

**Representation of Deaf Culture in Films:
a case studies of four films**

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Introduction

Film is the one of the mainstream mass media in our society. It serves as an important tool to represent the ideology of people. From the contents of the films, audience can see the ideology behind the film makers, while in the interest oriented film industry, film makers may try to fit the taste and the ideology of the audience. And of course, in the totalitarian states, film is an important media machine for propaganda, and delivers the ideology.

Film has an interesting relation with deaf people. When the French Lumiere Brothers first invented film, it was silence: film is only some moving illustration, that means, what a deaf people watch is the same as a hearing people watch a film. In 1930's, film with soundtrack was invented, and from that time, film was getting far away from deaf people. Deaf people still can enjoy from watching film with the aid of subtitle, but they cannot enjoy the sound effect and background music, which are important component of a film nowadays.

As the audience, deaf people are being left away by the hearing filmmakers. How about as the contents of the films? Do the filmmakers consider deaf people while they making dreams for the audience? Or do the filmmakers willing to tell us a story about deaf people? Of course, they did, and did in many different ways. Those films include a sympathy to deaf people, or just put deaf people as supporting characters.

In this paper, I am going to use four films: *Beyond Silence* (Jenseit der Stille) by Caroline Link in 1996, *Mr. Holland's Opus* by Stephen Herek in 1995, *Silent Love* (聽不到的說話) by

John Chiang (姜大衛) in 1985, and *Prince Charming* (黑馬王子) by Jing Wong (王晶) in 1999, to demonstrate how the image of deaf people, and the deaf culture of different places, are represented in the films. I will try to point out how the filmmakers understand or misunderstand deaf people and the deaf culture, for example, some directors and script writer may misunderstand deaf people's muteness is totally cannot make any sound from their vocal cord.

Also, I will try to suggest methods that how to link the deaf culture and the hearing by filmmaking.

Analysis of the Films

In this paper, I am going to analyse the four films in the following ways. Since the setting of the story is similar (deaf people and hearing people in the same family), I may group *Beyond Silence* and *Mr. Holland's Opus* into one section, on the other hand, the two local films, *Silent Love* and *Prince Charming* are grouped into another section for discussion.

I may use the follows questions as the base of my analysis of the films:

1. The image of the deaf character(s), which is portrayed.
2. The accuracy of the description of the deaf people.
3. The position of the director.

Music as the Difference: *Beyond Silence* and *Mr. Holland's Opus*

In the two films: Caroline Link's *Beyond Silence* and Stephen Herek's *Mr. Holland's Opus*, directors set a family of a combination of deaf parent have hearing child(*Beyond Silence*), or hearing parents have deaf child(*Mr. Holland's Opus*). And the dramatic conflict between the parents and children using different language and belonging to different culture, music is used as a key point that lead to the conflict between deaf and hearing family members.

Both films are set in a open-minded standing point, that both films have a happy ending of a sincere understanding from each side of the family.

Synopses of the films:

Beyond Silence: Lara is a hearing girl who has deaf parents. She is a fluent German signer and she plays the role of interpreter for her parents to deal with the outside world since she was young, for example go to the bank, or watch TV programme which do not have subtitle.

One Christmas, her auntie, Clarissa, gives her a clarinet as the Christmas gift, and since that day Lara discovered the amusement of playing music, it makes her father's dissatisfaction: when he was young, once Clarissa plays clarinet in a private party, since he is deaf and does not know what is going on and laugh during the performance. His father punishes him and it is the cause of the poor relationship of Martin and Clarissa, while Clarissa thinks it is a humiliation, and also caused Martin's total rejection of music, since music shows that he is different from others, and also the sad experience.

Lara studies clarinet well and shows a great potential to develop her own career of being a professional clarinet musicians. However, Martin does not allow Lara to study in the conservatory in Berlin. By the aid of Clarissa, Lara still goes to Berlin to have her further study in music.

Lara meets a sign language teacher, Tom, and they fall in love. After the death of her mother in a bicycle accident, Lara recognizes that her parents are the most important people in her mind. In the final scene, the audition of the conservatory, Martin arrived the auditorium, and tells Lara that he supports her pursuit of music, and he is willing to know more about

music, which is her love, her future career. The ending shows the willing of communication between two worlds.

Mr. Holland's Opus (excerpt): Glen Holland is a composer and teach music appreciation in the John F. Kennedy High School. When he knows his wife is pregnant, he starts the dream of giving the best musical environment to his son, Cole, so that he can be a musician; he even let the baby inside the womb to listen music.

When his son is around one year old, his wife, Iris, discovers that their son cannot hear. They send him to a doctor and “diagnosed” that Cole’s is 90% deaf. The doctor suggests them avoid to communicate with Cole with gestures, try to talk to Cole as much as possible, and arrange oral training to him.

However, the condition of Cole does not improve. Cole cannot speak, and cannot hear what his parents speak. They parents cannot communicate with their son. Iris decides to send Cole to a school of sign language, that they can learn a common language for communication.

Glen is busy on teaching, he cannot pay so much attention on Cole. Also, he afraid that Cole will be disappointed when he knows his father’s job is a field that he can never understand, so he never teach Cole anything about music. On the day of John Lennon’s death, Cole wants to tell Glen something about his school life, but Glen refused that because of his bad mood on Lennon’s death. Cole is annoyed, because Glen thinks that he do not know what music is. In the exaggerated conversation with Glen, Cole tells his father his understanding of

music, he knows what music is although he can never appreciate it, he loves his father and he willing to know what his father loves, that is music. Glen knows that when he try to avoid music as the blockade between him and son, it become the blockade finally.

Glen approach the deaf school and arrange a concert. In the concert, Glen “sings” the song *Beautiful Boy* by John Lennon in signed American English to Cole. At that night, Cole “listen” to Beatles’ music by sitting on the loud speaker. Music is no longer the gap between the father and the son.

Analysis

In both films, the deaf characters are portrayed as ordinary people. Just in case that they cannot use spoken language. Martin is a worker in a printing factory; Cole obtain his education from a school for deaf children with sign language as the medium of instruction, and at the end of the film, Cole is an adult and he is a teacher of sign language in ac school for deaf children, and a university in Washington D.C. also recruit him as sign language teacher.

In the films, both deaf characters are not discriminated. Martin’s sad experience is just caused by his deafness caused his misbehavior, it cannot regard as discrimination. Although Martin is somehow unlucky, it is not because he is deaf, and it is just a consideration of drama: Clarissa and his husband also bear the tragic characteristic. Cole shows a very positive image: healthy, good looking, has a successful career.

There are many scenery of actors speak and sign at the same time in both *Beyond Silence*

and *Mr. Holland's Opus*. I never learn German Sign Language and American Sign Language, I cannot determine if they are signing the sign language or just a signed spoken language. From my understanding, at least the grammar of ASL is different from American English, so, it is impossible that the actors speak what they sign, and, the just signed the spoken language is most possible, since it is weird that sign the sign language but speak the spoken language while both are in different syntax. The case in *Beyond Silence* may the same, when the actors speak and sign together they may just signs the spoken language but not signing the sign language. Only the actors are silent, they may possible to use the real sign language.

In *Mr. Holland's Opus*, there are many scenes of other people address to Cole, and we can see the sign name of Cole is the finger spelling of letter "C" and put before the chin. It is a accurate representation of American deaf culture that the sign name of American deaf people prefer to relate their sign name with their written name by adding the finger spell of the initial of their name. Cole is a typical example.

The directors of the films want to raise the awareness of the deaf people. The directors uses music as a key point to reveal the difference between deaf and hearing people, and by the conflict and misunderstanding which derived from the understanding and misunderstanding on the music perception of deaf people, the directors tell the stories about the important of the agency to understand and accept the Other. Difference is unavoidable, but the key point is willingness and the attitude to understand, and accept each other. Just like Martin shows up in

Lara's audition, and tell Lara "I want to know more about music." Cole's concern of music, and Glen shares music with the deaf.

The directors give a positive point of view for audience to think about how to face the deaf people and their culture.

The Representation of Deaf People in Local Films

These two films were shot in different era, *Silent Love* is shot in 1986 and *Prince Charming* is shot in 1999. Actually only *Silent Love* is a film about deaf, and contain characters who are deaf (act by hearing actors). *Prince Charming* is a comedy by Jing Wong and there is only one scene has deaf characters, however, that is an interesting scene shows a very positive image on deaf people, but also shows a misunderstanding on deaf culture.

Synopses:

Silent Love: Heung Git, Little Dragon, Fatty Turtle, and Leopard are a group of deaf people who live together with a prostitute on a boat. They earn money by picking pocket. Kei is a released prisoner and live with them after once he saves Heung. There is a group of gangsterd disturb them frequently.

After a series of incident, Leopard is killed by the gangsters. Kei helps them to catch those gangster, as revenge. However, Kei is killed by the escaped one, and Heung kills the one. As a result, Heung is arrested and imprisoned.

Prince Charming (excerpt): Wah and Tart discuss Tart's debts with the creditor, Mr. Fat, in a cafeteria. Mr. Fat and his gang's member want to have a fight with the two poor guys. At the fatal moment, Ice, another leading character, use sign language to arouse the numbers of deaf people in the cafeteria that Mr. Fat humiliate them, so that all of them get angry and scare away Mr. Fat.

Analysis

The portrayals of deaf people in these two films are quite different. In *Silent Love*, deaf people are emphasized as the minority, the victims, and the weak one in the society. They are the suppressed lower class; they are “disable”, so they can only seek help from government (as Kei said), or being pocket pickers.

However, in that 4 minutes scene in *Prince Charming*, the deaf people are shown as ordinary people who do not use our spoken language that is all the different audience can see from this scene. In this scene the deaf people can substitute by a group of foreigners, and Ice use a language besides Cantonese to arouse that group of people, the story is still work. So, the discourse shows by the director is that: deaf people are just the other language user.

The director of *Silent Love* shows his ignorance on deaf and deaf culture. The most obvious one is the setting of a hearing but muted character, Heung. In the reality, as James Woodward stated that, it is almost impossible to find a case of hearing but muted (personal communication, Nov 7, 2002). Refer to the real reason of deaf people also mute can understand why “hearing but muted” is almost impossible. The reason of deaf people cannot speak is that they do not have the input of spoken language during their critical period, even they have healthy vocal organ, they do not know how use them since they cannot hear what sound they make, and they do not know what for since they never hear spoken language. If a person is hearing, they can acquire the spoken language as ordinary people because they can

hear. If his/her vocal organ is damaged in what level, there are still many sounding methods not involve the vocal cord to substitute, or many surgeon operation can rebuilt his/her vocal organ such as mouth, maybe they have difficult to speak, but they still can speak.

Also, in a scene of *Little Dragon* is stopped by a policeman on the street, he wants to tell the policeman he is deaf-muted, but he point to his lips first to tell the policeman he is muted, then he point to his ears to tell the policeman he is deaf after the policeman keep talking to him. Again, it shows the ignorance of the director on the relationship between deaf and muted. Deaf people cannot speak is not because they cannot make sound, but just because they never hear how spoken language like, so that they cannot use their healthy vocal organ to speak. In American, deaf people may use yelling as a reaction of being humiliated as dummy. In *Beyond Silence* and *Mr. Holland's Opus*, the deaf character also shout in there angry moment.

Prince Charming gives a positive image to the deaf people, but it seems that the director still have misunderstanding on deaf culture. At first, from the story, Ice said she learnt sign language through the voluntary work with deaf people, however, the story said she born and grew up in Shanghai, and then study in the UK, that scene is the second day of her first trip to Hong Kong, that is, she can only learn Shanghai Sign Language or British Sign Language, but must not Hong Kong Sign Language, so it is ridiculous that she can communicate with a the Hong Kong deaf people. Although HKSL has relation with SHSL, it is still possible that the Shanghai lady can sign with the Hong Kong signers, but I may wonder if the director really

knows the historical background of the development of these sign languages. I prefer to make a conclusion that the director thinks that there is a Universal Sign Language, which is also a common misconception of hearing people on deaf culture.

The stand point of *Silent Love* is sympathy, shows a strong willingness to helps those weak, suppressed minorities. However, while the director cannot shows his understanding on deaf people and deaf culture, I wonder if the sympathy is valid. It is not fair to doubt the sincerity of the director, it can come from his true heart, but a sympathy base one misunderstanding only reveals the power of hearing discourse. While the mid 1980's has a trend of other-able motif in the local film making industry (e.g. 癲佬正傳 by 爾冬昇, 何必有我 by 鄭則士 etc).

The setting of a scene of deaf people maybe just a concern of dramatic effect, to shows the intelligent of the Shanghai lady who knows sign language. I still doubt the director also use a hearing perspective to gaze on deaf people but not a real understanding. For example at the end of the scene, Ice introduce the deaf people to Wah and Tart, she used "hard-of-hearing" to describe them, when Tart response "Oh, they are deaf?", Ice look embarrassing. Director try to show his open-mind to gave a higher status to the deaf; however, it just shows he does not know the construction of people of hear-of-hearing and deaf. In the film those people are signers and they do not wear hearing aid, obviously they recognize themselves as deaf rather than hard-of-hearing, while hard-of-hearing is the Other to them.

Also, in the English subtitle, the term “hand signs” is used but not “sign language”, it shows the filmmakers do not have the awareness of sign language is a language.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the four films, it can see that filmmakers' awareness on deaf people is raised and improving. But they still make lots of mistake in their representations of deaf people and deaf culture. It can understand that some are technical concern, such as speak and sign at the same time is a concern to those hearing audience who do not know sign language, they may get bored if the actors just signs and they only read the subtitles to know what they are signing.

It is still a problem (especially in Hong Kong) that even the director wants to speak for the deaf people, they just use the hearing aspect to tell a hearing version of the deaf story. It is because they only able to make a discourse of hearing, while the hearing director exercise the power of making discourse, the representation of deaf people cannot fit with the real deaf culture. The only way is the involvement of deaf people in the filmmaking. Such as the participation in the film production that deaf characters should be act by deaf people. Or deaf director should make films by themselves, to represent themselves to the hearing. Nowadays they society is more open than the pass, deaf people can get the power easily, and exercise it as a resistant to the hearing discourse.

Recently there is a good example in Japan. The film *I Love You* is a love story set in a theatre for both hearing and deaf actors. This film is co-directed by a hearing director and a deaf director, also, all deaf characters are acted by deaf actors. It is a breakthrough in the

hearing society.

Films is a powerful media to spread ideology. Deaf people can use this as a tool to resist the hearing discourse. And, it is a good way for the communicate between deaf and hearing, so as the ending of *Beyond Silence* and *Mr. Holland's Opus*, we must have the agency to understand and accept the Other first, otherwise the real acceptance may not occur.

Reference

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