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Film: Deaf Characters

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Film: Deaf Characters

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This entry focuses on films made by American and foreign filmmakers who have little or no special interest in or knowledge about deaf people or Deaf communities. Casting hearing actors to portray deaf characters is unfortunately common. Because neither the filmmakers, the expected audiences, nor the actors know anything about d/Deaf people, inauthenticities are widespread. These problems are only slightly improved by casting a Deaf actor: Deaf actors can portray authentic use of a sign language but are often limited by the script, the director, and the editing process. Therefore, while the signing community commends the casting of Deaf actors, the discussion here focuses on the deaf characters themselves and reasons for their inclusion in the story. In the following, the actors are labeled either “D” for Deaf or “h” for hearing. If there is no label, the actor’s status is unknown.

Deaf Main Characters

Films such as *The Miracle Worker* (1962, Patty Duke h), *The Hammer* (2010, Russel Harvard D), *Music Within* (2007, Ron Livingston h), and the Lon Chaney story, *Man of a Thousand Faces* (1957) are dramatized biographies of famous deaf people—or in the case of Chaney, the story of a famous actor with Deaf parents (Celia Lovsky h and Nolan Leary h)—who must struggle in a hostile, biased world. Other than these movies based on true stories, only a few films have a main character who is deaf. One such film is *Johnny Belinda* (1949). It begins with Belinda (Jane Wyman h) depicted as almost a non-person, until a kindly doctor arrives in town and teaches her sign language. The German film *Stille Liebe* (2001) is about a Deaf nun (Emmauelle Laborit D) who, just after taking her vows, meets a Deaf Latvian immigrant (Lars Otterstedt D) and falls in love. In the South Korean film, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), the main character is a deaf man (Shin Ha-kyun) working in the black market organ trade. The Indian film *Iqbal* (2005) features a deaf boy (Shreyas Talpade) in a rural village who dreams of becoming a cricket player and actually makes the national team. *Bangkok Dangerous* (1999) is an unusual film in that the main character is a deaf contract killer (Pawarith Monkolpisit h), and in an early flashback, the audience gets a glimpse of how he was taunted as a deaf child. Other films feature deaf criminals, for example, *Requiem for a Dream* (2000, Bryan Chattoo D) and *No Way Out* (1950, Harry Bellaver h), but only as minor characters.

Beyond Silence (1996), is perhaps the only major movie about a hearing child’s relationship with her Deaf parents (Howie Seago D and Emanuelle Laborit D). This German film is unusual in its depiction of a Deaf character’s emotional growth. *Khamoshi: The Musical* (1996) is a Bollywood remake of *Beyond Silence*.

Deaf Communities

Virtually no films show their deaf characters living in Deaf communities, or even in relationships with another deaf person. *Children of a Lesser God* (1986) broke ground in its scenes set in a deaf school and at a Deaf party, but it actually focused on the experiences of a speech teacher who falls in love with a Deaf janitor, Sarah (Marlee Matlin d). Matlin won an Academy Award for her portrayal of Sarah but, ironically, the movie proved frustrating to Deaf viewers, who found that the ASL dialogue had been pushed out of the frame by camera angles and editing.

Deaf Characters as Context for Hearing Main Characters

Many films follow the formula of “Lesser God,” making the hearing character the main focus. *Mr. Holland’s Opus* (1995) chronicles the life of a frustrated musician who drifts away from his family in bitterness when he learns that his only child, Cole (Nicholas John Renner d at age 6, Joseph Anderson d at age 15, Anthony Natale d at age 28), is deaf. In the end, Cole shows Mr. Holland that empathy, kindness, and joy are more important than hearing. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1968) depicts various hearing people in a small town who learn and grow from interacting with the Deaf character John Singer (Alan Arkin h). When Singer’s Deaf friend

(Chuck McCann) is committed to a psychiatric hospital, Singer dies in despair, leaving the hearing characters wiser, but not happier. This film shows Singer lipreading and writing with the hearing characters, and signing with his Deaf friend. Serving a similar role but with more positive results, the deaf protagonist (Ming-hsiang Tung) of the Taiwanese film, *Island Etude* (2006) also serves as a sounding board, but his presence heals those he meets.

In many films, however, the only function of the deaf character is to give the audience context for the main (hearing) character. In *Gas, Food, Lodging* (1992), a woman visits a seemingly tough Hispanic acquaintance and discovers that his mother (actress uncredited) is deaf. After seeing them interact, she realizes that her friend is not the tough guy she had previously believed him to be. In Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975), one of several intertwined stories about people in the country music industry concerns an affluent white woman who is married to one cad and having an affair with another, while enjoying a career as a studio gospel singer. Her attention to her two deaf children (James Dan Calvert d and Donna Denton d), with whom she signs, tells us that there is more to her than music, money, and men. The 1977 film *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* presents filmgoers with another confused young woman living a double life: by day, Theresa is a kind and patient teacher of deaf children, but by night, she cruises bars seeking casual sexual encounters. In both films, working with deaf children is portrayed as a noble, even redemptive, endeavor. Association with deaf people does not always redeem the main character, however, as we see in *Walker* (1987), where the main character is thoroughly evil despite his soft spot for his deaf fiancée (Marlee Matlin d).

Grand Canyon (1991) has deaf characters deep in the background. The son of an apparently well-to-do family works in a summer camp where a deaf boy is registered, and another character places a TTY call to his daughter at Gallaudet University. Both details signal the audience that these characters are empathetic. *Speakeasy* (2002) uses a Deaf father-in-law (Andy Vasnick d) and a young deaf daughter in a similar background fashion. In *The Family Stone* (2005), one of the more stable and functional members of an eccentric family is a gay Deaf man, Thad (Tyrone Giordano d). When a "normal" dinner guest ignorantly speculates about the difficulties posed by a deaf, gay child, the whole family gasps, and the mother tells Thad, "Hey! You're as normal as any other asshole sitting at this table, and don't you forget it!" thus confronting the guest with a more universal construct of what "normal" means.

Deaf Characters and Sign Language for Intrigue

Thrillers with deaf characters typically put a deaf woman in peril. In *Hear No Evil* (1993), Jillian (Marlee Matlin d) has been learning from her hearing boyfriend which mechanical devices cause ear-splitting noises. When she is pursued by a would-be murderer, she takes advantage of a fire alarm, a sprinkler system, and a stereo turned full blast to mask the sounds of her movements as she attempts to hide. In *Orphan* (2009) a family with two children, one of them deaf (Aryana Engineer h), adopts an orphan who turns out to be a murderous psychopath. When this "orphan" cleverly steals the deaf girl's hearing aid before launching the climactic killing spree, we gasp in horror as the deaf girl negotiates the house unable to hear just where her mother or the murderer are. *Suspect* (1987) has a major deaf character, a mentally ill transient (Liam Neeson h) who has lost his hearing during the Viet Nam war and is accused of murder, but the film focuses on the efforts of his court-appointed attorney, who first must realize that he is deaf, then piece the case together with minimal help from him. (His treatment by the police will be regarded as unsettling and quite authentic by many deaf viewers.) In a departure from the usual use of the deaf character in thrillers, *The River Wild* (1996) has hearing characters communicating surreptitiously in ASL after they are taken hostage. A brief glimpse of a Deaf father (Victor H. Galloway d) at the beginning of the movie shows where they learned to sign.

Deaf Characters as Jokes

Not many movies make jokes about deaf characters anymore, but a few stand out. In *Murder by Death* (1978), Yetta (Nancy Wilson), a deaf housekeeper sent to work in the mansion of a mad millionaire, has silly communication misfires with the blind butler. *See No Evil, Hear No Evil* (1989) similarly pairs a deaf (Gene Wilder) and a blind character for comic interaction, requiring impressive choreography for its jokes, but one poignant scene contrasts their differing attitudes towards being blind and deaf.

Minor Characters Who Just Happen to be Deaf

Increasingly, we find films with minor characters who just happen to be deaf. *Pocket Full of Miracles* (1961), includes a deaf woman (Ellen Corby) in its supporting cast of street people who befriend Apple Annie. The somber story of *It's My Party* (1995) unfolds as a man is dying of AIDS. When he hosts his own goodbye party the final night of his life, we see that his sister (Marlee Matlin) is deaf, and that everyone else at the party is able to communicate with her without fuss. *The Lingui Incident* (1992) features a deaf restaurant hostess (Matlin) being courted by a man desperately searching for a green-card bride. This film is memorable for the appearance of Matlin's real-life interpreter. The sleeper movie *Crazy Moon* (1986) is about a shy, eccentric young man who is ready to escape the confines of his wealth, and a deaf woman (Vanessa Vaughn) who possesses the easiness in the world that the hero wishes to emulate. This film shows the deaf character with deaf roommates. In *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), the main character, Charles, has a younger deaf brother, David (David Bower) for whom he interprets—even for David's longtime friends who, oddly, do not seem to know how to communicate. It's noteworthy that Charles deliberately filters what David says when he deems the comments to be insulting or inappropriate, but while viewers may find this unethical, it seems that David somehow knows his brother is censoring communications and doesn't mind. When a hearing woman is attracted to David, she learns to finger spell for herself.

Deaf Characters as Metonyms

A few movies use deaf characters to represent or emphasize powerlessness of certain social groups. *Illtown* (1996) uses the character of a deaf teenager (Adam Cartwright) to represent the powerlessness of youth in America. An extremely disturbing example of a deaf woman as the ultimate powerless person is found in *In the Company of Men* (1997). Chad wants to toy with a woman's affections for the sole purpose of dumping her just so he and his friend can watch a female be crushed. A deaf woman (Stacy Edwards) is their perfect victim. China's *To Live* (1994; also released in English as "Lifetimes") uses a deaf woman (Tianchi Lu) to symbolize the victimization of the Chinese people during the Communist Revolution. Similarly, *The Perfect Circle* (Bosnia, 1997) follows the harrowing story of two young brothers, one hearing, one deaf (Almir Podgorica), caught up in the siege of Sarajevo. The hearing brother serves as interpreter.

The French film *Ridicule* (1996) uses deaf characters to show the vacuity of the court of King Louis XVI, shortly before the French Revolution, where witty repartee can win royal favor. At an exhibition by the Abbé de l'Épée, one of the pupils (Bruno Zanardi) answers a question from the audience with such witty sign play that the Abbé cannot translate it into French. The audience is impressed, applauding what they could not understand.

Psychosomatic Deafness

A far-fetched but convenient story device is psychosomatic deafness as a result of emotional trauma. These roles allow deaf characters to speak clearly and require hearing actors. In *Psych Out: The Trip* (1968), after Jenny (Susan Strasberg) is deafened by her mother's cruelty, she sets out to find her brother and ends up in San Francisco's Haight Ashbury during the Summer of Love. The title character in *The Story of Esther*

Costello (1957, Heather Sears h) became deaf and blind after witnessing the accidental death of her biological mother. The rock opera *Tommy* (1975) presents a boy (Barry Winch h as young Tommy, Roger Daltry h as the adult) who becomes deaf and blind after witnessing his father's murder at the hands of her mother's paramour. *Amy* (1998) also has a child (Alana de Roma h) who becomes deaf when she witnesses the death of her father during a rock concert.

Heightened Sensory Powers

The myth that deaf (and blind) people have heightened sensory perception sometimes prompts writers and filmmakers to provide their deaf characters with supernatural powers. *After Image* (2001) presents Laura (Terylene d), a young deaf woman whose visions and strange dreams enable her to discern clues to crimes. *What the Bleep Do We Know?* (2004) is a hybrid of narrative and documentary filmmaking, with Amanda (Marlee Matlin d) simultaneously experiencing different planes of existence as she struggles with the existential angst of her life.

Exploring Themes of Isolation

Several recent films have used a deaf, or, in one case, deafened, character to explore the longing for true communication and connection with others, and the difficulty for any human language in making truly meaningful contact with another person. The French film *Code Unknown* (2000) and the American film *Babel* (2006) both present signing deaf characters as symbols of isolation, not because these characters cannot communicate (they can), but perhaps because Sign is wrongly seen as more immediate, more intimate, and the films show that this is not the case—the deaf characters are like everyone else in having trouble really getting through to others. In *Babel*, the deaf Japanese teenager (Rinko Kikuchi h) cannot truly communicate with the father who loves her until she is literally naked, while in *Code Unknown* the deaf child (Elisabeth Marceul) playing charades with classmates cannot convey in mime the pain she is feeling, even to other deaf children who are trying hard to understand. In *The Five Senses* (1999), an ophthalmologist who is slowly becoming deaf learns to make meaningful contact when a prostitute teaches him to use his sense of touch, a sense which a second main character, long deprived of the touch of another human being, weeps for. These films use deaf characters and signed languages in productive and non-stereotypical ways.

This article has covered only a few of the pre-1988 films discussed in John S. Schuchman's seminal work *Hollywood Speaks*. Because sign language and the notion of Deaf culture were not on the mental maps of mainstream audiences at the time he wrote, Schuchman, unsurprisingly, found few nuanced film representations and believed that captioning, by providing access for Deaf audiences, would force a change. He was right: indisputably, many more deaf characters are incorporated into the storylines of mainstream films, and occasionally a character is surprisingly nuanced. But it remains the case that authenticity is subject to the overall goals of a film's writers and director.

Miriam Nathan Lerner and Edna Edith Sayers

See also [Actors](#); [Artists](#); [Deaf Cinema](#); [Film: Documentaries](#); [Film: Silent, Indies, and Post-Talkies Era](#); [Literature, Deaf Characters in](#)

Further Readings

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