What is it like to “hear” a hand?  
You have to be deaf to understand. (Madsen 1–2)

The existence and maintenance of cultural folklore is dependent upon the telling and retelling of cultural stories. The means by which these stories are told vary widely. Each person is led to participate in this cultural exchange through the vehicle of language. Similar to the spoken language, sign language also transcends stories and unites a group of people thereby developing a culture. Moreover, the history of deaf people and their culture is a lengthy one that stems from the perception of their means of communication, especially their language. Three themes in particular will be considered in this article. First, by examining the development of sign language, one can see that this language does not need the spoken word for validation. Second, sign language created a distinct culture by means of its visibility. Last, the article considers how the historical repression and re-emergence of American Sign Language (ASL) continues to make a cultural impact today. These themes will take shape through a historical analysis illustrating the significance of a language contributing greatly to the creation of this culture.
Methodology

Research for this article is first explored through a historical perspective; this begins with a brief account of the history of deaf people from approximately 400 BC to present day. Moreover, the sociological perspective considers the impact of language on the development of culture, specifically how sign language contributed to the creation of deaf culture. As an example, when audiences are watching films where deaf characters are being depicted, various stereotypes are seen as reality. In analyzing *Mr. Holland's Opus* directed by Steven Herek (1995), a film depicting a 30-year period of time, a comparison was performed between the literature concerning that time in history (1965 – 1995), and the portrayal in the film of deafness, sign language, and identity. Second, methods of content analysis were used to examine the exposure of deaf culture to the larger audience in *Mr. Holland's Opus*. And last, a sociological approach was also used in determining the influence of film on the perceptions of deaf culture in reality. Through this methodology, the implications of these perceptions of deaf culture are illustrated to audiences through mass media.

Early Beginnings: The Validation of Sign Language

History demonstrates that the concept of deafness, sign language, and identity did not go unnoticed, but may have been severely misunderstood, even in the time of philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. A timeline of deaf culture from PBS.org chronicles Plato’s assumptions that those without speech showed no evidence of intelligence, and so, he concluded, “deaf people must not be capable of ideas or language” (www.pbs.org/wnet/soundandfury/culture/deafhistory.html). Jerome Schein and David Stewart further reinforce Plato’s notion with Aristotle’s conclusion that “those who could not speak were unteachable” (8). As laid out in the timeline from PBS.org, these biases toward deaf people continued throughout the Dark and Middle Ages, where deafness was seen even as demonic possession.

Theme one states that those who use sign language as a primary means of communication are not using symbols in lieu of spoken language; rather, when more closely examined, the complexities that constitute language can be seen. As defined by Schein and Stewart,
“language is a systematic means of communicating ideas and feelings by the use of conventional symbols” (viii). Thus, signing does not emulate the spoken word, but stands as a distinct language on its own, with its own syntax, lexicon, and nonverbal cues.¹

Harlan Lane, author of *When the Mind Hears*, offers the view that in the middle of the 1700s, a yearning to educate the deaf compelled Charles Abbé de l’Épée of France to learn the language of those who had already developed their own systems of signs. Lane contends that l’Épée began his learning with deaf people, who were viewed as poor, despised, and illiterate, in order to learn their signs. What l’Épée failed to recognize however, was the completeness of sign language. Schein and Stewart contend that while l’Épée is revered by many for creating and calling attention to the deaf community, l’Épée could only learn sign because of its pre-existence (14). Therefore, his contributions were not so much a formation of a community as an expansion for which he may have even served as an ambassador in some ways. Carol Padden and Tom Humphries realized the important cultural impact of l’Épée’s influence. The story itself was not what made the impact; rather, the defining element was in the symbolism contained within the retelling of the story. This process of storytelling, much like folktales, is readily seen in all cultures. Padden and Humphries concluded that “this is not merely a historical tale, but also a folktale about the origin of people and their language . . . [and] is entirely appropriate as a central image in a folktale of origins, not at all unlike folktales of other cultures” (29).

Additionally, the development of sign language also played a role. Oliver Sacks writes:

... but even de l’Épée was unaware, or could not believe that sign language was a complete language, capable of expressing not only every emotion, but every preposition and enabling its users to discuss any topic, concrete or abstract, as economically and effectively and grammatically as speech. (20)

Furthermore, Ronnie Bring Wilbur contends that it is highly improbable that ASL is a direct descendent of French Sign Language (FSL). Rather, he supports the idea that French signs were adapted by American signers to conform to pre-established methods.² In addition to Lane, and Schein and Stewart, Nicholas N. Mirzoeff explains that Roch-Ambroise Coucurran Sicard furthered l’Épée’s work. As suggested
by Schein and Stewart in *Language in Motion*, Sicard went from “learning a sign system designed to represent, to grammar of spoken French to learning sign language, the lexicon and grammar of the deaf community” (15).

According to Lane, “the signing community is a linguistic minority and [his account of the deaf] history interprets the records of their struggle in that light” (xv). He focuses on a 150-year span (1750–1900), because he suggests that not only do these years include the “founding of the education of the signing minority to the abandonment of that minority education” (xv), but also, nothing has fundamentally changed since 1900. In brief, his work presents the reader with a first-person account through Laurent Clerc’s perspective.

Clerc, a deaf pupil of Sicard, accompanied Thomas Gallaudet back to the United States. Gallaudet, an American clergyman, had traveled to France to learn Sicard’s methods. Gallaudet and Clerc collaborated in the United States to establish a foundation for the use of sign. Simultaneously, an interesting phenomenon was occurring on Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts. In *Everyone Here Spoke Sign*, Nora Ellen Groce speaks of the acceptance of the inability to hear owing to the unusually high proportion of deaf people on the island. In discussing this acceptance, Groce illuminates what she considers the most striking fact about the deaf people on Martha’s Vineyard: “they were not handicapped because no one perceived their deafness as a handicap” (110).

Acceptance and Rejection of Sign Language

The use of sign language, although severely oppressed, served to unite a deaf community and contributed to the strength and survival of their culture.

The social acceptance on Martha’s Vineyard was not resistant to the pressure to send deaf children to residential schools. In “A Silent Exile on This Earth: The Metaphorical Construction of Deafness in the Nineteenth Century,” Douglas C. Baynton discusses how, through the creation of these schools in the United States, the deaf “may be said to have become the Deaf: that is, hearing impaired individuals became a cultural and linguistic minority” (217). Sacks further explains that “some in the deaf community mark this distinction by a convention
whereby audiological deafness is spelled with a small “d,” to distinguish it from Deafness with a big “D,” as a linguistic and cultural entity” (ix). This distinction was made clear through residential schools. Although these schools separated children from their families and their homes, R. Greg Emerton writes that a potential function of these schools was exposure to deaf culture. Therefore, he states, “the schools provided a viable milieu for enculturation” (quoted in Parasnis 139). Enculturation for these students included “learn[ing] about themselves and how they fit into the world around them” (138). As most deaf children are born to hearing parents, the dormitories of these schools provided the transmission of shared knowledge, beliefs, narratives, and images to comprise a rich and distinctive culture (Sacks 58–59). The people who knew the culture best most easily transcended this.

According to Baynton, the formation of this culture enabled the deaf people to possess a “cultural space in which to create alternative meanings for their lives” (237). The concept of “alternative” here describes something other than what the hearing world prescribes. Baynton describes this space as being crucial, because in this space, deaf people were able to create their own meanings and to separate themselves from the meanings attached to deafness by hearing people. The crucial element for Baynton is an understanding of how silence, and therefore deafness, is perceived:

Deafness is a relationship, not a state, and the use of the ‘silence’ metaphor is one indication of how the relationship is dominated by the hearing. Hearing is defined as the universal and deafness, therefore, as an absence, as an emptiness. (226)

Padden and Humphries explain that the important difference is the center of understanding, because for deaf people, the greatest deviation from the norm is hearing. Yet, to assume deaf people live in silence is to wrongly assume that sound has no place for deaf people. The recognition by deaf people that everyday activities produce sound, i.e., bodily functions and/or sound-causing actions (tapping, slurping through a straw), validates the role sound plays in their lives. Moreover, this role is so influential that actions producing noise are contemplated well in advance of their execution; consequently, there is naïveté in following the assumption that sound plays no role in the lives of deaf people. The very essence of sound is the foundation of the power
struggle which exists between the hearing and deaf cultures. Moreover, film titles also serve to reinforce the notion that silence, therefore deafness, is to be associated with powerlessness. The belief that deaf people have an affliction in a dominant worldview, as this concept appears, at minimum, in the writings of Kathee N. Christensen, Gilbert L. Delgado, and Padden and Humphries. However, deaf people do not see themselves as having a disability to overcome. This was also readily seen in early film development. Stephen P. Safran in The Journal of Special Education discusses that, “[W]hile film is often considered a reflection of society, it also serves a critical educational function” (para 2). The “hearing” center of understanding is readily seen when looking at film titles. Demonstrated in feature films Hear No Evil (1993) and Dead Silence (1997), the power struggle of silence versus sound, and even deafness versus hearing, is evident. This is also seen in films made for television. Beginning with Silent Victory (1979), film titles utilizing this metaphor continue to have a presence including Love Is Never Silent (1985), Trapped in Silence (1999), Bridge to Silence (1989), and Locked in Silence (1999). Using titles with words such as “trapped,” “bridge,” and “locked” further reinforces the ideology that deafness is a condition to be escaped from or cured of.

According to John Schuchman, hearing producers who delivered inaccurate images of deaf people to mass audiences dominated the cultural space described previously by Baynton. Historically, silent films created an environment where both deaf and hearing people could enjoy the picture to relatively the same degree. The appeal of film to the deaf community existed in part because:

During the early silent years of film, deaf persons sat in movie house audiences everywhere in the United States and participated, on a comparatively equal basis, with their hearing peers, as dramas, comedies, and the news unfolded on the theater screens. (Schuchman 21)

Schuchman explains that this mutual appreciation of the film was not because of the addition of subtitles; rather, it was the simplistic physical movements of the actors that created mutual appeal for the deaf and hearing audiences (22). However, Schuchman also notes that while the mode of presentation may have facilitated mutual enjoyment, representations of deaf people and culture within the films were limited to perpetuating particular stereotypes. Stereotypes include early film
representations depicting deaf people with “the dummy label,” as perfect speakers, as expert lip readers, or as unhappy deaf people (30–37). Safran also writes, “inaccuracies, stereotypes, and glaring omissions have also been the rule” (para 25) for films with a focus on deafness. Such stereotypes have continued their on-screen presence. Films such as *See No Evil, Hear No Evil* (1989) and *A Summer to Remember* (1985) depict deafness as something to be joked about. In the first, Gene Wilder portrays a deaf character who takes great measures to exaggerate the volume of his voice. Labeled as a comedy, the condition of deafness is used as a tool to provide humor; a tool that only serves to reinforce for audiences the perceived inadequacies of a deaf person. In the second example, a child is brought out of his perceived “deaf” misery by the sudden presence of an orangutan. The child and the animal communicate through sign. Once more, the condition of deafness is seen as something that can be treated lightly. Moreover, the complexity of sign language is reduced to the capabilities of an orangutan. This provides great credibility to the potential of the animal, but it does little to promote the complexities and reality of sign language in humans.

The film *Flesh and Fury* (1952) depicts a situation of a deaf, speaking-impaired fighter. This character seems to have no formal language, yet is able to read lips. It is discovered that he can sign, but is reluctant to use it because of his experiences of societal disapproval. At the film’s end, an opportunity to restore his hearing through surgery is presented. Once more the audience is shown that deafness is something to be cured.

The portrayal of “unhappy deaf people” is seen in films such as *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1968) and *Tin Man* (1983). In the first example, the main character is so distraught by his deafness that he chooses to end his life. In *Tin Man*, a young deaf man attempts to use computer technology to translate speech to visible words on the screen. The computer can also translate typed words into an electronic voice. One might question why a deaf person would create such a program as he will not hear the voice himself, although this may also be perceived as a foreshadowing of future events. He eventually confesses to a friend that he hates being deaf. By the film’s end, his hearing is restored and he can speak. Not only does this film show deafness as a burden to overcome, it again demonstrates that deafness is something to be cured.
Education: The Oralism Debate

Deaf cultural space was invaded in the educational realm as well. Writings concerning the debate over the use of speech (oralism) versus sign language as a form of instruction play a dominant role in the researching of deaf culture (Neisser; Sacks; Lane; Baynton; Schein and Stewart; Mirzoeff). In 1880, this debate surfaced in Milan, Italy, at the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf, which ultimately concluded that the oral method of instruction would be the way to restore the deaf to society and provide them with a greater knowledge of language (Schein and Stewart 20). As mentioned previously, l’Epée did not acknowledge that sign language possessed enough weight to be a language of its own. However, Neisser writes that the proponents of oralism believed this method was “not only a teaching method, but a philosophy of life, a model for deaf behavior” (22). Katherine A. Jankowski writes that language works to unite people within specific boundaries. Those supporting oralism were not concerned with the deaf person’s ability to function in the greater society; rather, Baynton explains that the educators of the time were more concerned with national unity. This also relates to the center of understanding mentioned previously. This pronouncement was the result of the dominant culture-making decisions for a subculture. Although members of the deaf culture knew which method (sign) would be best for them, they were much smaller and nonvocal. As a result, they were disregarded.

Described by Sacks in Seeing Voices, Alexander Graham Bell was among the more prominent supporters of the oral method of instruction. Much of his support had to do with the scales being tipped in favor of oralism in Milan. Paulette W. Campbell describes oralism as “a means for deaf people to participate in their local hearing communities” (18). However, a 1972 study cited by Sacks places the average reading level of deaf high school graduates at the fourth-grade level. With limited reading capabilities, one’s ability to actively participate in their community, i.e., voting, reading the newspaper, legal matters, banking needs, and furthering one’s education, is severely compromised.

In discussing the distinctiveness of oralism and language, Schein and Stewart write, “speech does not need to be meaningful; language does” (x). In actuality, “deaf people show no native disposition whatsoever to speak” (Sacks 31). Moreover, Schein and Stewart contend that “accepting the independence of speech and language is essential to
appreciating ASL as a fully developed language, not a manual version of English” (xi). To further their view, that is, the validation of sign language as a language, Schein and Stewart maintain that communication can occur without language, but the quality of that communication “will be thin gruel compared to the rich stew that comes with language” (ix).

What ultimately came to fruition, according to a study by Meath-Lang and colleagues discussed by Wilbur as well as Sacks, is that deaf students view English as something that is taught to them, rather than something that is learned. In essence, according to Lane, the oralist tradition not only denied the existent deaf culture, but any perpetuation of that culture because:

. . . oralism gives the deaf ready intercourse with the rest of society, discourages deaf congregation and intermarriage, helps the deaf read in English while cultivating their minds and aids in making us “as precisely as possible like other people.” (111)

In addition, Neisser points out that “only in extremely rare cases do speech and lip reading become the primary language mode for the deaf” (277).

Hollywood and Deafness

As the deaf community was contending with the impact of oralism on their existence, Hollywood was also sending out images to be perceived as reality. According to Schuchman, the ability to lip read was portrayed in films; however, these scenes often lacked realism. Schuchman cites the film *The Man Who Played God*, directed by Harmen Weight in 1922 and remade in 1932, as an example of this practice. Remade again in 1955 as *Sincerely Yours* starring Liberace, a man loses his hearing and is shown using binoculars to “read” conversations from the lips of people in the neighborhood park. Not only does the character learn the difficult skill of lip reading in a short period of time, the character also regains his hearing. Thus, while a deaf character plays a major role in the film, the audience is shown that deafness is something temporary that can be cured or fixed. Perhaps even more disconcerting is the contemplation of suicide stemming from the perceived isolation of deafness. The audience is drawn into having pity on this man because of his deafness, and later to ultimately share in his joy when his
hearing is restored. The focus here lies in the acquired ability to speak and hear and as a result, to become a functioning member of society.

Although popular culture, as well as the greater society, influenced the deaf culture, interestingly, the deaf community established some practices which continue to influence the sports world. Today, specific examples noted by Shein and Stewart are the invention of the football huddle and the creation of hand signals shared by umpires and pitchers in baseball (170).

One hundred years after oral methods of instruction were favored, the oral/manual controversy incorporated the deaf person’s need for identity. In an example cited in Multicultural Issues in Deafness by Christensen and Delgado, one of the major problems for a deaf person is that “he must function in a world where he is viewed as having an affliction while trying to maintain his identity as a whole person, a person whose language and cultural development are intact” (6). In the made-for-television film Amy (1981), Amy, the main character, works in a school for blind and deaf children. As the film progresses, the audience sees many scenes from the classroom setting. They are reminded of the importance and power of speech through Amy’s main goal: for the deaf students to speak and read lips. Schuchman writes that the film seems to resemble a balanced viewpoint:

... yet, the context of film is historically flawed and leaves viewers with a sense of triumph, implying that successful articulation programs encourage the integration of deaf persons into the mainstream of America. (81)

The audience, says Schuchman, is not provided with any representation of an active deaf community. The character of Amy is not deaf and the deaf characters are only seen in the school setting. Deaf in America presents the idea that hearing people perceive signed languages as protected and romanticized by deaf people because of their dependency on them. However, the authors, Padden and Humphries, propose the less considered notion of the dependency on speech for hearing people. In contrast to Amy, another made-for-television film, And Your Name Is Jonah (1979) depicts the positive opportunities that result from the ability to use a language natural to an individual’s needs. The audience sees the challenges of parenting a deaf child. More importantly, the viewers are also witness to the freedom and power that results from using a naturally acquired language, in this case sign. In this film, deaf actors portray all the deaf roles.
Re-Emergence of ASL

At this point, ASL is not only a recognized language of a linguistic minority, but its presence in popular films continues to impact how the deaf culture is perceived by society at large.

According to Schein and Stewart, at the beginning of the 1960s ASL gained legitimacy in the United States as a language, therefore improving and validating the status of the deaf community. This occurred in a variety of ways. In their writings, Schein and Stewart say that a change in attitude toward sign language came about with the publication of *Sign Language Structure*. Schein and Stewart describe this book by William Stokoe, as a pivotal work presenting the argument that sign was a language, not merely a representation of spoken words but more significantly, the passing down of folklore (23). At the same time that the recognition of sign occurred, a need for properly trained, professional ASL interpreters was also noted (Neisser). During this period of time, several organizations and technological advancements opened the possibility for deaf people to more fully participate in society without having to deny their native language.

*Children of a Lesser God* (1986), starring Marlee Matlin, was the first film in 60 years to have a deaf actor play a major film role. In the film, Matlin is a deaf teacher for deaf students. When compared with other films, the uniqueness of this depiction lies when the common ground for the communication between characters becomes sign, not the spoken word. However, Schuchman argues that, “despite the fact that a major character is deaf, deafness itself is de-emphasized” (83). Furthermore, Schuchman contends that because the scope of the film is reduced to a conflict between two individuals, “it virtually eliminates any possibility that a movie audience will understand the larger cultural discrimination with which deaf persons contend” (84). Nevertheless, Schuchman says that the film “finally allowed audiences to recognize the power and beauty of sign language” (85), which was lacking in other films. For her performance, Marlee Matlin was awarded an Academy Award. This award established recognition of deaf culture by society at large. Matlin later went on to act on television in *Reasonable Doubts* (1991) and more recently in *West Wing* (2002), again displaying an acceptance of “difference” in relation to culture. According to Schuchman, only three movies were produced in the 1980s dealing with deafness (80). However, a variety of movies were released
for television and film audiences in the 1980s and 1990s. Since the 
publication of Schuchman's book in 1988, many films involving 
the portrayal of deafness have been released. Many of these films 
were released for television viewers thereby increasing the exposure of 
the deaf culture to broader audiences.3

Case Study: Mr. Holland's Opus

Matlin's presence on screen created the opportunity for further work to 
be produced depicting deaf people and their culture. Mr. Holland's Opus 
highlights a 30-year period of time, beginning with the 1960s. This 
film incorporates ideas presented throughout this historical overview of 
the development of deaf culture. This film will be analyzed from three 
perspectives. First, a comparison between what is represented on screen 
paralleled with what has been documented as taking place during that 
time in the creation of deaf culture. Second, a brief section is presented 
regarding content analysis relating to the presence of the deaf character 
and sign language. And last, a sociological approach is employed con-
cerning the use, or the lack of use, of ASL and the implications this has, 
not only on the development and depiction of the deaf character, but 
also how this representation influences the hearing community.

Historical/Literature Comparison

The birth of Cole Holland provides great joy to his parents, until his 
astute mother realizes the blaring horn of a fire engine does not cause 
her sleeping infant child to stir, while everyone else cover their ears. 
Upon visiting a specialist, the Hollands are told their son has a 90 
percent hearing loss. This doctor advises them to discourage the ges-
tures their son has begun to use in order to communicate, as these 
"signs" will not help him succeed in the hearing world. Residential 
schools and speech training are emphasized as ways for Cole to "find his 
voice." Literature of the time such as Your Deaf Child: A Guide for 
Parents by Helmer Myklebust suggests parents focus on speech and lip 
reading for their children in the early years as this will help the child to 
communicate better in the long run. In the book, written in the 1950s, 
communication methods of the deaf child are limited to speech train-
ing and lip reading. Parents are presented with basic ways to enhance
the speech capabilities of their deaf child, similar to those employed by Mrs. Holland and Cole in the film, where a child is taught how to “feel” sounds and subsequently produce them. While gestures are tolerated, no consideration is given for any type of formal instruction in sign language. Despite a 15-year gap between the time represented in the film (1965) and the release of this book (1950), the ideas presented are consistent, highlighting the fact that no noticeable progress had been made.

The depiction of Cole using gestures to facilitate communication reflects the reality of deaf children raised in hearing environments, thus reinforcing the literature suggesting that sign language is a natural way for the deaf child to communicate (Neisser 95). On the other hand, the doctor’s reaction, while representing a facet of reality, also serves to reinforce one of the arguments made by Schuchman: that “early film makers were fairly circumspect on the topic of medical treatment for deafness, but they were blatant in their use of speech as a symbol for a successful cure of a previously deaf-mute character” (46). Moreover, as stated previously, despite the historical developments of sign language, the complexities of the language are not given any credit at this point in the film. While reflecting an aspect of reality, only one possibility, oralism, is presented to the parents of Cole, and therefore the audience is led to believe that no other alternative existed. Such depictions reinforce notions established by those of the oralist tradition. The philosophy of oralism went beyond the hope of deaf people acquiring speech; rather, the issue was “whether a small group shall be allowed to speak, congregate, marry, proliferate, work, and act as free men and women or whether they shall conform to the majority, [and] be fashioned . . . into the likeness of common men” (Lane 355). Therefore, adopting oralism as a legitimate philosophy endorses repression of the deaf culture. Furthermore, demanding the deaf culture to accept this notion beseeches them to conceal their identities.

As Cole ages, his parents must consider how he will be educated. While investigating schools, the approach of “total communication” is presented to the audience. Total communication consists of the simultaneous use of speech and sign. In reality, the concept of total communication came about in the seventies, after the ban on sign language in the schools was lifted (Neisser 4). This method was seen as a compromise between the proponents of the oralist tradition and those supporting sign. However, a great misunderstanding remained in that
sign language was not given validation as a language. Although signing was permitted, the idea that one still needed speech to communicate effectively still existed. A member of the Bell Association, where part of the mission included ensuring patriotism and English-speaking deaf children, is quoted as saying, "If only speech is used with the children, the children will learn speech and become assimilated into the hearing world" (Neisser 32). What is further demonstrated in the film is that sign language is much more complex than simply gestures, as communication was not effective and led to family conflict and frustration. Once Cole and his mother share a common language through learning ASL, their communication gains depth, thereby emphasizing the first theme that sign language is not merely a representation of the spoken word.

As Cole enters his teenage years, his mother fosters his many interests. She does not see him as having limitations because of his deafness, much like the situation on Martha's Vineyard. Deafness is not seen as a disability because of a mutual understanding between Cole and his mother. Mr. Holland, however, believes his son has fewer possibilities available to him. Cole's thoughts of being an astronaut are dismissed as silly by his father. This difference of opinion only serves to create a stronger bond between Cole and his mother, and severely hinders a relationship with his father.

The death of John Lennon in 1980 served as a turning point for Mr. Holland. With music playing an integral role in his life, this had a profound impact on him. As his son was deaf, Mr. Holland assumed his son would not understand the gravity of the situation. In this example, the idea that sound plays no role in the life of a deaf person is exemplified. Described by Padden and Humphries, the character of Mr. Holland furthers the belief that deaf people "are locked 'on the other side' behind 'sound barriers,' and are condemned to a life lacking the depth of meaning that sound makes available to hearing people" (92). Once he began to understand his son better, he considered things in a different light. By the late 1970s, technological advances opened the doors for the deaf to have greater participation in society. In his quest to include his son more into his life, Holland arranged a special multicolored flashing light show to accompany a musical performance. In addition, the visibility of a sign language interpreter reinforces not only a respect for the use of sign, but also that the use of sign unites those for whom sign is their dominant language. Although once
severely oppressed, through sign language, stories are told, information is given and received, and a culture is reinforced and strengthened, accentuating our second theme. Sign language is the bond holding the members of the deaf community together.

As the film ends, the year is 1995. Cole now lives independently. In letters home he writes of not having a love interest, but looking for one. He has a career and entertains a possible change in his place of employment. Cole teaches at a school for deaf children. In the 1990s, awareness of the deaf and their culture was growing. While some stereotypes remain, the possibilities for the deaf have grown in many ways. Depicting Cole as a teacher for the deaf appears to limit one's career choices. His dreams of being an astronaut or even a mechanic, as he showed great interest in cars, are no longer present. However, his career choice may also be seen as reinforcing his culture, as deaf educators were once again desired in the schools. Deaf teachers were again seen as an asset in terms of educating deaf children. The re-emergence and visibility of sign language allows members of the deaf community not only to find identity as a linguistic minority, but also to alter how that group is perceived through media, shedding light on our third theme.

Content Analysis

*Mr. Holland's Opus* is approximately 2 hours and 20 minutes in length. Of that time, Cole Holland's character makes eight brief appearances which together account for roughly 15 minutes of the entire movie. The actual use of sign language is only seen for about half of that time.

Sociological Language Usage

The introduction of the character of Cole provides the element of irony for the film. Mr. Holland has a son who cannot hear the music his father adores. The sense of understanding is furthered by Mr. Holland's intense understanding of music and its inner workings, i.e., timing, symbols, and composition, but does not readily translate this to understanding the workings of sign language. He defines music as being more than just notes on a page, "it's about heat, feelings, and moving people. Something beautiful." He tells his students that he can teach
notes on a page, but he cannot teach “the other stuff.” This explanation correlates to Schein and Stewart’s comparison of speech and language, in that, speech would be meaningless without an internal understanding for the words being expressed.

Effects on the Audience

Theme one of this article contends that sign language does not need the spoken word for validation. This is demonstrated clearly in the scene where Mr. Holland and Cole are struggling with how they can relate to each other. Mr. Holland needs his wife to translate, supporting the notion that not only does one need knowledge of the language to understand, but the ideas expressed by Cole are not simple and limiting thoughts. Neisser notes that the publication of *Sign Language Structure* (Stokoe) confirmed the legitimacy of sign language, although supporters of oralism believed ASL to be a primitive system. Cole’s ideas include not only objects, but also rich emotions.

This scene also depicts the “expert lip reader” stereotype described by Schuchman. While Mrs. Holland translates for her husband, Cole reads his father’s lips. This portrayal is unique in that the hearing person is reliant on someone else to provide assistance in order to find meaning. However, in most cases, a deaf person is made to appear dependent on hearing people. Presenting the audience with the idea that a deaf person would read lips with ease perpetuates the myth that lip reading is easily acquired.

Theme two in this article refers to the creation of a distinct culture by means of the visibility and recognition of sign language and deaf culture. When Mr. Holland chooses to incorporate a deaf audience into a musical performance by means of a colorful flashing light display, the film’s audience is made aware of how one culture can, with effort, adapt and embrace the differences of another. Before Mr. Holland’s attempts at integrating the deaf culture into his work, and essentially his life, his son saw him as an outsider. Society is seen to have this same reaction to deaf people because their center of understanding, in this case music, does not allow for deviations beyond that “center.” This makes clear that change is possible when the effort is made to expand boundaries. In this way, cultures develop a mutual recognition for each other’s differences.
And last, the third theme of this article explores how the repression and re-emergence of ASL continues to make a cultural impact today. At the beginning of the film, Mrs. Holland displays extreme frustration at the inability to communicate with her young son. Learning ASL becomes the key to alleviating this frustration and developing a meaningful bond between mother and son. On a greater scale, this character takes the time to appreciate—not that someone is lacking something, as is typically done in society—but instead that ASL will create opportunities for learning and being. The oppression of ASL reduced deaf people to a single characteristic. However, one needs to understand that the inability to hear is only a small trait among many, which constitutes membership to the Deaf community. This membership is overlooked by a hearing society by the lack of concrete concepts with which to define a culture. For example, the Egyptian culture is often associated with the pyramids, belly dancing, and pharaohs. A culture such as this is readily identified by the sum of its artifacts, behaviors, and concepts. New information serves to strengthen the recognition of that culture. However, Deaf culture is not willingly conducive to such qualifiers. Hearing people lack the universal understanding of Deaf culture and therefore cannot recognize its richness. Furthermore, the lack of hearing becomes the defining feature of the person causing nothing else to matter. The understanding of how a culture is created by things that are perceived as lacking seems inconceivable to members of established dominant cultures.

ASL is seen as the replacement for what is missing for the deaf community. Once ASL is viewed as a language, the culture can then be validated by this concrete attribute. Society can then recognize it as not only legitimate, but important. In the film, one sees Mrs. Holland evolve from an ignorant state where communication with her son is negatively impacted, to a position where ASL is the key to understanding not only her son, but also the broader context of the deaf. By the film’s end, Mr. Holland’s own effort to sign authenticates his acceptance of his son and the culture of which he is a part.

Conclusion

If society were to recognize the medical condition of deafness as separate from Deafness as a culture, the validity of sign language and proof of a distinct culture would not be necessary. Second, developing an
awareness of another culture aids in the creation of a consciousness that distinct cultures coexist. This realization then leads to greater understanding and appreciation of the differences, reducing the strength of the cynical belief that unity results from sameness. Depictions such as those in *Mr. Holland’s Opus* help direct an audience to embrace the diversities that exist between the hearing and Deaf cultures. It is through these new perceptions that new behaviors and ideologies arise.

The closing lines of Madsen’s poem “What is it like to ‘hear’ a hand?/You have to be deaf to understand,” provides a noteworthy insight to the deaf perspective. I would venture to say that this idea has been, and remains, the truth for many deaf people. However, I would also argue that one does not need to be deaf to understand. The necessity lies in an appreciation of the history, formation, and reality of the Deaf culture. It must be understood that film depictions are only one person’s interpretation and it is the viewer’s responsibly to separate the creative aesthetics of film production from the small element source based on reality. To idly sit and simply accept the scrolling images as truth is to devalue the primary source of those images. If film has the power to affect the direction of the thoughts of dominant culture, further research must be done in order to have a greater understanding of this impact. In turn, this research could alter the culturally imposed ideas that are accepted as the norm.

NOTES

1. According to Arden A. Neisser, signs of ASL refer directly to meaning rather than specific words. Some signs may be iconic in nature, but may lose this trait as the language evolves. Neisser explains the iconicity of signs is more helpful for hearing people attempting to attach meaning to signs (47).

2. In addition to differences between FSL and ASL, Thinkquest.org spotlights the nations of Norway, China, and Japan, which have sign languages unique to their cultures and locations. Furthermore, Sacks notes that more than 50 native sign languages have been documented.

3. It is important to note that many feature and made-for-television films concerning deafness can be found; however, only those produced/released in the US and only those dealing with “authentic” conditions are considered in this research.

Works Cited


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