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M50 Introduction to Visual Culture

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**Beyond Sound and Silence: Exploring the Non-Ableist Gaze in *CODA***

*CODA* (2021) stands out among the many other modern films as an engrossing depiction of the deaf experience, as viewed through Ruby's journey as a Child of deaf Adults, torn between the worlds of sound and silence. This film navigates the complexities of deaf culture and familial bonds through a non-ableist gaze, a perspective that respects the autonomy and agency of deaf individuals without relying on stereotypes or pity (Bérubé, 153). Garland-Thomson’s idea of how “shape structures story” is integral to understanding this gaze. It suggests that instead of being marginalized or reduced to simple plot devices, the physicality and experiences of characters with disabilities must be fundamental to their narrative identities (Garland-Thompson, 114–121). Similarly, Villarejo’s perspectives on film sound and its relationship to narrative structure complement this approach, advocating for a storytelling technique that respects and authentically represents the experiences of disabled characters (Villarejo, 55-57). This viewpoint challenges the traditional cinematic narrative by offering a more inclusive and representative portrayal of disability, steering clear of stereotypes and reductive depictions allowing for a film with a non-ableist gaze.

This essay will examine how *CODA* uses a non-ableist gaze, effectively employing sound design and visual narrative to offer a deeper understanding of deaf experiences. It will do so by drawing on Villarejo's insights on the significance of cinematography, film sound editing, and Garland-Thomson's ideas on how "shape structures story." Additionally, by showcasing Bérubé's theories on representation, it will also show how the film develops its story while portraying deaf characters in a way that goes beyond stereotypical narratives and promotes an inclusive cinematic environment. It will demonstrate what methods the film uses, such as its use of silence as a narrative device and real-life casting of deaf actors, how these methods contribute to the narrative, and why they are pivotal in promoting a deeper understanding of deaf experiences. By analyzing these aspects, the essay aims to underscore how *CODA* not only reshapes disability narratives but furthers a non-ableist gaze, setting a precedent for inclusive and empathetic portrayals in cinema.

Central to this analysis is the integration of Villarejo’s and Garland-Thomson’s theories, providing a framework to dissect *CODA’s* unique sound and visual storytelling. Villarejo’s examination of film sound is pivotal in understanding how *CODA* shifts the auditory experience to center the deaf perspective. In a similar vein, Garland-Thompson's notion of 'shape structures story' will be crucial in examining how the characters' physical experiences shape their narratives rather than having their bodies altered to fit a preconceived narrative. Bérubé's discourse on representation will further guide the analysis, therefore establishing the social and cultural significance of *CODA’s* realistic portrayal of the deaf community. This essay aims to not only dissect the film’s artistic choices but also highlight their broader implications for disability representation in media. It will delve into these theoretical frameworks, applying them to a detailed examination of key scenes in *CODA* to illustrate how the film exemplifies a non-ableist gaze.

In *CODA*, the innovative blend of sound and visual narrative immerses the viewer in the deaf experience, showcasing a non-ableist stance. The scene with the choir performance is an ideal example of this; as the camera moves to Ruby's parents and the choir's diegetic sounds of the choir fade away, enveloping the audience in silence, it creates a moving contrast between the vibrant world of sound and the silent, yet emotionally rich world of the deaf characters by letting the audience briefly "hear" what the characters hear. This technique, a powerful narrative tool, not only highlights the deaf experience for a non-ableist perspective but also aligns with Villarejo's assertion in "The Language of Film" about the profound impact of sound, or its absence, on narrative interpretation. By doing this, *CODA* adopts a storytelling style that is inclusive and faithful to the experiences of the deaf, offering a deeper, more complex representation that is consistent with Garland-Thomson's advocacy for diverse body narratives in cinema. The film skillfully switches between the choir's performance and Ruby's parents, illustrating their need to interpret her performance visually through others' reactions. This juxtaposition accentuates the divide between the sound-filled choir environment and the silent perspective of the deaf characters. Rather than portraying Ruby’s parents as isolated due to their deafness, the film offers a rich tapestry of emotional responses that are fully accessible to them. The use of close-up shots along with soft, natural lighting captures their facial expressions, conveying a depth of emotion and engagement that defies the stereotype of deaf individuals as detached from primarily auditory experiences. The visual focus on the parents, accentuated by the fading sound, mirrors the non-ableist representation advocated by Garland-Thomson, by refusing to depict disability through a lens of lack or otherness. Rather, the movie embraces the deaf characters' mode of communication as whole and self-sufficient. This change also disrupts the normative auditory-centric viewing experience, instead of offering a visual-centric storytelling mode that aligns with a non-ableist perspective.

Similarly, the film’s furtherment of the non-ableist gaze through the use of sound and silence is also masterfully demonstrated in the scene where Ruby learns about the suspension of their fishing license. Here, the film uses a combination of sound design and cinematography to portray the characters' inner turmoil. The family members' expressive faces and anxious sign language are captured in close-up by the camera, emphasizing the gravity of their circumstances. During heated moments, the film amplifies the family's expressive signing with vocalizations that vary in volume, mirroring their emotions. This technique effectively immerses viewers in the deaf characters' experience. Warm, natural lighting highlights the intimacy and authenticity of the moment. It casts soft shadows that gently sculpt the characters’ faces, accentuating their emotional expressions without creating an over-dramatized aesthetic. The lighting and color palette used in this scene not only add to the emotional weight of the action but also give a sense of reality and immediacy. These visuals, in combination with the diegetic sound of their signing—where the thuds and taps of their hands add a rhythmic and textual layer to the scene—create a multisensory experience for the audience. By synchronizing the emotions of the characters and the sounds they produced by signing, the scene exudes emotional gravity, highlighting each character's unique story, guaranteeing that the deaf characters' communication style is not disregarded but rather essential to the narrative.

This scene’s careful orchestration of visual and auditory elements not only aligns with Garland Thompson’s idea that film aesthetics should advocate for a multisensory approach to storytelling, especially in representing the lived experiences of disabled characters but also reflects the film’s larger thematic concerns. The Rossi family's troubles in this conflict are not only personal; they also serve as a symbol of the larger systemic problems that the deaf community faces. This is in line with Garland-Thomson's concept of the narrative prosthesis, where disability functions as more than a plot device; it shapes the characters' experiences and stories. Instead of portraying the family's deafness as a challenge to overcome, *CODA* shows it as an essential component of who they are. By presenting their communication style without translation or voice-over, the film validates their language and, by extension, their autonomy and place in the narrative. This attention to detail in the film's sound editing respects and reflects the genuine way in which the deaf community communicates, allowing for a realistic portrayal.

In addition to its cinematic devices, *CODA's* narrative structure emphasizes its non-ableist stance, which is evident in the way its characters and story are developed. Garland-Thomson's theory of how physical experiences shape narrative identity is reflected in the film's narrative, which sensitively tells the tale of the Rossi family and Ruby's personal development. This is especially evident in the way Ruby's relationships with her family and community are portrayed. The narrative does not exploit Ruby’s family’s deafness for dramatic tension but uses it to explore themes of identity, belonging, and self-actualization ​​through a narrative approach that refuses to treat deafness as a hindrance but rather as an intrinsic element of the family’s identity, furthering the films non-ableist gaze. The film’s narrative suggests that Ruby's experiences are not about overcoming the ‘obstacle’ of her family's deafness but about embracing it as part of her multifaceted identity, an idea explained in Berube’s “Representation”.

The film celebrates the close-knit relationship between the Rossi family by showcasing their strength and cohesion in the face of adversity. This representation contrasts with the frequent narrative of isolation in media portrayals of deaf individuals. It portrays a vibrant community that thrives on communication and shared experiences. Additionally, the narrative's development from Ruby's family's early misinterpretation of her love of singing to their eventual acceptance of her represents the movie's non-ableist perspective. It is similar to Wilkerson's idea of "Embodiment," where the characters' physical conditions are integral to, but not the sole determinants of, their lives and stories.

In addition, Leo's character portrayal also challenges ableist narratives, showing him as a complex individual, not defined by his disability. The film captures this in scenes like the bar confrontation, where Leo, despite being deaf, engages in normal activities and assertively defends himself against mockery for using ASL and disrespect. This aligns with the ideals in "Representation" about depicting disabled individuals as fully realized, not just defined by their disabilities. Similarly, Leo's character echoes Laila from "Margarita with a Straw" by defying the stereotype of desexualization in disabled characters. His romance is shown as a typical, modern relationship, challenging the misconception that disability hinders normal romantic experiences. Through Leo’s everyday life, assertive nature, and romantic endeavors, *CODA* conveys that disability does not limit a person's ability to lead a rich, complex life, prompting viewers to rethink stereotypes about disability and intimacy.

In a social and cultural context, *CODA* stands out for its non-ableist perspective, which is supported by the casting of deaf actors, an important distinction from its French counterpart. This dedication to realism extends beyond the actors to include deaf crew, who contribute to the film's story and perspective. This approach is consistent with Bérubé's emphasis on authentic representation, providing a nuanced depiction of the deaf community and going beyond tokenism to actual inclusion. *CODA* avoids ableist stereotypes by allowing individuals of the deaf community to share their own stories, emphasizing the need for self-representation in disability media for an accurate depiction of their daily lives.

Furthermore, the casting of prominent deaf actors Marlee Matlin and Troy Kotsur marks a huge cultural milestone. The Academy Awards for Kotsur and Matlin mark a change in the industry's perspective of deaf talent. Their popularity and critical praise demonstrate the rising respect and acceptance of deaf actors in mainstream movies. This representation goes beyond simple screen presence; it empowers and affirms the deaf community while also offering fresh narratives in mainstream media, encouraging inclusivity, and motivating future generations. Such visibility and acknowledgment are crucial in an industry where deaf artists have long been underrepresented, demonstrating the transformational potential of authentic representation in film.

Moreover, there are broader social and cultural implications to *CODA's* casting and representation. By questioning established conventions in the field and giving deaf artists a platform on which to display their abilities, *CODA* influences public perceptions and understanding of the deaf community. By showing deaf characters through the lens of deaf performers, *CODA* provides an honest and nuanced representation that resonates with audiences and helps to create a more inclusive cinematic scene. The film's commitment to a realistic portrayal can also be seen in the way the Rossi family's fishing company is presented. It not only highlights the family's individuality and bond but also serves as a metaphor for the larger socio-economic trials that the deaf community faces. These instances are skillfully used to highlight how deaf culture interacts with larger societal systems and to promote an inclusive, non-ableist viewpoint that acknowledges the challenges of surviving in a society primarily designed for the hearing. This aspect of the movie offers a thought-provoking reflection on inclusiveness and the necessity of cultural changes and societal changes to recognize and integrate the deaf community.

Furthermore, *CODA* sets itself apart in the disability media scene by almost adopting the romantic comedy or musical genre. This is a big change from the often serious or heavy themes that are usually related to disability narratives. This choice offers a refreshing perspective on the depiction of disabilities by showing that stories with disabled characters don't necessarily have to be centered around the disability itself. Instead, they may be entertaining and lighthearted. This facet of *CODA* contributes to a more inclusive cinematic landscape by showcasing the everyday, human experiences of its characters, irrespective of their disabilities.

In summary, *CODA* brilliantly encapsulates a non-ableist gaze through its masterful blend of cinematography, narrative depth, and cultural authenticity. At the cinematic level, the film ingeniously uses sound editing and visual storytelling to immerse viewers in the deaf experience, resonating with Villarejo’s and Garland-Thomson’s theories. Narratively, it transcends typical disability portrayals, showcasing complex characters and their interactions within a rich, emotionally nuanced context, in line with Bérubé's insights on representation. Socially and culturally, *CODA* breaks new ground with its authentic casting and depiction of deaf actors, challenging industry norms and reshaping societal perceptions of the deaf community. This harmonious integration of all three levels of analysis not only enriches the cinematic landscape but also advocates for a more inclusive, empathetic understanding of diverse experiences.

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