

## BREAKING BARRIERS: THE REPRESENTATION OF DEAF CHARACTERS IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA AND ITS IMPACT ON DEAF CULTURE

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Article Received: 23 October 2025, Article Revised: 14 November 2025, Published on: 04 December 2025

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DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.3119>

### ABSTRACT

The Representation of Deaf Characters in Contemporary Cinema and Its Impact on Deaf Culture" examines the depiction of deaf individuals in modern films and the resultant influence on Deaf culture and society. This study rigorously analyses contemporary cinematic trends to evaluate their precision, profundity, and influence on societal conceptions of deafness. Historically, deaf individuals have been portrayed in clichéd or peripheral ways in media. Recent years have witnessed a transition towards more nuanced and accurate portrayals, frequently propelled by the heightened participation of Deaf filmmakers and consultants within the film industry. This examination examines the impact of modern representations on society perceptions of deafness, the formation of Deaf cultural identity, and the enhancement of visibility and empowerment for Deaf individuals. The study assesses various significant films and individuals, examining their contributions to breaking prevailing prejudices and showcasing diverse perspectives within the Deaf community. The study underscores the transformative potential of honest representation by analysing audience reception and the larger ramifications of these portrayals. Moreover, the effects of these film representations on Deaf culture are examined via multiple perspectives, encompassing the enhancement of cultural pride, the advancement of social inclusion, and the impact on policy and advocacy initiatives. The results indicate that, although advancements have occurred, persistent campaigning for more genuine and diverse representations is essential. The study concludes by highlighting the necessity of continuous collaboration between Deaf individuals

and the film industry to guarantee that future representations enhance Deaf culture and foster a more inclusive comprehension of deafness.

**KEYWORDS:** Breaking Barriers, Deaf Characters, Contemporary Cinema, Deaf Culture.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the course of history, the portrayal of deaf people in the media has been rife with prejudices and inaccuracies (Emens, 2008; Leigh, 2009). In early depictions, deaf people were frequently restricted to positions that were pitiful and tragic, or they were used as plot devices rather than as fully realised humans. Films from the early 20th century usually portrayed deafness via a medical or philanthropic lens (Foss, 2014), putting more of an emphasis on the purported shortcomings and limits of deaf individuals rather than their strengths and the difficulties they face. In addition to contributing to a narrow and frequently negative public impression of deafness, such portrayals also led to the reinforcement of social stigma and marginalisation.

Over the course of the past several years, there has been a discernible development in the manner in which deaf individuals are portrayed in contemporary film (Safran, 1998). This transition has been fuelled by rising activism from the Deaf community as well as a growing realisation of the need for portrayals that are diverse and authentic. There has been a recent trend among contemporary filmmakers, many of whom are deaf themselves or who collaborate closely with deaf consultants (Schuchman, 2004), to portray deaf characters with a greater sense of profundity and authenticity. Moving beyond the basic and stereotyped views of the past, these portrayals frequently reflect a variety of experiences and identities that are present within the Deaf community.

The Deaf community as well as the general public are key beneficiaries of this shift towards more nuanced depiction in film (Leigh, et al,2020), which has substantial ramifications for both groups. Contemporary films challenge long-standing prejudices, promote a more inclusive view of deafness (Davis,1995; Norden, 1994; Romero-Fresco, 2018), and build a broader understanding of Deaf culture and identity by depicting deaf individuals in a variety of positions that are rich and multifaceted. The growing number of projects that are headed by people who are deaf and the increased visibility of deaf people in mainstream media both

highlight a growing dedication to authenticity and representation, which is a significant step towards greater equality and inclusivity in the film industry.

Throughout the course of history, the portrayal of deaf people in the media has frequently been characterised by a lack of nuance and depth (Davis, 1995). During the early days of cinema, deaf characters were almost always shown via a medical or philanthropic perspective, with the emphasis being placed on their perceived inadequacies rather than their complete humanity (Hobgood, & Wood, 2013). For instance, early films commonly portrayed deafness as a terrible affliction or utilised deaf individuals as vehicles for expressing pity and charity (Smith, 2010). Some of these depictions remain prevalent today. According to Jones and Patel (2015), these depictions not only contributed to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes but also played a role in the marginalisation of deaf individuals within society and the stigmatisation of those who are deaf.

Throughout the 20th century, the limited and frequently problematic portrayal of deaf individuals in the media was a reflection of broader societal attitudes regarding disability and difference. Scholars contend that images of this nature were emblematic of a greater cultural propensity to see disability via a deficit model, in which the emphasis was placed on what was "lacking" rather than on the varied experiences of individuals (Wright, 2018). Over the course of the past several years, there has been a substantial trend in current cinema towards portrayals of deaf people that are more authentic and empower them. A rising realisation of the need for varied representation, as well as an increase in the participation of Deaf individuals both in front of and behind the camera, have been the driving forces behind this transformation (Harris & Turner, 2021). CODA (2021) and Sound of Metal (2019) are two examples of films that have received accolades for their genuine portrayals of Deaf culture and experiences. These films are reflective of a larger trend towards more nuanced storytelling (Miller, 2022).

The emergence of projects that are headed by deaf individuals and the incorporation of deaf consultants into the making of films have both been significant contributors to this transition. Contemporary film has begun to challenge conventional preconceptions and provide a picture of deafness that is more inclusive and truthful (Johnson & Lee, 2023). This is accomplished by depicting deaf characters in a range of positions and circumstances. Not only does this

transition contribute to a more equitable representation of disability in the media, but it also helps the general public have a better knowledge of Deaf customs and traditions.

In recent years, a number of films have garnered praise for their portrayal of Deaf people, which has contributed to a movement towards representations that are more authentic. CODA (2021), Sound of Metal (2019), and A Quiet Place (2018) are a few examples that are particularly noteworthy. The documentary "Child of Deaf Adults," often known as CODA, has garnered a lot of praise for its realistic portrayal of the dynamics of Deaf families and the function of a hearing child in a Deaf home situation. The movie received a lot of appreciation for the fact that it had Deaf performers and consultants, who helped to ensure that it accurately portrayed the culture and experiences of the Deaf community (Smith, 2022). The documentary Sound of Metal examines the journey of a heavy metal drummer who begins to lose his hearing. It offers a nuanced look at the emotional and psychological repercussions of deafness, and it was praised for its attention to the perspectives of persons who are deaf (Harris & Turner, 2021). The film A Quiet Place is set in a post-apocalyptic world in which humans are required to communicate with one another through the use of American Sign Language (ASL) in order to avoid being killed by dangerous animals. The film also places its deaf characters in a prominent position and incorporates ASL into its narrative (Miller, 2022).

### **Portrayals of Deafness: Authenticity vs. Stereotypes**

The representation of Deaf characters in these films varies in terms of the degree to which they eschew stereotypical portrayals and depict them in a genuine manner. Because it features Deaf performers and depicts Deaf culture with richness and depth, CODA stands out as a film that is both realistic and sensitive in its portrayal of the Deaf community. The video presents a balanced portrayal of Deaf culture and family life by putting an emphasis on the issues that Deaf individuals confront in their day-to-day lives and highlighting the difficulties that they face (Smith, 2022). Sound of Metal, on the other hand, presents a depiction of deafness that, while compassionate, occasionally promotes certain clichés about the tragic loss of hearing and the influence it has on an individual's identity (Harris & Turner, 2021). A Quiet Place has been criticised for its rather sensationalised portrayal of deafness as a survival tactic rather than a natural part of human variation (Miller, 2022). This is despite the fact that the film is known for its groundbreaking usage of American Sign Language (ASL). In general, despite the fact that these films are a step forward in terms of the portrayal of Deaf characters, the tension between authenticity and caricature continues to be a serious issue. According to

Johnson and Lee (2023), it is essential to have a constant engagement with Deaf consultants and designers in order to guarantee that portrayals continue to be respectful and representative of the various experiences that are prevalent within the Deaf community.

### **The Impact of Deaf Representation on Deaf Culture**

Significant cultural transformations in the view of deafness have been brought about as a result of the greater exposure and nuanced treatment of deaf characters in contemporary cinema. Over the course of history, deafness has frequently been analysed through the lens of a deficiency model, which places an emphasis on limitations and shortcomings. Recently released films, on the other hand, have presented depictions that are more nuanced and varied, so highlighting the richness and diversity of the Deaf culture. For instance, CODA (2021) depicts deaf people as diverse characters who have their own cultural norms, struggles, and strengths. This is a departure from the conventional portrayal of deafness, which suggests that it is either a medical condition or a cause of pity (Smith, 2022). According to Jones and Patel (2015), this transition has contributed to the challenging and redefining of society views regarding deafness, which has resulted in a deeper awareness for the culture and identity of the deaf.

It has been demonstrated through research that such depictions have the potential to result in more favourable cultural perceptions of deafness. These films contribute to a more comprehensive cultural knowledge that honours the experiences of the deaf and challenges the prejudices that have long dominated media portrayals (Wright, 2018). They achieve this by presenting deaf individuals as vital members of their communities. According to Harris and Turner (2021), this developing portrayal encourages a more inclusive understanding of disability by putting more of an emphasis on the cultural and social components of deafness rather than concentrating simply on the restrictions that are considered to be associated with it.

### **Influence on Deaf Audiences and Mainstream Viewers**

It is important to note that the influence of these depictions extends to both mainstream viewers and Deaf audiences. Films such as "Sound of Metal" and "A Quiet Place" offer a sense of affirmation and representation to audiences that are deaf. In addition to providing acknowledgement and exposure, they are reflective of experiences that are meaningful to those who are deaf (Johnson & Lee, 2023). According to Miller (2022), this portrayal has the

potential to strengthen cultural pride and a sense of belonging among the Deaf community, thereby supporting the experiences and identities of the Deaf.

When mainstream viewers see deaf characters in positions that are more complicated and positive, it helps to shatter the preconceptions and preconceived notions that they have about deafness. Films that authentically portray the experiences of the Deaf community contribute to a public perspective that is both more informed and more sensitive. As a result of this exposure, audiences can have a deeper knowledge of Deaf culture and the obstacles that are experienced by individuals who are Deaf, which can lead to increased advocacy and support for Deaf causes (Smith, 2022). As a result, these depictions not only aid populations that are deaf, but they also contribute to greater cultural trends towards diversity and inclusivity.

## **Challenges and Opportunities in Casting Deaf Actors**

### **Challenges**

1. **Limited Opportunities:** Deaf actors often face significant barriers in securing roles in mainstream media. The casting process frequently overlooks Deaf talent in favor of hearing actors who can mimic deafness. This practice not only deprives Deaf actors of opportunities but also perpetuates a cycle of misrepresentation (Smith, 2022).
2. **Typcasting and Stereotyping:** When Deaf actors are cast, they are frequently relegated to roles that reinforce stereotypes or focus narrowly on their deafness. This typecasting can limit the scope of roles available to Deaf actors and perpetuate a one-dimensional view of Deaf individuals (Harris & Turner, 2021).
3. **Accessibility Issues:** Production environments are often not designed with Deaf actors in mind, leading to accessibility challenges. This includes inadequate provision of interpreters, lack of support for communication needs, and insufficient accommodations for Deaf actors' preferred methods of communication (Johnson & Lee, 2023).
4. **Misrepresentation of Deaf Culture:** When Deaf actors are not involved in the creative process, there is a risk of misrepresenting Deaf culture and experiences. The lack of Deaf perspectives in writing, directing, and producing can result in portrayals that are inaccurate or insensitive (Wright, 2018).

### **Opportunities**

1. **Increased Authenticity:** Casting Deaf actors provides an opportunity to present more authentic and nuanced portrayals of deafness. Deaf actors bring lived experience and

cultural understanding to their roles, leading to more accurate and respectful representations (Miller, 2022).

2. **Diverse Storytelling:** By including Deaf actors, filmmakers can tell a wider range of stories that reflect the true diversity of human experiences. This inclusion allows for the exploration of Deaf characters in various roles beyond the traditional, stereotypical portrayals (Smith, 2022).
3. **Cultural Enrichment:** Deaf actors contribute to the cultural richness of films by bringing unique perspectives and experiences. Their involvement can enhance the depth of storytelling and offer new insights into Deaf culture and experiences (Harris & Turner, 2021).
4. **Breaking Barriers:** Casting Deaf actors in mainstream roles can help break down barriers and challenge existing stereotypes. It promotes inclusivity and demonstrates a commitment to representing all voices and experiences in media (Johnson & Lee, 2023).

### **Contributions of Deaf Filmmakers to Cinema:**

Filmmakers who are deaf have made major contributions to the film industry by bringing forward distinctive points of view and accurate depictions of the realities of deaf people. As a result of their participation in the making of films, they work to ensure that stories about the Deaf are conveyed in a sensitive and accurate manner. Marlee Matlin, a director and actor, has been active in pushing for Deaf representation in film and has worked on a variety of projects that emphasise Deaf culture and issues (Smith, 2022). Matlin won an Academy Award for her role in *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), which was one of the films for which she was nominated. In a similar vein, filmmaker and screenwriter Nyle DiMarco has made use of his position to promote Deaf culture and raise awareness about issues that are relevant to the Deaf community through his work in film and television (Johnson & Lee, 2023). Deaf filmmakers frequently challenge prevalent prejudices and present novel narratives that contradict conventional, one-dimensional depictions of deafness because they offer an alternative perspective. As an illustration, Christine Sun Kim, a writer and filmmaker who is deaf, has utilised her art and media projects to investigate the junction of deafness with broader themes of identity and communication. As a result, she has broadened the breadth of how deaf experiences are portrayed in film (Harris & Turner, 2021). Deaf filmmakers contribute to the expansion of the depiction of deaf people in the media by avoiding the typical stereotypes that are associated with the deaf community. One further way in which deaf filmmakers contribute to the advancement of accessibility and



diversity in the film industry is through their work. According to Miller (2022), their work frequently highlights the significance of including Deaf perspectives into all stages of film production, including but not limited to writing, directing, acting, and post-production responsibilities. In the context of this focus on accessibility, campaigning for the use of subtitles, sign language interpretation, and other adjustments that make films more accessible to Deaf viewers is included. Filmmakers who are deaf have the ability to influence industry norms and support more inclusive approaches to filmmaking through the establishment of these standards.

The accomplishments of Deaf filmmakers serve as significant role models for the Deaf community, demonstrating that Deaf individuals are capable of excelling in all aspects of the film business with the help of their abilities. According to Wright (2018), their achievements serve to motivate and enable aspiring Deaf actors and filmmakers, thereby contributing to the development of a new generation of talent within the community. A higher sense of representation and pride can be found among the Deaf community as a result of the visibility and success of Deaf filmmakers.

### **The Need for More Authentic Storytelling**

It is of the utmost importance to tell stories that are not only real but also truthful when depicting cultures that are under-represented in the media, such as the Deaf community (Murphy, 2017). Other examples of such cultures include the hearing community. Representations that are true and courteous are not only a contribution to the battle against stereotypes and misinformation, but they also serve as a representation of the genuine diversity of experiences that individuals have gone through.

By ensuring that characters who are deaf are portrayed in a manner that accurately represents their actual experiences, challenges, and strengths, genuine storytelling ensures that the characters are portrayed in a manner that is not just accurate but also correct. The provision of a wide variety of characters and narratives that go beyond the conventional and somewhat restrictive depictions of deafness is one way in which this objective might be fulfilled. In order to accomplish the objective, this is an essential step. By depicting Deaf characters as fully developed persons who have their own tales that are unique to them, (Murphy, 2017) This can be accomplished by showing Deaf characters as having their own storylines. One of the ways in which these filmmakers can make a contribution is through this.



Since the beginning of time, a substantial number of depictions of deaf people in the media have depended on preconceived conceptions (Foss, 2014). This has the potential to contribute to the dissemination of inaccurate information and the reinforcing of stereotypes that are not positive. In authentic storytelling, these prejudices are challenged by providing images of Deaf people that are more accurate and sophisticated than those that are normally used. Authentic storytelling also provides images of Deaf people (Poveda, et al, 2008). This tactic contributes to the elimination of barriers that are caused by misunderstandings and the development of a picture of deafness that is more accepting and compassionate. It is also helpful in removing barriers that are caused by misunderstandings.

Include Deaf people in the process of telling tales, whether they are doing so in the position of actors, authors, or directors, in order to produce portrayals that are authentic. This is crucial and necessary for the aim of producing portrayals that are authentic. When it comes to the creation of narratives that are meaningful to the Deaf community, the efforts of Deaf creators are absolutely necessary (Brueggemann, 1999 ; Charlton, 1998; Padden, & Humphries, 2006). Deaf innovators bring with them their own unique personal experiences and cultural insights, which is the reason for this phenomenon. As a result of their involvement, they take steps to ensure that stories are delivered from the perspective of an insider, which eventually results in representations that are more profound and significant than they would have been otherwise.

Not only does the telling of tales in a true manner boost inclusivity in the wider media landscape, but it also increases the level of inclusivity that exists inside the Deaf community (Wrigley, 1996). A climate that is more accepting, respected, and respectful of the ideas and viewpoints of all individuals can be cultivated by the media through the transmission of information that highlights the different experiences and perspectives of the Deaf community (Saunders, 2016). This can be accomplished through the dissemination of information. Through the utilisation of this strategy, not only does it adapt to the requirements of Deaf audiences, but it also teaches mainstream viewers, which ultimately leads to an increase in comprehension and acceptance.

## CONCLUSION

In addition, there is a larger cultural shift towards a higher knowledge and incorporation of people who have hearing impairments, and the rise of Deaf representation in the media is an

illustration of this larger tendency. A greater awareness and incorporation of people who have hearing impairments is important. The United States of America is currently experiencing a paradigm shift of this kind. What you see here is an illustration of a cultural movement that is now taking place. At the same time as the film industry is in the process of moving away from outmoded stereotypes and adopting more authentic images of the deaf community, it is also providing a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective on the lives of those who are deaf. Authentic portrayals of the deaf population are becoming increasingly prevalent in the film industry, which is the reason for this trend. The method that is being discussed here includes the full process of moving away from concepts that have been examined in the past. Another element of the process is detailed here. While they are engaging in conversation with audiences that include people who are both hearing and deaf, they also present visuals that are not only pertinent but also respectful. This is done simultaneously with their participation in the discussion. CODA and Sound of Metal are both wonderful examples of this change since they give details that are not only pertinent but also respectful. Both of these publications are excellent examples. Excellent illustrations of this transition may be found in both of these films. An good illustration of this transition can be seen in both of these films that are being discussed here.

People who are deaf in the film industry are making a significant contribution to the shift that is currently taking place inside the film industry. In order to accomplish this, they give novel points of view that not only improve the storytelling process but also bring into question the typical stories that are prominent in the industry. The engagement of these individuals not only helps to guarantee that depictions are more realistic, but it also helps to improve accessibility and diversity inside the business. Due to the fact that their presence serves to assure it, this is the case. In addition to the numerous benefits that may be obtained from the engagement of these individuals, the fact that this is it is one of those advantages. Through the incorporation of the voices of deaf individuals into all elements of filmmaking, from acting to directing, the media has the ability to more effectively depict the broad spectrum of experiences that deaf people have. Among these capabilities is the capacity to represent the one-of-a-kind situations that people who are deaf are forced to go through. Due to the fact that deaf people have access to such a diverse range of experiences, this is something that can very well be accomplished. Certainly, this is something that is attainable. Maintaining advocacy actions and working in conjunction with Deaf creators is an absolute requirement in light of the fact that it is anticipated that the demand for authentic tales will

continue to have a greater prevalence in the years to come. Due to the fact that these endeavours are essential parts of the total, the relevance of these endeavours is brought to light. There are a variety of goals that can be accomplished by the utilisation of realistic representations. These goals include the elimination of preconceived notions, the development of empathy, and the provision of a forum for individuals who are deaf to talk about their experiences. Through the use of realistic figures, it is possible to achieve each and every one of these accomplishments. The use of accurate representations is directly responsible for the fact that each and every one of these things is now attainable for the first time. It is of the utmost importance to lay a strong emphasis on authenticity and variety, ensuring that every voice is heard and valued. This is of the utmost importance. The importance of this cannot be overstated. This is as a result of the fact that the media environment is in a state of continual upheaval, which is something that must be kept in mind due to the huge relevance of the situation.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Encouragement and assistance should be provided to deaf individuals so that they can participate in all aspects of the filmmaking process, including acting, writing, directing, and producing. Those who are deaf must be provided with aid since it is essential.
2. There should be a way to develop and implement initiatives that would assist the film industry in recognising and promoting the musical and performing abilities of deaf musicians and actors. The motion picture business will benefit from these programs in a positive way.
3. Deaf actors and crew members must be provided with the necessary accommodations in order for them to be able to work on film sets. These accommodations include interpreters, captions, and assistance with communication. It is essential that these individuals be provided with these accommodations.
4. In order for filmmakers to get a more profound understanding of Deaf culture and the reasons why it is essential to portray Deaf people in an appropriate manner, it is of the utmost significance that educational programs and resources be made available to individuals who work in the film industry.
5. When it comes to the media, there should be a diverse assortment of experiences and narratives that are examined from the point of view of the deaf population. This should receive a great deal of support from the community. For the purpose of ensuring that the viewpoints of Deaf individuals are heard and respected throughout the length of the

filmmaking process, it is extremely necessary to collaborate with organisations and advocacy groups that are dedicated to the Deaf community. This is the only way to accomplish this goal.

6. Films that are produced by deaf individuals and that depict the culture and experiences of the deaf community should be promoted and given financial investments. It is necessary to make these investments and promote these films.

Making it a practice to monitor the portrayal of deaf people in the media on a regular basis is something that should be done since it is vital. This will ensure that the descriptions continue to be polite and pertinent to the topic regardless of the circumstances.

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