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Between the superhero and the supercrip: Deaf Gain, exceptionalism and normality in contemporary film and television

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ABSTRACT

The inspirational 'supercrip' has long been a staple of deaf film narrative, but the 2010s and 2020s have seen an explosion in new screen portrayals of superheroes whose powers operate as extreme examples of Deaf Gain. Deaf superheroes both challenge the supercrip trope by resituating their skills in a fantastical context, and perpetuate it through their continued focus on exceptional bodies. Confronting this paradox through analyses of several recent characterizations, this article investigates the deaf superhero corpus' potential to make a radical contribution to screen representation, not only through its portrayal of deaf exceptionalism, but of deaf normality.

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Introduction

The supercrip – the exceptional disabled person who inspires audiences by 'overcoming' their disability – has long been a deaf character archetype on screen. Many films focus on deaf characters striving towards achievements (falsely) presumed to be incompatible with deafness: fluent speech, positions of power in hearing-dominated environments, mastery of dance, the composition and performance of music.[1] The deaf supercrip is often portrayed as socially isolated but uniquely gifted, their deafness leading to preternatural perception in other senses. The most common example is the magical lipreader, seen in films and series such as *Sur mes lèvres* (*Read My Lips*),[2] *Code of Silence*,[3] *Only Murders in the Building*,[4] *Sue Thomas: F.B. Eye*[5] and *Baby Driver*,[6] which rely on the myth that lipreading can deliver flawless comprehension. Even when they feature deaf actors, these majority hearing-led productions often depict implausible scenarios as logical and realistic (Gollan 2025, 2). This tradition is troubled by the arrival of a new screen archetype which transplants the extraordinary deaf character from realist genres to the realm of the fantastical: the superhero.[7]

Deaf superheroes began appearing in the 2010s in films like *Sign Gene*,[8] a 2017 thriller from Deaf writer, director and actor Emilio Insolera, in which sign language is a superpower with telekinetic features. In 2021, the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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(MCU hereafter) debuted the first of three deaf superheroes, the ultra-fast immortal Makkari in Chloé Zhao's *Eternals*.[9] The MCU miniseries *Hawkeye*[10] was released on Disney+ in 2022, the first film or series to acknowledge Clint Barton (aka Hawkeye)'s hearing loss, which had been referenced in comics but never on screen. *Hawkeye* also introduced Maya Lopez (aka Echo), played by Deaf Indigenous amputee Alaqua Cox, who in 2023 received her own miniseries, *Echo*.[11] In 2022, Apple TV+ released the family-friendly miniseries *El Deafo*,[12] adapted by Cece Bell from her autobiographical graphic novel of the same name. Reimagined as animated bunnies, Cece and her friends celebrate her deafness through her alter ego 'El Deafo', who flies through the air in a red cape and visible hearing aids. Deaf superheroes also appear in *Black Lightning*,[13] *Love and Destiny* (*Chen Xi Yuan)*,[14] *Code 8*[15] and *The Tomorrow People*.[16] They even crop up in other genres as sources of inspiration for deaf children, as in the 2013 metatextual drama *No Ordinary Hero: The SuperDeafy Movie*[17] and the 2023–2025 horror series *The Last Of Us*.[18]

This unprecedented rise over a single decade has been praised by deaf critics and audiences for its visible, celebratory representation of deafness, 'a sign of better things to come for the Deaf community' (Later 2022). These texts are generally received overall as welcome alternatives to stereotypes depicting deafness as a problem, tragedy or hindrance. Deaf superheroes display an exaggerated form of Deaf Gain, their heightened visual acuity, proprioception, vibration detection, signing and lipreading skills transformed into literal superpowers. Yet these texts cannot be entirely separated from the history of ableism and audism on screen.[19] Ableist stories are uninterested in the lived reality of disability unless it involves 'success' and 'excellence' measured in normative terms and achieved against perceived odds. For Eli Clare, supercrip narratives 'rely upon the perception that disability and achievement contradict each other and that any disabled person who overcomes this contradiction is heroic' (2015, 8–9). The deaf superhero corpus both unsettles and upholds this dynamic. On the one hand, it refuses the script whereby characters strive to cure or transcend disability, showing its heroes' radical acceptance of their deafness, which is often the source of their superpowers. On the other, it continues a long tradition of focusing attention on hyper-skilled, extraordinary deaf bodies over representative, 'ordinary' ones.

This article reads recent screen portrayals of the deaf superhero through Joseph Murray and H-Dirksen L. Bauman's concept of Deaf Gain (2014), which considers deafness from a position of plenitude rather than deficiency. Yet the article also studies these texts' laudatory portrayal of exceptional bodies in relation to the legacy of the supercrip. It begins by examining the tradition of deaf supercrips in realist genres such as crime thrillers, concentrating on the trope of the magical lipreader. The focus then turns to the fantastical conventions of the superhero action genre, analysing the heightened superpowers that reimagine and extend the 'gains' of deafness explored in Murray and Bauman's volume. Finally, it explores a counter-vision to deaf exceptionalism through the portrayal of deaf normality in the MCU series *Hawkeye*, as well as the dramatic texts *SuperDeafy* and *The Last Of Us*. The article concludes that the deaf superhero corpus has significant potential for contributing to narratives of Deaf Pride and combating tropes of audism in screen representation. Yet these benefits cannot be fully realized without an

understanding of the pervasiveness of supercrip stories and what they have historically demanded of deaf characters.

Supercrip

A term of unknown origin that entered common disability parlance in the 1970s, the supercrip is widely recognized as one of the most persistent tropes in narratives of disability. As Eli Clare explains:

> The nondisabled world is saturated with these stories … they focus on disabled people 'overcoming' our disabilities. They reinforce the superiority of the nondisabled body and mind. They turn individual disabled people, who are simply leading their lives, into symbols of inspiration. (2015, 13)

Supercrip narratives position disabled characters in conflict with their bodies, demanding they fight against their nature in the pursuit of excellence. They must display an exceptional show of exertion to force themselves into normative ways of being (e.g. employment, romantic relationships, physical independence) or to reach exceptional markers of success (e.g. academic qualifications, artistic masterpieces, sporting awards). Occasionally, the supercrip will subvert expectations and succeed *because of* their non-normative body (see the deaf lipreader trope explored below). All these portrayals centre models of extraordinary grit and giftedness, more suited to inspiring nondisabled audiences than engaging disabled ones who seek to see themselves represented on screen.

Martin Norden identifies the prevalence of the supercrip in what he calls 'the cinema of isolation' (Norden 1994), which portrays 'extraordinary (and often initially embittered) individuals whose lonely struggles against incredible odds make for what it considers heart-warming stories of courage and triumph' (3). Among these, deaf supercrips are numerous. For example, in the many adaptations of the life of deafblind student and advocate Helen Keller,[20] Helen is positioned as a supercrip due to her capacity to acquire language despite being unable to see writing or hear speech. Her teacher, Anne Sullivan, is also a classic example of a 'hearing saviour', without whose passion and dedication Helen would not be able to succeed. Similarly, in the many films about late-deafened musicians,[21] the protagonist encounters despair (often leading to suicidality) in the wake of a sudden hearing loss, struggling until, against the odds, they find a way back to music (e.g. sensing electro vibrations through speakers, composing visually through sheet music and memory). In several of these films, no longer being able to hear music is the ultimate loss, but recovering music after deafness is also the ultimate triumph which transcends the perceived limits of the character's impairment. These narratives are closely associated with traditional notions of the artistic genius; as Lennard Davis writes, audiences are drawn to 'people who overc[o]me their disabilities or use … them in ways we conventionally associate … with the genius of creativity' (Davis 1995, 9).

But perhaps the most pervasive deaf supercrip narrative is that of the magical lipreader. In crime genres in particular, ludicrously accurate lipreading is treated as a credible vehicle for plot advancement. In reality, lipreading is highly context-dependent, requiring a complex (and tiring) process of piecing together meaning from various sources; not only lip movements, but other facial, bodily, environmental and informational cues. Lipreading is a key skill and communicative strategy for many d/Deaf and hard of hearing people;

however, even experienced lipreaders can usually only decipher around 30% of speech (Altieri, Pisoni, and Townsend 2011, 2). Despite this, the supercrip lipreader often makes the ideal criminal mastermind or maverick crime-solver. In Jacques Audiard's 2001 film *Sur mes lèvres*, the deaf protagonist Carla (played by hearing actor Emmanuelle Devos) becomes attracted to a professional burglar and offers up her flawless lipreading skills for reconnaissance. In a series of low-lit scenes, Carla perfectly deciphers the mob's conversations through a pair of binoculars, from one building to another. This is implausible not only due to the visual set-up (distance, stark angles, darkness, the interfering glass of the window and binoculars), but also due to the lack of contextual clues, with Carla picking up on precise names and locations that she is seeing for the first time. The following year, the US series *Sue Thomas: F.B. Eye* adopted the same premise, its deaf lipreader protagonist solving crimes through her visual talents. 15 years later, *Baby Driver*'s hard of hearing getaway driver can repeat back an elaborate heist plan, word-for-word, after spending the original briefing at the back of the room, wearing sunglasses and blasting music through his earbuds. In the 2021 first season of *Only Murders in the Building*, the Deaf character Theo signs with his father, but otherwise lipreads seamlessly, sometimes between different rooms.

In 2025, with Deaf actor Rose Ayling-Ellis in the main role, the UK series *Code of Silence* portrays lipreading in more authentic but still unrealistic circumstances. Plucked from her job in a police station canteen when the station's regular lipreaders are unavailable, Alison is recruited to an organized crime investigation for her impeccable lipreading skills. Unlike earlier portrayals, *Code of Silence* is notable for its representation of the guesswork and analysis involved in lipreading. The series shows Alison's thought process through innovative captions, which update themselves from blurry, phonetic syllables to distinct, complete sentences as Alison fills in the blanks: Figure 1 and 2

This technique is a powerful means of visualizing the difficulty and skill involved in lipreading, and Alison often reminds her hearing colleagues that they must face her and not obstruct their mouths for her to understand. But when her subjects' faces are visible,

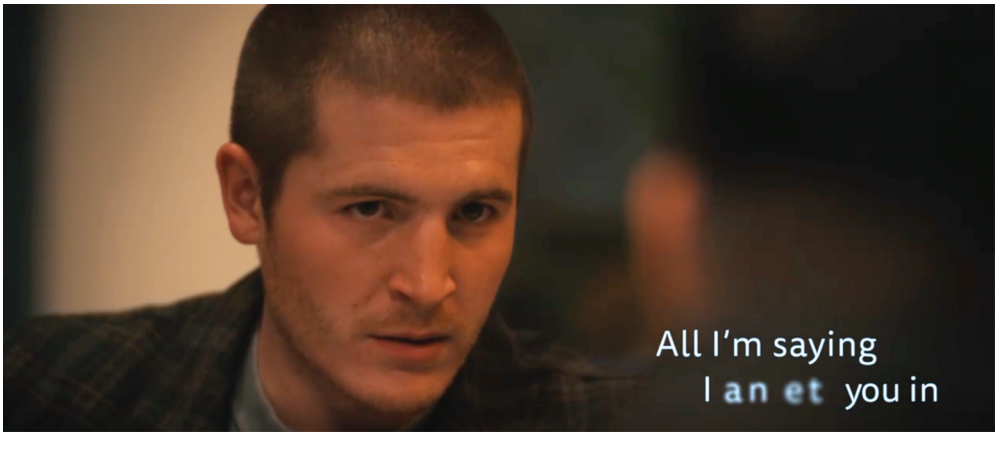

Figure 1. *Code of Silence* S1E1, Alison perceives phonetic syllables (rendered as blurry) on a man's lips. Image description: Close-up of a man's face next to the caption 'All I'm saying I *an et* you in' (emphasis in original; italics represent blurred letters).

Figure 2. *Code of Silence* S1E1, a split second after Figure 1, Alison deciphers the syllables into a complete sentence. Image description: Close-up of a woman's face next to updated, complete caption 'I can get you in'.

Alison rarely fails to comprehend them. Throughout the series, she gathers precise intelligence in increasingly complicated scenarios, in furtive glances to avoid notice, via surveillance taken at odd angles from spy cameras, or on grainy closed-circuit television (CCTV) footage gathered from afar.

Finally, perhaps the most exaggerated portrayal of magical lipreading on screen is that of *Eternals*' Makkari. In the original MCU comics, Makkari takes the form of a white nondisabled man. Yet Chloé Zhao's adaptation 'retcons' (Ratto 2017) the character into a Deaf woman of colour, played by the Black Deaf actor Lauren Ridloff.[22] In a tavern scene, Makkari barters with two traders, who attempt to scam her. As she turns her back momentarily, one man whispers to the other, 'Just lie to her'. Makkari whips around and signs to them, her friend Druig interpreting: 'I can sense vibrations. Even the tiniest movement. Including your voices when you speak.' Not only is Makkari an expert reader of lips, she can sense the shape of the vibrations created by them, with no need to even see the speaker pronouncing the words. However, there is a key difference between Makkari and the protagonists of *Sur mes lèvres, Sue Thomas: F.B. Eye*, *Baby Driver*, *Only Murders in the Building* and *Code of Silence*: Makkari is a super-skilled, hyper-perceptive superhero. In other words, her superpowers are part of a genre-wide suspension of realism, rather than a misunderstanding of deaf realities. Herein lies the crucial difference between traditional portrayals of the deaf supercrip, and contemporary portrayals of the deaf superhero.

Superhero

The audiovisual and narrative conventions of the superhero genre offer a unique opportunity to crystallize the principles of Deaf Gain. For Murray and Bauman,

> To many in the deaf community, being deaf has nothing to do with 'loss' but is, rather, a distinct way of being in the world, one that opens up perceptions, perspectives, and insights that are less common to the majority of hearing persons. The biological, social, and

> cultural implications of being deaf are not automatically defined simply by *loss* but could also be defined by *difference*, and, in some significant instances, as *gain*. (2014, xv, emphasis in original)

Indeed, in addition to her invisible lipreading, Makkari has a suite of skills connected to her hyper-perception of movement through sight and vibration. A popular theory even suggests that Makkari's deafness is an in-built optimization of her superhero body. As she travels faster than the speed of light, being deaf 'helps her to use her powers as she's not affected by the sonic boom that comes with her cosmic running and the shockwaves she generates, and that's pretty much a power on its own' (Tyler 2022). *Eternals* also refuses to portray Makkari's deafness as a defect when Ajak, a healer Eternal, cures Makkari of an injury. Though a golden, healing light envelops her whole body, Makkari is not 'healed' of her deafness; instead, it is integral to her cosmic design. Similarly, Echo has been Deaf from birth and raised in a combination of American Sign Language (ASL hereafter) and Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL), her ease in sign enabling her choice not to use hearing technologies like hearing aids or cochlear implants. Like Makkari, Maya has ultrasharp vision, depth perception and reflexes. However, her unique superpower is different: an ability to mimic the exact movements of others, making her a formidable fighter able to counter her rivals' every move. Though her superhero name may appear to be a reference to sound, in fact it describes this skill: over a lifetime of Deaf Gain, Maya has developed this ability to 'echo' those around her. Likewise, *The Tomorrow People*'s Cara does not require hearing or speech because she is telepathic, able to bypass sound to read thoughts directly (though she elects not to read minds and instead to sign with those who understand ASL). Finally, *El Deafo*'s Cece is drawn to create her superhero alter ego when she realizes that her 'Phonic Ear', a large hearing aid connected to a microphone worn by her teacher, allows her to hear the teacher even when she leaves the room. The other children come to view this as a superpower, leading them to call Cece 'The Listener For All'.

Beyond these positive manifestations of Deaf Gain, the deaf superhero body is also radical for its revision of the negative connotations that have long been attached to disability in the portrayal of the supervillain. According to Haslem, MacFarlane and Richardson, 'the superhero's body is a site of fantasy, aspiration, codified desire, and identification' (Haslem, MacFarlane, and Richardson 2018, 2). By contrast, the supervillain's body is frequently mutilated or 'incomplete' in some way that visually encodes their moral failings. Both comic books and screen action genres have long traded in villain characters whose physical deformities operate as shorthand for the 'evil cripple' trope, notably facial injury (The Joker, Red Skull) and limb difference (Ma Gnucci, Dr. Octopus). Brett Butler asserts that,

> In comic books and graphic novels, disabled characters tend to be villains whose disabilities and deformities represent their inner ugliness and evilness, or they are pathetic background characters meant to be saved by the able-bodied hero. (Butler 2019, 93)

José Alaniz and Scott T. Smith even see the disabled supervillain as a necessary counterpart to give the nondisabled superhero's body greater meaning: 'supervillain deformity [serves] as a contrast to nonpareil superheroic physiques' (Alaniz and Smith 2019, 3). Of this dichotomy, Haslem, MacFarlane and Richardson write that the superhero must provide an aspirational model, 'more strong, more able, more beautiful, more desirable'

while the supervillain's defective body must evoke fear or revulsion, their physical fallibility recalling 'caricatures of various socially marginalised groups – the working class, the homeless, the mentally ill, the disabled' (Haslem, MacFarlane, and Richardson 2018, 2). These caricatures are often heightened by the inclusion of transhuman technologies that invoke the uncanniness of the cyborg: prosthetics, masks, breathing apparatuses and so on. Some superheroes themselves are even mutilated by these villains through forced medical experimentation (e.g. Deadpool, Wolverine), whose body modifications may bring them strength but also extreme suffering. By contrast, the use of hearing aids and cochlear implants by some deaf superheroes (e.g. El Deafo, Hawkeye) and of prosthetic limbs by multiply disabled ones (e.g. Echo) refuses this sinister, ableist coding. Technological enhancement can even be seen as essential to the superhero's aesthetic: when Cece begins using her hearing aid, a device which augments her body to give her new abilities, she likens herself to Bruce Wayne, who dons technological armour to become Batman (Aneja and Shilpa 2025, 14). The deaf superhero thus folds the disabled villain/nondisabled hero binary in on itself, creating a single aspirational figure whose disabled body may be modified (or not) without abjection. Bell even portrayed her characters as bunnies (with their tall ears) to make El Deafo's hearing aids especially conspicuous, recasting what made her visibly different as a child into a part of her superhero costume (Bell 2015, see Figure 3).

These characterizations have the capacity to bolster deaf children's sense of self-esteem, *El Deafo* being a direct example of how Bell used superhero iconography to accept and celebrate her own deafness as a child. If the supercrip is a 'symbol of inspiration' for nondisabled audiences (Clare 2015, 13), scholars like Anil K. Aneja and B. S. L. Shilpa indicate deaf superheroes' capacity to generate positive identifications among deaf viewers: 'These assertive deaf portrayals not only foster a sense of shared experiences and community but also empower young [deaf and hard of hearing] readers to navigate the hearing world with confidence' (2025, 15). Many deaf critics and fans write of the value they find in seeing their deafness reflected in aspirational deaf screen figures

Figure 3. *El Deafo*, the 'El Deafo' superhero character with her highly visible 'Phonic Ear'. Image description: A cartoon of a girl bunny wearing a red cape and hearing aids flying against a blue sky, with the title 'El Deafo' beneath.

(Anonymous 2019; Schulman 2022).[23] In fact, this value even appears as a storyline in adjacent screen texts, such as in *The Last Of Us*. Hiding from predators in a postapocalyptic dystopia, Deaf child Sam and his hearing adult brother Henry must move locations to avoid detection. At first Sam is too afraid to leave his hiding place, but finds the courage to do so when Henry paints a superhero's mask around his eyes. And a brief search of online fan and critic responses yields direct accounts of self-identification and fulfilment through engagement with these texts. As just one example, one deaf Redditor writes of *Hawkeye*:

> Had hearing issues all my life, but it's now getting worse. Seeing somebody like Clint going through the same thing is 'calming' somewhat for me, if that makes any sense. If he can do it, I can as well. (@DonKiddic)

@DonKiddic's response (echoed by many)[24] reveals another dimension of positive self-identification with the deaf superhero, beyond the demonstration and celebration of Deaf Gain. For these viewers, the most inspiring dimension of the Hawkeye character is his struggle with recently-acquired hearing loss, a struggle which causes him pain but does not undermine his heroic qualities. In a radical turn, this deaf superhero is remarkable not so much for the extraordinariness of his superpowers, but the relatability of his human body.

Supernormal

If the supercrip misrepresents deaf experience to satisfy hearing fantasies and the superhero supplants exceptionalism to an aspirational realm, perhaps the most radical of these representations may be those that emphasize the normality of the deaf body, both capable of excellence and vulnerable to fallibility. One of the most striking examples of this is 2022's *Hawkeye*. Clint Barton, aka Hawkeye, is a member of the Avengers superhero circle for his outstanding archery skills. Yet unlike other human heroes who augment their bodies with technological armour that effectively transform them into supernatural beings (e.g. Batman, Black Panther, Iron Man), Hawkeye's weapons are limited to his arrows and his fists; he has 'the eye of a hawk', but no superhuman powers. Unlike Echo, his skills are also not directly explained by hearing loss. In fact, Hawkeye's hearing has been ambiguously and inconsistently represented across the Marvel canon, both on screen and in comics. Clint first appeared in the 1964 comic 'Tales of Suspense #57' and for 19 years the character was portrayed as hearing. In the 1983 issue 'Hawkeye #4', he deliberately deafens himself with a sonic arrow to escape the supervillain Crossfire, who brainwashes others through invasive sound waves. At the end of the same issue, Hawkeye obtains a hearing aid, which works miraculously well and effectively returns him to hearing status (a development Aneja and Shilpa describe as a supercrip trope [2025, 2]). In the following decades, few comics and none of the *Avengers* films referenced this deafness, until the 2012 comic 'Hawkeye #19', colloquially known as 'the deaf issue'. In this edition of Hawkeye's story, Clint and his brother Barney already know basic ASL, which they learned when Clint was temporarily deafened as a child from physical abuse by their father. This ability to sign becomes relevant once more when Clint is deafened for a second time in his life, when the supervillain The Clown stabs him in both ears with his own arrows. The issue adapts traditional comic conventions to incorporate Clint's perspective. When the newly deafened young Clint hears voices but cannot understand

them, the speech bubbles contain illegible scribbles. And although the re-deafened adult Clint cannot hear voices at all, speech bubbles still appear (for he sees people speaking) but are empty. The issue also uses the iconography of comic panels to insert ASL signs in place of spoken dialogue.

Issue #19 was released one year after Jeremy Renner's first screen performance as Hawkeye in 2011's *Thor*,[25] so it is relatively unsurprising (though not inevitable) that performance did not incorporate the original hearing loss storyline from 1983. However, none of the character's following appearances in *The Avengers* (2012),[26] *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015),[27] *Captain America: Civil War* (2016)[28] or *Avengers: Endgame* (2019)[29] mentioned any of his three canonical experiences of hearing loss, either. The 2021 series introduces the hearing loss narrative to the screen for the first time, while retaining continuity with the previous films. When asked why he is wearing a hearing aid, a montage of explosion sequences from the Avengers' battles flashes before Clint's eyes. In this version, the cause of his hearing loss is more banal than sonic arrows or stabbings to the head: long-term noise exposure. Clint may be an Avenger, but he is not a god like Thor or a technological marvel like Iron Man. He may be a superhero, but his human body is nonetheless vulnerable to external hazards. Casey Ratto sees this narrative slippage, the tendency to 'ret-con' (or force 'retroactive continuity' with preceding texts) as a particular problem for invisible disabilities in comics, on page and screen). For Ratto, visible disabilities in these texts are 'sticky', to use Sarah Ahmed's epistemological term, but sensory and mental disabilities are far more susceptible to revision. He describes Hawkeye's ever-shifting deafness as the most extreme example of how 'various disabilities have been retconned in and out of existence as the writer and the story requires it' (2017). Thus, canonically, since 1964 Hawkeye has been hearing more than he has been deaf, but he has also been deafened in four very different ways: supernatural weapon, stabbing, brain injury and noise exposure.

The *Hawkeye* series picks up after the events of *Avengers: Endgame*, when Clint teams up with another archer, Kate Bishop, to battle the supervillain Kingpin. They soon encounter the formidable Echo, who first appears villainous in her connection to Kingpin, but is slowly revealed to share more in common with the series' heroes (a situation explored in more detail in *Echo*). We first see Clint at a Broadway play, shifting in his seat as he adjusts his new hearing aid, which is causing him frustration and discomfort. As the series advances, we witness the newly deafened Hawkeye experience several perceptual disadvantages that do not affect the Deaf-born Echo. Though he is an accomplished archer with excellent visual and spatial perception, Hawkeye does not yet have a 'Deaf' eye: he cannot yet lipread, he doesn't know sign, he can't tap into vibrations, he misses details Echo doesn't. Maya exploits this at one point by crushing Hawkeye's hearing aid to disadvantage him in combat. However, while the series portrays Maya as exceptionally competent, it also shows these competencies to be learned rather than innate; these are skills that Hawkeye may eventually learn to access, too. Thus *Hawkeye* emphasizes the differences in how deafness can be lived across individuals and over time.

Ultimately, *Hawkeye*'s portrayal of deafness seems to provide what Brett Butler imagined two years before the series' release: a superhero who operates 'not as a supercrip, sentimental figure, or savage, but as a well-rounded disabled character whom the reader values as an integral part of the story'. Such a characterization evokes portrayals from beyond the superhero action genre, such as *No Ordinary Hero: The SuperDeafy Movie*, in

which a Deaf actor, Tony, plays a superhero on children's television. Learning that one of his partner's students has been masking his deafness to assimilate with hearing children, Tony visits the class to discuss Deaf Pride. He begins by explaining how special deaf people are and how they can do anything they put their mind to. But the Deaf student, Jacob, isn't satisfied. He asks Tony: 'But don't you just want to be normal?' When Tony asks him what he means by 'normal', Jacob answers, 'It means being the same as everybody else.' After some reflection, Tony responds with a message that would not feel out of place in *Hawkeye*:

> Tony: But no two people are the same. You know what I think? I think there's no such thing as normal. No, there's no way. Everyone is unique; we all have special traits.
>
> *[Addresses a hearing student]* So, what are you good at?
>
> Student A: Soccer!
>
> *[Addresses another hearing student]* Are you good at soccer?
>
> Student B: No, not really, but I'm really good at swimming and maths.
>
> Tony: OK, so now, I have a question: soccer or swimming, which one is more normal?
>
> The class: Both!
>
> Tony: Exactly, you got it.

Through this exchange, Tony asks the children – and the audience – to adjust the parameters of what they understand to be normal, prompting a broader definition that encompasses deaf experience not as aberrant, but legitimate (King 2023, 57). *Hawkeye* also shows this experience to be not monolithic, but complex. In both texts, differences in capacity and experience are real and can engender either advantage or disadvantage depending on the circumstances, but they are never positioned along a continuum from normal to abnormal. Exceptional beings like Echo incarnate exaggerated forms of Deaf Gain. Yet characters like Hawkeye can also 'normalize characters with disabilities and engage a new generation of fans who are open to the images of non-traditional superheroes' (2019, 106). As Ben Ghan writes in *The Spectatorial*, such characterization can not only evoke inspiration to excel, but identification with the messiness of reality:

> I have hearing loss. I am not completely deaf like Clint, but I have almost no hearing in my right ear. I wear a hearing aid. My little brother has progressive hearing loss in both of his ears. For us, seeing a superhero also being unable to hear what people are saying, seeing a superhero reading lips and needing to look at people when they talk, is amazing. (2014)

In other words, the newly deafened Hawkeye occupies a space between the superhero and the human, a messy space that, while only showing one individual's experience, gestures towards the complexity of deaf representation and identity.

Conclusion

The long history of audism in film is both disrupted and reinforced by the recent appearance of multiple deaf superheroes on screen. Films and series like *Eternals, Hawkeye, El Deafo* and *Echo* celebrate and literalize Deaf Gain through the exaggerated

cinematic language of the superhero genre. These differing visions of deaf exceptionalism occupy an ambivalent place in deaf screen representation, oscillating between subversive narratives of empowerment and what disabled writer Brook H. describes as 'resorting to tired tropes like Inspirationally Disadvantaged or Disability Superpowers' (2021). Yet unlike the magical lipreaders of *Sur mes lèvres*, *Sue Thomas: F.B. Eye*, *Baby Driver*, *Only Murders in the Building* and *Code of Silence*, these extraordinary figures exist in an alternate reality in which supernatural levels of power and perception are canon. In these worlds, vibration perception, vision, balance, signing and spatial awareness are the sources of superhuman abilities that render deaf bodies exceptional. However, these superhero texts do not portray deafness as a monolithic magical trait. Some deaf superheroes, like Makkari, are portrayed as 'perfect' beings whose deafness is part of their cosmic design, something even an all-powerful healer does not seek to 'cure'. Others, like Echo, are human, their bodies the site of what supercrip narratives would conventionally consider defects, be they disabilities since birth (deafness) or injuries from experience (amputation). Through extreme grit and Deaf Gain honed over time and experience, they *become* superhumanly capable. Still others, like Hawkeye, have been superheroes since before their hearing loss. It is plausible that over time, Deaf Gain will sharpen their skills, yet this is as yet unrealized and their transition from hearing to deaf is an imperfect and uneasy one that nonetheless does not undermine their heroism. These deaf superhero texts show the multiple ways of deaf knowing and being which are different – but neither inherently inferior nor superior – to hearing ones. Ultimately, they demand a conscious reconsideration not only of what it means to be exceptional, but of what it means to be human.

Notes

1. See, for example.
   Lartigau, Eric, dir. 2014. *La Famille Bélier* (*The Belier Family*). Paris: Jerico.
   Heder, Siân, dir. 2021. *CODA*. Culver City: Apple Original Films.
   Isenberg, Adam, dir. 2011, *Una vida sin palabras* (*A Life Without Words*), Istanbul: Zela Film.
   Madell, Jane and Taylor, Irene, dir. 2018. *The Listening Project*. Portland: Vermilion Films.
   Henríquez, Samuel, dir. 2012. *Entre Sombras y Seruros* (*Between Shadows and Whispers*). Venezuela.
   Tal, Itay, dir. 2019. *Elohe Ha-psanter* (*God of the Piano*), London: Film Republic.
2. Audiard, Jacques, dir. 2001. *Sur mes lèvres* (*Read My Lips*). Paris: Why Not Productions.
3. Moulton, Catherine. dir. 2025. *Code of Silence*. London: ITV Studios.
4. Hoffman, John and Martin, Steve, creators 2021-present. *Only Murders in the Building*. Burbank: 20th Television.
5. Johnson, Dave Alan and Gary R. dir. 2002–2005. *Sue Thomas: F.B.Eye*. Toronto: Pebblehut Productions.
6. Wright, Edgar, dir. 2017. *Baby Driver*. Los Angeles: Working Title Films.
7. This article employs the spelling of both 'deaf' (used to refer to the physiological condition of not hearing) and 'Deaf' (denoting a cultural and linguistic identity), deferring to 'deaf' when the identities being referenced are unknown or mixed, as this distinction is mostly considered respectful and useful in the academic field of Deaf Studies. However, I also defer to Brenda Brueggemann's nuanced analysis of terminology in her formative (2009) book Deaf Subjects, in which she problematises any simplistic impulse to categorically divide bodies and identities between 'deaf' and 'Deaf' and the potential slippage and even exclusion that such nomenclature canengender (11–15).

8. Insolera, Emilio, dir. 2017. *Sign Gene: The First Deaf Superheroes*. Milan: Pluin Productions.
9. Zhao, Chloé. dir. 2021. *Eternals*. Los Angeles: Marvel Studios.
10. Igla, Jonathan, dir. 2022. *Hawkeye*. Los Angeles: Marvel Studios/Disney+/Walt Disney Pictures.
11. Dayre, Marion. dir. 2023. *Echo*. Los Angeles: Marvel Studios/20th Television.
12. Bell, Cece. dir. 2022. *El Deafo*. Culver City: Apple TV+/Industry Entertainment/Lighthouse Studios/Wellsville Productions.
13. Akil, Salim. dir. 2018–2021. *Black Lightning*. Burbank: Berlanti Productions/DC Entertainment/Warner Bros. Television.
14. Guo, Hu, Lam, Yuk-Fan and Liang Sheng, Quan. dir. 2019. *Love and Destiny (Chen Xi Yuan)*. Shanghai: GCOO Entertainment/Huace Media/Shanghai Croton Culture Media Co.
15. Chan, Jeff. dir. 2019. *Code 8*. Toronto: Collective Pictures/Blue Ice Pictures/Colony Pictures.
    Note: this superhero, Freddie, is not deaf but is nonverbal and communicates predominantly in American Sign Language (ASL).
16. Berlanti, Greg, Klemmer, Phil and Plec, Julie. dir. 2013–2014. *The Tomorrow People*. Burbank: Berlanti Productions/CBS Television Studios/Fremantle.
17. Kotsur, Troy, dir. 2013. *No Ordinary Hero: The SuperDeafy Movie*. Chicago: Mariposa Creativity/Gatesman Photography/LJM Enterprises.
18. Druckmann, Neil and Mazin, Craig. dir. 2023–2025. *The Last of Us*. Los Angeles: HBO.
19. Audism: n. 'bias or discrimination against people who cannot hear or have difficulty hearing, or prejudice or hostility toward them.' https://www.dictionary.com/browse/audism.
20. Penn, Arthur. dir. 1962. *The Miracle Worker*. Playfilm Productions.
    Aaron, Paul. dir. 1979. *The Miracle Worker*. Atlanta: Half Pint Productions.
    Tass, Nadia. dir. 2000. *The Miracle Worker*. Burbank: Disney.
21. See, for example.
    Adolfi, John G. dir. 1932. *The Man Who Played God*. Burbank: Warner Bros.
    Douglas, Gordon. dir. 1955. *Sincerely Yours*. Burbank: Warner Bros.
    Dowse, Michael. dir. 2004. *It's All Gone, Pete Tong*. Healdsburg: True West Films/Vertigo Films.
    Marder, Darius. dir. 2019. *Sound of Metal*. Culver City: Amazon Original.
22. Ratto (2017): 'To retcon is to change the past in order to fit the present.'
23. See comments on Reddit forums such as r/deaf, including for *Echo*, *Hawkeye* and *Eternals*.
24. See, for example, Berry (2021), Brook (2021), Polo (2021) and Schulman (2022). The original comment from @DonKiddic is available at https://www.reddit.com/r/marvelstudios/comments/r9f7ym/hawkeye_is_more_groundbreaking_than_people/.
25. Branagh, Kenneth. dir. 2011. *Thor*. Hollywood: Paramount Pictures/Marvel Entertainment/Marvel Studios.
26. Whedon, Joss. dir. 2012. *The Avengers*. Burbank: Marvel Studios/Paramount Pictures.
27. Whedon, Joss. dir. 2015. *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. Burbank: Marvel Studios.
28. Russo, Anthony and Joe. dir. 2016. *Captain America: Civil War*. Burbank: Marvel Studios.
29. Russo, Anthony and Joe. dir. 2019. *Avengers: Endgame*. Burbank: Marvel Studios.

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Data availability statement

A catalogue of feature films, series, shorts and documentaries containing sign language and deaf characters, including the tag 'deaf superhero', is searchable online at the Sign on Screen project website: www.signonscreen.com/film-finder/. Academics, film industry staff and community members are encouraged to download the free dataset for their own research by clicking on 'citing this database'.

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