, and claim their identities however they choose. As terms change, we can see a variety of ways that people label and express themselves. It is important to ask how each individual wants to be addressed, and to not take one person's individual experiences as a blanket understanding for all people with that identity. Some people might claim and find power in identifying as Disabled, and we need to accept that and allow them to decide that for themselves. Correcting someone on how they should identify is never your place.

Similarly, someone can find power and community in identifying as Deaf. They also might decide to say hearing-impaired, hearing loss, deaf, or deaf-mute. These are terms we shouldn't use to address any Deaf individual unless they explicitly identify as that term, and implore you to identify them as such. Otherwise, the widely accepted term is Deaf. Because of the constantly changing vernacular, critics and resources about the movies I review, as well as the movies themselves, might use outdated or incorrect terminology. While I will strive to use the most accepted terms available in my own writing, I acknowledge when other terms are used, and the significance of that within other sources throughout this thesis. It is important to recognize these terms and how they provide context, despite their derogatory nature in some uses.

As we acknowledge identities, intersectionality should be addressed. Within each person's life experience, they have many aspects about themselves that affect how they view the world, and in turn how the world views them. These are often ever-changing as you understand yourself and express them, and different identities might feel more salient at times. Your gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, ability, and a multitude of other aspects can be part of your identities, and intersectionality describes how they might overlap and affect your life. As a Deaf woman, you might have a vastly different experience than a hearing man might. This difference in experience cannot usually be pointed to one singular identity. Intersectionality highlights that all identities you hold have some effect on your life experience, and cannot be wholly separated from each other. I am a white, cis, hearing woman, and those identities together shape my experience differently than what other women might experience. Having these privileges means that I can only speak on the experiences I have, and must rely on and share others' experiences as members of the Deaf community to fully explain the accuracy of these films. While I have learned some as a hearing person, I am still unable to truly understand how others have been affected by these media representations. My argument stands as a hearing person hoping to help gather resources and inform other hearing individuals of the more widely recognized expectations.

### **Context for the Treatment of Deaf Individuals in Film**

#### **Deaf Culture and Film**

Film is vitally important in Deaf culture, and advances in film technology have been important in preserving and sharing cultural artifacts as they were originally created. For

example, within my referenced sources, you will find a number of videos instead of traditional printed academic texts. This is an aspect of Deaf culture that helps to preserve the original messages of Deaf individuals. Because American Sign Language (or any signed language) is an entirely different language from English, with its own set of rules, syntax, and structure, written pieces don't entirely capture the original signed information. Each transcribed article is taking the very visual sign language, and translating it into English to put it into the different sentence structure that an English speaker might read. As such, the Deaf community values videos to document and share their information. It allows actual signs to be seen as they are, and the language can be understood easier by individuals whose first or primary language is ASL. Many websites catered directly to Deaf people utilize videos far more than written words. Another utilized technique is to GLOSS the videos, which is the closest we can get to an exact transcription of a signed video. It helps to transliterate ASL into the English language while including all the context of what the face, body and hands should be doing to convey the sentence in ASL (*American Sign Language Essential All Online Courses - Lesson 1 | Living Language, n.d.*).

Historically, alongside the rise of silent films and as access to film became more easily available, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) used film to record and immortalize some of their master signers of the time. The University of Rochester sign language research center explains this about the NAD Films:

In the early part of this century, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) created a set of films of the most fluent 'sign masters' of the time. Their goal was to preserve and demonstrate the sign language of the epoch. Twenty-two films were

made between 1910 and 1920, fifteen of which have survived. They featured speeches, poetry and stories performed by twelve master signers. The master signers were of different ages, providing a sample of three generations of ASL users at the time. Because of the filming materials used at that time, some footage was lost to normal processes of damage and what remains is a restored version of the remaining footage. (Olson & Van Cleve, 2004)

Having some way to archive these signers helps to preserve that history. English speakers have writings to see how the English language has changed over time, but the equivalent hadn't yet existed for signed languages. While it obviously isn't equal to the amount of historical evidence we have on other languages, it offered a great leap to what could be retained prior to film (*Rare, Old Films Show Lively Deaf Culture, Linguist Says* 1995).

In addition to helping to preserve and study language over time, advances in film and film representation were crucial to Deaf history. Silent films allowed more equal access to Deaf film goers and film stars that wanted to simply enjoy and be a part of their entertainment. As stated by Schuchman, "Older citizens who are deaf or hard of hearing recall the years of silent films (1893–1929) as a 'golden era' in the cultural history of the American Deaf community" (Schuchman, 2004). Theaters were accessible to Deaf and Hearing alike, since the movie didn't require you to hear dialogue to understand the plot. Deaf culture and sign language utilizes facial expressions to punctuate and clarify signs, so Deaf people were exceptional in silent films. It was necessary to use big facial movements to convey the action in these movies, and there wasn't a need to speak, so any Deaf person, whether they vocalized or not, were put on an equal playing field with hearing actors. One

particular actor named Granville Redmond, a close friend to Charlie Chaplin, achieved a fair amount of success in silent films and in his own art. While Granville's involvement in film was secondary to his painting, his guidance helped Chaplin develop his famously successful expressions (Shields, 2020). Despite the equality in how well they could perform the required roles, Deaf people were still used as comedic relief in these early films. There was a stereotypical "Dummy" role that derived from the term "deaf and dumb", and was portrayed as an immoral and oblivious character. I will touch more on these stereotypes later in this thesis.

### **Movie Theater and Film Release Accessibility**

Overall access for theater viewings and movie releases play a huge part in representation, as it shows which audience is being catered to. Regardless of whether you are focusing your representation on a Deaf or hearing audience, the portrayal you give should be accurate and authentic. Hollywood releases seem to cater to the largest audiences they can grab. Releases are often measured by first weekend box office sales, and it seems like an easy step to add input and consult Deaf people in the accuracy of the signing and portrayals. It would then likely include the million people who identify as Deaf or with some hearing loss in the U.S. A quick peruse through the many sites and lists analyzing Deaf representations highlights that being represented intentionally and accurately matters to members of the community (Mitchell, 2006). Like other often-excluded groups, the Deaf communities are tight-knit and quick to share when something shows the authentic Deaf experience, so that everyone can relate and enjoy it.

It would make sense to think about the framing and accessibility in the editing process, but unfortunately this is not always the case. Several films cut off sign language when being used by an actor, so that you are only able to go off the provided captions rather than the signs. This can be used to disguise inaccurate signing as well as make clear that they don't expect the audience to know the language, and both reasons are disrespectful. Another choice that reads as exclusive is when movies are able to caption when a character signs, but then keeps all spoken parts uncaptioned. It flaunts the fact that you have the capabilities, and didn't see the captions as distracting when necessary for the hearing audience, but then the argument is made that they're distracting once the movie is back to English. It proves that the arguments against captions are flimsy.

Theaters don't prioritize accessibility in their schedules and viewing options. Usually specific screenings that include captioning are on less desirable days (for example, on Tuesdays but not on a weekend when ticket sales are in higher demand), or the captioning technologies available are limited and at hours of the day that aren't ideal for a family. Screenings during school hours and weekdays when people are at work mean that you'd have to take a day off to go to the theater, which creates barriers for individuals and families to participate in media together. Even when accommodations are available, there are often issues with quality and filmgoers report that the poor quality disrupts the experience. For example, some theaters offer caption glasses that help viewers by making a full transcription of the dialogue visible on the screen. However, the caption glasses have been said to give the wearer headaches, and they often project the captions across the glasses in a way that is hard to read while still viewing the action on the screen. Many Deaf people have expressed issues

with the captioning machines not working at the start of the movie, or dying halfway through, making their ticket payments worthless as they aren't able to fully enjoy the movie. As one member of the Deaf community put it, "I go to customer service and they never really do anything...they just throw free movie tickets at me. This doesn't really solve the problem. I let them go to waste" (O'Sullivan, 2019). Because the problem isn't actually addressed, the accessibility of captioning is rarely prioritized.

Research shows the main issues in representation of Deaf Culture are limited representation, lack of consultation, and inaccuracies in the films. Based on IMDB's full database of films, only 74 films since the 1920's and the start of major motion pictures actually highlight and include Deaf characters, out of the 7.5 million movies listed on the site (*Deaf Characters in Movies*; n.d.). This is a clear absence of representation at all in mainstream media. There are simply too few films that attempt to include Deaf representation to allow for inaccuracies to be ignored. In the few representations that do exist of Deaf communities, it is clear that studios are making the films about this community without including members in the production process. This is an issue because the few roles available for Deaf actors or talented people in production are overlooked for work.

The films suffer in accuracy of portrayals, as well as the framing of scenes and technical composition needed to represent sign language. Research shows that portrayals often lack consultation or use of Deaf talent, demanding "this cycle of misrepresentation and unequal or non-existent employment opportunities for Deaf professionals in the entertainment industry, both in front of and behind the camera, must end. This has been happening for decades; enough is enough" (Kilkenny, 2020). The recency of this points to



the fact that change has been incremental, but is still missing important work and understanding. If we are seeing boycotts of movies and tv in the past year, that means that hearing audiences are still choosing to allow production without consultation, and education on this topic can help us expect better.

Research shows that these issues contribute to the quality or lack thereof within depictions. One analysis explains, “labels for deaf characters include ‘dummies,’ ‘perfect speakers,’ ‘expert lip-readers,’ and ‘the unhappy deaf person’” (Stedman, 2019). These tropes were commonly used in older films (Schuchman, 2004), but their traits carry over into more modern examples in film through subtle actions. The “dummies” trope creates the expectation that Deaf people aren’t intelligent and uses them as the butt of jokes. It’s incredibly harmful because of the existing issues with education for the Deaf. Oral schools pushed them to only voice, which meant that time was taken from actual learning to work on the vocal quality (Lewis, 2018). Mainstreaming and putting Deaf children in Hearing classrooms meant that curriculum wasn’t made as accessible to every child (Bergey & Gannon, 2016).

On the opposite side was the “perfect speaker” trope, leaning into the oral school standards, and often played by hearing actors. These Deaf characters were praised for voicing well, instead of allowing their use of Sign Language, leading audiences to believe that the main goal of a Deaf person should include speaking. While the “perfect lip reader” might be explicitly described with that title in some films, the same trope is re-used if a character is somehow able to follow every conversation, especially without direct eye-contact. Lastly the “unhappy Deaf person” is shown throughout plot lines to add conflict. It makes every Deaf

character upset about their identity, and that they want to actively “fix” their hearing. This stereotype goes with the medical example of Deafness, rather than the social model and its focus on the community that Deaf people associate their experiences with. Often Deafness was used as a plot device to “fix,” and the happy endings were constantly a miracle cure to their hearing, rather than accepting the individual as they are (Stedman, 2019). Anytime a trope is used to describe an entire community or lived experience, individuals are diminished and driven to self-doubt (Klein & Shiffman, 2009). This hurts those with the identity, and those whose only experience with the identity comes from these limiting portrayals.

### **Issues of Representation and Lasting Effects**

The research above points out the major issues with consistently underrepresenting and misrepresenting members of the Deaf community on screen. Casting Deaf actors and actresses in roles that call for a Deaf person is necessary. There will never be an actor that emulates the Deaf experience as well as a person with that experience in real life. Deaf talent are consistently given limited parts in Hollywood. Evidence shows that “Hollywood is known to have a problem with disability representation. According to the website IndieWire, 59 non-disabled actors have received Oscar nominations for playing characters with disabilities. Off-screen, as well, the film industry body CreativeSkillset reports that 1.5% of the UK film production workforce identifies as disabled, compared to 14% of the general population in the UK” (Hewitt, 2018). This phenomenon is often referenced with the slang term “cripping up,” which describes representations where abled people take on disabled roles (Novic, 2019). It leads to perpetuation of stereotypes, as the actor feels the need to emphasize the stereotypical traits expected of a Deaf or disabled person. This is used in films

often for easy opportunities to create interesting characters without effort and development, as made clear in an interview with the director of the film *Hush*, “We thought that if we made the lead character deaf-mute then we would create the potential for really really fascinating version of these movies...I think that at the beginning Maddie being a deaf-mute was something that was more of a script challenge” (Thurman, 2016). These films use Deafness as the character’s sole personality trait rather than taking the time to make 3-dimensional characters.

The other issue, evidenced by the interview described above, is that casting Deaf actresses and actors as people not defined solely by their Deafness is important. Representation that highlights the unique experiences of Deafness is important, but films should also normalize that sometimes people are Deaf, might use sign language or cochlear implants, and are still dynamic people worthy of quality representation. Main characters, side characters, and multiple people in a movie can be Deaf, and that can be a normal life experience that doesn’t need to be central to the plot. This step is where true acceptance and understanding can blossom. When films are using sign language or Deaf individuals, it should be common practice to consult Deaf individuals for accuracy (Murphy, 2017). ASL is a real language, and should be treated as such.

When there is no representation, or only marginal tokenized characters to portray whole identities, symbolic annihilation occurs. Research shows that individuals who don’t have examples to look up to suffer from self doubt and devalue themselves (Klein & Shiffman, 2009). When there is no image of themselves reflected in the media, especially with how much media is produced currently, it leads audiences to believe that those shown

(usually white and abled people) are held in higher esteem than other groups. In areas that lack diversity, often media representations are the first or only understanding of identities that people receive. If a group isn't shown, or only is portrayed with specific stereotypes, those sparse representations can form a whole understanding of that identity. Even in media intending to offer diverse representation, Deaf individuals lack examples of empowered characters. Research on Deaf representation in children's books notes, "Results indicated that these books did not portray Deaf characters from a cultural perspective but, rather, highlighted aspects of deafness as a medical condition, one that requires fixing and that perpetuates stereotypes of deafness as a disability"(Golos & Moses, 2011). It can be incredibly isolating for someone to grow up and be surrounded in real life as well as the media without a single person that shares common experiences to them. Each individual representation, if seen as a stand-alone in a multitude of releases, can define an entire perspective, so it is crucial that those representations be thoughtful in their production. An absence of portrayals is just as harmful as inaccurate and negative portrayals, but both can be improved by support of accurate films. Often productions that do choose to highlight diversity and minority groups are underfunded, under advertised, and don't take the time to make portrayals as authentic as possible. This creates an argument against representation in the future, when one attempt does poorly. These rare occurrences are held as evidence why representation isn't financially worth it, without examining the other factors.

I chose to analyze the films *Children of a Lesser God*, *Hush*, and *A Quiet Place* because of their individual successes and failures in representation and progression. Each of the three films chosen had an impact on Deaf representation at the time of its release. *Children of a*

*Lesser God* allowed for the first ever Deaf actress to win an Academy Award and Golden Globe. It was praised in its time for representing Deaf characters as ordinary humans with lives, but has become rapidly outdated in its portrayals. *Hush* was released onto Netflix with plenty of recognition and positive reviews from hearing audiences, but shows glaring issues with casting and a clear lack of consultation on Deaf culture. Its recency of the last few years demands that *Hush* show consideration of Deaf talent and accurate technology, but this isn't fulfilled. Lastly, *A Quiet Place* does well as the most recent release, gaining critical acclaim while incorporating Deaf talent in their consultation and acting. These samples show a pattern of slow progress, and demonstrate points that are consistently missed in portrayals.

In this thesis, I use a mixture of textual analysis and discourse analysis to dissect these films. Analysis discourse is used to “understand and explain how these elements contribute to the text’s meaning... also explores potentially unintended connections between different texts, asks what a text reveals about the context in which it was written, or seeks to analyze a classic text in a new and unexpected way” (Caulfield, 2019). Discourse analysis works alongside these techniques, as a “research method for studying written or spoken language in relation to its social context. It aims to understand how language is used in real life situations” (Luo, 2019). Both techniques serve to understand the text as it stands alone and specific to the production’s intent, along with context of the time periods and surrounding conversations about the social aspects that affect each film’s impact.

### **Children Of A Lesser God Analysis**

The film *Children of A Lesser God*, released in 1986, was a significant achievement in Deaf representation at the time. It follows a Hearing teacher's relationship with a Deaf

janitor at a school for the Deaf, and the communication barriers they face. It has received plenty of positive acclaim and criticism alike. The story's content, characters, the lens they use, and the talent themselves all factor into their impact and representation. As mentioned, there are limited numbers of movies that include Deaf representation in Hollywood. These movies often lack consultation with members of the Deaf community throughout the production process, which often leads to inaccuracies and limiting tropes. This film can be valued for its inclusion of Deaf talent, but the framing is outdated and inauthentic to many individuals' Deaf experience. While I analyzed this movie from my hearing background and experiences, I brought in examples and commentary from Deaf individuals who are more qualified to comment on what this film shows, and what could be improved. While the film shows sign language and Deaf characters, I argue the movie is using these identities as a way to create conflict for hearing audiences without proper consideration for Deaf audiences. Throughout the film the production choices tend to favor the concerns of hearing audiences over those of Deaf audiences, for example, by removing the signs from the screen implying they were unnecessary for audience members to understand the film and by ensuring that all of the lines they wanted the audience to understand would be voiced or explained out loud. At several points, signs are obscured, cut from frame, too distant to see properly, or are sideways from the camera.

Even when there is a party of Deaf people signing, the camera angles tend to focus on the hearing protagonist, James. Most scenes center him, so his signing (while slow) is more understandable than any other characters. In his conversations with Sarah, the independent and stubborn Deaf woman, they make sure that he is the primary subject. She

signs facing him directly, without any shift towards the camera, making it difficult or impossible to see her engaging in communication on the screen. One scene has her signing while facing entirely away, looking out a window, and still he is somehow able to understand her signs. These oversights are important because they reflect the bias towards the hearing audience and center the Hearing perspective even while surrounded by Deaf individuals.

Another choice that suggests the production privileges hearing audiences is the use of SimCom and of James voicing Sarah's signing. This decision points to the fact that the movie is intentionally for hearing audiences, at the expense of Deaf interest. He repeats her sentences like he is considering her words, and answers questions in a way that tries to explain what the question was without explicitly saying it. This extensive process functions to make audiences reliant on James to translate, when captions would have simply solved all of the confusion. The failure to include captions takes away Sarah's autonomy, and makes every conversation framed around James' perspective. As one review notes, "If a story is about the battle of two people over the common ground on which they will communicate, it's not fair to make the whole movie on the terms of only one of them" (*Children of a Lesser God (1986)* - *IMDb*, n.d.). This choice also makes it more difficult for the audience to connect with her, because we don't get moments that are about only her; it's always tied to his voice. It creates a distance that feels intentional. While Hollywood wanted to use her Deafness as an interesting barrier to their communication, this choice doesn't fully give her independence in her story. They keep the framing around the hearing character to make the movie palatable. It can't challenge the hearing audience too much because it caters wholly to them, so they mediate the amount of connection we have to Sarah. We are meant to feel empathetic to

both characters, but the focus is on James' struggle with understanding Sarah's choices and loving her enough to make a compromise between entering her silent world, or forcing her into his hearing one.

Diving into the actual content itself, several aspects stand out as worthy of critique. Representation is an important consideration in media, and portrayals cannot be taken lightly. Because Hollywood films lack diversity, every time minority groups are shown they serve as a standalone reflection of the entire group. If only one movie comes out of Hollywood production in an entire year with sign language and Deaf characters (*Deaf Characters in Movies*, n.d.), that film deserves to be analyzed as an important artifact in educating the hearing public about Deaf culture. It is the one chance that the community gets in the public eye to be understood and accepted, and that opportunity needs to be treated as such. Once more content is broadly released it allows for a deeper range of stories and experiences to be shared, which is crucial to progress in inclusion. That being said, each moment of representation should be considered throughout the movie.

First, we start with the main character, James, who seems in all ways to have every privilege. A white, cis, heterosexual, able man who doesn't usually have to make many compromises in his life, and doesn't experience discrimination from any of those identities. He is framed as somewhat of a hero, and at the very least a protagonist in the film. It seems that he comes in with the mindset of helping, or "fixing" Deaf children as he teaches them to voice at an oralism school. Oralism schooling is a problematic structure in itself, and has been an issue throughout Deaf history. Being taught to voice doesn't give a Deaf person a conceptual foundation of words, but focuses on pronunciation and how it sounds. These



ideas are incredibly difficult for someone who has never experienced sound, and takes away time from other useful learning. It caters to the hearing world, and expects Deaf people to conform and “act normal” rather than appreciating sign languages as real languages and encouraging development in that. In fact, many oralism schools outright forbid signing, and would punish children that picked up their hands. It took away their real language development, and led to the statistic that most Deaf people only read at a 6th grade level. This isn’t at all about intelligence, but about their language being taken away and time being devoted to a skill they would never hear.

This perspective is troubling because of the impact it has had on the Deaf community and its history. Many older generations were denied their actual language, and praised for this conformity rather than their actual talents. These ideas were seen throughout the film. In the classroom, James forces the children to voice, asking them outright if they can read lips. Research has proven that reading lips has been proven to be ineffective, and at most you only catch about 30% of the information (Stedman, 2019). If you consider that, it means that teaching Deaf students to only voice and lip-read reduces their understanding in conversations to that percentage, and the school expects them to embrace and enjoy that way of life. They have the talent show with families coming to watch, and the faculty speak to their families about all the progress they’ve made and how wonderful it is that they are talking, but again it isn’t a real skill. It is difficult to ignore the fact that all of these hours spent voicing a song could have been spent on real applicable learning that hearing students did get to experience. The audience members in the scene clap for the children after their performance, even when their voicing sounds bad, because at least they are talking, which

seems diminishing and belittling at best. The whole performance is about making those hearing families feel better that their Deaf child is conforming more to hearing society, and making them feel more comfortable around them, instead of being able to fully sign and understand that language.

This scene also highlights the role of guilt among parents who chose not to learn how to sign with their children. For example, Sarah's mom tells us that she was made to feel guilty and "to blame" when she didn't sign with Sarah, but you can tell that their relationship was strained because of that. Imagine not being able to understand the same language as your parents growing up, not being able to explain what was wrong, or connect with them. It would be so difficult, and it happens constantly for Deaf individuals. Even the title of the film comes from this problematic place, speaking to an epic poem's perspective that God must be imperfect, to have made imperfect people. It refers to people being inferior to others, and just seems like a demeaning title. It draws the perspective again to the fact that people see Deafness as a disability instead of a rich culture, community, and way of life. One source argues to use the term "Deaf Gain" in opposition to "hearing loss" in order to encompass the myriad ways in which both deaf people and society at large have benefited from the existence of deaf people and sign language throughout recorded human history" (Bauman, & Murray, 2014). This research shows the multitude of benefits that the community gives, instead of making their experiences feel somehow incomplete.

Focusing back on James, his character fits into that white savior complex, or common trope within Deaf representation, that Deaf people need saving or to be "cured" of their "problems." We hear Sarah's mother even say that at times you could barely even notice

her “problem,” and that boys still liked her despite that. It frames Deafness in a terrible way, and makes it feel like they are to be pitied for not fitting into the hearing world. In reality Deaf culture is a very prominent aspect in many individuals’ lives, and there can be an immense sense of pride for the community and the language. It’s frustrating to see that negated so often throughout the film. James speaks explicitly to Sarah that he doesn’t believe her when she explains that she likes being Deaf and signing, and says the only reason she doesn’t speak is because she’s scared. It’s disheartening and incredibly invalidating to the entire Deaf community that he voices these opinions and still is forgiven and appreciated as the protagonist. Nearly all of his remarks to Sarah seem unforgivable and demeaning. I was unable to find a conversation throughout the entire film where he treats her as a full dynamic person without belittling or insulting her in some way. He consistently finds a way to whine at her for not voicing, question her life decisions, and ask personal questions that he has no right to know.

Sarah’s treatment throughout the film cannot be separated only by ableism or sexism; it seems to be a result of both identities. She is constantly treated as an inferior to James, and praised for the bare minimum by most characters. One particularly infuriating scene is the poker night scene, where James explains that Sarah learned from a book, and she plays remarkably. They start off the game by saying that Deaf people are cheaters and use signs to tell information across the table, which is a gross stereotype. Signing isn’t a form of telling secrets, it is her and many others only way of communicating. Every comment about her skill afterwards is said only to James, and she is left entirely out of the conversations. Guests congratulate him for her skill, saying that he “did so well with her,” and that she’s so

impressive. The entire scene is demeaning to Sarah's character and to the Deaf people who hear those comments so often in their real lives. Again it shows the perspective of the hearing world dismissing Deaf people, no matter how talented they might be. All of the learning she did and talent she has gets placed onto the hearing man.

Many conversations between Sarah and James come from a condescending perspective. His first conversation is just asking her why she won't read his lips and voice. Her stubborn behavior is framed in a comical way, but it's understandable when you think about the scene from her point of view. If you had gone to an oralism school since you were 5, and have been Deaf since birth, and then at 25 a man comes to you and bothers you about speaking when you've tried and been bullied for how you sound for years, you would likely be annoyed as well. When she doesn't want to try and learn with him, as if he had any new techniques that previous teachers wouldn't have tried yet, he oversteps even further. He finds her mother and goes to her house. It seems like the perfect example of him not seeing her as an independent, autonomous person. Any 25 year old that has a potential friend or partner go over their head to their parents to ask about their behavior should be furious from that, and she moves past it fairly quickly and still continues to spend time with him. This level of disrespect feels unforgivable in my opinion, but it's possible she is used to that behavior.

The next interaction at the restaurant is another attempt at him to question her decisions. He still asks her why she won't speak, and then judges her career choice. Even after really little evidence that she is smart besides her quick answers and the principal's praise, James pushes that Sarah should be applying herself more and trying harder because she's just so intelligent. This mindset is problematic because it shows him denying any of her

feelings about signing, and about work. Plenty of people are incredibly happy in simple consistent jobs no matter how smart they are, and it's rude to deny that happiness and believe that everyone wants to do more prestigious work. He is also calling her smart for being able to do the same tasks that most people accomplish each day, similar to those at the poker game. It's ableist to be shocked and comment on how amazing someone is just for existing as a person, because it sets the assumption that Deaf people can't usually be that way.

This film does offer one of the first mainstream Hollywood representations of a Deaf protagonist, but it does so using a number of damaging stereotypes, including that Deaf people are disabled, broken, or need fixing. There is constant pressure to lipread, assuming that it is easy to do and always possible. People and especially James push the idea that Deaf individuals must be able to speak to achieve success. The last trope is more subtle but prevalent throughout, and is that Deaf people can't have a family or a relationship. James and Sarah's relationship is constantly strained by his expectations of her, and pity that he shows. When they have the conversation about music, he complains that he can't enjoy it because she can't. This is an unfixable problem, because she will never hear it like he does, and she still tries to problem-solve. As she described the sound of waves to him earlier, she asks him to describe the song, but he quickly gives up and says he can't do it. It puts up this barrier that makes their relationship impossible, and frames the issue as her Deafness, and not his perspective of the situation.

Treating Sarah like an inferior woman who would like to fit gender roles happens often. While it is perfectly acceptable for someone to want to fulfil those expectations, it

should be their own decision. James often tells her exactly what they will be doing, without regarding her feelings first. He arrives at her house and tells her to pack up because she's moving in with him. He then decides that she doesn't have to worry about her work anymore and can rely on his position, without considering that she might enjoy her job. When she says she wants to be a mother he says something particularly heinous, that he doesn't want Deaf children, but that it'd be "fine." While a hearing audience might overlook this phrasing, and even relate, it's yet another example of disrespecting Deaf culture. While it can make sense from a hearing perspective to want the easiest life possible for your child and to acknowledge that the world discriminates against the Deaf, it is incredibly ableist to say so in such a demeaning way. The underlying emotions are that he'd see them as broken and disabled, like their mother, and "fine" isn't the same as unconditional love.

Their big fight towards the end of the movie could have broken the tropes and shown a real perspective from Sarah. She tells him how wrong he is, and that she feels proud of being Deaf, but all of that is shadowed by his outburst, yelling even that she could "speak right." She leaves him and reconnects with her mother, and it felt like she could have ended the movie with autonomy and a better relationship with her mother, after her mom even learns signs and apologizes for her actions. However the movie is framed to have a happy ending for a hearing audience, and it ends with them together. Sarah ignores his cruel words from earlier, admits that she wants to do more with her life, and is going to college. It feels like a regression that she accepts this inferior treatment, and takes away any power she might have had in the film. James asks her to compromise at the end, between speaking and silence, and she submits to that.

Nevertheless, the film had a lot of positives that need to be addressed. Prior to its release, the Deaf characters shown in Hollywood were much more meek and dependent. Marlee Matlin stands out in *Children of A Lesser God* as a stubborn and witty woman, even if there are times that she shows weakness. The movie was one of the first to show a broad audience that Deaf people are people the same as everyone else, with hopes, dreams, and feelings to express. Deaf people were humanized to hearing audiences and it brought in more normalization of the Deaf experience. While we expect more out of the media now, these small steps were necessary for our expectations to be raised. The film allowed for the first Deaf person to win an Academy Award, and a Deaf woman at that. While there is an issue that no other Deaf individuals have won since then, it was an important milestone for Deaf representation. It allowed for Marlee Matlin to become a well-known name in Hollywood, and continue on to many roles after that. The writer of the original play, turned into this movie, demanded that Deaf people play the main Deaf characters, and that an expert of the language must be consulted. Many Deaf actors were included in the production and prominent sign language instructors were hired to make sure that William Hurt's signing as James was accurate, while in character. Accuracy of the language is another small detail to be appreciated.

Many people in the Deaf community were excited about this film's impact, and the fact that any story of this kind was shared. The struggle between a hearing and Deaf couple trying to communicate and understand each other's world was a familiar script, and they could empathize with trying to find a balance. They were similarly proud of Marlee Matlin's recognition, and the powerful performance she put into the role. If you have absolutely no

validating representation in the media, any amount feels like a momentous occasion. Going from being ignored by Hollywood and the entertainment industry, to having a critically acclaimed movie that shows struggles that you've personally had, is a giant leap forward. *Children of a Lesser God* was an important milestone in Deaf representation. While it carried many inaccuracies and negative aspects, the fact that it had any representation at all was novel. The movie was able to elevate Deaf talent, and portray sign language to many who had never seen a sign before. Deaf people were handed the spotlight like never before, and this push has allowed us to raise our expectations for the future. Now we expect what was surprising about this movie's portrayals to be the lowest bar. We demand inclusive, diverse casts of people from a variety of experiences, and see that they are more than one-dimensional characters. This film's content, lens, and characters prove that we have made some progress, and push us further yet in decades to come. One story can't define a community, but one more can help if we hold it accountable.

### **Hush Analysis**

Our next film *Hush*, released in 2016, shows a Deaf author's fight for her life when a masked killer shows up to her solitary home in the woods. While hearing and Deaf audiences alike were drawn to the film for its unique premise, it lacked critical details in its portrayal. When we view this movie, because of its recency, we expect more progress in representation, consultation of Deaf creators, and less dependency on harmful stereotypes. Making sure that your movie shows accurate portrayals of the Deaf community, and use of sign language needs to be a standard set for all films. This film centers around a Deaf woman, and the apparent difficulties that are added by her Deafness, which ties into one of



the classic tropes of the “unhappy Deaf person”. It’s clear throughout the film that this identity is used more as a device to create interest within the genre, than seen as an actual part of people’s life experiences. The audience is made clear to be hearing individuals, as the use of sound and expectations of what the Deaf experience would be is dramatized for suspense.

From the start of the film, we see Maddie using technology to communicate with friends. In some ways, her actions are consistent with how Deaf individuals would use the technology, but there are some inconsistencies. On both her phone and computer, there are flashing options that will alert someone to a message. While each person might prefer different settings, it seems unlikely that a woman alone wouldn’t utilize that function instead of the audible alert, especially since we are led to believe that she doesn’t experience any sound. It makes messages much easier to notice from a distance, because of the visual cue. It would function similarly to the fire alarm that is shown, which flashes bright lights to catch attention.

Next, the scene with her neighbor Sarah highlights the differences between a hearing woman playing a Deaf woman, and an actual Deaf person’s communication. Sarah uses Simcom in this exchange, talking while signing, which feels useful for the hearing audience more than it shows a realistic conversation. ASL and English are two different languages, and it’s difficult to use both at the same time without losing information. Even when practiced and fluent, the spoken word and/or the signs can suffer, and it feels like the signs were less necessary in the scene. The issue of lip-reading is immediately brought up. Similar to discussions around *Children of A Lesser God*, lip-reading needs to be recognized as an

inconsistent way to catch words. As one reviewer mentions “Judging from tweets from directors and actors on both movies mentioned, it appears the hearing acting world are not aware of just how repressed deaf actors are. They do not understand that as a deaf actor auditions are limited and dependent on the communication skills required. Even the best lipreader with the clearest speech may not be able to convincingly seem “hearing.” And this is why despite learning sign language and playing on the usual deaf cliches, a hearing actor cannot always seem “deaf” – no matter how well trained they are” (Withey, 2016). Not only do they acknowledge that information isn’t able to be fully absorbed by lip-reading, but they notice that hearing actors aren’t able to accurately portray the nuances of the Deaf experience. Even if she is able to demonstrate some facial expressions, or use some signs, the visual is drastically different from someone who might be more involved in the Deaf community. The movie depends on the audience not knowing ASL, and to excuse any issues with her signing with backstory in a following scene. The movie covers it’s issues by explaining that she went deaf later in life and felt isolated from the hearing and Deaf worlds, which is a real experience for many. It doesn’t portray the entire Deaf experience however, and doesn’t excuse the film’s use of a hearing woman for the role.

A glaring issue reviewers point to is Maddie’s response when Sarah tries to sign back to her. Maddie says that it’s not necessary for her to sign and learn the language, which feels out of place for actually Deaf individuals. While you may not want strangers to see you as only an opportunity for ASL practice, that effort from family and friends is almost always encouraged. As she explains her feelings of isolation, these efforts from Sarah to learn the language would be received as clear work to improve their communication, and not

discouraged. It shows that they care about connecting with you, and understand that lip-reading isn't an effective solution, so for Maddie to brush it off as unnecessary feels out of touch with the Deaf community. To a hearing audience, that can reinforce the idea that we don't need to learn ASL and support those around us, but can depend on them to bridge the communication gap. In reality, learning how to communicate to loved ones and to others is an act of human decency, and a step in recognizing the barriers built into our society.

Along with these issues in portrayal are incongruencies in the signs and facial expressions. Part of the syntax of ASL is using facial expressions. There are specific mouth shapes and the like that fundamentally change the meanings of a sign, and Maddie remains fairly inexpressive throughout the movie. She mouths some words, while showing more blank expressions for others, and it all comes across as an unbelievable performance to people in the community. There are times where her signing goes from ASL, which is a language, to PSE, or Pidgin Signed English. This means that at times, she uses American Sign Language structure and rules, but then shifts to a more mixed version of signs and English. Again, this is possible for those who became Deaf later in life, but it more likely shows a lack of detail from the film production. Without any Deaf consultation or casting, it's evident that these aspects were overlooked as unimportant to the vision of the movie, rather than included to represent those who were learning the language later in life.

Maddie's moments with the killer are frustrating for their Deaf portrayal because it's clear again that Deafness is treated only as a narrative device. The horrific scene where Sarah is slamming on the glass door as the attacker kills her decides to ignore actual ways people experience the world. The vibrations and movement would have attracted attention quickly,

because those movements are felt even when they aren't heard. Deaf people often tap or stomp to grab attention from others, because those vibrations are easier to pick up on. This scene pretends to create tension, instead of showing what actually would be experienced. Once there is an exchange between the two, the issue of lip-reading is glossed over yet again, and they decide that it's possible for her to understand a stranger from 20 feet away and through a glass door, even with less than ideal lighting conditions. Each one of these factors add to the difficulty of lip-reading, but it assists the plot to have her understand his words.

It's important to acknowledge the feelings of Deaf reviewers and their issues with these films because ultimately, it is their identity being portrayed, and their interpretation of its accuracy and authenticity. As a hearing viewer, we can only speak to our own understandings, not for others. As one Deaf reviewer explains, "When you have people fluent in this language and have been using it all their life, they really know what they are talking about". (Poynter, 2019) As an industry, you need to consult and realize the perspectives of marginalized identities before production, or at the very least acknowledge and be accountable to critique after. This movie shows the worst recognition of the three for issues in representation and owning up to their mistakes. The director himself has statements from an interview that directly show his lack of knowledge, and even interest, about the Deaf community. As he explains, "One of the things I had always wanted to try, which would be so challenging to me as a director, was to try something without dialogue. I coupled that with this idea that Kate was talking about a lot, which was the anxiety of seeing somebody try to get into your house. We thought that if we made the lead character deaf-mute then we would create the potential for a really fascinating version of these movies." This shows

outdated terminology that is generally agreed upon to be incorrect. Deaf-mute implies that a person can't vocalize or speak, and that they would want to, which are both often inaccurate about Deaf individuals. It proves that the director didn't think about the Deaf identity, but instead genuinely saw it as a unique challenge and plot point. This comes across as ignorant and disrespectful to the community, as it is clear there was no research or effort exerted to understand the culture more than knowing about sign language. Another statement makes it clear that he didn't see a Deaf audience watching his movie at any point of production or after as he explains, " 'Oh, if we actually remove sound then it would be impossible to build tension. Modern audiences, having not grown up on silent films, are suddenly going to have to seek out every kind of audio stimulus anywhere else in the environment. Then I thought we wouldn't even have people watching the movie at that point' " (Thurman, 2016). This is almost ironic, as Deaf people are able to watch movies without any audio, as long as they are Deaf-friendly with well-done subtitles or accommodations. This quote finalizes the fact that he doesn't care about the impact his movie has on the Deaf community, and doesn't consider that it might benefit him to create a good representation and accommodate for Deaf viewers. On a personal note, I have seen Deaf-produced horror films that are silent, and yet still create tension.

The film *Hush* shows a lot of the technology that Deaf individuals use to navigate the hearing world, but large issues are made. On top of that, they decided to hire the director's wife to play the Deaf heroine, rather than looking for any Deaf talent that could portray the role. The most heinous part of these decisions is how they responded to backlash from the Deaf community. They made a small explanation to the press that they needed the character

to voice-over for her inner monologue, and then proceeded to block and report any social media that argued with this decision. Exposure to the Deaf community explains why this choice was so misinformed. Many Deaf individuals can voice, and every person has a different experience with hearing loss. There is another simple fix of hiring another person to do the voice-over portion, if they aren't able or willing to do that. These solutions still offer actual representation of a Deaf actor in the film, while sticking to the director's original design. There are major inequities in the entire entertainment industry with hiring Deaf talent, and this movie is another example in a sea of Hollywood films that chose to hire an able person over someone with the actual identity or disability.

The redeeming takeaways from the film are few and far between, but there is something to be said for showing independence and strength from the Deaf heroine. While we hope to be past that, and have those traits understood as common sense, we aren't there yet. Many times, the representation that we have plays into stereotypes, and makes anyone with a marginalized identity seem weak or bad in some way. Having the main character defend herself despite being Deaf, and use tricks that show benefits to being Deaf rather than only negative aspects is encouraging. One reviewer who identifies as Disabled said that she was inspired by the representation showing empowerment and success that is separate from Maddie's Deafness (Lopez, 2016). Maddie is able to be a writer about stories that don't revolve around that identity, which is rare to see in the media. Often if a character is differently-abled, they frame their life around that one aspect as the most important piece of who they are, and that isn't the common real-life experience. While it is disappointing that the actress herself is hearing, it can be a small step in representation to show a strong

powerful woman that overcomes such a dangerous threat, while being Deaf. We see that the lack of representation and missed opportunities for consultation from Deaf talents lends itself to heavy use of tropes without empowering the Deaf community or showing hearing audiences accurate life experiences. It allows this movie to gain recognition for the bare minimum, instead of expecting Hollywood to respect the Deaf community in their portrayals.

### **A Quiet Place Analysis**

*A Quiet Place*, 2018, is a horror film about a family that has to live in absolute silence after monsters with ultra-sensitive hearing show up on earth. This film stands out from the others with its recency and highlight of ASL. Most issues shared about the film are about editing and its release, instead of problems with the content. We see improvements in their casting, and use of consultation, making less areas for the audience to critique. Their portrayals fall less in the tropes of Deaf individuals, and fall short primarily in the theater experience rather than the content. Most of the focus will be on these concerns, but there are minor discrepancies to be addressed.

One hiccup in the overall use of Deaf technology is their misrepresentation of how cochlear implants work, versus hearing aids. A Deaf reviewer clarifies their disagreement, “Although to be honest, the rigged cochlear processor bothered me in that a cochlear processor doesn't emit sound the same way a hearing aid does. A hearing aid amplifies sound and can often give feedback. A cochlear implant bypasses the damaged portion of the ear to directly stimulate the auditory nerve. So these two things are not the same.” (Frohock, n.d.). The movie utilizes the feedback to ultimately create a solution to kill the monsters, but the

cochlear implant they were using to make that happen, wouldn't have worked in that way. It's a small detail that could have been remedied by changing the way it functioned to hurt the monsters, choosing an actress that used hearing aids instead, or having the actress wear hearing aids in the film, but the discrepancy doesn't seem to add harm. It can draw attention away from those who understand the difference in technology, but isn't directly damaging to the community.

Within the movie itself they don't mention names, but the Deaf daughter (Regan) is clearly highlighted through the film as we are shown her experience of the world with these super-hearing monsters. They introduce her into the film with a clear and lingering shot of her cochlear implant, to make sure that her Deafness is understood by the audience. John Krasinski mentions from casting that he didn't want to hire a hearing actress for the Deaf role, and wanted to be able to understand the situation better. It was a considerate choice to include an actual Deaf actress in one of the more major roles, and who was often consulted on aspects of the film. There is also utilization of a Deaf ASL Coach for the cast to learn signs from. These are small but helpful steps to encourage accuracy in the representation. However, one person's experience can't account for the entire Deaf community, and there are some issues in the connotations of hearing and deafness within the film.

That being said, the strength of the message behind this representation contributes well to the authentic portrayal of the Deaf community. A reviewer notes "Many people in the deaf community (myself included) are cheering the film on, because it provides the hearing mainstream with even more exposure to what psychologist Harlan Lane calls the 'Deaf-World' and because it signals yet another media victory for the deaf community as it



continues to try to re-center deaf identity with the idea of ‘Deaf Gain.’” (Kincheloe, 2018) . It is uplifting that the girl’s Deafness doesn’t hinder her success and instead helps to defeat the monsters. She isn’t portrayed as a weak character, and while she is kept from some tasks, it isn’t about her Deafness. The guilt that both she and her father carry over the brother’s death highlights aspects of this life that aren’t solely about her hearing, and the father is able to show her love by trying to fix her implant. These moments are able to show the dimension of her character past being Deaf. She is able to help her other brother and her family throughout the movie, and isn’t treated any more fragilely than the other children, which happens to many who identify with a disability.

From a hearing point of view, we are given all the details needed to understand suspenseful moments, and catch when things are tense through the usage of sound. These details are less inclusive to Deaf individuals because of the film’s heavy reliance on loud or silent moments to demonstrate danger. While captions can describe sounds and music cues, it isn’t readily included in all scenes. On the other hand, some scenes take away the sound entirely in order to emulate Regan’s experience of the situation, and the movie does well showing the danger and fear in expressive facial cues. This dependence on sound and little other cues at times is a little less inclusive than it could be if the Deaf audience was considered, but is a minor detail to pick at.

A more frustrating detail is noticed in the framing of the film. The movie makes clear that even though ASL is their form of communication, the audience isn’t expected to grasp their conversations through signs. Captioning is applied over all scenes with sign language, making most of the film captioned and accessible to hearing individuals who lack

that language. This often covers the signs as they are cut to the edges of the screen, or off-screen entirely. Many shots frame their faces while their signing is just out of frame, and replaced by captions. It seems fairly easy to add in some captions with sound cues and captions for spoken portions, as the audience has clearly agreed to use them for the rest of the content, but these are left out. Only about two or three lines of dialogue are spoken throughout the movie, but these words are un-captioned, pointing out that accessibility was only included to assist the majority, not other groups that might utilize the captions. As one late-deafened critic who doesn't yet know ASL points out, "I hope captioning movies is something future filmmakers will consider. Since box office numbers are so valuable, I just want to point out that I, and many other deaf people, would go to more movies if captioning was available for the entire film. Just pretend that deaf people speak a different language (we do) and then caption appropriately. Otherwise, we'll be waiting for the DVD, which will come with subtitles" (Frohock, n.d.).

This movie has many positives to note, and does the easiest first step of consulting the community they are borrowing from. Something that seems so simple has been often overlooked, but taking the time to learn accurate signs from ASL coaches, as well as consulting Deaf people about how they experience life, plays a great part in making sure portrayals are accurate and authentic. While issues in editing still create barriers for everyone to enjoy a film, the content shows clear improvement from the other films. Sign language and a Deaf character feel less like a gimmick in this film and more like a real aspect of life, with how events might happen in a fictional circumstance. Successful representations and taking the time to ask Deaf talent for input are steps that need to be expected in the future,

but it's important to highlight when they are included because of how often they aren't. Seeing these problems addressed is motivational because it suggests that perhaps our future film will rise to that standard, and continue to improve.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, it's clear that some progress has been made, but similar to other issues with representation, the work is not yet done. If we want to improve our individual actions and understandings of people, and put in the work to become more accepting and accommodating to all, we need to see those steps in our mainstream media. We need to expect more than the bare minimum from movies, and support Deaf talent being utilized in more roles. Having consultation, as well as hired actors and actresses from the community should be required for any media production. Representation needs to be accurate and authentic to the Deaf experience, but to be wholly inclusive we should see diverse characters as leads and support throughout. Using Deafness only as a plot point to add interest, or to add sign language because of its appearance instead of its actual functionality, does a disservice to the Deaf community, and to hearing audiences that lack exposure in other areas of their life. As viewers, we need to demand more from these studios, and use our viewership to support those who focus on inclusivity. Portraying real people as real people does a great deal of good for everyone, and we need to make that standard clear as consumers.

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