

Of Mute Servants, Deaf Young Ladies and other Stereotypes. People with Hearing and Language Impairments in Films

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Summary

The aims of this contribution are to analyze the image conveyed by cinema of deaf and mute people along history, and to identify the films that convey a positive and realistic image of these people and those that reflect negative or stereotyped images. 53 films, spanning from 1929 to 2006, are analyzed. The main focus of the analyses is on the image that is transmitted of people with hearing and/or language impairments and the use that cinema makes of disability.

Keywords: Hearing impairment, Deafness, Dumbness, Muteness, Stereotype, Disability.

Since the 70s, the idea of people with disabilities has changed considerably. After the paradigm of rehabilitation, a health-care based model focused on disability, time has led to attention being focused on the individual and the achievement of personal goals that are important for him/her, such as an improvement in quality of life and self-determination, equal opportunities, and full participation in all aspects of life.

The media play an important role in the consolidation of this new idea of disability¹. The media's behaviour towards people with disabilities and the development of attitudes and values follow parallel paths. Cinema, in particular, is a medium of unquestionable value for the communication of ideas. For a large proportion of the population it is one of the main ways to access certain images and information, hence its usefulness in the promotion and development of positive attitudes, in the progressive eradication of prejudices and stereotypes, and in the process of educating and informing society in general and groups such as teachers and educators in particular.

The aims of this paper are first to analyze the image conveyed by the cinema of deaf and mute people along history, and, second, to identify the films that convey a positive, realistic and faithful image of people with

hearing and language impairments and those that reflect negative, stereotyped or misleading images. For this purpose, 53 films in which deaf or mute characters appear were analyzed (Table 1). The films span from 1929 (*The Cocoanuts*) to 2006 (*Goya's Ghosts*). The analysis focused mainly on the following elements: the cinematographic use of disability, the image of the deaf or mute person transmitted, the role and attitudes of the rest of the characters, and the media and the communication and intervention systems used.

The films were selected according to the following **process**: (1) a review of databases and other documentary sources specialized in cinema and disability; (2) a search for titles with one of the following descriptors in their synopsis: deaf, deafness, mute, muteness, mutism, deaf-mute and sign language; (3) a selection of the films to be analyzed based on their impact and availability; (4) the drawing up of an index-card to analyze the films (including technical details, character description, the image conveyed by the character, the behaviour and attitudes of the other characters, etc.); (5) a viewing of the films by two observers; (6) an idea-sharing session to discuss the observations made and to draw conclusions. Some of the aspects analyzed are described below.

In 18 of the 53 films there are mute characters. These are generally people who suffer from defects or malfunctioning of the phono-articulatory system (films number 3, 9, 15, 20 and 40), but there are also others in whom muteness is associated with shock or with a personal decision not to speak (films number 10 and 37).

In the other 35 films, i.e., in the vast majority of them, there are deaf characters. People with different degrees of hearing loss are included within this category: people with congenital deafness (films number 4, 13, 16, 26, 27 and 41) or with deafness developed during adulthood (films number 5, 8, 21, 36, 38 and 53). The mistakenly called deaf-mutes are also included within this group. The group of people with hearing impairments find this obsolete and incorrect term offensive^{5,6} because it is based on an erroneous understanding of the condition that suggests that these people are unable to communicate with others. Deaf people can communicate by means of sign language and/or oral language (in its spoken or written form, each according to the per-

son's skills and/or preferences). In this paper we have used the term deaf for those characters who suffer from hearing loss (to a greater or lesser degree) and who find difficulties in their daily life to access communications and information (the so-called deaf-mute characters are therefore within this category), and we have used the term mute for those who cannot speak due to a malfunctioning of the phono-articulatory system or who display muteness associated with emotional shock or psychopathological conditions. Nevertheless, the descriptor "deaf-mute" is still used in film databases. In this sense, films such as *Belinda*, *Man of a thousand faces*, *Deaf Smith and Johnny Ears* and *Speak Little Mute Girl* appear linked to this descriptor.

The use of deaf or mute characters in films

It is not usual for a director or script writer to randomly include a person with a disability in the plot of a film. Among the 53 films analyzed we find 5 main reasons that justify the inclusion of deaf or mute people:

Table 1. List of films subjected to analysis.*

	Title	Director	Year	Disability
1	<i>The Cocoanuts</i>	Robert Florey	1929	Muteness
2	<i>The Old Dark House</i>	James Whale	1932	Muteness
3	<i>The Most Dangerous Game</i>	Irving Pichel	1932	Muteness
4	<i>Mystery of the Wax Museum</i>	Michael Curtiz	1933	Deaf-muteness
5	<i>Un grand amour de Beethoven</i>	Abel Gance	1937	Deafness
6	<i>The Story of Alexander Graham Bell</i>	Irving Cummings	1939	Deafness
7	<i>The Ghost Ship</i>	Mark Robson	1943	Muteness
8	<i>And Now, Tomorrow</i>	Irving Pichel	1944	Deafness
9	<i>Cobra Woman</i>	Robert Siodmak	1944	Muteness
10	<i>The Spiral Staircase</i>	Robert Siodmak	1945	Muteness
11	<i>Out of the past</i>	Jacques Tourneur	1947	Deaf-muteness
12	<i>Letter from an Unknown Woman</i>	Max Ophüls	1947	Muteness
13	<i>Johnny Belinda</i>	Jean Negulesco	1948	Deaf-muteness
14	<i>No Way Out</i>	Joseph L. Mankiewicz	1950	Deaf-muteness
15	<i>The Black Castle</i>	Nathan Juran	1952	Muteness
16	<i>Mandy</i>	Alex Mackendrick	1952	Deafness
17	<i>House of Wax</i>	André De Toth	1953	Deaf-muteness
18	<i>The Big Combo</i>	Joseph H. Lewis	1955	Deafness
19	<i>Man of a Thousand Faces</i>	Joseph Pevney	1957	Deaf-muteness
20	<i>The Tingler</i>	William Castle	1959	Deaf-muteness
21	<i>Elmer Gantry</i>	Richard Brooks	1960	Deafness
22	<i>The City of the Dead</i>	John Llewellyn Moxey	1960	Muteness
23	<i>Homicidal</i>	William Castle	1961	Muteness
24	<i>The Curse of the Werewolf</i>	Terence Fisher	1961	Muteness
25	<i>The Miracle Worker</i>	Arthur Penn	1962	Deaf-muteness
26	<i>The Evil of Frankenstein</i>	Freddie Francis	1964	Deaf-muteness
27	<i>The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter</i>	Robert Ellis Miller	1968	Deaf-muteness

*The films were selected from the following databases: Internet Movie Database^{2,3} and All Movie Guide⁴.

Table 1 (continued). List of films subjected to analysis *.

	Title	Director	Year	Disability
28	<i>Ryan's Daughter</i>	David Lean	1970	Muteness
29	<i>The Last Picture Show</i>	Peter Bogdanovich	1971	Muteness
30	<i>The Return of Count Yorga</i>	Bob Kelljan	1971	Muteness
31	<i>Deaf Smith and Johnny Ears/ Los amigos</i>	Paolo Cavara	1972	Deaf-muteness
32	<i>Spaek Little Mute Girl/ Habla, mudita</i>	Manuel G. Aragón	1974	Deaf-muteness
33	<i>Murder by Death</i>	Robert Moore	1976	Deaf-muteness
34	<i>Looking for Mr. Goodbar</i>	Richard Brooks	1977	Deafness
35	<i>Children of a Lesser God</i>	Randa Haines	1986	Deaf-muteness
36	<i>See No Evil, Hear No Evil</i>	Arthur Hiller	1989	Deafness
37	<i>The Piano</i>	Jane Campion	1993	Muteness
38	<i>Immortal Beloved</i>	Bernard Rose	1994	Deafness
39	<i>Four Weddings and a Funeral</i>	Mike Newell	1994	Deaf-muteness
40	<i>Mute Witness</i>	Anthony Waller	1994	Muteness
41	<i>Mr. Holland's Opus</i>	Stephen Herek	1995	Deafness
42	<i>Dobermann</i>	Jan Kounen	1997	Deaf-muteness
43	<i>In the Company of Men</i>	Neil LaBute	1997	Deafness
44	<i>Sweet and Lowdown</i>	Woody Allen	1999	Muteness
45	<i>Goya in Bourdeaux/ Goya en Burdeos</i>	Carlos Saura	1999	Deafness
46	<i>Sur mes lèvres</i>	Jacques Audiard	2001	Deafness
47	<i>11'09''01 - September 11</i>	Claude Lelouch	2002	Deaf-muteness
48	<i>Dear Frankie</i>	Shona Auerbach	2003	Deafness
49	<i>The Reckoning</i>	Paul McGuigan	2003	Deaf-muteness
50	<i>A lot like love</i>	Nigel Cole	2005	Deafness
51	<i>Babel</i>	Alejandro G. Iñárritu	2006	Deaf-muteness
52	<i>Copying Beethoven</i>	Agnieszka Holland	2006	Deafness
53	<i>Goya's Ghosts</i>	Milos Forman	2006	Deafness

*The films were selected from the following databases: Internet Movie Database^{2,3} and All Movie Guide⁴.

1.- Disability is the central topic of the film, either because the main character is deaf or mute (films number 27, 35, 37, 40, 46 and 47), or because the film depicts the process of learning a system for communication (films number 13 and 32), or because it reflects the quest for a cure (film number 8).

2.- Biographical component: these are films that reflect (to a greater or lesser degree of faithfulness) the lives of people who really did suffer from the disability, such as Beethoven (films number 5, 38 and 52) or Goya (films number 45 and 53), or of people who were close to them (films number 19 and 25).

3.- The character suffering from a disability (especially when dealing with muteness) contributes to the creation of an atmosphere of fear, an environment that is strange or menacing (films number 12, 3, 4, 7, 15, 17, 20, 22 and 23).

4.- The characters' disabilities are used to create humour. In this case we should differentia-

te between films that make fun of disability (films number 33 and 36) and those that have fun with disability (films number 1, 39 and 44).

5.- The disability is associated with aspects that are useful for the plot. Lip-reading, for example, is seen as a threat in certain films (films number 11 and 14), or is what triggers the story in others such as *Sur mes lèvres* (*Read my lips*). The absence of speech is a widely used resource aimed at showing show the characters' helplessness and creating situations of tension, since these characters cannot warn others of the danger they are in and they therefore become more vulnerable victims (films number 10, 20, 22, 23, 24, 30 and 40).

Although it is usual to find one of these reasons linked to the inclusion of characters with disabilities in films, there are also examples of plots that would work out in the same way even if the character in questions did not suffer from a disability (films number 11, 47 and 50). Nevertheless, this normalized and desirable treatment continues to be the least frequent.

The image of the person that is transmitted: stereotypes, false myths, and reoccurring ideas

Stereotypes

Characters with disabilities have appeared in films since the early days of cinema. Initially, they involved men with physical disabilities, deformed beings, generally evil, and sometimes terrifying. Blind characters were also frequent; innocent, and often endowed with exceptional powers. In both cases, the image transmitted was of little help for the social integration of people with disabilities.

With the advent of sound in the cinema in the late 20s, deaf and mute characters began to appear in films. As was the case with other types of disability, the images portrayed were very stereotyped and, although we cannot talk of clichés as clear as those related to blind or physically disabled characters, the representations that made along the history of this type of film have not reflected either.

Mute characters, appearing before deaf ones, inherited the stereotype of the physically disabled. In general, they were *servants* (or helpers) with strong constitutions and a sinister look who served an evil master (films number 2, 3, 4, 15 and 17), or were silent witnesses to passion or crimes (Figure 1).

Although this is a reoccurring stereotype in horror films, servants have also appeared in other genres, such as comedy [*Murder by Death*], and even in other cinematographies [*Bangiku* (1954) by Mikio Naruse].

Another frequent stereotype is a variant of the *sweet innocent* proposed by Norden⁷. In this case, we are dealing with a beautiful young woman with whom the



Figure 1: Sinister-looking servants whose role is to establish an atmosphere of terror.

viewer empathizes, and who must often be taken care of owing to her to her representation as being helpless. This stereotype is not as clearly defined as the previous one, but it is common for most of the women who suffer from deafness or muteness to appear as attractive young girls (Figure 2).

The power of attraction of these women lies either in their natural beauty and sweetness (films number 6, 8, 10, 40, 43 and 44), or in a wilder, sexual attraction (films number 24, 26, 32 and 42). However, older women are only present in three titles (films number 19, 20 and 33), and in one of them there was no other option since it is a biographical film.

False myths and reoccurring ideas

Stereotypes convey a simplified mental image of a group of people. This image is seldom faithful to reality, even though it might be accepted by most people as a pattern. The case of false myths is even worse: these are ideas that do not correspond to reality, but that are believed to be true by groups or societies.

In the films analyzed we have identified false myths that distort and damage the image of deaf and mute people. The first is the extraordinary capacity deaf characters have for lip reading. There are clear examples in films 6, 8, 14 or 48. It is a widespread myth to believe that all deaf people can communicate perfectly well due to their incredible talents for lip and face reading. This is not true. Oral language is not conceived for visual but for auditory perception, and there are many situations that prevent accurate lip reading. There are few films that approach this aspect in a realistic way: *The heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *See no Evil, Hear no Evil*, show the difficulty involved in lip reading if the speaker has no



Figure 2: Deaf and/or mute women are almost always played by attractive young actresses.

communicative intentions (Figure 3).

Another of the recurring and mistaken ideas present in many films is doubt regarding the intellectual abilities of deaf or mute people. This might be the most harmful image provided by such characters since the others, more or less explicitly, usually associate impaired intellectual abilities with muteness, although also with hearing impairments. The clearest cases are seen in films such as *Johnny Belinda* or *The Last Picture Show*. In the latter, the mute boy is often referred to as silly, stupid or retarded. This is hinted at in a subtler way in films number 2, 7, 14, 17 and 33. In *The heart is a Lonely Hunter* this is modified when the personality is developed, although this is an exception.

In a humorous style, Woody Allen gathers all the mistaken clichés related to intellectual ability and the origin of disability and expresses them through his uneducated and egocentric protagonist in *Sweet and Lowdown*. This character, upon meeting a mute girl says: *I get a goddam mute, orphan half-wit. The jackpot.*

Another image that is repeated in many of the films analyzed is the lack of social integration of mute and deaf characters. Although there are certain examples of integration (although never complete), there is a clear tendency to place these characters at the fringes of society. In the case of the mute servants in horror films, their masters' mansions, workshops or houses are usually located in remote places (films number 2, 3, 4, 15 and 17). There are also characters who live away from population centres either because it is where their family lives (films number 13, 25 and 32), or because owing to their of their disability they live alone and outside, although near, the community (films number 26, 28, 31 and 49).

Cinema's representation of deaf and mute people is that of beings who are isolated from society. This isolation works both ways, since it is not only due to attitudes

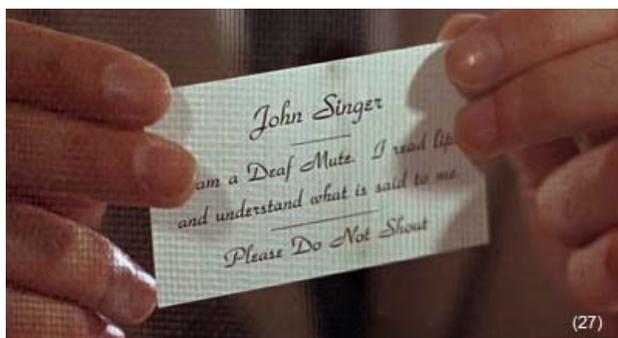


Figure 3: The first impression we get of the main character in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is a very good summary of the false myths that exist about deaf-mute people.

of the community itself, which excludes them, but is also encouraged by the person him/herself. In this sense, the following sentence read by the voice over in the film *The Ghost Ship* is interesting: *This is another man I can never know because I cannot talk with him. For I am a mute and cannot speak. I am cut off from other men...*

Even in a film that shows a deaf-mute character who seems to be integrated in a group of friends (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*), the truth is that his presence in the group is merely symbolic: since only one of the members of the group (his brother) is able to use sign language, the rest hardly address him and he is thus excluded from their fun.

Deaf or mute characters only have partners in 13 of the 53 films. Although relationships are established, they are hardly ever stable and consolidated (films number 10, 19 and 50), and it is very frequent to see precisely which difficulties these characters may have in their quest to achieve stability in love (films number 27, 31, 40, 43, 46 and 51).

The disabled character is a parent in only three of the films: in *Johnny Belinda*, where the child is the product of rape; in *Man of a Thousand Faces*, where the disability stems from the biographical component of the film; and in *The Piano*, where muteness is a personal choice. In short, there is clear pessimism related to the idea of these people creating a family or having an abundant group of friends.

Attitudes of the rest of the characters towards the deaf or mute person

In this section we distinguish between the parents' attitude and those of other people who are close to the disabled character: fiancé, siblings, etc., and the attitude of the more general group of people with whom they share their environment (family friends, neighbours, community). Concerning the first group, within the family there is a whole list of attitudes and behaviours that range from denial (films number 15 and 32), overprotection (films number 10 and 16), susceptibility (film number 48), doubts regarding the children's intellectual capacity (films number 13, 25, and 29), and frustration due to communication difficulties (films number 41 and 51). There are also other more positive and constructive attitudes such as the will to communicate (a desire that appears mainly in mothers: films number 16 and 41), genuine interest in learning their communicative system (films number 19 and 25) and adaptations to improve communication: to face them or to touch their shoulder before speaking, the use of gestures, writing, etc. (films number 6, 8, 31, 41 and 48).

Regarding the attitudes of the people around them, they are negative in practically all the films analyzed: rejection (films number 19, 28, 43, 44 and 46), fear (films number 4, 7, 14, 15 and 17), pity (films number 10, 13, 27, 29, 32 and 40), overprotection and patronizing attitudes (films number 8 and 29).

Here, films such as *Mandy*, *Children of a Lesser God* and *Dear Frankie* are important. In all three of them there are positive and constructive attitudes, both within the family and among the people surrounding the disabled characters (encouraging the independence and autonomy of people with hearing impairments, confidence in their learning and managing capacities, etc.). An example of the first is the mother's attitude in *Mandy*, a 1952 film in which there is a woman who, sure of her daughter's learning possibilities and the benefits that attending a special school for children with hearing impairments will bring, does not hesitate to place these attributes before her marriage and family life. Regarding the environment, the following extract from *Dear Frankie* is a good example of the most common attitudes of others towards the young man, as opposed to his mother's susceptibility: Mother: "What was the problem anyway? Could you not understand him? Waitress: "I understood him perfectly. He's a smart wee cookie. Mother: For a deaf kid? Waitress: For his age.

Communication systems and education

In the films analyzed most of the deaf and mute characters use sign language together with lip reading to communicate. Regarding frequency, commonly used gestures and/or written communication, take second place. Nevertheless, since it is impossible to speak strictly about the use of "Total Communication"⁸, in most of the films there is an informal and non-systematic use of it, more as a cinematographic resource whose purpose is to make the plot more dynamic than as a deliberate decision taken because of the awareness of the benefits of this system in favouring the communication and integration of deaf or mute characters.

Regarding the communication systems used by the rest of the characters, the passage of time allows us to speak of a significant difference: while in the first films sign language was only used by professionals such as doctors or teachers (films number 6 and 13), its use gradually became generalized, at least among those closest to the person with hearing and/or language problems (films number 35, 39, 42, 50 and 51).

Finally, regarding education for deaf people, the most paradigmatic example and the one that caused the greatest impact was *The Miracle Worker*, which captures the educational process of a small girl who due to illness

was left deaf-blind at the age of 19 months. The film reflects how her teacher taught her the manual alphabet and how to lip-read by touching others with her fingers. *Johnny Belinda* and *Speak Little Mute Girl*, following a similar line, respectively show the process of learning sign language and the attempt to defeat muteness. In both films the intervention, carried out on an "expert's" initiative, a doctor and teacher, is performed in a rather haphazard way. Returning to an institutionalized context, *Mandy*, *Children of a Lesser God* and *Mr Holland's Opus* reflect the education deaf people receive at specific centres, while the most inclusive example can be found in *Dear Frankie*.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been to analyze the image conveyed by cinema of deaf or mute people. In this sense, an analysis of the selected films suggests that the treatment they receive on the big screen has improved considerably with the passage of time, the image shown of them becoming much more realistic from the mid 80s onwards.

Stereotypes of fierce and evil males, sweet and naïve women, often with limited intellectual capacity, have gradually begun to disappear, and the image of deaf and mute people transmitted has become more positive and normalized. In this sense, *Children of a Lesser God*, from 1986, is an inflection point.

Images and practices more closely related to the present conception of people with disabilities have begun to appear. Thus, we have observed how the people gain in importance to despite their disabilities (*Babel* as opposed to *See no Evil, Hear no Evil*), the supremacy of education over rehabilitation, or in other words the role of teacher over that of doctor (*Looking for Mr Goodbar* as opposed to *Johnny Belinda*), normalization as opposed to isolation (*11'09''01 – September 11* as opposed to *The Evil of Frankenstein*), and the more practices as opposed to other more segregating ones (*Dear Frankie* as opposed to *Mandy*).

In spite of this improvement, there are hardly any titles that show a completely normalized image of deaf or mute people. Although there are characters that are apparently integrated within the employment context, for instance, in the field of their personal life they often feel lonely and misunderstood; they only have one friend, it is frequent for them to have no partner nor children, etc.

Regarding the second goal of this paper, below, as a synthesis, there is a list of films that provide good or bad examples related to the treatment of the deaf or

mute people and the way in which hearing and/or speech impairments affect the different aspects of their lives (Table 2).

Cinema still has a long way to go until the images conveyed will be fully adapted to the principles of normalization and inclusion. The presence of people with disabilities on the big screen is still not as frequent as would be desirable and there are important aspects of the lives of these people that are distinctly lacking (the role of associations, for example) or that are far from current approaches (in many films, social integration is relative or limited and inclusive concepts are not contemplated).

Nevertheless, the image cinema provides of people with disabilities in general, and of deaf and mute peo-

ple in particular, has improved considerably. At the same time, we are gradually gaining access to rules or recommendations that can serve as guides for film makers regarding the treatment they should give their characters and the effect of their images on the viewer (Regulations of the Royal Trust⁹, for example). In addition, we have access to titles that provide good examples of important aspects in the life of people with disabilities and that can be used in the process of educating and informing society in general and groups devoted to the care of people with disabilities in particular.

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Table 2. Messages transmitted by films regarding people with hearing and speech impairments.

Normalized image of deaf or mute people	<i>In the Company of Men</i> <i>11'09''01 – September 11</i> <i>Dear Frankie</i> <i>A Lot Like Love</i> <i>Babel</i>
Importance of the person and his/her feelings about disability	<i>The Heart is a Lonely Hunter</i> <i>Children of a Lesser God</i>
Independence	<i>The Story of Alexander Graham Bell</i> <i>And Now Tomorrow</i> <i>The piano</i> <i>Dobermann</i>
Educational content	<i>Mandy</i> <i>The Miracle Worker</i> <i>Looking for Mr Goodbar</i> <i>Children of a Lesser God</i> <i>Mr Holland's Opus</i>
Stereotyped, mistaken and negative image	<i>Murder by Death</i> <i>See No Evil, Hear No Evil</i>
Segregation	<i>The Ghost Ship</i> <i>The Evil of Frankenstein</i> <i>Speak Little Mute Girl</i> <i>The Reckoning</i>
Defencelessness	<i>The Spiral Staircase</i> <i>Johnny Belinda</i> <i>Mute Witness</i>

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