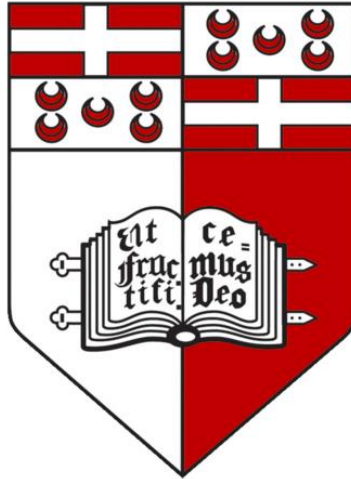


**University of Malta**



**DBS5006 Disability and Culture**

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**The Emergence of Deaf Cinema in the Film and Media Industry**

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**MA Disability Studies**

## **Introduction**

Deafness is known to be a hidden disability. If people do not realize that a person is deaf, the person will be treated like hearing persons, whereas if people find out that a person is deaf, the person is likely to be treated differently, stigmatized and labelled. In the mainstream film and media industry, such invisibility is also present. The few films that have deaf characters tend to marginalize and medicalize deaf people, and to portray them as pitiable or as inspirational, especially since these films are generally directed by filmmakers who do not know anything about Deaf culture (Schuchman, 1988 as cited in Leigh, 2009). Moreover, deaf character roles are more likely to be cast by hearing actors, resulting in insufficient and inadequate representation of the Deaf community, which further conceals the reality about Deaf culture. According to Barnes, disabling images are a result of non-disabled people being in charge of creating and producing them (1992). These films are a major source of information for people who never met with Deaf persons, and the perspectives they may form about the Deaf would be in accordance with what they watch in the media, whether or not it is accurate (Safran, 1998; Haller & Zhang, 2014).

This paper explores deaf people's journey in the film and media industry, which started as early as the invention of the motion picture. This invention led to the silent film era, a period during which films were accessible for the Deaf community, as they had no sound and relied heavily on visual cues. The invention of the motion picture was also an opportunity for the Deaf community to start creating films and preserving sign language. The paper then describes how the end of this era and the introduction of the talking picture led to cinema about deafness. The talking picture had a huge impact on the Deaf community, and this impact continues to be felt to this day, not only due to the lack of accessibility but also because of the Deaf community's lack of adequate representation in the film and media industry. Finally, this paper explores how the Deaf community turned to alternative options by creating a Deaf Cinema. They started to create and produce sign language entertainment films as well as films which incorporate Deaf culture. To this day, Deaf

Cinema continues to be an opportunity for Deaf people to develop their talent in the film and media industry, whether behind or in front of the camera.

### **The Silent Film Era**

One of the most important periods in Deaf history is the 'silent film era', which took place in the early twentieth century (Schuchman, 2004; Robinson, 2006; Krentz, 2006). According to Schuchman (2004), many Deaf people used to call this period the 'golden era' for various reasons mentioned throughout this section. The motion picture camera originated by deaf inventor Thomas Edison, and the first films included a film with a deaf character as well as films with deaf actors whose role was just to act and not to portray deaf characters (Leigh, Andrews, & Harris, 2018).

### ***Visual Cues***

Silent films did not have sound, which made them accessible for the Deaf community who did not require subtitles or interpreting, and were able to enjoy films on equal ground with the hearing community (Schuchman, 2004; Robinson, 2006). Images dominated silent films and both the deaf as well as the hearing audiences relied heavily on visual cues since dialogue was muted, making such films a highly visual medium. Visual cues of communication, such as the actors' body language, gestures, and facial expressions, were a very important factor for silent films, as these helped to get the story across to the audience (Robinson, 2006). Robinson (2006) uses the example of the visual scream expression in her article, explaining that with or without sound, the nature of the scream depends on the type of expression and context, such as showing pain versus pleasure, or wrongdoing versus right doing. She insists that it does not matter how one communicates in real life, whether through sign language or spoken language, because in silent

films there is no sound and the story relies heavily on the expression and the context of the image. Furthermore, according to Deleuze (1985, as cited in Robinson, 2006), silent films had various visual signifiers which in a way make them audible, such as images of moving lips or a horse galloping. So the Deaf people's ability to enjoy the silent films came naturally, since visual cues of communication are also part of deaf people's day-to-day lives when communicating with others.

### ***Preservation of Sign Language***

The introduction of motion pictures also meant that the Deaf community could start preserving sign language over time. Before the development of film, sign language could only be passed on manually through live face-to-face interaction by visiting places frequented by the Deaf, such as Deaf clubs, schools, and theatres (Krentz, 2006). Deaf people also used photos, paintings, drawings, and text to depict sign language, yet these static forms of communication did not fully capture the flavor and movements as well as the facial and body expressions used in sign language (Schuchman, 2004; Krentz, 2006). In his book 'Tales of the Deaf and Dumb: With Miscellaneous Poems', Deaf author Burnet (1835) wrote that attempting to describe or learn sign language by words or from books is like attempting to do the impossible. In fact, anyone attempting to learn sign language is highly encouraged to meet with the local Deaf community and interact with Deaf people in person, as this is the most recommended approach to learn (Newspoint - University of Malta, 2018).

It so happened that at the same time as the silent film era, oralism was spreading across the world. Oralism is an approach where speech is given preference over sign language, and at the time sign language was banned in order to make it more effective for deaf children to learn the spoken language (Hutchison, 2007). It involved a movement of hearing people whose aim was to remove sign languages by eliminating Deaf sign language educators and banning sign language

from schools, forcing Deaf people to use lip-reading and the spoken language (Schuchman, 2004; Krentz, 2006; Ladd, 2007). Films started being used as a medium to preserve sign language and keep it from getting lost, so that future generations could view past signers (Ladd, 2007; National Association of the Deaf, 2010). The first films that featured sign language took place as early as 1913, and George Veditz, the President of USA's National Association for the Deaf at that time, recorded a film called 'Preservation of Sign Language' (Padden & Humphries, 2005; NADvlogs, 2010). Before film, signs changed constantly and continued to develop, but with the introduction of film, sign language started to become more standard and uniform (Krentz, 2006). A local example is the Maltese Sign Language Research Project created in 1996 by the University of Malta's Institute of Linguistics and Language Technology, by recording Deaf adults chatting with each other ("Dizzjunarju tal-Lingwa tas-Sinjali Maltija," 2018). Over the years, Deaf research assistants worked on the Maltese Sign Language dictionary, which to this day continues to be updated regularly with recorded videos of the developing signs. One can notice in the dictionary that for some words, there is more than one video for the same word, because the signs were not previously recorded. If the younger generation of Malta's Deaf community did not learn specific signs when meeting with the older generation, they created and used different signs.

The silent film era was brought to an end by the talking picture in 1929. This was the beginning of what Schuchman (2004) called the Deaf community's 'post-silent-film reaction', that led to cinema about deafness. When the Deaf actors started to be replaced by hearing actors and when Deaf audiences were no longer able to enjoy the films due to lack of accessibility, Deaf film makers started to create films of entertainment for Deaf viewers. They also started to use captions to make films accessible, and they also continued to train Deaf actors.

## **Cinema About Deafness**

There are various mainstream films which have deaf character roles or where deafness is part of the films' subject. This section will explore the representation of the Deaf community in mainstream media and the kind of awareness that hearing filmmakers may be raising, according to whether they are exploiting or including Deaf persons.

## ***Cultural Appropriation***

Rather than recognizing and celebrating a culture by practicing cultural appreciation, members of mainstream society may turn to cultural appropriation by using a minority's culture and adapt it to make it their own (Heyd, 2003; Han, 2019). Cultural appropriation exists in mainstream films. These films include Deaf character roles played by hearing actors, who may learn sign language in a short time to use during a film. When this happens, the usage of sign language is not natural, sometimes even incorrect - something which may not be evident for the hearing community but which is disappointing for the Deaf community for not being provided with adequate representation (Schuchmann, 1988, as cited in Leigh 2009). Deaf personality Nyle DiMarco (2017) argues that it is unfeasible to represent proper sign language on the media after learning it in a short time, as learning the language requires years of interaction in person with the Deaf community. In his video, Nyle shows a few clips of actors who are not native sign language users using sign language, and compares their signs to his proper version of sign language. When looking at the comparison, anyone can notice that the difference is immense, artificial, and quite obvious, not just in the signs used but also in the facial expressions and body language. A noteworthy example is Paul McCartney's music video for *The Valentine* (2012), which features two famous hearing actors, namely Natalie Portman and Johnny Depp, using sign language. This received various criticisms from Deaf music fans who were furious because the sign language is

incorrect, and Johnny Depp himself admitted that he had to learn sign language by copying what another person showed him (Mitchell, 2012; Smart, 2012). The aim of using sign language in these films and videos is for the filmmakers to look good, rather than to promote sign language.

Cultural appropriation can further create stereotypes that affect how mainstream society portrays the Deaf community. On the one hand, it is positive that sign language and deaf culture are present on film as this raises awareness, such as the film about the deafblind person Helen Keller *The Miracle Worker* (Penn, 1962). However, it is important to point out that the Deaf community is underrepresented when hearing actors are cast for Deaf roles, as the filmmakers are indirectly undervaluing talented Deaf actors, who have a history of theatre and film acting (Leigh, 2009). The filmmakers also do not have sufficient knowledge about the Deaf community. They may think that they are supporting the deaf and helping them to achieve their goals by raising awareness. Yet the filmmakers are actually aiming to achieve their own goals, instead of working on the inclusion of Deaf people. They are taking away opportunities from the Deaf community and excluding them by casting hearing actors and misrepresenting the reality. If filmmakers want to raise awareness about the Deaf, they should not only cast Deaf actors for deaf character roles, but also hire Deaf professionals as part of the crew, as they can bring in-depth experience to the table and ensure positive portrayal.

In his article, Krentz (2006) says that sign language videos teaching how to sign are beneficial for the hearing community, as mainstream society can become more 'Deaf-friendly', but he insists that this may lead to hearing people taking over the jobs of Deaf people. There are many opportunities for hearing people, since most of the time the films' characters are hearing. Filmmakers do not cast deaf people for hearing character roles, even though they are capable. So when films that include the deaf are created, there are many talented deaf actors waiting on the sideline that should be given a chance. Director John Leonetti was subject to criticism when

he said that hearing actress Kiernan Shipka learned what it is like to be deaf and used sign language flawlessly in his 2019 movie *The Silence*, offending the Deaf community (Roxborough, 2017; Parfitt, 2018). Only deaf people themselves know what it is like to be deaf. They have lived experiences and do not need others to act on their behalf. These directors are far from supporting the Deaf community or making the world more deaf-friendly, as they are actually part of the problem and thinking only of what they will gain by exploiting the Deaf.

There are various mainstream films that feature Deaf actors for Deaf character roles, and which are good examples of positive portrayal as well as correct representation of Deaf culture and sign language. Deaf actress Marlee Matlin who starred in *Children of a Lesser God* (Haines, 1986) won an Oscar for her performance, reinforcing the Deaf actors' positive influence in the media (Leigh, 2009). The recent movie *Baby Driver* (Wright, 2017) cast Deaf actor CJ Jones as the Deaf father of the main character. Director Edgar Wright said that during auditions, the hearing actors pretending to be deaf seemed strange when compared to the Deaf actor's audition, and Wright immediately gave CJ Jones the part (Bevan, 2017). CJ Jones said that the lack of cast Deaf actors could be due to the lack of awareness about the Deaf actors' talents, as well as the expense of having the interpreters on set (Girma, 2017). The casting of Deaf actress Millicent Simmonds in the movies *Wonderstruck* (Haynes, 2017) and *A Quiet Place* (Krasinski, 2018), gave her the ability to represent the Deaf community's potential. Director John Krasinski rightly insisted that she was the most proper actress for the role and that she would bring more depth and value to the film (Parfitt, 2018; Burton, 2018). Deaf actors who are cast in mainstream films are not only entertaining the audience but also educating them about Deaf culture. They are an example of positive representation that the Deaf community deserves. They also serve as excellent role models for young aspiring Deaf actors. In fact, speaking about her experience of growing up, Deaf actress Charlie Raine stresses that she hid her deafness, as she did not know anyone who was deaf at school and there were no deaf TV characters that she could identify with (Withey, 2020).



## ***Deaf Talent***

In 2015, the Deaf community started a campaign using the hashtag #DeafTalent on various social media platforms, sparked by their outrage at a published dialogue with a hearing actress who was cast in a deaf character role. During the dialogue, the hearing actress spoke about her starring role as a Deaf mother in the movie *Medeas* (Pallaoro, 2013), and explained that in order to learn about deafness she met with a group of girls, referring to them as 'deaf and mute' (Rivera, 2015). The Deaf community felt insulted not just about her role, but also because this sort of interview misleads the public, up to the point that many people are surprised when they see a Deaf person doing ordinary things (Shannon, 2015). The hearing actors can easily use incorrect terminology due to their lack of awareness and their lack of lived background experience that Deaf persons have, therefore they can easily represent Deaf persons inaccurately. Meanwhile, Deaf actress Millicent Simmonds shattered stereotypes by her Deaf character roles in the two mainstream films mentioned earlier. She hoped that filmmakers would be inspired by her Deaf talent, and aspired to convey the message that Deaf persons are talented (NowThis News, 2018). A quick search of #DeafTalent on the social media platform Twitter shows that the hashtag which was created in January 2015 is still trending on a daily basis by the Deaf community, many times attracting others outside the community.

In the film industry, it is very normal to see disabled character roles played by non-disabled actors - and winning awards for their performances. Shinn (2014) referred to John Belluso's theory about why non-disabled actors are cast as disabled characters, stating that the audience does not like to be related to disability and is relieved to see an actor as non-disabled in real life. He said that the audience is comforted by the fact that the struggles and pain that they watched on film are a fantasy. He also said that filmmakers would rather cast stars in leading roles, in order to make it

to the top of the box office. There are no disabled Hollywood stars, yet if disabled actors were given the opportunity they would become more visible and high-profile, attracting more publicity. In her interview with BBC, American actress and disability rights advocate Maysoon Zayid argued that if disabled actors cast in leading roles were surrounded by stars, the film would make it to the box office (2018, BBC).

## **Deaf Cinema**

As explained above, the silent film era was taken over by inaccessible talking films, so the Deaf community needed alternative options and deaf filmmakers started to create sign language entertainment films (Schuchman, 2004). As film technology advanced, becoming more available and affordable, the Deaf community continued to produce films of art performances in sign language (Leigh, Andrews, & Harris, 2018; Peters, 2000). Mainstream films started to be retold in sign language, not by translating from a spoken language to sign language, but by translating visual symbols and visual effects of action movies into sign language (Sutton-Spence & Kaneko, 2017). Moreover, Deaf filmmakers started to produce films, not necessarily about deafness, but which incorporate Deaf culture. “Deaf professionals were taking matters into their own hands and not waiting for hearing Hollywood to call” said Gallaudet University’s director of the theatre and dance program Ethan Sinnott (Murphy, 2017 para.18). Although a small niche in Hollywood, deaf filmmaking is highly embraced by the Deaf community, according to Deaf artist Shoshanna Stern (Puente, 2010). This section will explore Deaf Cinema, which refers to Deaf people and their talent in creating films, and who are both in front and behind the camera (Christie et al., 2006).

## ***Deaf Film Festivals***

There are various recurring Deaf Film Festivals around the world, due to the increased number of film productions created by emerging as well as established Deaf filmmakers and artists. The list of Deaf Film Festivals is almost endless, during which the Deaf filmmakers' work is shown and recognized, while also having the opportunity to receive professional support. A few examples are Deaffest in UK, Seattle Deaf Film Festival, Toronto International Deaf Film and Arts Festival, Moscow Deaf Film and Visual Art Festival, Tokyo International Deaf Film Festival, India International Deaf Film Festival, Swedish Deaf Film Festival, Festival Clin D'Oeil, and CINEDEAF International Deaf Film Festival in Rome. Films of different genres and different lengths are screened during these festivals throughout a number of days (Christie et al., 2006).

These festivals promote Deaf identity as well as Deaf Culture and Deaf Pride, an excellent illustration of the affirmative model of disability. The affirmative model views disability from a non-tragic point of view (Swain and French, 2000). Some disabled people live a positive life and feel proud of their disability identity, especially due to the support that they have or the culture that they are part of. Some disabled people live a positive life and feel proud of their disability identity, especially if they form part of a culture and have adequate support. They experience a fulfilled diverse life and a positive sense of identity due to their disability acceptance and their ability to embrace the positive aspects of life. The affirmative model has played a big and important role in the self-representation of disabled people - this model was built on the development of disability studies and disability arts (Rice et al., 2015).

## ***Deaf Cinematic Principles***

In Deaf Cinema, deaf filmmakers apply particular principles, features, and techniques in their work to produce films, using what Deaf filmmaker Wayne Betts Jr calls as the Deaf Lens, giving the audience the opportunity to view the world from a Deaf person's perspective (TEDx Talks, 2010). During his talk, Betts stresses the importance of details captured on an image, which can give a story without the use of speech or sign language. He also explains that when he was studying as a film major, he was finding it difficult to follow the rules of film language and techniques, realizing that he was unable to apply them to make Deaf films. He argues that he found various techniques a wrong fit for him to use, such as the terms 'voiceover', 'off screen narration', and many other terms which developed over time by people working with sound, acknowledging that sound was an essential part of their film, and that sound influenced how a film is edited. Yet, Betts is Deaf and he reminds the audience that he does not work with sound but with visuals only. He wanted to apply the Deaf Lens to film which uses principles that focus on how Deaf persons perceive the world by capturing what the eyes of a Deaf person sees. This is done by using sign language scripts instead of written scripts, by using different editing techniques that are more deaf-friendly, and by replacing the voiceover in films with visual story telling.

Disabled people use art to express their struggling experiences due to the barriers encountered, or to reveal what the culture that they share with other disabled individuals is like, rather than using art to show what it is like to live with an impairment (Barnes 2013). The De'VIA (Deaf View/Image Art) manifesto was created to represent the art created by Deaf artists and the way they perceive the world according to their visual experiences. In his article, Miller (1989) said that the manifesto focuses on how the experience and culture of the Deaf are expressed by using specific art elements. "These experiences may include Deaf metaphors, Deaf perspectives, and Deaf insight in relationship with the environment (both the natural world and Deaf cultural

environment), spiritual and everyday life” (Miller, 1989 pp. 772). Many Deaf filmmakers apply the De'VIA definition to film. Two examples are the short films *Copper* (O'Donnell, 2014) and *The Quiet Ones* (Garratty, 2015), which have characteristics that are in accordance with Deaf Cinema. These films were screened in various Deaf film festivals around the world, and also received a number of awards.

*Copper* was directed by hearing filmmaker Jack O'Donnell and includes both Deaf as well as hearing cast and crew. This film is an excellent example of art about disabled people. The story is about a young Deaf boy who meets a human-statue. In the film, the Deaf boy communicates using sign language. His hearing mother uses sign language too to communicate with him, but his hearing father does not know how to use sign language and struggles to communicate with his son. This reflects the experience of many Deaf children who grow up in a hearing family. There are scenes when the mother is angry with her son whereas the father is not angry and does not want the mother to scold their son, representing a society that behaves differently with Deaf people due to their deafness, such as feeling awkward and avoiding conversation. Throughout the film, there are moments of silence during some scenes, when the soundtrack and the characters' conversation are muted whereas the subtitles are no longer visible. The audience cannot hear anything that the characters are saying, which reveals what it is like for Deaf people who can see people speak but are unable to understand what is being said. Other gestures during the film that reflect Deaf culture are the moment that the boy bangs his hand on the table to get his parents' attention, and the moment that the father taps his son on his arm to get his attention. It is also important to notice the aesthetics used by the filmmaker who uses visual techniques in order to represent sound. The human-statue in the film has his eyes closed, yet he starts to move as soon as he hears the coins being tossed in the ceramic bowl. The image of the coins being tossed in the ceramic bowl represents sound visually, a Deaf way of viewing and perceiving sound. In fact during the final scene, the father and the boy are both seen next to each other as

human-statues with their eyes closed, holding each other's hand. When the children toss the coins in the ceramic bowl, only the father opens his eyes, since his Deaf son did not hear the coins. The father squeezes his son's hand, which prompts the son to open his eyes too - a gesture used by the father to inform his Deaf son that coins were tossed. The final plot showing the happy mother watching her husband and their Deaf son together also symbolizes Deaf persons overcoming barriers and bringing families together.

The other short film, *The Quiet Ones*, is a thriller directed by Deaf filmmaker Teresa Garratty, with the crew and cast being a mixture of Deaf and hearing individuals. The story is about the murder of a teacher at a Deaf boarding school, with four students as suspects. The scene in the beginning of the film immediately gives the impression that the consultant is deaf, because she does not look up when the detective speaks. She only looks up shortly after he gives her a pen. She also does not realize that the detective spoke to her again, until coincidentally she looks up and her facial expression indicates that she noticed the detective is speaking to her, which prompted her to ask him to repeat. The consultant continues to give the impression that she is deaf when she explains what she knows about deaf people and how they communicate. In fact during some scenes, when the Deaf students stop talking and their body movements are captioned, the consultant is shown watching and noticing their body movements. For instance, when the camera zooms on the way the actress avoids eye contact, this body language is captioned as 'LIE', or when the camera zooms on the way the actress gulps, this body language is captioned as 'deceit'. The captioned shots describing the body language give the audience a glimpse of how Deaf people rely on body language to communicate and understand what is happening. Filmmaker Garratty explains that they chose these shots so that the audience focuses on the characters' body language rather than sign or spoken languages (Deaffest, 2015). In fact, only the consultant notices the body language, which prompts her to ask further questions or write notes about their behavior. The film also represents the Oralism era during the scene where the teacher strikes the

student's hands, demanding that the student does not sign in class. In the final scene we see the consultant putting on the hearing aid, which confirms that she is deaf. This scene is a good representation of how deaf people can easily hide their deafness, and how easy it is for the society to not notice when someone is deaf. The short film is a good example of art by disabled people about their lived experience. The Deaf filmmaker uses her personal experience as a Deaf person to write the story, and also refers to deafness during the film, even though the story is not about deafness.

Deaf Cinema enhances positive and realistic attitudes, and the portrayal of Deaf people is accurate because films include both Deaf and hearing professionals as part of the crew. However, it is good to point out that the audience of Deaf Cinema is mainly the Deaf community itself.

## **Conclusion**

The media is a very powerful tool that shapes society's portrayals and attitudes towards disabled people. Correct representation of disabled persons in this industry is crucial, and by involving them directly in the first place ensures this. Such is the case of the Deaf community, who have a history of filmmaking and who developed their talent over time. This enabled them to preserve sign language and to portray the Deaf Community accurately. Hearing filmmakers can also make this possible by working with Deaf people who are part of the team, both behind and in front of the camera. Using mainstream media accurately can educate, promote and affirm the identity of Deaf people and what they truly represent.

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