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Lost without translation: *Children of a Lesser God* and sign language filmmaking under non-signing control

Gemma King and Sofya Gollan

School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics, The Australian National University, Acton, Australia

ABSTRACT

Screen portrayals of deafness and sign language date back to the silent era. Yet with few exceptions, widespread ableism in film industries has led to the exclusion of Deaf creators from leadership roles and barred them from exerting authorial control. This has created a chronic language barrier whereby the vast majority of sign language screen content is written, framed and edited by non-signers, giving rise to tropes and techniques that perpetuate myths about deaf experience and obscure the semantic meaning of sign language dialogue. In these cases, sign becomes 'foreign' – incomprehensible, inaccessible, not of the creators' world – despite the fact that sign languages are natural languages which originate from *within* every country and are therefore not 'foreign' at all. This article traces the connections between deaf history and cinema and critiques the norms of sign language representation by directors, writers, producers and cinematographers who do not understand the sign language they are representing. Through a study of the first major film to include a signing Deaf star, *Children of a Lesser God* (Randa Haines 1986), it reveals the limitations of authentic casting when a screen text is crafted by individuals for whom sign is a 'foreign' language.

KEYWORDS

Sign language; deafness; language barrier; authorial control; *Children of a Lesser God*; casting

Introduction

Since the invention of the movies, even before the arrival of the talkies, filmmakers and audiences alike have been fascinated by deafness and sign language. Yet with some important exceptions, the screen industries of the twentieth century systematically denied Deaf creators participation in production and cast hearing actors in deaf roles.[1] These practices led to the perpetuation of myths and harmful tropes about deafness and sign language which continue to impact cultural stereotypes and narrative conventions on screen. In these texts, deafness is often represented as a tragic, isolating and pathological condition. Deaf characters are frequently portrayed as passive witnesses or victims with little agency or interiority. If sign language is included, it is usually in disjointed fragments that fail to convey the grammatical complexity, abstract capability and emotional depth of sign. This is the result of an industry-wide language barrier that has

CONTACT Gemma King gemma.king@anu.edu.au The Australian National University, School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics, Acton, 2601, Australia

become so normalised in sign language cinemas that it has become invisible to the hearing world.

Deaf casting has increased enormously since 1986's *Children of a Lesser God*, for which Marlee Matlin became the first Deaf film star and Academy Award winner. Yet the majority of sign language screen texts are still produced under hearing and non-signing authorial control. In using this term 'authorial control', we do not wish to impose an auteurist frame, but to acknowledge the immense power that comes with the capacity of various individuals on a film project to make (sometimes unilateral) creative decisions, and the linguistic and cultural risks of such decisions being made by lead creatives who have little or no understanding of the sign language/s being portrayed. This lack of linguistic competence in the writing, filming and editing of sign language screen content has led not only to the reinforcement of audist misconceptions about deaf experience and identity but to a technical approach that obscures the semantic complexity of sign on screen. In such texts, signing is often cut out of frame in favour of the facial close-ups typically used to film speech. They often employ phonocentric editing norms, such as reaction shots, which cut away from a signing character in the middle of their dialogue. Others preclude the possibility of deaf comprehension entirely, for example, by conveying essential meaning in voiceover, often projected over unrelated visuals such as a landscape, without the accompaniment of subtitles, sign language or even opportunities for lipreading. This cinematographic approach, which presumes speech as the default language mode, reduces the representation of sign from complete languages to a series of aesthetic gestures. Even today, these gestures are often denied the legitimation of subtitles.

This article critiques the practices of sign language representation on screen by directors, writers, producers and cinematographers who do not understand the sign language they are representing. It focuses on the pivotal case study of *Children of a Lesser God*, whose American Sign Language (ASL) dialogue represented a chronic language barrier to its creators, to reveal the risks and unintended consequences of sign language filmmaking under non-signing authorial control. Paradoxically, *Children* was an example of historic Deaf casting on the one hand, and profoundly audiocentric cinematographic and narrative traits on the other. Investigating fundamental practices such as framing, editing and subtitling and their application to *Children*, the article shows how the industry-wide acceptance of a default language barrier contributes to myths that fetishise sign and undermine its linguistic complexity and completeness.

The backdrop of deaf history

Sign language access is vital for deaf, hard of hearing and nonverbal hearing people, enabling equitable education conditions, neurological development (Corina and Singleton 2009), mental and emotional wellbeing (McRae et al. 2025), and community belonging (Padden and Humphries 2005). Yet despite the centrality of sign languages to Deaf Culture, and cinema's curiosity about these movements frequently described by hearing characters as 'so beautiful' (Gollan 2025), sign language use was actively suppressed from the late-nineteenth to the late-twentieth centuries. This period was shaped by oralism, an audist ideology that denigrates sign language, positing it as a rudimentary code unequal to the sophistication of verbal language. Oralist pedagogy involves banning

sign language use and teaching deaf children to lipread and speak so they can 'participate in the larger world around them' (Padden 2004, 250) and was official policy in most deaf schools and institutions globally for approximately a century. This was despite the fact that prior to this, manualist (i.e. signing) Schools for the Deaf had spread from their foundation in eighteenth-century France to locations across Europe, Asia, Oceania, Africa and the Americas. This had been a golden age for manualist education in many schools. Yet at an education conference held in Milan in 1880, a group of hearing pedagogues agreed on an oralist strategy that would be rapidly rolled out in most of these Schools for the Deaf and into mainstream institutions over the following years. This was a catastrophic turn that would deprive millions of language access for over a century.

Oralism not only repressed sign language use and transmission, it undermined its status as language at all. The ideology positioned sign languages more as artificial codes invented to complement speech, rather than natural languages which evolve – like spoken languages – over the centuries from authentic, communal use. Even today, this perception of sign languages as having been artificially 'invented' leads to the presumption that they are merely gestural 'versions' of spoken languages, e.g. French Sign Language as signed French, ASL as gesture-version of English, etc. (This is despite the fact that British Sign Language, Auslan and New Zealand Sign Language all arise from English-speaking countries but differ enormously from ASL). This misconception binds sign languages to spoken languages in the popular imaginary, in a relation of dependency.

An official, quasi-global, oralist pedagogical policy continued until the advent of the Deaf Rights Movement, a nascent political consciousness which grew with the publication of the first book documenting American Sign Language in Stokoe (1960) (Stokoe) and crystallised into active protest on the Gallaudet University campus in Washington DC in 1988 (Greenwald 2014). A protest that began with a specific goal, the appointment of a Deaf president to the Gallaudet University leadership, quickly became a broader advocacy movement that spread internationally. This linguistic and cultural resistance emerged only 2 years after the release of *Children of a Lesser God* and contributed directly to the adoption of the 1990 Americans with Disability Act. Throughout the 1990s, comparable disability legislation was passed in Armenia, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe, followed by many other countries in the 2000s and 2010s. The period of Deaf resistance saw an important increase in sign language access through educational methods and interpreting services. Yet oralist assumptions about the supremacy of speech persist, often fuelled by a misguided notion of the capacities and role of cochlear implants, and to this day an estimated 98% of deaf children still do not receive education in sign (Murray, Hall and Snoddon 2019, 711).

Deaf history meets the screen

The rise of oralism from the 1880s onwards meant that sign language oppression and erasure was being systematically carried out at the same time that cinema was invented. Yet deafness was always an object of fascination on screen, used as what David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder call 'narrative prosthesis', or 'the dependency of literary narratives upon disability' (2000, 53). Films have long used disability tropes to symbolise

their narrative in literal terms, often as reductive metaphors. For example, countless texts deploy deafness as a metaphor for isolation, blindness as shorthand for innocence and paralysis as a physical manifestation of a sense of limitation or imprisonment. The plots of such films are often built around non-disabled anxieties about the physical functions which are impaired by these disabilities; they focus on sound (especially music) for deafness, sight (especially visual arts) for blindness and movement (especially sport and sex) for paralysis. Often, these preoccupations with goals and sensations that are perceived to be unattainable in disabled bodies do not resonate with disabled viewers at all; instead, they satisfy fantasies of how non-disabled people imagine life with a disability to be.

Mitchell and Snyder's patterns of narrative prosthesis abound in sign language films from all eras. For example, in 1948's *Johnny Belinda*, hearing actress Jane Wyman plays a young deaf woman almost entirely cut off from society. Belinda spends most of her time on the family farm, where her hearing father and stepmother have never tried to learn sign or teach her to write. Belinda is less a fleshed-out character than a symbol of extreme vulnerability and isolation. Like the handless and tongueless Lavinia in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, her deafness results in a state of languagelessness that makes her an easy target for a local rapist, who correctly assumes she will not be able to tell her story. It is only through a hearing saviour who arrives on the scene to teach her sign that Belinda is able to emerge from her 'silence' thanks to his civilising mission, and thus to obtain justice.

In another example, 1968's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, hearing actor Alan Arkin plays Singer, a deaf man who has recently moved to a new town and is lodging with a hearing family. Singer is not oral, and unlike the close deaf friend he has left behind, none of the characters in this new environment can sign. Despite his fluency in ASL, this lack of interlocutors leaves Singer as languageless in his new environment as Belinda had been on the farm. In place of conversation, he goes about doing good deeds for the townspeople around him, his connections with others built on a lopsided dynamic whereby he remains unknown and unknowable to the other characters and, by extension, the audience. Physically and ontologically mute, Singer serves as a blank slate upon which others project their anxieties and desires. Like many other deaf characters across film history, he ultimately serves as a tool for the hearing characters' self-actualisation or redemption. Belinda in *Johnny Belinda* and Singer in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* are the protagonists of these films, but their personhood and interiority is concealed by their incapacity to communicate, be it due to their own language deprivation, the monolingualism of the speakers around them or the film's visual framing of sign. These texts do not represent disabled subjectivities or lived experience so much as a poetics built on the symbolic connotations nondisabled cultures attach to disabled bodies.

Other common tropes portray hearing loss as tragedy, sending their protagonists on a hero's quest for a cure. Martin F. Norden identifies a long list of silent films about either blind or deaf characters, usually conventionally attractive young women, whose blindness or deafness is cured by magic, religion, or technology. He writes of the 1910s and 1920s, 'in a very short period of time, filmmakers working with non-comedic victimization themes moved from tragedy to general able-bodied helpfulness to the ultimate in paternalistic attitudes: curability' (Norden 1994, 38). The trope reappeared at the end of the century, with the rise of films and

series depicting cochlear implant activation. This trope, which reappears in films as recent as 2023's *The Unheard*, is overwhelmingly applied to young deaf women, who serve as the classical damsel-in-distress figure 'saved' by the miracle cure. As Lisa Cartwright suggests, 'the repetition of the Deaf-girl-who-comes-to-voice theme in sound cinema has been an important means of collective, public working through of the social meaning of deafness in the hearing world' (Cartwright 2008, 57).

But despite the persistent influence of oralism in the contemporary era, the sensorial modalities of the screen make it an ideal tool to represent sign language; for what is sign but a moving image? Like theatre and sign poetry, two of the oldest forms of sign language cultural expression, the screen conveys sign in its true form, in visual movement. But unlike these live art forms, cinema also captures sign and disseminates it across time and space. In fact, it is often a more useful language mode than speech on film sets. In an interview with Matlin about the making of the 2021 Best Film Oscar winner *CODA*, Jack Smart reports: 'as it turns out, ASL is an ideal language for a film set, where directors can give actors notes from far away or while cameras are rolling' (Smart 2022).

Indeed, we are currently witnessing an explosion in the quantity of sign language screen productions, with more features, shorts, series, and documentaries released with sign language dialogue since the 2000s than in the entire century before. There have never been more Deaf actors working in the industry, with several gaining mainstream recognition, such as Lauren Ridloff (*The Walking Dead* 2018, *Sound of Metal*, *Eternals* 2021), Sophie Ayling-Ellis (*Doctor Who* 2025, *Code of Silence* 2025 and 131 episodes of UK soap opera *EastEnders* 2020–22) and Millicent Simmonds (*A Quiet Place* 2018, *A Quiet Place Part II* 2021, *Wonderstruck* 2017). However, casting is merely the first step in authentic deaf representation. The heritage of over a century of hearing actors in deaf roles, and the continued prevalence of non-signing crew, continues to dominate. There are important exceptions to this trend, such as Shoshannah Stern and Joshua Feldman's series *This Close* (2018–2021), Nyle DiMarco's reality show *Deaf U* (2020), Troy Kotsur's feature film *No Ordinary Hero: The SuperDeafy Movie* (2014) and the short films, series, and documentaries of William Mager, CJ Jones, Brian Duffy, Louise Stern, Ace Mahbaz, Sofya Gollan, Emilio Insolera, Jade Bryan, and Marlee Matlin herself, among others. Yet the most widely viewed and awarded contemporary screen texts are still hearing-led projects. Many of these depict deafness and sign language in overall positive terms, yet they fail in part, for example, the normalisation of magical lipreading in *Eternals* or the inaccurate depiction in *A Quiet Place* of a cochlear implant that emits a whistling feedback noise (which only a hearing aid, not a CI, can generate). Meanwhile, others continue to offer infantilising and even pathologizing pictures of deafness, such as the portrayal of deaf people as being uniquely vulnerable to exploitation and separated from wider society, as seen in films like *La Famille Bélier* (2014), *Hush* (2016), *CODA* (2021), and *The Tribe* (2014).

To understand how the tension between signing and non-signing authorial control continues to impact sign language cinema, we will now turn to arguably the most influential sign language screen text of the twentieth century, *Children of a Lesser God*. The first major motion picture in which a Deaf actor stars as a Deaf protagonist, the film was groundbreaking for its casting, its foregrounding of Deaf Culture, and its significant proportion of ASL dialogue. Yet *Children* was nonetheless made under hearing authorial

control, a fact which compromised both its technical presentation of sign language and its ideological approach to deaf characters and their voices, both physical and symbolic.

The case of Children of a Lesser God

When Mark Medoff began discussions with film studios about the adaptation of his successful 1979 play *Children of a Lesser God*, he spent several years negotiating with producers to ensure authentic casting. The play's Deaf roles had typically been performed by Deaf actors on Broadway, West End, and theatres around the US, and most executives were supportive of casting Deaf actors in the film's many secondary parts. However, in a 2019 interview reflecting on the film's cultural legacy, Marlee Matlin described how when it came to a lead considered capable of carrying the film alongside a hearing star, hearing writer Medoff 'fought very hard – for several years maybe – that this part must be played by a deaf person' (Matlin 2019). It was after the film's casting director scouted actors from a Chicago performance of *Children* that hearing director Randa Haines found her star, then performing a supporting role in the play, to lead the film (Matlin in Anderson 2017). Nineteen years old at the time of her discovery, Marlee Matlin had never performed in front of a camera, but her talent finally secured authentic casting for the *Children of a Lesser God* film. At the age of 21, Matlin won the 1987 Best Actress Academy Award for her first screen role, making her the first Deaf Oscar winner and, to this day, the youngest Best Actress winner of all time.

Following this historic win, Matlin was denigrated by critics and colleagues alike, many of whom suggested she had not truly earned her award, not only due to her lack of experience but to an assumption that she was not in fact 'acting'. This accusation stemmed from a deeply ableist misconception that 'deaf person' constituted a complete character on its own, denying deaf personhood and personality. By this reasoning, as a deaf person, Matlin must have merely been playing herself. As she explained in a 2017 article, 'one particular column by Rex Reed said that my win the night before was probably the result of a pity vote and that he thought that I wasn't necessarily the one who deserved the Oscar because I was a person who was deaf, playing a person who was deaf. And how was that acting?' (in Anderson 2017). In her 2009 memoir *I'll Scream Later*, she admitted that William Hurt, her co-star and offscreen abusive intimate partner at the time, had been one of those to undermine her achievement. Cath Clarke describes the aftermath of the Oscars ceremony, as told to her by Matlin:

> Hurt got in the car and started laying into her verbally: 'What makes you think you deserve it? There are hundreds of actors who have worked for years for the recognition you just got handed to you', she remembers. 'Think about that'. He then told her to sign up for acting classes. (Clarke 2021)

Despite this criticism, Matlin's performance offers a profound character study of a woman whose relationship with culture, speech, relationships, and education are deeply personal and complex. Like the play, the *Children of a Lesser God* film revolves around a central romantic relationship, between the hearing English user James (Hurt) and the Deaf ASL user Sarah (Matlin). James and Sarah both work at a School for the Deaf in rural Maine which teaches both sign and speech. James has recently been engaged as a speech teacher, and Sarah has worked as a custodian at the school since she graduated

there 7 years prior. As the film unfolds, it becomes clear that while Sarah is intelligent enough to have pursued higher education, her traumatic upbringing in a hearing family that did not learn sign for her has bonded her to the school, the only linguistic and cultural environment in which she feels safe. Unlike all but two of James' students, who relish learning to sing along to Michael Convertino's *Boomerang* and how to 'pick up hearing girls', Sarah has refused to speak ever since she was mocked and exploited for her deaf accent as a child. Her 'silence' becomes both the magnetic force that attracts James, who is determined to convince her of the utility of speech, and the fundamental conflict that threatens to tear them apart. James is baffled and frustrated by Sarah's insistence that sign language is sufficient for her communication needs, not simply because he is more proficient in English than ASL, but because he cannot imagine a complete life led within a Deaf world.

Despite James' limited imagination, he does not view deaf peoples' situation as hopeless. Unlike the funding partners of the *Children* film project, he does not have to be convinced of deaf people's linguistic, creative or intellectual capabilities. In a line that endears him to the cynical Sarah, when she says that hearing people think deaf people are stupid, he replies 'only stupid hearing people think deaf people are stupid'. He also understands that sign language is true language, with distinct benefits and value to its users. However, James' perspective is nonetheless an oralist one in that he believes in the necessity and supremacy of speech over sign. He does not ban his students from using sign, but he considers ASL less as a self-sufficient communication method and more as a first step in language learning, to be deployed in the service of gaining proficiency in the more useful language, spoken English. In other words, James is tolerant of Deaf Culture but considers the pinnacle of deaf excellence to be successful integration into hearing society. The limits of his ability to comprehend deaf perspectives are revealed in his response to Sarah when she confesses one of her life's aspirations; he cannot understand her hope to have deaf children. No matter how much he comes to care for deaf individuals, he can only ever consider deafness as a deficiency to be mitigated through hearing language modes.

To be clear, *Children of a Lesser God* does not stage James' unexamined audism in straightforwardly positive terms. The multiple meditative scenes of Sarah swimming nude in the school's pool, scenes portrayed in slow motion and with a muted underwater soundtrack, could be read as objectifying, but also as inviting us into the tranquillity of her interiority. We are encouraged to identify with Sarah's robust sense of self and to prickle along with her at James' insistence on trying to mould her into his vision of a 'successful' young deaf woman. James' persistent pressuring of Sarah to speak his name during sex, for example, is framed as selfish and insensitive, and her refusal as righteous. In short, the film holds James to account for his audist and sexist control of Sarah, a control he slowly learns he must relinquish if their relationship is to continue, on equal footing.

However, while the film may be critical of audism on a narrative level, its cinematographic and translation techniques betray a foundation of audiocentrism of which the team behind the camera – director, producer, screenwriter, cinematographer, editor – appear to be unaware. This audiocentrism permeates the film. Michael T. Smith identifies the slippage between *Children*'s conscious critique of audism and its unconscious perpetuation of it in his analysis of the exclusionary practice of speaking at a deaf person's

back, words they can neither hear nor lipread. Smith cites the early scene in which James calls after Sarah, who is ascending a staircase with her back to him and therefore does not know he is calling to her. The school's hearing principal, who is walking with James at the time, chastises him for this gaffe, noting with sarcasm 'yelling at the back of a deaf person; very good, James'. Smith rightly notes that at this moment the film critiques such habits of non-inclusive communication, presenting James as thoughtless and foolish. Yet Smith then contrasts the film's self-awareness with several other scenes in which the camera commits the same mistake as James. He cites the first classroom scene, in which James 'delivers a lecture on facing his deaf students so that they can read his lips. However, this scene is shot with his back turned away from us (the viewer). Rather than presenting an instance of irony, moments like this reinforce notions of normativity' (Smith 2021, 69). The passage is delivered in spoken English, with no subtitles, and filmed over James's shoulder, so deaf audience members are triply denied language access: no sign, no subtitles, and no opportunity to lipread. Of another scene in which James speaks while the camera watches him walk away, Smith describes the embedded hearing positionality that such camerawork betrays:

> The irony here is that the film itself is often yelling at the back of a deaf person (so to speak). There is no empathy for deafness in terms of the camera. Instead, we have a film (perhaps unconsciously) following the conventions of filming an exit from the back. (as opposed to requiring that all shots include a character's lips or other similar message to make the scene accessible to the deaf) (88)

Sarah's sign life and James' speech life finally collide at a crucial turning point in the film. After several months of James urging Sarah to integrate into his world, she invites him into hers, bringing him along to a cocktail party celebrating a respected Deaf academic she admires. Despite knowing ASL (at least enough to have a social conversation), in the fully signing environment James quickly begins to feel out of place. He insists on filling the space with his voice, even though the few other hearing guests understand how rude it is to speak at a deaf party if otherwise able to sign. He withdraws from the conversation Sarah is engrossed in, finally insisting she leave early with him. After months of urging Sarah to go to college, he drags her from this discussion among Deaf intellectuals; this was not the kind of academic environment he had in mind. Sarah thus realises that while James expects her to step into a language environment in which she is a minority, he is not willing to do the same and doesn't understand what it could offer. When they return home, she confronts him, explaining that unless he can stop trying to change her, their relationship will never be a true partnership.

Sarah's monologue at this critical juncture of the plot is compelling and impassioned, but it is what surrounds the monologue that reveals most about the film's underlying language politics. For one, the scene is shot in low light, a lamp focusing on Sarah's face throughout, but her hands are only illuminated during signs that happen to be located close to the face and head. The camera frames her in a mid-shot that shows most, but not all, of her signing space. Her hands often drop out of the frame, especially when she leans forward in anger. Most of the dialogue should be intelligible to ASL users (more so than in many other scenes) but her signing is nonetheless working against the constraints of the camera and mise en scene, rather than being supported by them. Most importantly, there are no subtitles translating Sarah's signing into English. If subtitled conventionally,

the exchange would read as follows (note the emotional and tonal inflections before each utterance):

Sarah [ASL, *defiant*] 'No one's ever going to speak for me again'.

James [English and ASL, *dismissive*] 'Come on. How're you gonna manage?'

Sarah [*passionate*] 'Everyone's always told me who I am, and I let them: "she wants, she thinks". And most of the time they were wrong, they had no idea what I said, wanted, thought. And now they will'.

James [*exasperated*] 'Well that's alright, I'll buy that'.

Sarah [*weary*] 'No you won't, how could you?'

James [*vehement*] 'Because I love you!'

Sarah [*calm*] 'Love has nothing to do with it'.

James [*sarcastic*] 'That's wonderful. [*furious*] Then what the hell have we been doing?'

Sarah [*calm*] 'Watch my hands'.

James [*sarcastic, nasty*] 'It's hard to avoid them'.

Sarah [*calm*] 'This sign: it means to connect. Simple. But it means so much more when I do this [*moves the sign through the space separating the two of them, showing deep connection*]. Now it means to be joined in a relationship, separate but one. [*insistent*] That's what I want. But you think for me, think for "Sarah", as though there were no I. [*impersonating thoughtlessness*] "She will be with me. Quit her job. Learn how to play poker. Leave Orin's party. Learn how to speak". [*serious*] That's all you, not me. Until you let me be an "I" the way you are, you can never come inside my silence and know me. And I won't let myself know you. Until that time, we can't be like this [*deep connection sign*]. Joined'.

This is one of the most radically 'Deaf' scenes in all of cinema. It is not just a personal outpouring but a political stance; a refusal to be forcibly assimilated, to be controlled and patronised by hearing people who believe they know what's best for her, better than she does. It shows this Deaf protagonist's Deaf Pride, self-determination, and rich inner life. But this scene, like every other scene in *Children of a Lesser God*, is completely unsubtitled. Instead, the omnipresent James repeats her words verbally for the audience's comprehension, a technique he uses in all his interactions with signers throughout the film. This is not a case of James acting as an interpreter for other characters; he does this even when no other characters are present, as in this scene (perhaps a remnant from the original play which of course could not be subtitled live). In other words, he assumes the role of interpreter for the hearing *audience*, albeit an unethical interpreter who ignores the profession's principles of neutrality and fidelity. Interpreters are bound to a code of

ethics whereby they must insert as little of themselves as possible into their translations, operating as a vessel for others' exact words and tone. James, on the other hand, imbues his translations with his own emotions and opinions. As a result, Sarah's passionate rebellion against James is overlayed by his own derisive reactions to her words. Of course, we still see Sarah's facial expressions, which are essential to the sign equivalent of tone of voice. But instead of receiving Sarah's meaning unadulterated, with subtitles translating her words directly, her sign voice is filtered through James' speech voice. To demonstrate this contrast, the below passage shows James' vocalisations throughout the exchange, with new punctuation, pronouns and tone markers reflecting his distortion of Sarah's voice:

> [*dismissive*] No one's ever gonna speak for you again? Come on! How're you gonna manage? [*downcast*] Everyone's always told me who I am and I let them: 'she wants, she thinks'. And most of the time they were wrong. They had no idea what I said, wanted, thought. And now they will. [*exasperated*] Well that's alright, I'll buy that. [*angry*] No I won't how could I? [*vehement*] Because I love you! [*disdainful*] Love has nothing to do with it? [*sarcastic*] That's wonderful. [*furious*] Then what the hell have we been doing? [*sarcastic, nasty*] Watch your hands? It's hard to avoid them. [*frustrated, mocking*] This sign: to connect. Simple. But it means so much more when I do this. [*increasingly downcast, then despairing*] That's what I want. But you think for me, think for Sarah, as though there were no I. She will be with me. Quit her job. Learn how to play poker. Leave Orin's party. Learn how to speak. That's all you, not me. Until you let me be an 'I' the way you are, you can never come inside my silence and know me. And I won't let myself know you. Until that time, we can't be like this. Joined.

In a powerful moment in which Sarah declares that 'no one will speak for her again', her words are modified through the act of having someone else speak for her. Her voice is doubly erased; by the lighting and framing which obscures parts of her signing, and by the translation method which overlays her calm, determined announcement with the scornful and obstinate reactions of the person who has systematically denigrated her language use for months. Because of the interference and distancing created by this approach to translation, we as an audience can, to a certain extent, 'never come inside [Sarah's] silence and know [her]'. The irony appears to be lost on both James and the makers of the film itself.

As Smith concludes, *Children of a Lesser God* does not appear to actively intend to exclude deaf viewers. Captions for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH) do indeed exist for the film, though their availability at the time of the film's release was inconsistent, and far from guaranteed in cinemas, a fact that revealed much about the film's intended audience. Rather, the film's visual composition reveals how little Matlin's virtuoso performance was intended to be understood without English translation. Perhaps more perniciously, the creators' choice not to incorporate subtitles, opting instead to have James overlay Sarah's words with his own biased filter, reveals how little the film respects the individual cadence of her sign voice. Her preferred means of self-expression, one that is sufficiently grammatically complete and legitimate as to merit subtitling, is both interrupted and manipulated. A story entirely about Deaf experience, in which a Deaf actor portrays a Deaf woman who communicates only in sign, was an unmatched opportunity to create a film that employed the full potential of the cinematic medium to convey a Deaf voice (not in the audiological sense of the sound of speech, but in the ontological

sense of individual self-expression). Like the source play it draws on, the film could have framed Sarah's refusal to speak in terms of the broader cultural stakes at play, as a legitimate political stance within Deaf Culture rather than as evidence of personality traits (stubbornness, defiance) or past trauma. Such a film could have fully engaged an audience that, like Sarah, privileges spatial and visual communication, without excluding viewers who don't. But ultimately, *Children of a Lesser God* fails to imagine a deaf audience at all.

Conclusion

Films such as *Children of a Lesser God* show us the vital importance of Deaf casting; Marlee Matlin as Sarah not only communicates in fluent ASL but embodies the unique sensory, spatial, and cultural dimensions of Deaf experience. The contemporary wave of authentically cast Deaf roles in film and television owes much to *Children*'s example, which proved the commercial viability and creative interest of screen projects that feature Deaf stars. Yet they also reveal how Deaf casting can only go so far when such performances are undermined by the film around them, not least an audiocentric translation strategy that overlays and distorts Sarah's sign voice with the vocal interferences of the very man who is trying to control her. This is a powerful metaphor for the dynamic of non-signing authorial control in sign language cinema. *Children of a Lesser God* shows us the risk of filming dialogue that neither the director, cinematographer, nor editor understands. Assuming that fluency is unnecessary to successfully represent a sign language on screen reduces sign to an aesthetic element. Even when dialogue is performed by a native signer, phonocentric framing and editing practices can obscure its semantic meaning. Combined with a lack of subtitles and a camera that is proverbially 'yelling at the back of a deaf person', this chronic language barrier can render films about sign language and deafness inaccessible to the very people they attempt to represent.

Note

1. We defer to Deaf Criticism norms in our use of 'deaf' to refer to the physiological experience of deafness and 'deaf' to refer to cultural identity, which is often connected with use of a sign language. However, we also acknowledge the complex slippage between the two, the potential exclusionary nature of 'deaf' for those denied access to Deaf Culture and sign language and the diversity of terminology used by people with hearing loss to describe themselves. Like Brenda Brueggemann, we acknowledge how important such terms are for many, while foregrounding the value of a theory of 'betweenity' (Brueggemann 2009, 9) that troubles the boundaries between them.

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Notes on contributors

Gemma King is Senior Lecturer in French at the Australian National University. From 2023 to 2026, she is an ARC DECRA Fellow on the project 'Sign on Screen: Language, Culture and Power in Sign Language Cinemas'. She researches contemporary francophone and transnational screen cultures, specialising in representations of multilingualism, deafness, disability, colonial histories, violence and social power. She is President of the Australian Society for French Studies and author of the books *Decentring France: Multilingualism and Power in Contemporary French Cinema* (Manchester University Press, 2017) and *Jacques Audiard* (2021), a volume in Manchester's French Film Directors series.

Sofya Gollan is a PhD candidate at the Australian National University investigating representations of sign language and Deaf characters on contemporary screens. Her research integrates Deaf Critical Theory with Film Studies to interrogate how hearing filmmakers deploy silence and sign language as narrative devices to present Deaf characters as diegetic silence. A Deaf filmmaker-scholar, Gollan's documentary *Imagined Touch* received the 2024 AWGIE Award for Best Short Documentary and screened at the Lincoln Centre for Performing Arts NYC, while her digital video work *Threshold* has been exhibited internationally and at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia.

ORCID

Gemma King http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4695-4032

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