

# Portraying DHH Characters on Screen: Comparative Review of *Sound of Metal* (2019) and *CODA* (2021)

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With the current boom and public attention to the portrayal of minority characters and communities, as well as individuals with disabilities in media—be it fictional representation in books or on screen—and entertainment powerhouses such as the Marvel (Disney) Studios putting forward movies and TV series centring on DHH (deaf or hard of hearing) characters,<sup>1</sup> it is worth discussing how this particular disability has been recently represented in film, what kind of stories are put forward for the general audience, and the diverse responses those portrayals have received. As the American National Association of the Deaf comments on their website: “Too often media representations lack authenticity and present a distorted view of the deaf and hard of hearing community, and the misrepresentation deprives the public of an accurate understanding of a community that is rich in culture and language.”<sup>2</sup> This particular review, therefore, aims to discuss two recent American films—*Sound of Metal* (2019) and *CODA* (2021)—and both the praise and the criticism that have been aimed at them in relation to their representation and depiction of DHH individuals.

*Sound of Metal*, directed by Darius Marder, tells the story of heavy metal drummer Ruben (portrayed by Riz Ahmed), a recovering addict, who experiences a sudden hearing loss. Feeling that his life is over, as he cannot continue in his chosen career, and on the verge of returning to his addiction, he is accepted in a rehabilitation house for deaf individuals. Although he at first struggles and wishes for a simple and fast solution (during the film, Ruben even goes through a cochlear implant surgery), eventually he finds his place in this new community, learns ASL (American

Sign Language) and finds a different way to approach music, so important to his life before the hearing loss. Although written and directed by Marder and starring Ahmed, both of whom are hearing entertainers, the film did cast several actors from the DHH community. Importantly, Paul Raci, who portrays Joe, the proprietor of the rehab house, although not deaf, is a CODA (child of a deaf adult). While both Raci and Ahmed were nominated for their portrayals at the 2021 Academy Awards—for Actor in a Supporting Role and in a Leading Role, respectively—the film received two Oscars for Best Sound and Best Achievement in Film Editing, bringing it attention from the wider public.

The film has received, overall, very positive reviews, particularly Riz Ahmed’s portrayal of the main character has been applauded. Indeed, Ahmed, mostly known as a stand-up comic, shines in this serious role, illustrating well the frustration and fear of Ruben as his connection to music, presumably an aid in his addiction recovery, disappears in a single moment. Similarly, Paul Raci, portraying the quiet, level-headed Joe, is excellent and creates a formidable opposite to the quick and anxious Ahmed. What stands out, however, the most about the film is the sound design—the first loud, “metal” minutes are followed by white noise and silences intended for the audience as a means to follow Ruben’s own experience and the hardship of losing one’s hearing. As we observe Ruben both struggling to learn ASL and getting a cochlear implant—which he at the end of the film chooses to take off—the film also portrays the difficult and different ways of possible recovery and acceptance of a disability. However, it needs to be said that the film follows the usual cliché of a Hollywood recovery narrative; and disregarding the utilisation of the hearing loss and the DHH community, it is often indistinguishable from other films where a character

<sup>1</sup> Besides portraying a minor DHH character in Marvel’s *Eternals* (2021), the upcoming mini-series *Echo* (2023) will focus on a deaf main character Echo, portrayed by a deaf actress Alaqua Cox, “Echo,” *IMDb*, accessed November 27, 2023, [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13966962/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_srg\\_0\\_tt\\_6\\_nm\\_2\\_q\\_echo](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13966962/?ref_=nv_sr_srg_0_tt_6_nm_2_q_echo).

<sup>2</sup> “Guidelines for Media Portrayal of the Deaf Community,” *National Association of the Deaf*, accessed November 27, 2023, <https://www.nad.org/about-us/position-statements/guidelines-for-media-portrayal-of-the-deaf-community/>.

enters a certain type of rehab, learns about themselves and successfully leaves at the end of the film's narrative with a "new" outlook on their life.

Turning now to *CODA*, a film by Sian Heder, which is comparable to *Sound of Metal*, particularly in terms of the public attention and the awards it has received. This recent movie focuses on the story of teenage Ruby Rossi, a CODA, whose main role in life is helping her parents and brother—all of whom are deaf—navigate issues at work, school, or at the doctor's office. Although the family is heavily dependent on her, Ruby dreams of moving away for college and pursuing a career in music, which her family is at first incapable of understanding. Eventually, however, her parents and her older brother change their opinions and Ruby in the film's final moments succeeds in her audition and eventually leaves her family for college. While, again, the main character of Ruby (and the actress) is a hearing individual, Ruby's family is portrayed by Marlee Matlin (Jackie), Troy Kotsur (Frank), and Daniel Durant (Leo), all DHH actors.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, *CODA* has received the Best Motion Picture of the Year award at the 2022 Academy Awards, as well as a nomination for Troy Kotsur for his portrayal of Ruby's father.

*CODA* has gained again mostly good reviews before and following its awards. Particularly, being an adaptation of the French film *La Famille Bélier* (2014), Heder's picture has been praised for the employment of DHH actors, whereas the original French one had mostly hearing ones, garnering understandable criticism. All four actors portraying the Rossi family have great chemistry together, wondrously depicting a difficult dynamic with particularly Emilia Jones (Ruby) and Troy Kotsur being the standouts. The film provides a great mix of funny and sad scenes, illustrating well the joys and frustrations of both Ruby and her family when navigating their surroundings. Similarly to *Sound of Metal*, however, *CODA*'s overall narrative is again somewhat of a stereotype

with a young character trying to distance themselves from their family and their values and the struggles that come with that; Ruby's departure for college with her family looking at her car at the end of the film has been depicted many times before in other "coming of age" narratives.

While both films have been mostly applauded, some significant criticism has also appeared, particularly in connection with the portrayal of the DHH community and individuals. It is worth noting some of it, as it seems to correspond to a larger debate in Hollywood and in the film industry, namely whether films should be looked upon mostly as entertainment or whether they have a role in furthering minority groups and informing the larger public about them, and where the balance between that simple entertainment angle and the public service announcement should be. *Sound of Metal* has, for example, been criticised for not casting a DHH actor in Ruben's role, although the character begins the movie as abled.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the film's portrayal and simplification of Ruben's cochlear implant surgery has been questioned, as in reality the process of evaluation, scheduling, and importantly paying for the procedure is much more difficult. Whereas this particular point appears valid, the film necessarily oscillates between a realistic representation and "movie magic," where certain events need to happen faster and facts are obscured so a movie narrative can flow better.<sup>5</sup> Both films have also been criticised for portraying deafness as a burden—although it can be argued that *Sound of Metal* smartly subverts the cliché with the main character accepting his disability in the end. *CODA* has specifically been castigated for Ruby's own role in her family's life as essentially a helper and a translator, although there is currently an abundance of devices that the DHH community can use, such as phone apps (or even a simple pencil and paper).<sup>6</sup> Overall, both films have also been said to be aimed for the "hearing gaze," particularly due to their interest in main—hearing—

<sup>3</sup> Marlee Matlin has previously received the Academy Award for Best Actress for her role of Sarah in *Children of a Lesser God* (1988), a film portraying a school for the deaf; a film which is now often quoted as an obsolete example and a standard of *how not* to portray the DHH community.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Bradshaw, "Sound of Metal review—Riz Ahmed keeps swirling disability drama on the beat," *The Guardian*, published April 8, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/apr/08/sound-of-metal-review-riz-ahmed-keeps-swirling-disability-drama-on-the-beat>.

<sup>5</sup> Bradshaw, "Sound of Metal review."

<sup>6</sup> Laura Hood, "Despite its Oscar win, *CODA* is still a film that depicts deafness as a burden," *The Conversation*, published March 30, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/despite-its-oscar-win-coda-is-still-a-film-that-depicts-deafness-as-a-burden-180222>.

characters pursuing traditional music careers.<sup>7</sup>

With many of the reviews of the films in printed media and online—both in magazines and journals, on personal blogs, or YouTube channels—it is important to note that there are valid, objective points of criticism (such as censuring *La Famille Bélier* for its employment of hearing actors for DHH roles, asking whether the reality of deafness is a mere plot device for these motion pictures or simply whether they portray ASL accurately). At the same time, there appears much criticism that speaks to an individual experience of the particular film goer and is quite subjective; a single movie character cannot encompass the experience of an entire and diverse community. It is similarly important to acknowledge that films continue to largely cast DHH actors and invent DHH characters for minor roles where they often lack names and backstories; however, it seems crucial to recognise that a great stride has been made in this respect. Additionally, particular criticisms such as “I would have liked the film to recommend things that young people could do to prevent their health,” in response to Marder’s picture—where the hearing loss happens due to loud metal music—undoubtedly interrogate films’ educational role,<sup>8</sup> but could diminish the industry to an instructional enterprise.

Indeed, media portraying disability will always stand on the precarious point of being simply entertainment and a vessel for the furtherment of the portrayal of minoritised characters and communities, and such films must be both applauded and criticised. A recent article on *ASHA*<sup>9</sup> *Wire* comments that “while there’s room for improvement in more authentic portrayals of DHH characters and technology, the media industry is on the right track with its inclusion of more characters and stories for the DHH population.”<sup>10</sup> Both *Sound of Metal* and *CODA* appear to second this evaluation. While in no way perfect, often simplifying the experience of the DHH community, they importantly challenge the still lacking representation and can hopefully only aid in more films or TV shows coming to existence in the future.

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<sup>7</sup> Amanda Morris, “Representation or Stereotype? Deaf Viewers Are Torn Over ‘CODA,’” *The New York Times*, published March 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/30/movies/deaf-viewers-coda.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Johnson, “Five ways ‘Sound of Metal’ is misleading: interview with Dr Dalia Tsimpida,” *Judith Johnson*, published May 14, 2021, <https://judithjohnsonphd.com/2021/05/14/five-ways-sound-of-metal-is-misleading/>.

<sup>9</sup> American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Walker, Marcia Walsh-Aziz, and Andrea Warner-Czyz, “Media Representation and Hard of Hearing People,” *ASHA Wire*, published September 13, 2022, <https://leader.pubs.asha.org/doi/10.1044/leader.AEA.27092022.aud-dhh-media.16/full/>.

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