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A call for change: sign language cinema and the politics of visual storytelling

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between sign language and the recorded moving image is unique – film is the only true medium for retaining the spatial, temporal, and visual nature of sign languages. Yet this linguistic integrity remains largely unrealised, as film and television industries maintain barriers that prevent Deaf creators from accessing positions of creative authority. I address this paradox: the screen's capacity to perfectly capture sign languages versus the industry's oblique and persistent refusal to entrust Deaf filmmakers with creative leadership. As a researcher and Deaf writer-director with over 20 years in the film industry, I examine how hearing culture's hegemony maintains audiocentric practices through casting, cinematography, narrative tropes, and production hierarchies. Through production studies analysis, I propose crucial distinctions between authentic deaf casting and what I call 'Deaf authorial control'.[1] This article outlines a path toward authentic Deaf authorial control encompassing writing, directing, and producing roles – the key creative positions shaping screen texts from conception to distribution. This article challenges the current paradigm whereby Deaf stories are frequently told through hearing perspectives. This demands recognition that Deaf creators bring not only linguistic and cultural authenticity but also inherent visual approaches that benefit the artform itself, regardless of subject matter.

KEYWORDS

Sign language; deafness; authorial control; authentic casting; production

Introduction

The global rise of sign language visibility across digital media platforms reveals a striking contradiction at the heart of contemporary screen culture. While Deaf influencers control their representation in ways that are personal, effective and sustainable through social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube (Bart et al. 2022; Saunders, 2016), commercial film and television industries remain structurally resistant to Deaf creative leadership in self-determinant roles such as writer, director or producer. This disparity highlights the urgent need to examine how traditional screen industries perpetuate exclusionary practices despite growing recognition of Deaf cultural and linguistic contributions to visual storytelling.

Historically, deaf and disabled individuals have faced greater barriers to authorial leadership positions than to acting opportunities. The multinational statistical evidence is

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sobering. In Australia, while 18% of the population identifies as having a disability, Screen Australia's (2024) 'Seeing Ourselves on Screen' report reveals only 4.2% of characters in Australian screen content are portrayed as having a disability, while merely 1.7% of writers, 1.3% of directors and 1.1% of producers identified as disabled. Similar disparities exist internationally, with the UK Film Council's Diversity Survey (British Film Institute 2022) finding that while 5.3% of on-screen roles went to disabled actors, only 2.1% of credited writers and 1.6% of directors were represented. In the US, industry reports from the University of California Los Angeles and the University of Southern California show that of the 26% of the US adult population who identify as disabled, only 2.7% of disabled characters in commercial films and TV shows are played by self-identified disabled actors, while disabled people represent less than 1% of professionals in credited writer, director and producer roles (Smith et al. 2021; Hunt and Ramón, 2022). What this evidence tells us is that even the low Deaf and disabled on-screen visibility has outpaced behind-the-camera authority.

As a practitioner-scholar positioned at the intersection of Deaf filmmaking and academic analysis, my perspective emerges from both theoretical engagement with critical film studies, disability studies, and critical Deaf studies, alongside my own professional experience navigating industry structures that systematically privilege hearing creators. My fluency across multiple sign languages – including Australian Sign Language (Auslan), British Sign Language (BSL), and American Sign Language (ASL) – alongside English provides unique insight into the linguistic and cultural complexities of translating Deaf experiences to screen. Such linguistic diversity and sociolinguistic variation within Deaf communities have been extensively documented (Lucas 2001). This dual positioning as both insider and analyst reveals the persistent gap between industry rhetoric on inclusion and the material realities of creative decision-making. The phenomenon I investigate centres on what I term the 'authorial control paradox': while the screen is the ideal medium for preserving the spatial, temporal, and visual nature of sign languages, the very industries that profit from Deaf content continue to exclude Deaf creators from positions in which they might exercise meaningful creative authority. This exclusion manifests not merely in casting decisions – though authentic casting of deaf actors in deaf roles remains crucial – but more fundamentally in who controls the narrative development, cinematographic choices, and production processes that determine how sign languages and Deaf experiences are constructed for screen consumption.

Contemporary screen representation demonstrates both progress and persistence of problematic patterns. Hollywood productions increasingly featuring Deaf actors in prominent roles – major stars like Millicent Simmonds in *A Quiet Place 1 & 2* (2018 – 2021) and Lauren Ridloff in the *Walking Dead* (2018) and *Eternals* (2021) exemplify this trend. Similarly to these screen texts, Deaf performers often work within creative frameworks developed by non-signing writers, directors, and producers. The result is a form of representation that may appear authentic on surface level (and to non-signers) while remaining constrained by hearing-centric directives on narrative structure, visual composition, sound design, and linguistic expression. Professional Deaf creatives typically find themselves relegated to supporting roles – Sign Language Director or Deaf Consultant, validating creative decisions made by non-deaf practitioners – rather than positions in which they might shape fundamental directions, otherwise colloquially named 'deafwashing'. This relegation reflects broader power dynamics within

commercial screen industries that position Deaf participation as accommodation rather than recognising Deaf cultural and linguistic contributions as inherently valuable to the artform. The persistence of these dynamics stems from intersecting factors: historical perceptions of deaf people as objects rather than subjects of representation (Norden 1994), commercial imperatives that prioritise established industry insider networks over inclusive practices, and the reluctance of hearing professionals to dismantle their hegemonic vision; an imaginary of what it must be like to be deaf – to use sign language – and to live in a silent world.

Through production studies analysis combined with critical examination of industry practices, this article proposes a framework for understanding authentic Deaf authorial control as distinct from – though complementary to – authentic casting practices. I argue that transformative representation requires fundamental restructuring of creative hierarchies rather than mere inclusion of Deaf bodies within existing systems. Such transformation demands recognition that Deaf creators bring not only cultural authenticity but innovative approaches to visual storytelling that can enhance cinematic expression across all subject matters. The analysis that follows challenges current paradigms where Deaf perspectives are filtered through hearing perspectives and requires recognition of Deaf creative vision as a resource for cinematic innovation rather than a limitation to overcome. I examine how Deaf creators might reclaim narrative authority while identifying the structural changes necessary to support authentic creative collaboration between deaf and hearing filmmakers. While meaningful deaf-hearing collaboration is possible in the film industry, this can only be achieved once the dominant filmmaking culture has undergone a profound reassessment of what Deaf creators are capable of and how they choose to represent their languages, transforming cinematographic, cultural and linguistic representations of sign on screen. This call for change is both academic critique and professional testimony, a provocation offered up in response to the profound dissonance of accomplished and professional Deaf creatives being told by hearing filmmakers and producers that their projects are shining a light on under-represented voices and the issues Deaf people face, while simultaneously locking them out of the sites of creative power.

Challenging audism: linguistic hegemony and cultural authenticity

Understanding Deaf exclusion from creative leadership requires centring the analytical tools of Critical Deaf studies rather than applying broader frameworks of marginalisation. While the persistent exclusion of disabled people from creative authority reflects broader patterns of ableism and marginalisation as explored by Clare (2015) in his analysis of disability, queerness and liberation, Critical Deaf studies specifically examines the experiences, cultures, and identities of Deaf individuals.. It challenges the audiological perspectives that dominate both medical and media discourses while advocating for recognition of Deaf people as a linguistic and cultural minority with distinct sign languages and social practices (Ladd 2003). This specificity matters: where general disability studies might focus on access or accommodation, Critical Deaf studies foregrounds questions of linguistic rights, cultural sovereignty, and audism – a term originally coined by Humphries (1975)—the belief that hearing is inherently superior to deafness, which manifests through institutional structures and systemic barriers that

marginalise Deaf individuals and their languages (L. Bauman and H-Dirksen 2004). The necessity of signed languages for the education and health of Deaf children is well established in recent research (Murray, Hall and Snoddon, 2019).

Linguistic hegemony operates distinctively in screen representations of Deaf people, requiring analytical frameworks attuned to both visual language and cultural politics. Cultural authenticity, in this context, refers to the degree to which representations of a particular group's experiences, values, traditions, and beliefs align with their lived realities. Other scholars working on Deaf representation have drawn from different theoretical traditions. Abigail Davies, for example, employed Gramsci's subaltern discourses in her process as script editor developing a half-hour screenplay by Deaf screenwriter Lyn Stewart-Taylor for the British Sign Language Trust (BSLBT). Davies' approach created space for Stewart-Taylor, a relatively inexperienced screenwriter (and by industry standards 'untested') to reclaim her cultural narrative while navigating proscriptive industry processes (Davies 2019). While subaltern frameworks usefully illuminate power dynamics and silenced voices (Binebai 2015; Spivak 1988), they don't fully address the linguistic hegemony specific to Deaf experience in media. Critical Deaf studies, by contrast, directly confronts how oralism – the prioritisation of spoken language and marginalisation or erasure of sign languages – manifests even in ostensibly 'inclusive' screen representations. It is a framework offering more precise tools – particularly its focus on linguistic hegemony and the cultural politics of sign language representation.

Linguistic hegemony manifests in media representations of oralism, the prioritisation of spoken language and the marginalisation or erasure of sign languages, even while being presented on screen. This can take the form of editing processes that cut short signed dialogue, framing that prioritises reactions rather than completed exchanges in sign, portraying deaf characters who primarily communicate through speech or technology rather than sign language, or by failing to provide accurate and accessible subtitles or captions for Deaf viewers consistently across all languages, spoken or signed, presented on screen. Such practices reinforce the essentialism of needing to hear spoken languages to fully participate in the cultural transactions that occur when we watch film or television. This centring of speech as the means of framing the Deaf experience undermines the linguistic rights and cultural identities of Deaf individuals.

Authentic casting vs authorial control

The definition of authentic representation of marginalised communities in film and television has emerged as a central concern in contemporary media studies and production practices (Crutchfield and Epstein 2000; Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick 2019; Haller 2010). Within this broader discourse, the representation of deaf and disabled individuals intersects with ethical considerations of authenticity, agency and the politics of portrayal. As Ellis and Garland-Thomson (2020) argue, disability representation in film is shaped by broader cultural and political forces that often reinforce ableist norms, making authentic disabled leadership and agency essential for meaningful change. Unlike many gender and racial minorities, disability discourses often involve divergent sensory embodiment that non-disabled creators don't have physical access to. This demands not only crafting stories that resonate as legitimate with minority identities but a mise en scène

and cinematography that responsibly engage the audiovisual medium in ways that provide nuanced characterisation, rather than reinscribing isolation and alterity.

As Mitchell and Snyder discuss, dominant, non-disabled filmmaking has long legitimised the appropriation of disabled bodily experiences as metaphorical devices (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, 53). Meanwhile, disability-led representation navigates tensions between medical and social models, challenging fundamental assumptions of what the disability experience must involve. Critically, disability itself is not static; it can involve unstable, episodic or progressive conditions that influence how characters may be depicted in distinct ways (Samuels 2017). To be Deaf specifically involves daily code-switching between signed languages, speech, lipreading and text-based communication (writing, SMS, captions, etc.) Yet screen representations routinely portray Deaf people using a single communication modality regardless of context, medical interventions or situational dynamics. Many also depict deafness as an inevitable, total lack of audition, a complete silence erasing the diversity of sensory perceptions which, like vision, can range across a broad spectrum. This reveals the important distinction between two common approaches to authentic representation in the film industry: the casting of deaf and disabled actors in corresponding roles versus the involvement of deaf and disabled individuals in the authorial leadership positions of writing, directing, and producing. Ensuring that cinema and television offerings with sign language and Deaf characters are written, directed and/or produced by Deaf filmmakers is paramount to upholding linguistic integrity, which extends beyond mere accurate signing; it encompasses the cultural nuances, historical context, and lived experiences of Deaf individuals (Hamilton and Egbert 2024). By separating out and examining the practical dimensions of the key roles that construct narrative representation, I highlight the inequities in authorial positions for Deaf creatives, the difficulties in gaining meaningful access to industry, and how it impacts Deaf cultural politics.

Limitations of casting alone

In addition to creators, the film and television industries have historically excluded disabled performers, with non-disabled actors typically cast in disabled roles – a practice colloquially termed 'disability drag' (Siebers 2008) or 'crip-face'. Sandahl and Auslander (2005) examines how non-disabled actors are taught to appropriate temporary disability markers such as specific movements, vocal patterns, or physical characteristics as performative elements, rendering disability as spectacle. For Deaf representation specifically, this manifests when hearing actors play Deaf characters without cultural understanding or proper sign language fluency, reducing complex linguistic and cultural identities to simplified visual markers or stereotypes. This is further problematised when hard-of-hearing (HoH) actors are cast, thus fulfilling the brief of authentic casting, but their ability to mask their hearing loss, or 'pass' as hearing often signals a convenience to producers not willing to incur the extra budgetary cost of sign language interpreters or adapt to Deaf-centric practices. While these individual actors may be legitimately exploring their identity as deaf or Deaf by taking on these roles, they still present with limited knowledge of sign or participation in the Deaf community and culture. Their use of sign on screen frequently mirrors that of hearing actors playing deaf characters, learning sign dialogue in auto-mimetic fashion that is often nonsensical to sign fluent audiences.

Consider the vocal correlation: where actors perform in non-native languages or adopt culturally specific accents, audiences will perceive critical differences between those who authentically speak a foreign language versus those using coached pronunciation. If the accents are unconvincing or inconsistent, audience engagement is likely to be reduced (Abimbola Adetola Stephen-Adesina 2024). This 'disability drag' in Deaf representation consistently produces problematic patterns:

(1) Sign language becomes gestural and decorative rather than authentic dialogue with full linguistic import;
(2) Deaf characters are frequently depicted through a medical lens rather than a cultural one, presenting with physical deficit;
(3) Speech abilities lack consistency with the range of deaf accents – characters either do not speak at all or have perfect speech, rarely demonstrating the wide spectrum of speech acquisition; and
(4) Narratives tend to centre on 'overcoming' deafness rather than exploring Deaf identity, pride and culture as Deaf gain (Baumann and Murray 2014).

The stakes of these misrepresentations extend beyond aesthetic concerns. Film and media remain the primary means through which hearing audiences encounter and construct understandings of deafness, making these distorted portrayals particularly influential. When hearing filmmakers perpetuate 'disability drag', they don't merely create inaccurate individual characters – they build upon and reinscribe existing stereotypes, creating a feedback loop that shapes public perception, policy discussions, and ultimately the material conditions Deaf people navigate. Paradoxically, authentic casting in recent high-profile productions has added what might be termed an 'aura' of authenticity to hearing filmmakers' creative visions. Films like *CODA* (2021), *A Quiet Place* (2018), *Sound of Metal* (2019), *Wonderstruck* (2017), and *The Tribe* (2014) have achieved significant critical and commercial success, with their authentic casting functioning as cultural capital that validates the projects while creative authority remains concentrated in hearing hands. This dynamic reveals how Deaf participation – even authentic Deaf performances – can ultimately serve to benefit and legitimise the creative vision of hearing filmmakers rather than challenging the fundamental power structures that exclude Deaf voices from authorial control.

This is a persistent pattern in the screen industry, with the intersection of authentic casting practices and industry structures revealing significant tensions. The economic model of screen production often prioritises bankable stars over authentic representation, creating a circular problem: disabled actors cannot become 'bankable stars' if they aren't given opportunities to build their careers, yet producers insist they need bankable stars in order to secure finance for their project. This creates barriers for Deaf actors and impedes the career progression of future Deaf stars. Additionally, accelerated production timelines may discourage proper training in sign languages for non-signing actors, fundamentally distorting the languages being depicted, resulting in incomprehensible dialogue or mis-signs.

While recent years have witnessed significant advocacy and gains for authentic casting, resulting in productions like *CODA* (2021) for which experienced Deaf actor Troy Kotsur was awarded an Oscar, and television series such as *Switched At Birth*

(2011–2017) considered ground-breaking for its largely Deaf cast, authentic representation in authorship has received less critical examination and industry support. It could be said that the favouring of authentic casting over authentic narrative control performs a highly visible act of inclusion that diverts our attention away from the systemic narrative control that non-disabled creators hold, who conform to societal expectations to reinscribe negative tropes on disability and deafness on screen for commercial gain (Norden 1994).

These distinctions become tangible when examining specific examples of Deaf authorial control. In *This Close* (2018), Shoshannah Stern and Josh Feldman's dual roles as co-creators, writers, and executive producers enabled them to construct narratives where sign language dialogue flows naturally without being subordinated to hearing expectations. Their control extended to casting decisions, rehearsal processes that accommodated signed exchanges, and editorial choices that preserved the rhythm and spatial requirements of ASL conversation (Petski and Goldberg, 2019).

When Deaf individuals occupy authorial leadership positions – writing, directing and producing – this is where the most significant progress occurs in dismantling systemic issues. These roles contribute to the shaping of a project from its earliest stages: generating original concepts to portray realistic D/deaf experiences, ensuring the cinematography and editing choices privilege sign language in the frame and exercise significant creative agency when responding to critical feedback from financial stakeholders. These are all forms of narrative control over the filmmaking process that most actors cannot exert. In particular, Deaf creative power is essential when pushing back against commercial studio mandates to reduce sign language presentation in anticipation of audiocentric audience expectations. In such cases, the capacity for deaf resistance is equally important as the capacity for deaf representation.

It is critical to outline the dimensions of the three different creative roles of writing, directing and producing, presenting systematically how they can afford authorial control – or not, depending on circumstance – over how Deaf texts and sign languages take shape on our screens.

Writing: beyond getting it 'right'

Deaf and disabled screenwriters bring transformative perspectives to screen representation through their lived experience and creative approaches. Their contributions extend far beyond simply getting disability 'right' to fundamentally reshaping how stories are structured, characters are developed and their agency unfolds. They are more likely to create deaf/disabled characters with genuine agency and complexity, rather than functioning as inspirational objects or narrative devices for deepening non-disabled characters' story arcs. Jacques Audiard's *Read My Lips* (*Sur mes lèvres*, 2001) exemplifies the persistent cinematic mythology that positions lip reading as a superhuman ability possessed by deaf characters (King 2023). This French thriller follows Carla, a hard-of-hearing office worker who uses her supposed exceptional lip-reading skills to assist in criminal surveillance. The film's central premise relies on the audiocentric assumption that deaf people naturally develop compensatory 'superpowers' – a trope that simultaneously others and fetishises deaf experience. As Lehman notes, 'only 30% of spoken English can be accurately lip read (even by the best lip reader who has been deaf for many

years)' (Lehman 2023). Yet Re*ad My Lips* presents Carla as capable of reading conversations from impossible distances, in poor lighting conditions, and even through reflections in windows – feats that would challenge even the most skilled lip reader. This misrepresentation serves as what David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder term 'narrative prosthesis', using disability as a plot device rather than exploring authentic deaf experience (Mitchell and Snyder 2000). Carla's supposed lip-reading abilities function primarily to advance the hearing characters' criminal schemes, positioning her as a useful tool rather than a fully realised protagonist. The film never interrogates the exhausting cognitive load of lip reading and more critically, the high error rate. To be a skilled lip reader, there is an underlying requirement to possess an extensive vocabulary in the spoken language; if you do not know the word in the first place, you cannot recognise it on the lips.

More problematically, the film reinforces a tendency critiqued in works such as *Signing the Body Poetic* to reduce sign langauge and Deaf communication to visual spectacle, overlooking its linguistic and cultural richness (Bauman, Nelson and Rose 2006). Carla's hearing aids and lip-reading abilities are presented as sufficient for full participation in the hearing world, perpetuating oralist ideologies that position speech and lip reading as superior to sign and as fully comprehensible to deaf people, reinforcing what Kaite O'Reilly calls the 'dominant ideology of ability' that privileges hearing norms (O'Reilly et al. 2021) and erasing the linguistic and cultural richness of sign language communities. The film's approach to Carla's deafness as a convenient plot mechanism rather than a lived identity reflects the broader pattern identified by Kenny Fries in his test for authentic disability representation: disabled characters who exist primarily 'for the education and profit of a nondisabled character' rather than possessing their own narrative agency (Fries 2017). *Read My Lips* ultimately uses Carla's perceived abilities to serve the hearing characters' objectives while failing to provide genuine insight into deaf experience or challenge audiocentric assumptions about communication, community, and capability.

When Deaf writers create deaf characters, we see a fundamental shift from characters defined by what they cannot (or superhumanly can) do to characters navigating worlds not designed for them. This distinction – between individual limitation and environmental barriers – reflects the political consciousness that Deaf writers bring to character development. The stories that emerge often highlight systemic societal barriers rather than focusing on bodily limitations (or unrealistic superpowers), reflecting a political understanding of disability as socially constructed rather than merely personal tragedy. In fact this unique perspective is especially important in depictions of deafness, but should not *only* be valued in sign language films. True progress will be made when Deaf and disabled writers not only have narrative design of their characters but are able to develop their skills and credits to be recognised as screenwriters *full stop*. This distinction would be a fundamental shift in industry thinking – moving from a tokenistic approach whereby Deaf creators are sought only for 'deaf stories' to an inclusive environment where their creative vision is valued across all genres and content categories.

In writing a deaf-centred narrative, a Deaf screenwriter brings embodied knowledge that infuses their work with experiential authenticity. This extends to cultural competencies within disability communities; writers familiar with colloquial 'insider' language, humour, and references can create nuanced representations that resonate with authentic

cultural dynamics. When writing for sign language dialogue they can bring innovative approaches to collaboration incorporating community-specific cultural references, linguistic patterns, and social dynamics that situate characters within actual disability cultures rather than as isolated individuals defined solely by medical conditions. As Ellis (2015) notes in presenting characters with disability:

> Instead of dividing the representation of disability into a positive and negative binary opposition, it is important we see people with disability along the full spectrum of human experience and popular culture characterisation - as good, bad, right, wrong, strong and weak. There need to be moments where disability is relevant and irrelevant. (8)

When Deaf creators bring these cultural experiences to their work, they position Deaf characters as part of a complex community with shared language and references rather than individual, isolated and often, medicalised tragedy. However, while screenwriters establish foundational elements of representation, their story blueprint as outlined in the screenplay may be altered through subsequent production practices. When only a Deaf writer has been engaged to write the script, with no other Deaf collaborators, they must navigate multiple layers of editorial intervention from the production team, that can operate from ableist assumptions about 'universal' storytelling. The writer's authority on the page can be compromised through production processes that prize 'relatable' disability narratives over authentic ones (Haller 2010). Despite these pressures, Deaf/disabled screenwriters continue to transform screen representation through persistence and innovation. These include Shoshannah Stern and Josh Feldman as Deaf showrunners for two seasons of the Sundance Now series *This Close* (2018–2019), Ted Evans as writer/director of *The Retreat* (2025) Louise Stern as writer/director of *The Hand Rises* (2026) and William Mager as sole writer and executive producer for the B.B.C.'s *Reunion* (2025). The contributions of disabled screenwriters extend beyond individual projects to gradually reshape industry assumptions about what kinds of disability stories are worth telling and how they can be told. Their work constitutes both creative expression and cultural resistance in an industry still structured around non-disabled perspectives.

Directing: visual authority and cinematographic integrity

By comparison with screenwriters, directors possess more immediate control over how disability is visualised and embodied as they seek to realise the script's vision. By its nature the role requires making immediate decisions (in collaboration with producers) regarding casting, budget allocation, and, critically, the overall tonal and thematic execution in close collaboration with the art director, cinematographer, and finally in post-production, with the editor, sound designer and music composers. The director's authority manifests in minute-by-minute decisions about performance, visual composition and pacing that cumulatively construct deafness and disability on screen.

When Deaf directors control these elements, we see substantive differences not just in what deafness looks like, but in the rhythms and sensory dimensions of how disability is experienced in cinematographic terms by viewers. A compelling example of this difference can be found in Kaite O'Reilly's analysis of Deaf-led visual direction in theatre production, which translates well to film practices. In developing her theatre work *And Suddenly I Disappear: The Singapore/UK 'd' Monologues*,

O'Reilly collaborated closely with Deaf visual language performer and director Ramesh Meyyappan on creating sections utilising visual language, alongside hearing director Phillip Zarrilli who directed the overall production. While full authorial control did not rest with Meyyappan as the Deaf visual language director, O'Reilly's process argued for a model of sensitive, Deaf-led collaboration. O'Reilly describes how, when working with Meyyappan, it was essential that 'Deaf experience and culture had priority and led the creation of visual language sequences in order to create equality and balance between Deaf and hearing cultures onstage' (O'Reilly et al. 2021). A critical dramaturgical challenge in this work was addressing the question of 'how can we create equality onstage between spoken and signed/visual languages, without the latter being dominated by the "noisiness" of speech?' (O'Reilly et al. 2021). This collaborative approach prioritised visual language equality. It challenged conventional hierarchies where sign language is positioned as secondary to spoken language and ensuring that Deaf cultural perspectives shaped the fundamental creative direction rather than being accommodated as an afterthought.

Similarly, in film Deaf directors are well placed to apply their linguistic competency to ensure the visual integrity necessary for signed dialogue. Framing conventions in cinematography have a critical impact on representation, particularly for Deaf characters and signers. A clear example appears in *Children of a Lesser God*, (1986) where despite featuring Deaf actor Marlee Matlin, the film frequently crops her signing hands out of frame or uses shot compositions that prioritise the other characters' faces and reactions before completing signed dialogues. These cinematographic choices – carried out by the cinematographer but ultimately under directorial control – effectively privilege spoken dialogue while dismembering sign language, reducing it to incoherence. When non-deaf directors lack awareness of how framing and editing choices impact signed dialogue, even scripts written by Deaf writers and performances by Deaf actors can be undermined through editing and shot composition choices that render signing incomplete or secondary. By contrast, directors fluent in sign, whether deaf or hearing, 'inherently understand the visual integrity necessary for signed dialogue and typically ensure that cinematography and other filmic choices preserve rather than fragment this linguistic expression'

The director's visual authority extends beyond technical competence to creative innovation. Deaf directors bring understanding of spatial relationships, visual rhythm, and temporal pacing that matches the natural flow of sign language conversation rather than imposed hearing expectations. This includes blocking that reflects how Deaf people naturally organise physical space for optimal communication, lighting design that ensures sign visibility while maintaining artistic vision and editing choices that respect sign language syntax while allowing complete expression of signed thoughts. Furthermore, Deaf directors possess cultural competency that influences performance direction, understanding the nuances of Deaf identity expression, community dynamics, and authentic cultural references that inform character development and narrative progression. This cultural knowledge extends to understanding the diversity within Deaf communities, recognising that Deaf experience encompasses various communication preferences, educational backgrounds, and cultural affiliations that should be reflected in authentic characterisation.

Producing: structural power and material conditions

Finally, producers wield structural power that shapes projects from their inception through to distribution. They serve as intermediaries between the commissioners, studio executives, financial stakeholders and creative team, protecting the overall vision against outside influence and control. Alternatively, they can undermine and diminish the creative direction, risking the dilution of the writer and director's intentions in order to appease the concerns and priorities of executives focused on commercial success. When the producers themselves are Deaf or disabled, they can wield authority not only over what stories get told but oversee the material conditions of production, often implementing accessible production practices that allow Deaf or disabled creatives to build sustainable careers. This structural authority can reconfigure the foundation upon which representation is built.

Shoshannah Stern and Josh Feldman's experience as co-creators, screenwriters, and executive producers of *This Close* (2018–2021) demonstrates the transformative potential of Deaf creatives stepping into the role of producer. As the first Deaf TV showrunners in the US their series featured Deaf actors, themselves as writer-stars, and significant Deaf and deaf crew members (encompassing both culturally Deaf sign language users and physiologically deaf/hard-of-hearing professionals). According to Stern, 'We had 18 deaf people working with us behind and in front of the camera' in Season 1, including deaf production staffers in roles such as casting assistant, editor, artist, directors of artistic sign language, and production assistant (*Variety*, 2019). This production model was possible because they maintained producer authority throughout development and production. Such Deaf-led productions provide a model where pathways can be negotiated for Deaf creatives to flourish, placing resources that allow for expert translations of written scripts to signed dialogue, alternative rehearsal methods that allow for the physicality of signed exchanges, implementing on set processes that accurately, inclusively, and agentively portray deaf experiences. Conversely, the absence of Deaf producers can lead to the systematic exclusion of deaf perspectives. In her analysis of *Wonderstruck* (2017), A. Marra documents how director Todd Haynes admitted there was 'some discussion about hiring a Deaf actor for the adult Rose (played by Julianne Moore) but ultimately contended that the film needed recognisable stars for financing purposes' (Murphy, quoted in Marra, 2017; Marra 2020). This decision, driven by commercial considerations rather than authentic representation, illustrates how producers' priorities directly shape writers' vision and directors' casting and creative choices.

It should be acknowledged that while Deaf writers and directors are rare, Deaf producers are rarer still, given the depth of networking experience that is required by financing processes, enticing and managing the multiple stakeholders that attach around the nucleus of the creative team. The language barrier between sign and spoken language is considerable without sign language interpreters, and the producer role itself requires a high level of competency in written language – which may be a second language for many Deaf producers. The role of hearing producer as ally becomes critical in building the careers of Deaf writers and directors, as they negotiate with decision makers who exert considerable financial influence on the outcomes of the production. This has certainly been in play throughout my career, with producer Della Churchill recalling the recurring conversations she had with financing agencies regarding the feasibility of

supporting a Deaf director: 'they wanted to know how she would make decisions surrounding sound, how she would interact with crew, and how she would maintain discipline on set . . . . . they didn't expect that interpreters could follow the technical jargon. It didn't seem to click that she'd already made films successfully' (Goswell et al. 2008). I had written and directed nine short films independently to completion at that point, many more than the two to three that most hearing directors would have accomplished before they were perceived as experienced enough to progress to longer form projects. In that case, while the producer's advocacy was essential to securing funding and protecting my creative vision, these examples demonstrate that producers wield the structural authority to either perpetuate exclusionary practices or create the conditions necessary for deaf creative leadership to flourish.

The producer's role extends beyond individual project advocacy to industry transformation. Deaf producers, or hearing allies in producer roles, can establish precedents for accessible production practices and develop professional development pathways for emerging Deaf talent, creating financial structures that recognise the value of authentic Deaf storytelling. This includes advocating for distribution strategies that prioritise Deaf audiences without excluding hearing viewers and building industry relationships that normalise Deaf presence in decision-making roles. While continued advocacy for authentic casting remains crucial, greater attention must be directed toward increasing opportunities for deaf and disabled individuals in authorial creative positions. The future of authentic representation lies not in choosing between these approaches but in developing production models that integrate both, dismantling industry barriers and recognising that comprehensive authentic representation encompasses both the visible presence of deaf and disabled bodies on screen and the less visible but equally crucial presence of deaf and disabled perspectives behind the scenes.

Conclusion

The authentic representation of Deaf stories is possible on screen. However, it cannot be achieved without genuine Deaf authorial agency. It is not my goal to advance an essentialist argument; in particular, I reject any policing of whether deaf and hard of hearing creatives have been raised as signers, especially as the majority of deaf children are raised in hearing families and oralist education systems which continue to deny them sign language access. Neither do I wish to suggest that Deaf authorial control cannot be combined with responsible hearing direction of sign language on screen. Yet such a project requires commitment to a collaborative, Deaf-led approach that brings both a knowledge of sign and how it operates, as well as lived experience of Deaf perspectives and how they can be depicted through the most sign-friendly artistic medium, the screen.

Hearing creators wishing to collaborate on Deaf stories must first address the fact that Deaf creatives have been systemically excluded from positions of power and authorial control throughout film history, their capacity to deliver a successful, commercial product that would appeal to a majority hearing audience dismissed. They must confront the explicit and implicit ways in which audism and oralism continue to impact the ways hearing creators write Deaf characters and frame, film and edit their languages on screen. They must acknowledge the ways that Deaf inclusion has been used in tokenistic terms to 'deafwash' projects that include Deaf actors or consultants, but no meaningful Deaf

authorial control. Ultimately, they must be willing to occupy an uncomfortable place of unknowing. This requires embracing the humility needed to learn how sign is used, how Deaf perspectives can be conveyed and how cinematography can showcase a sign language not as a tokenistic gesture, but as a legitimate, complex and complete language in its own right. Ultimately, this requires not only the accurate portrayal of sign but a robust production context shaped by Deaf authorial control.

Note

1. Following established practices within Critical Deaf Studies, lowercase 'deaf' refers to the audiological condition of hearing loss, while uppercase 'deaf' signals cultural-linguistic identity and community membership, typically associated with sign language use (Padden and Humphries 1988, Padden and Humphries 2005; Ladd 2003). This capitalisation embodies the pride Deaf communities hold in their culture and resists medical-deficit models. However, like scholars working with other identity categories tied to marginalisation, I recognise these distinctions are not always clear-cut. The Deaf/deaf distinction, while politically valuable, can inadvertently exclude individuals who lack access to Deaf Community spaces or sign language, or who navigate complex relationships between deaf and hearing identities. As Ladd emphasises, 'Deafhood' is 'not a finite state but a process' (2003, 3), affected by nation, era, class, race, and education. My use of these terms honours both the political necessity of this distinction – its capacity as a 'decolonising' tool resisting audist oppression (Ladd 2003) – and the lived complexity it cannot fully capture. Where 'deaf' appears, I signal cultural-linguistic affiliation; where 'deaf' appears, I indicate the broader spectrum of experiences that may or may not include Deaf cultural identification.

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