

**People's Democratic Republic of Algeria
Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
University of Tlemcen**



**Faculty of Letters and Languages
Department of English**

**The Representation of Disability in Cinema: Deafness in
Sound of Metal (2019)**

Dissertation submitted to the Department of English as a partial fulfilment of the requirements for Master's degree in Literature and Civilisation.

Presented by

Abderrahmane BENYOUB

Supervised by

Dr Souad BAGHLI BERBAR

Board of Examiners

Prof. Daoudi FRID

Professor

President

Dr Souad BAGHLI BERBAR

MCB

Supervisor

Dr. Omar RAHMOUN

MCA

Examiner

2023 - 2024

Dedication

To my family and to my friends whom I would not have been here without, your love and support will forever be remembered. Without you, this work would not be possible.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to the people who supported in my journey, the family and friends, the professional teachers to which I am indebted to are, it is through their support that I reached the place I am standing in today.

Words fail to explain my gratitude towards my supervisor Dr Berber, only through her insight, encouragement, and professional and personal support have I managed to even complete the journey of my dissertation, I am eternally thankful for the chance to be her student.

To Prof. Frid, his expertise and wisdom in the field are an eye-opener, his lectures will always remain a founding academic memory of mine.

To Dr Rahmoun, whose classes sharpened my critical thinking skills, the way he teaches his students to fill them with curiosity and thirst for knowledge is astounding.

Their guidance has humbled, inspired and fueled my desire to learn and explore the domain of literature and civilisation, and for that I am deeply touched.

The chance to receive guidance, support and feedback from such distinguished members of the jury is a fulfilling experience that one cannot afford to miss, and for that, my heart is full.

Abstract

Disability has always been a misrepresented topic throughout history, people with disabilities were always minimized to their disability and treated accordingly. Media has been an important gateway to shaping and constructing narrative surrounding disability and the experience that follows it. Cinema has always been a cornerstone of media and a valuable tool for perceiving and shaping society. The dissertation at hand serves to observe the cinema's representation of disability through the lenses of the movie *Sound of Metal*, directed by Darius Marder using selected film theories and disability models. The goal of this dissertation is to examine the realism of deafness in the film, the psychology of the characters and the authenticity that Marder aimed to capture. The film *Sound of Metal* managed to push the boundaries of what is possible when it comes to portraying disability in cinema by depicting deafness in the movie through its use of sound design, sign language and appropriate casting of actors, ultimately showcasing the journey of disability representation in cinema.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	i
Acknowledgments.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
General Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Disability and Film Studies.....	3
1.1 Introduction.....	4
1.2 Disability.....	4
1.3 Medical Model	7
1.4 Social model.....	8
1.5 Impact of Media Representation on Societal Perception of Disability	11
1.5.1 Historical Context of Disability’s Portrayal in Media.....	13
1.5.2 Common Tropes and Stereotypes of Disability in Media	17
1.6 Film Studies	20
1.7 Casting	22
1.8 Sound Engineering	25
1.9 Conclusion	27

Chapter Two: Understanding Deafness through *Sound of Metal*.....28

2.1. Introduction.....	29
2.2. Summary of <i>Sound of Metal</i>	29
2.3. Characters.....	38
2.3.1. Lou	38
2.3.2. Joe	41
2.3.3. Ruben	42
2.4. Deafness in <i>Sound of Metal</i>	45
2.5. Conclusion.....	50
General Conclusion.....	51
Biography.....	52

General Introduction

Disability has always been historically marginalized in media. As a concept, the focus centred around the limitation of disability rather than discussing the nuance behind such a large part of what makes humanity an intriguing species since it can adapt and integrate a lack of function in its daily life. Cinema plays a vital role in shaping the narrative of disability since it has the ability to immerse the viewer in a given experience. Using various tools such as audiovisual tools and selecting the right actors to convey a message, cinema is a powerful medium that can shape the public perception of people with disabilities in a tangible manner that can affect their livelihood for better or worse.

Cinema, more importantly, is a subject of discussion when it comes to the issue of representation. In a historical context, cinema has not done an earnest job portraying disability in a faithful manner, leading to more controversial and questionable stereotypes pertaining to disability; thus perpetuating a negative image of people with disability to the public eye.

That however shifted in recent years following a cultural awakening that rallied for a more inclusive and faithful representation of disability that respects the people who live daily with it and picturing, to a large extent, the realistic experience of disability.

Darius Marder is an American director and screenwriter who is famously known for directing the film *Sound of Metal* (2019), a well-received film that has gotten critics acclaim for its representation of deafness and its various intricacies in a realistic portrayal that worked to deliver a message to the audience.

This dissertation then, examines disability in cinema through the lens of the film *Sound of Metal*, by analysing how deafness is portrayed and by taking into consideration selected film theories and disability models, it attempts to answer the following questions:

How is deafness portrayed in *Sound of Metal*?

Does the film attempt to break the established norms in regard to perceiving disability?

To answer these research questions, this work is divided into two chapters. The first one deals with disability and media, by reviewing the historical background of media representation of disability through social and medical views. The chapter begins by highlighting disability as

a broad and flexible term that changes depending on the context, and by analysing the dichotomy between social and medical models, the reader will gain a better idea of the conflict that existed for a long duration of time in history. The chapter then discusses the historical background of disability in cinema and how disability has been a tool to use in media rather than a social issue to portray, creating stereotypes that shaped public perception. The chapter also explains the various film theories such as realism, cultural film studies and psychoanalytic theories as well as creative tools such as sound design and casting that play a vital role in analysing the film *Sound of Metal* in the second chapter.

Chapter One: Disability and Film Studies

1.10 Introduction	4
1.11 Disability	4
1.12 Medical Model	7
1.13 Social model	8
1.14 Impact of Media Representation on Societal Perception of Disability	11
1.14.1 Historical Context of Disability’s Portrayal in Media	13
1.14.2 Common Tropes and Stereotypes of Disability in Media	17
1.15 Film Studies	20
1.15.1 Casting	22
1.15.2 Sound Engineering	25
1.16 Conclusion	27

1.1 Introduction

Disability has always been an integral part of mankind. Ever since the dawn of civilization, it has been represented in all its shapes and forms in different media. It was only since the rise of moving pictures that the representation of disability was thoroughly documented in a manner that scholars were able to track the effect of said representation on society and its view on people with disability. Such studies examine the dichotomy of disability and media in an extensive manner that allows a better perspective on the general picture of society that has only began to unfold in the mainstream public eye.

1.2 Disability

The Encyclopedia of Disability holds in the entry of “Models” that Disability is a multilayered, intricate and vast term. Humans have always had impairments throughout history and prehistory, interpretations and definitions of impairments and disability differ through societies and periods. A unified term and umbrella definition are improbable, and there are many varied and clashing approaches to the problem. Key terms such as *disability* and *impairment* have different definitions and for different causes depending on the individual cultural context, thus creating dubiety. Notwithstanding that the translation from one language to another adds another layer of complexity (Albrecht 1101). Such a dilemma makes it difficult to pin down the term to one clear and global definition. Different fields provide different understanding of the topic. In fact, the same entry explains further that:

There is no consensus definition of disability that suits all purposes. While the U.S. Social Security Administration defines disability in terms of functional limitations as they affect employability, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines disability as a physical or mental impairment that limits one or more major life activities. The point to be made here is that disability includes a number of physical, psychological, and medical conditions from arthritis, congenital anomalies, depression, HIV, hearing and vision impairment, multiple sclerosis, and impairment following an accident or medical episode, among others (Albrecht “Models” 1415).

Disabilities exist in multiple shapes and forms that span across a spectrum of conditions. As a matter of fact, one form of disability may have different types that are experienced differently

depending on the individual. Taking for example “Hearing Loss”, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention otherwise known as CDC classifies it in four types:

- **Conductive Hearing Loss**

Hearing loss caused by something that stops sounds from getting through the outer or middle ear. This type of hearing loss can often be treated with medicine or surgery

- **Sensorineural Hearing Loss**

Hearing loss that occurs when there is a problem in the way the inner ear or hearing nerve works.

- **Mixed Hearing Loss**

Hearing loss that includes both a conductive and a sensorineural hearing loss.

- **Auditory Neuropathy Spectrum Disorder**

Hearing loss that occurs when sound enters the ear normally, but because of damage to the inner ear or the hearing nerve, sound isn't organized in a way that the brain can understand (CDC parag.1.).

Not to mention the degree of hearing whether it is mild, moderate, severe or profound. Hearing loss has also different descriptions, it can be bilateral where it occurs in both ears or unilateral where it only happens in one ear. It can be Pre-lingual or Post-lingual where it happens before (pre) or after (post) learning speech (CDC parag.3.).

Disability goes beyond just physical or mental ailment; it extends to anything that limits an individual's ability to function as an active member of society. Therefore, according to The American Addiction Center official website, addiction is considered to be a disability by the definition of the Rehabilitation Act under Section 504, The American with Disabilities Act (ADA), and Section 1557 of The Affordable Care Act (Anderson parag.1.).

Due to the effect of drug and alcohol abuse, the human body may experience life altering changes that may persist even after recovery. Such effect can be permanent and for that reason, an individual with current or past usage of substance requires medical or social assistance to function in society. This explains why addiction is considered a disability and how people who experience it fall under the global term of Disability.

In her book *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist* Judith Heumann reflects on her experience as a disabled person who lived her life with post-polio effect. She became quadriplegic and struggled the entirety of her life to make the voice

of people with disabilities heard. She contemplates how her childhood was a constant struggle with a wheelchair, going from one place to another for fifteen years before the invention of the electric wheelchair motivated by a Canadian World War II veteran (Huemann 5).

Although things changed since the 50's, the issue of accessibility has always persisted to people with disabilities. The constant struggle to have rights in a society that does not cater for disabled people created a rift with abled people. This led to people with disabilities to feel alienated by society due to the misalignment of perception between an abled and a disabled person.

This feeling of alienation can transform into a feeling of loneliness. According to an article published by the National Library of Medicine, studies established that people with disabilities experience loneliness to a larger degree than people with no disabilities, and amongst the causes are the lack of accessibility that hinder their involvement in society whether for social activities, job opportunities or public transportation (Gómez-Zúñiga et al. 2). These factors create a society that is not inclusive to people with disabilities and causes a separation that can further harm the relationship between individuals and raise an issue of abandonment of people with disabilities.

Society, to a larger degree, prefers its individuals to be productive, fast paced and fluid toward the future, and for that reason it consciously and subconsciously promotes a “normal body” and a “normal mind”. Such agendas have a term which is “Ableism”. Jay Dolmage’s book *Academic Ableism* pictures disability as unnecessary, invisible and inhumane while able-bodiedness is ideal, normal and the default setting of humanity (Dolmage 7).

In his book, Dolmage focuses on how higher education is centered on ableism, and even going to the extent of disregarding people with disabilities as they are deemed less than ideal for the progress of society. The focus of higher education is almost always hovered around eliminating disabilities as it is negative to be disabled and it is to be avoided at all costs (Dolmage7).

Dolmage further explains how disability is wrongfully represented as one state of being. Instead of each disability being unique and having its own parameters, people with disabilities are put in one box. People who have physical disability are assumed to be cognitively disabled. The representation of physical disability is connected to cognitive or physical deficit, in what Dolmage calls a “disability drift”. It is the belief that some disabilities (i.e., physical disabilities) are better than others (i.e., mental disabilities) and in higher education, this kind of rhetoric is tangible and present in the everyday life of people with disabilities (Dolmage 9).

According to *The Encyclopedia of Disabilities Volume III*, models are an important tool to observe disabilities and how they are viewed in different fields. It analyses the terminology that is used to judge disabilities and their influence in establishing the status quo to make sense of the vast term that is disability (Albrecht “Models” 1101). Two important and valuable models are the social and the medical ones. Both are reflective of important aspects that have major effects on the lives of people with disabilities.

1.2.1. The Medical Model

In their article “Disability Discourse: Overview and Critiques of the Medical and Social Models”, Justin Haegele and Samuel Hodge analyse the two center lenses of perceiving disability in society throughout history. They argue that, historically, understanding of disability varied in different shapes and the discourse of disability has been dictated by people and organizations with authority that controlled the definition of disability. They referred to such individuals and organizations as “cognitive authority” (193). They continue to argue that several models throughout time have been changed or eliminated due to their being outdated or discriminatory. Originally, the concept of disability was conceptualized withing the religious narrative of Judaeo-Christianity as an act of higher being and that it presented a chance for miracles to occur. With time and medical and scientific progress, the notion of disability was no longer defined by religious leaders but with scientists and doctors as the new “Cognitive Authority” in the matter of societal experts for defining disability and healing it. (Haegele and Hodge 193)

Haegele and Hodge continue to make sense of the medical model and how it gained such power in society in the matter of disability discourse, arguing that the main reason is medicine’s ability to cure illnesses and putting the role of authority in the hands of medical professionals when it comes to shaping the life of people with illnesses and subsequently people with disabilities. And since experts in the medical field perceive disability from a biological point of view, they conceptualize disability as a biological product. This narrative narrows down the concept of disability to a biological defect, which creates a contrast with people who lack such defect, whether it is physical or mental. The problem lies in putting people with disabilities in a box of inadequacy created by the biological perception of medicine, rendering them ineffective members of society who require fixing to continue their role as “normal” individuals in the eye of the public (Haegele and Hodge 196).

The limitations that are caused by disability in the eye of the medical model are to be blamed on the impairment of the individual rather than the society that fails to accommodate them. Since the focus of medicine is to eliminate the disability, the blame is independent from the sociocultural, physical or political environment (Haegele and Hodge 196).

The major issue of the medical model according to Haegele and Hodge is that it impacts society and has a major effect on how people with disability receive their opportunities. A medical report will limit an individual to solely his or her disability without taking into account their personal experience, and while the medical practitioner is qualified to diagnose and cure said disability, they should not be the primary decider over the fate of the person with disability in society especially if the model observes only the disability, disregarding the individual behind it (Hagele and Hodge 196).

In his article “Social and Medical Models of Disability and Mental Health: Evolution and Renewal”, Andrew Hogan discusses how the medical model’s view of disability has been an issue ever since the term itself was coined in the mid 50’s by the psychiatrist Thomas Szasz who perceived that certain aspects of medicine should be excluded due to its perception over disability being riddled with stigma or oppression, especially when it comes to mental health and disability (parag. 3). Szasz argued that the issue is related to societal perception rather than the disability itself and while this exclusionist approach met an antireductionist approach that consisted of reducing the issues with medicine’s approach to disabilities as it saw that medicine still has beneficial effects on disability and mental health, the exclusionist approach aims to rectify the issue of how medical practitioners deal with people with disabilities on a political level. Szasz and his peers recognized that the underlying issue may not be with the individual with disability but rather with social perception (cited by Hogan parag. 4-5)

1.2.2. The Social model

The social model emerged as a response to the medical model; when the latter directs its focus on the individual with disability, the social model argues that the problem lies with society itself.

Haegele and Hodge mention several variations of the social model, from “the oppressed minority model”, “the social constructionist version of the United States”, “the impairment version”, “the independent living version”, “the postmodern version”, “the continuum version”, “the human variation version”, to “the discrimination version” (197), the discourse behind the social model is still ever evolving with time. Each variation addresses a different issue with

society's perception of people with disabilities. The social model addresses the issue of the lack of accommodation and the isolation of people with disabilities, it underscores the problem of apathy when addressing disability. This particular problem is associated with the medical model and how it bleeds into society and creates a misconception of how people with disability are acutely restricted and impaired and thus painting them as inadequate as functional members of society. This concern then urged the emergence of the social model as an alternative discourse when addressing the needs of people with disabilities (Haegele and Hodge 198).

Despite the fact that the social model is considered a counterpart of the medical model, it did not aim to completely eradicate it; rather, it attempted to address the years of alienation policies that treated people with disabilities as objects to be studied and to be institutionalized rather than have an alternative approach to integrate people with disabilities as a necessary component for an effective society. In his study "Alienation as a consequence of disability: contradictory evidence and its interpretations", James Romeis articulates an issue related to how people with disabilities feel alienated by society. He argues that individuals with disabilities feel as though their life is not under their control; decisions are made for them by people who have no understanding of their struggles, prompting an unnecessary struggle that could have been solved by integrating and consulting people who have said disabilities (Romeis 28).

The lack of empathy by society towards individuals with disabilities is addressed to a larger extent by the social model, the fact remains for a more progressive society to be established. Steven Gelb notes that in his article "Darwin's Use of Intellectual Disability in *The Descent of Man*", showing how history is ripe with examples of people with disabilities painted as being less than human. Renowned and controversial scholars such as Charles Darwin and Carl Vogt attempted to dehumanize people with disabilities. In his book *The Descent*, Darwin wanted to justify the fossil gap between humans and higher primates by the existence of people with intellectual disabilities or "idiots" as he referred to them (Gelb parag. 4). On the other hand, Vogt went the extra mile of labeling mentally-challenged people as the missing link and that there is no need to look for evidence to support Darwin's claim of a fossil gap (cited by Gelb parag. 4).

Individuals scattered all over the world, through all the human races, with low foreheads, small brains, long arms, thin legs, projecting, tusk-like teeth, suppressed noses, and other marks of arrested development; to say nothing of

millions of idiots and cretins produced by the same arrest in every generation of mankind, sustain the argument (quoted by Gelb parag. 8)

This indicates a deep revision of how society chooses to perceive disability, and the social model is an important and necessary tool in this regard if the apathetic and occasionally cruel lens should change in the favour of a more tolerant and accessible society. Yet the social model remains a flawed model in a continuously evolving atmosphere; it fails to address a number of issues when it comes to disability.

There seems to be a disconnect between impairment and disability. Haegele and Hodge criticize how the social model disregards, to a certain extent, disability as a major factor in the individual's identity since the impairment hinders the social and political as well as medical well-being of the individual with disability. This certain critique is met with strong disagreement from the social model advocates on the ground that while the impairment is an issue to people with disabilities, their concept of disability does not stem from the impairment itself, rather it comes from the social inequality between able-bodied and disabled people and how said unequal social perception defines disability from a social point of view (Haegele and Hodge 198).

Another critique according to Hagele and Hodge is the lack of connection between a person with disability and other forms of oppression such as sexism and racism. This intersectionality between disability and different forms of oppression connects between ableism¹ and oppression since the person with disability owns different forms of identity such as race, gender and sexual orientation. This specific critique suggests that the social model, while it claims itself as an advocate for people with disabilities, fails to take into account intersectionality with different forms of oppression, thus narrowing the scope in which society could provide proper accommodations based solely on disabilities and not the other parts of one's identity (Haegele and Hodge 198).

A final criticism would be a strong disconnect between certain aspects of society and the social model. In his article "What Good Is the Social Model of Disability?", Adam Samaha explores in depth the effectiveness of the social model in society. He picks the example of deafness and how it is addressed, should there be an attempt to eliminate it from society? Or should there be campaigns held to create a society that does not need hearing. Samaha underlays

¹ Ableism is a complex and evolving phenomenon encompassing benevolent, paternalistic, ambivalent, and hostile attitudes, and behavioral practices based on perceived disability status.

how deafness is more of a culture than an impairment and how cultures have their own set of languages and communities. To Samaha, the deaf culture considers that the attempt of medicine to eradicate deafness with technology such as hearing aids or cochlear implants is a threat to their way of life, and as expensive as such means may be for parents with newly deaf children, they will do anything in their power to “fix” their children and provide them with a “normal” life even if cochlear implants are not a perfect procedure that will magically turn a deaf or hard of hearing person into a “normal” person (1269).

Samaha even denotes the extreme medicine has reached in eliminating any cause of deafness by examining the embryos in fertilization laboratories and eliminating specific genes that causes certain genetic conditions. This process of using drugs and electing the choice of abortion for the embryos with inherited deafness showcases the extremity to which medicine goes to eliminate deafness. It was met with the opposition of deaf culture since it gave the impression that deaf people are considered to be defective products when the case has been established that deaf people thrive normally with the help of society. Samaha gave the example of Gallaudet university where most students were deaf and which encouraged the use of ASL (American Sign Language) and it was a federal attempt to establish how deaf people can thrive when given a proper societal support. Despite its limitation, the experiment remained a unique experience where deafness was not treated as disability but more as form of identity (Samaha 1269-1273).

The social and medical models both work in tandem as two sides of the same coin to view disability from different perspectives. They are, however flawed they can be, important tools in the process to untangle the multilayered aspect of disability, and that is especially the case concerning media and its many attempts to portray disability in many ways that could disregard the core essence of disability as an identity and as a medical phenomenon.

1.3. The Impact of Media Representation on the Societal Perception of Disability

When it comes to discussing the media’s perception of disability, Jacob Johanssen and Diana Garissi’s book *Disability, Media, and Representation: Other Bodies* delves deep into the importance of media in regard to shaping public opinion. Johanssen and Garissi explore the nuance that pertains media control over characterizing and articulating real life decisions that affect the livelihood of people with disabilities (2).

Johanssen and Garissi provide examples of how studies of media representation of disabilities in Britain shed lights on people with disabilities and their issues and that ultimately coincided with enacting the Disabled Discrimination Act in 1995. Those studies such as that of Colin Barnes in 1992 pushed the focus on the relationship between discrimination against people with disabilities and how it overlapped with racism and sexism shaped by the stereotypes pushed by media representation (cited by Johanssen and Garissi 4). And in the same year, Guy Cumberbatch and Negrine Ralph presented a quantitative comparative study estimating the presence of people with disabilities on television. This was carried on to 1995 when the Broadcasting Standards Service published *Perspectives of Disability in Broadcasting* that culminated to UK enacting the Disabled Discrimination Act in 1995 (cited by Johanssen and Garissi 4).

Johanssen and Garissi observed a trend of direct political action when scrutinized by the media, yet they noticed a lacking progress and a long journey ahead since the media themselves seem to often regurgitate misrepresentations that directly affect people with disabilities. For example, in the field of employment and training in the arts where their presence can provide more accurate representation, but due to the lack of accessibility, the image presented to the public eye is lacking (Johanssen and Garissi 4-5).

In “Friend or Foe: The Media’s Power to Inform and Shape Societal Attitudes towards People with Acquired Brain Injury”, the authors argue that media is the source in which an everyday person acquires their information and an understanding of the experience of people with disabilities, making it a crucial factor that sway people’s opinion in connecting abled and disabled people, and rather than reflecting or reinforcing the status quo, media representation has the power to shape and mold a group of people’s reality, making it the most effective tool to politically and socially undermine or elevate a specific perception to the public mass (Saunders et al 933).

However, perhaps the biggest effect of media on society is in establishing the concept of “othering bodies”; it creates distinct and polarizing images between the abled and disabled people. The concept of othering has roots in multiple fields but was first properly developed by the postcolonial thinker and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985). As she analyzes colonialist relations, Spivak argues that Othering is used as a practise of subordination, it is a way to let the other party know who holds the power. Othering is a form of prejudice and it often perceived in the categories such as gender, class, religion and disability. Othering can be

observed in linking disability with other categories, ultimately making that individual an outsider (Johanssen and Garissi 7).

When discussing the experience of the disabled, able-bodied people talk about disability in an ableist manner. They imagine what it is like to be disabled. And such imagination comes from pre-established information, often acquired from the media, and often this information is liable to falsification due to liberty of depiction. The representation is more concerned with the anxiety and fears of disablement than with the people with the disability itself; the lived experience is lacking or even absent but the fear and struggles of disability are exasperated to the point of the character becoming merely a disability instead of a three-dimensional person (Johanssen and Grassi 8).

The media then have the power to establish the realities of different groups of people, even creating a rift between them. The media, being the source of information of people, create a narrative that seems to bleed in key aspects of life such as politics and society and, through the examination of history, one can perceive how the media attempted to portray disability.

1.3.1. The Historical Context of Media Portrayal of Disability

In *The Disability Studies Reader*, Lennard J. Davis delves deep in how disability came to be perceived throughout history in different media. In fact, he approaches the topic of disability by examining the “norm”, and by understanding what makes people normal in the eye of society and why they try their best to fit in the concept of normalcy, one will be able to comprehend the position that has been forced on people with disability by elimination, because if one is not normal, one must be abnormal and, in many cases, disabled. Davis argues that normalcy is a social construct and not an inherent human condition.

To understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body. So much of writing about disability has focused on the disabled person as the object of study, just as the study of race has focused on the person of color. But as with recent scholarship on race, which has turned its attention to whiteness, I would like to focus not so much on the construction of disability as on the construction of normalcy. I do this because the “problem” is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the “problem” of the disabled person (Davis 2).

According to Davis, disability has been regarded differently in the times of Ancient Greeks and preindustrial Europe, he continues to comment on how the social process of disabling arrived with industrialization and with it came a discourse that is linked to eighteenth and nineteenth century notions of gender, race and nationality (3).

Furthermore, Davis points out the fact that words such as “normal”, “normalcy”, “norms” and “abnormal” were introduced late in the English language, or as Davis puts it,

the word “norm,” in the modern sense, has only been in use since around 1855, and “normality” and “normalcy” appeared in 1849 and 1857, respectively. If the lexicographical information is relevant, it is possible to date the coming into consciousness in English of an idea of “the norm” over the period 1840–1860 (3).

Davis then argues that the current understanding of normalcy is tied to the concept of “ideal”, a concept that is derived from the Greek mytho-poetic that is linked to that of gods, an ideal by definition that is not attainable by humans. In Davis’ words,

The notion of an ideal implies that, in this case, the human body as visualized in art or imagination must be composed from the ideal parts of living models. These models individually can never embody the ideal since an ideal, by definition, can never be found in this world. When ideal human bodies occur, they do so in mythology. So Venus or Helen of Troy, for example, would be the embodiment of female physical beauty (4).

Establishing the idea of norms, in Davis observation, creates the existence of a “deviant body”. Secondly, it pushes the narrative of what a normal body should be and third, it continuously pushes “The new ideal of ranked order... powered by the imperative of the norm, and then is supplemented by the notion of progress, human perfectibility, and the elimination of deviance, to create a dominating, hegemonic vision of what the human body should be” (Davis 8).

This led to the emergence of groups that advocate for the elimination of disabilities as they are considered undesirable and unfit for a better progress of humanity. Such groups like eugenics held extreme views for what an ideal body should be and saw that people with disabilities should not exist. In fact, Karl Pearson, a leading figure in the eugenic movement, defined the “unfit” as “the habitual criminal, the professional tramp, the tuberculous, the insane, the mentally defective, the alcoholic, the diseased from birth or from excess” (quoted by Davis 8)

In England, bills were introduced to Parliament to control the mentally disabled people, and in 1933, the prestigious scientific magazine *Nature* approved of the Nazi's proposal to sterilize people with disability. The magazine editorial said: "the Bill, as it reads, will command the appreciative attention of all who are interested in the controlled and deliberate improvement of human stock" (Davis 10).

If one takes novels as media, one would observe that historically speaking, it was rare for people with disabilities to be the main characters of a story. People with disabilities are often either side characters such as Tiny Tim that are used to illicit sympathy, or villains that are scarred, deformed, maimed or mutilated to showcase that disability is linked to a deep flaw of the character (Davis 11).

Films, on the other hand, have become a more prevalent form of media during the past decades, and as such, it is important that examination of disability's portrayal is carefully conducted since a film has a major effect on society's perception of people with disabilities. Stephen Safran provides a thorough investigation of disability's image in films in his article "The First Century of Disability Portrayal in Film". The earliest film depiction of physical disability has been in "a 50-second piece in 1898" (Safran 468).

Many early movies resorted to depict disabilities as punchline to jokes or for a melodramatic effect to gain the sympathy of the viewer. The range of disability swayed between being a victim or a villain, or seeking revenge for their disability (Safran 468). First presented in 1904, wheelchairs developed as a symbol of images such as "helplessness, evilness, confinement, heroism and dehumanization" (Safran 468).

In 1912, the theme "curability" first appeared and showed paralysis and blindness being cured by the miracle of medicine (Safran 468), this remains a storyline even nowadays. During World War I, several people with disabilities were employed, but that remained a rarity during the following several decades with the exceptions of veterans in wheelchairs being extras in *The Men* (1950) and *Coming Home* (1978) (Safran 468). In fact, up until the publication of the journal, only one actor with visible disability won an academy award otherwise known as Oscar for the best supporting actor for his role in the movie *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1949) (Safran 468).

After the 1929 stock market crash, screenplays depicted disabilities less favorably due to financial concerns. Studios focused on entertainment rather than controversial plots (Safran 469). The period of the 1930's saw the emergence of horror movies with the benchmark being the film *Frankenstein* (1931) that depicted motor disability and physical deformity in an exaggerated manner to illicit fear (Safran 469).

During Post World War II era in the later 1940's, physical disabilities were treated with more sensitivity but core depiction either saw disability as an obstacle to triumph or a way to be "saved" from their disability by able-bodied people. However, some movies such as *The Men* and *The Best Days of Our Lives* focused appropriately on the shock of becoming disabled and the rehabilitation process that comes with it, especially for war wounded soldiers (Safran 469).

In the 1950's era of blacklisting Hollywood notables on account of Marxism accusations, film audiences saw the rise of "civilian superstar" (Safran 469) that focused on traditional American values of self-determination and the support of family and friends in overcoming impairments but this era neglected the prejudice and negative image forced on people with disabilities in the previous decades. With the civil rights movement in the 1960's, people with physical impairments appeared in the mainstream cinema to showcase the difficulties of living independently in films like *Tell Me That You Love Me Junie Moon* (1970). The late 1970's saw the resurgence of the "civilian superstar" (in the *The Other Side of the Mountain* [1975] for example) while the Vietnam War created the image of the cynical "Madman" as in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) (Safran 469).

Safran also provides an overview of deafness in film since he considers that this disability has a unique place in society (470). During the Silent Film era, movies bridged the gap between the hearing and deaf world, both worlds could enjoy the same thing and it was a unique experience at a time where there was a lack in understanding of deafness and deaf people as a whole. It was with the introduction of sound in movies when studios refused to add subtitles to the movie that the gap returned (Safran 470). Ironically, it was the technological advancement that created an exclusion in society between the hearing and the deaf.

The employment of deaf actors has also been a major issue. John Schuchman identified up to five deaf actors in the silent movie era (cited by Safran 470), but no deaf actor was given a major role until *Children of a Lesser God* (1986) for which actress Marlee Matlin received an

Academy Award of Best Actress (Safran 470). Safran saw a hiring trend that followed her winning for stronger advocacy.

Sign language was also synonymous in the previous years with “secretive communication” and it was only with *Johnny Belinda* (1948) that sign language was used as an integral part of character development (Safran 470). Schuchman also noticed that motion pictures tend to oversimplify deafness and ignore issues related to language in the deaf community (cited by Safran 471). Only one film at the time featured deaf people conversing in sign language *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1968) and those actors were not deaf and their sign language was poor (Safran 471). Even in *Children of a Lesser God*, viewers had to rely on a hearing person to verbally translate what Marlee Matlin’s character was signing. There were no translations of sign language in subtitles so that, in Safran’s words, “the dynamics of the deaf community, a world in which manual communication must be understood, remain a mystery to most film viewers” (Safran 471).

This history of representation gave shape to many stereotypes and common tropes that lasted until many years later. Such stereotypes have a direct effect on the perception of disability in society since the film is an easy medium to digest by the average consumer. In fact, the most glaring effect of cinema is the ability to translate a stereotype into reality, effectively condemning the demographic suffering from such stereotype into a false reality that often times does not serve their interest.

1.3.2. Common Media Tropes and Stereotypes of Disability

Lennar J. Davis examines in “The Ghettoization of Disability Paradoxes of Visibility and Invisibility in Cinema” the stereotypes that are associated with disability in media. He articulates the paradoxical treatment of disability in films which is that although it has existed in many movies throughout the history of the cinema, it is always centered on the disability itself and not the individual behind it. Disability is used as a stereotypical narrative, generally as a challenge or a tragedy. Intellectual disabilities are most notably used as a tool to evoke compassion in the viewer. Davis state that “Most commonly audiences are called upon to produce a limited range of responses from sympathy or pity to some kind of beneficent granting of limited personhood to such characters” (39). The main goal according to Davis is to comfort the viewer through such stereotypes about themselves and their “normality” (39).

Every form of disability is stereotypically used to create tropes around the targeted disability. Affective and anxiety disorder illicit different reactions than intellectual disability (Davis 40). When affliction such as depression, delusion, or schizophrenia are portrayed, they are mainly used to portray a descent into madness, reflecting how the viewer will feel in a disabling and dehumanizing society. The character becomes then, a stand-in for the viewer to experience the injustice of the society. Movies like *Beautiful mind*, *The Soloist* then explore the character's descent into madness while offering a cure or a way of control to their affliction (Davis 40).

Another common stereotype is obsessive-compulsive disorder or OCD which sways between tragedy and redemption or tragedy and comedy. Davis gives the example the TV show *Monk* about a detective with OCD syndrome who is good at noticing clues that are hard to pay attention to for others due to his obsession with details (40). This show creates a character who is amusing yet in a debilitating situation, thus giving the viewers entertainment. Davis calls this kind of trope “the mascotization of disabilities” (40), it is the act of producing a “lovely, cuddly representation” of disability while showing how disability itself can be an effective ability in everyday life. Monk lives with an intense desire to solve cases and that puts a strain on his ability to live a normal life (Davis 40).

This kind of representation create stereotypes that revolve around people with disabilities. It put them in a box and disregards everything else but their disability. For example, people with OCD are very observant, people with schizophrenia are incapable of leading a normal life. It shapes how society perceives people with disability and treats them according to the stereotypes they came to learn in media representation.

Another reoccurring stereotype is the concept of “supercrip”. It is a mainstream stereotype that exists in contemporary media in all of its forms. In it, a person with disability is glorified and praised for an accomplishment they made despite their disability. Eli Clare writes that:

the supercrip is one of the dominant images of disabled people [...] A boy without hands bats .486 on his Little League team. A blind man hikes the Appalachian Trail from end to end. An adolescent girl with Down’s syndrome learns to drive and has a boyfriend. A guy with one leg runs across Canada. The nondisabled world is saturated with these stories (quoted by Shalk 73).

The discussion around the term supercrip centers around words such as overcoming, prevailing, surviving etc. It focuses on the personal attitude and perseverance of persons with disability rather than social barriers, giving the illusion that one is capable of overcoming all the effects of disability with sheer hard work (Shalk 73).

Contrary to the supercrip, another stereotype exists in regard to disability. It portrays people with disabilities as pathetic and in need of pity. This imagery is reinforced with portrayals such as Charles Dickens' Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* and the story of John Merrick *The Elephant Man*, successfully adapted to stage play and film which tells the story of a man with "normal" intelligence but abnormal physical deformity who was first kept as captive in fairs freakshow but later rescued by Sir Frederick Treves, a person with non-disabilities who belongs to the Victorian middle class (Barnes 8). Both stage play and film production feature people without disabilities who seek to capitalize on Merrick's public humiliation in an attempt to conjure feelings of pity and distress upon the viewers. At the same time, it serves to remind the viewer that the well-being of people with disabilities lies on the hands of the able-bodied, in this case Sir Frederick Treves. According to Colin Barnes, news and television media use images of people with disabilities, often children, in hospitals; constructing the myth that disability is connected to pain and suffering. Beside using these images to garner pity, this stereotype serves to divert attention from social components that are responsible for creating barriers around people with disability.

Furthermore, Barnes suggests that even though the media use neutral terms such as people with disabilities or disabled people, the language that comes with it is often filled with a tone of sentimentality. This is considered offensive and patronizing to people with disability as the reporters refers to them as "brave", "courageous", "victims" and "unfortunate" (8). He states that

Derogatory terms like 'cripple' or 'dummies' are never used but TV news stories often include depersonalised expressions such as 'the disabled' and 'the handicapped' - phrases which cause offence because they rob disabled people of their humanity, and so reduce them to objects (Barnes 8).

Stereotypes and tropes then are dangerous and tangible concepts presented to the public eye through the media. They are especially easy to digest through film and TV shows that target

all the demographics from the young child to the old person, solidifying a certain understanding about disability that is often times untrue and most of the time at the detriment of the well-being of people with disabilities.

1.4. Film Studies

Film studies is a discipline that revolves around exploring the different aspects of film-making and how it shapes society. Film studies then is an academic exploration of the epistemology of cinema; in other words, navigating the process of creating a film and all the knowledge that comes with shaping a motion picture. At the same time, cinema or film have a direct effect on the world. In his article “Film and History: Towards a General Ontology”, Floris Paalman uses the work of Elsaesser to examine the ontology of cinema on the world and how it shaped the individuals. He states that “Cinema serves as an ontology to ground our belief in the world” (23). Cinema then transcends being merely a medium and it becomes active in shaping reality. in Palmaán’s words

Cinema has thus been conceptualized as a ‘reality that thinks.’ Instead of looking into the meaning of a film or how it represents reality, Elsaesser stresses its existence and function, how its images affect viewers, how they constitute realities in their own right, and how they classify the world (23).

Film studies, otherwise known as Film Theory, uses the various academic theories to provide a lens in the matter of perceiving films. Arguably one of the most influential film critics on contemporary cinema, André Bazin, had a great influence on shaping film theory in an academic way that took cinema in a serious manner. In *Studying Film with André Bazin*, Blandine Joret takes a look at the unique position that Bazin held in the history of cinema. The French critic experienced the Nazi occupation of France in World War II and the post-war era when film culture began to flourish in Paris. Moreover, Bazin witnessed the institutionalization of Film Studies in universities and also the first comprehensive books about film history incorporated in the Sorbonne University after the Second World War. In Joret’s words, “Reading through his notes on preparing film screenings and discussions, one could easily conclude that Bazin in fact invented film analysis as it is taught in every single film program today” (Joret 9-10).

Amongst the theories used for film analysis is Marxism. According to *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory*, Marxism provides three forms of practice; economic, political, and ideological. Economic practice produces, from raw material, equipment and working force, the material conditions of sustenance. Political practice organizes social relations between different social groups. In Capitalism, political force creates antagonistic relations between the middle class and the working class. Ideological practice consists of creating subjectivity for individuals. Consequently, ideological practice produces subject positions which play an “active, determining role in the successful functioning of ideology. These subject positions, in turn, ensure that individuals play their role in reproducing economic and political practices” (Heath 114).

While Marxism focuses on the political, ideological and economic construct in films, Psychoanalysis rather shifts its focus on the individual's repressed desire and attempt to untangle it and explore it in a way that gives the viewer gratification and wish-fulfilment. According to *A Companion to Film Theory*, the psychoanalytic theory attempts to analyse the effect of the film on the spectator, how a film has a powerful ability to shape the mind of the spectator and elicit different responses based on the image that is perceived. More than just being motion pictures, a film has a hypnotizing effect that has various consequences on the viewer and that is to be studied and scrutinized in an academic manner (Allen 126).

The psychoanalytic theory, according to Richard Allen, explores the kinship between cinema and irrationality, the visual distinctive properties and the character and qualities of mass cultural narratives are what triggers the irrationality in the viewer's subconscious and elicits perverse pleasure. In Allen's opinion, the visual properties of film and irrationality have been analyzed in two varied yet related ways. The first emphasizes the closeness of film to thought and dream, and the second explores the importance of humans understanding of cinema's amplifying effect on perception; its “emphasis on what and how the cinema allows us to see, and how this affects our self-understanding” (Allen 124).

When it comes to applying the psychoanalytic theory, Damian Cox and Michael Levine in “Psychoanalysis and Film” articulate the benefit of psychoanalysis in examining the perception of the viewer for art and the effect of motion picture on the subconscious (2). Psychoanalysis enhances the understanding of the human mind and nature and the basic tenets of psychoanalysis that relate to the context of applying psychoanalysis on film studies consist of

the reality of dynamic unconsciousness, the reality of ‘primitive’ (primary process) mental function focused on immediate gratification of instincts and drives, the centrality of defense mechanisms for managing anxiety, the emotional meaningfulness of dreams and phantasy. Some features of film spectatorship are best explained by our tendency to repress and disavow uncomfortable or perverse desires, and to gain a special kind of gratification from the vicarious satisfaction of these desires in dreams and phantasies. In dreams and phantasies, representations beset us and our ordinary modes of self-critical judgment are suspended. Much the same thing seems to happen, at least sometimes, in film spectatorship (Cox and Levine 3).

Another theory that is used to examine films is Realism. Katherine Blakeney examines in “An Analysis of Film Critic Andre Bazin's Views on Expressionism and Realism in Film” the views of the famous film critic André Bazin. In fact, Bazin was a staunch supporter of this theory in the sense that he advocated to rely less on montage. Although Bazin admits in his article “The Evolution of Language in Cinema” that montage is necessary to bring film to life, he wished for more reliance on realism to bring films to fruition. For Bazin, reality and anything that can support it such as sound, invisible editing and deep focus define films (cited by Blakeney parag.1).

Cultural film theory on the other hand studies the impact of cultural norms on films. In his article “What is Cultural Studies Film Theory?” Tavares provides an overview on Cultural Theory and its relation to film theory. Developed by British Marxist academics in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, cultural theory is a mix between Marxist, semiotics and other film theories including that of Social Theory (Tavares parag 7). Tavares then articulates cultural studies in film theory as an objective analysis and politically driven examination of culture in film studies, in addition to criticize and investigate division in knowledge that are rooted in nature (Tavares parag 8).

All those theories are necessary to examine and analyse films in a methodological and critical manner. They provide a comprehensive understanding of all the aspects of film-making and give the scholar a tool to navigate the deep ocean that a film is. Film studies seek further to analyse the importance of casting and sound as important and necessary aspects of cinema.

1.4.1. Casting

Casting is the process of selecting actors for their role in film productions; it is an important step in the pre-production of films that the casting director goes through in order for the film to function and deliver its intended success. Suzy Catliff and Jennifer Granville provide a look into the process of casting in *The Casting Handbook: for Film and Theatre Makers*. They argue that casting is about finding a character that properly articulates the feelings, body language, and tone of speaking of the role they need to play (Catliff and Granville 6).

Generally speaking, casting directors tend to rely on typecasting for selecting actors for the roles. Typecasting concerns finding actors who are known for playing the role, for example Tom Cruise is known for playing action films (Catliff and Granville 6). It is an easier way for directors to typecast than to go through the arduous process of conducting many auditions, watching numerous tapes of known or unknown actors, and analyzing multiple auditions for the same actor in order to find the right person for the role. This process is often mentally draining and cost effective and can last for months, halting and even potentially risking the production of the film (Catliff and Granville 6).

Typecasting has not been without criticism however. In her article “Typecasting”, Pamela Robertson Wojcik explains that actors avoid typecasting for fear of being limited to a type role. Typecasting can put the actor in a position where he or she will be perceived solely based on the role they were cast in. Playing a type can be regarded as lacking in talent or failing to provide something original due to overplaying a type. Additionally, the audience will condemn the actor for playing a type role regardless of the quality of acting and the actor’s public image will be tied tightly to the role for creating a “unique role” (Wojcik 223).

Moreover, typecasting is seen as a limitation to the system of creating roles that are original. Wojcik argues that actors have avoided typecasting from the beginning of cinema. She provides the example of an actress from the silent film era, Louise Brooks, as she reflected on her career, stating “I just didn't fit into the Hollywood scheme at all. I was never, neither a fluffy heroine, nor a wicked vamp, nor a woman of the world. I just didn't fit into any category... You see, I didn't interest them because I couldn't be typed” (quoted by Wojcik 223).

In fact, typecasting in the eyes of some professional actors is linked to personality rather than acting ability. Wojcik compares the statement of Brooks and the classical British actor Eric Portman as he linked typecasting to the actor’s stardom. He wrote

So, personality can make you a film star. Whether you are a film actor or not, will depend on your histrionic talent... Still, if you have only a little talent, and a lot of personality, you may succeed—as a type. This means you will always be cast for the same parts. Your film life will, then, not be a long one (quoted by Wojcik 223).

Wojcik also points out the relationship between types and characterization, she argues that “Put simply, type is relatively simple, shallow, and unchanging, whereas character is complex, deep, and developing” (227). Types are linked to stereotypes and connecting a role to distinct a physical appearance, particular acting style and type of role. In fact, typecasting specifying actors for roles of doctors, teachers and politicians, for example, can potentially create stereotypes about these professions and link them to a particular gender, physical appearance or personality traits (Wojcik 227).

Historically speaking, typecasting served as a unique tool in segregating actors based on appearance in the period of the 1930’s up until 1945. Hollywood created and separated between races in a discreet manner that reflected the nature of typecasting in Hollywood at the time. Wojcik trace back these changes as she states

By the 1930s, race becomes its own category as The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences: Players Directory Bulletin (generally referred to as The Academy Players Directory) includes separate sections labeled "Colored" and "Oriental," which list all African American and Asian actors and actresses, adults and children, together while it classifies white men (without identifying them as such) as leading men, younger leading men, characters and comedians; white women as leading women, ingenues, characters and comediennes; and white children as boys and girls. While African American and Asian actors and actresses exist outside the lines, as it were, with no indication of whether they are, for instance, characters or ingenues, white actors such as Bela Lugosi and Peter Lorre who play ethnic types are still listed in the main male categories as “characters” (Wojcik 244).

Ultimately, casting is a delicate and important process that reflects and is affected by the political and social atmosphere. It represents the film industry view of the issues of society and consequently cements that message into the subconscious of the viewer, from casting

individuals to using sounds to build a film that resonates with audience in a manner that touches on the subjects that society deals with.

1.4.2. Sound Engineering

Sound is considered a pillar stone in shaping a film. When watching a film, the viewer's first impression is sonorous and visual. Sound is a creative tool that helps make the film a vivid experience; it is no longer an afterthought but an active part of film production that the director pays grave attention to in order to properly shape a film.

In “For the Use of Sound. Film Sound Analysis For Audio-Description: Some Key Issues”, Aline Remael analyses the complexities of sound design in today’s process of film making. She argues that with the rapid technological advancement, sound engineering became a crucial and complex part of telling a story and that “Both film scholars and technicians specializing in sound therefore have their work cut out for them, analysing, improving and controlling the complex narrative functioning of sound, as well as the influence of material factors on its production” (Remael 259).

Sound plays an important role in the process of “show, do not tell”. It is used from a narrative perspective to indicate elements of the story without the character in the film telling them. Rather, by the use of sound, one can receive numerous auditory information that is connected to the scene in the film. Remael cites Randy Thom as he underlines few aspects of sound’s role in a narrative point of view.

Some of the main tasks that the sound track can take on are

- suggest a mood, evoke a feeling
- set a pace
- indicate a geographical locale
- indicate a historical period
- clarify the plot
- define character
- connect otherwise unconnected ideas, characters, places, images, or moments
- heighten realism or diminish it
- heighten ambiguity or diminish it
- draw attention to detail, or away from it
- indicate changes in time

- smooth otherwise abrupt changes between shots or scenes
- emphasize a transition for dramatic effect
- describe an acoustic space
- startle or soothe
- exaggerate action or mediate it (Remael 262-263).

Sound engineering is a process that is done post production to minimize the cost of controlling the scene as it is difficult to isolate unwanted noise, and while the director uses the sounds during the scene as they are more “raw” and more attune to the scene, it is more likely for the process of sound design to be post-produced to mold sounds to the best possible outcome that is desired by the director.

One of the aspects of film sound is sounds effects. there are three forms of sounds effects according to Turner, “impact, Foley and imbiance” (quoted by Remael 263). According to Remael

Impact effects are created either for a diegetic inanimate object that has no aural identification in the ‘real’ world, or for an object that needs emotive impact within the diegesis (e.g., car tyres screeching). Foley effects, named after pioneer Jack Foley, involve artists who synchronize the actions of a character projected on a screen and record the relevant sound in a ‘sound pit’, which usually has ground platforms of different materials (e.g., footsteps, opening and closing of doors). Ambience effects aim to recreate the sound of specific locations (e.g., the echo of a cave, but also the roar of a crowd in a stadium) (263).

Sound engineering then is a vital cog in the grand scheme of film making, it is the story within the story that the capture the audience’s attention and elevates the immersion aspect of films and adds to the realism of the experience of film watching. Therefore, sound engineering can either elevate or downgrade the overall function of film as a whole.

1.5. Conclusion

Media and disability are deeply interconnected fields that affect each other in a tangible manner that starts from stereotypes, gradually transforming into realities. Such symbiotic relationship has been explored by scholars throughout time and documented in an academic process that allows a more comprehensive, extensive and critical judgement of media representation of disability from different angles that gave birth to adequate techniques of understanding

representation as a whole. Film making uses techniques such as casting and sound engineering to influence the audience, especially when dealing with disability as it is the case for *The Sound of Metal* film.

Chapter Two: Understanding Deafness through *Sound of Metal*

2.1. Introduction.....	28
2.2. About <i>Sound of Metal</i>.....	29
2.3. Characters.....	38
2.3.1. Lou	38
2.3.2. Joe	41
2.3.3. Ruben	42
2.4. Deafness in <i>Sound of Metal</i>.....	45
2.5. Conclusion.....	50

2.1. Introduction

Sound Of Metal is a film that dissects deafness and its effect on an individual, presenting the community of deaf people in a way that challenges their representation in the media. From sound design to sign language incorporation in telling a story, the film provides new insights through the life of the main character.

2.2. About *Sound of Metal*

Sound of Metal is a film directed and co-written by Darius Marder. It stars Riz Ahmed as Ruben, a drummer who realizes that his hearing is regressing and must confront his new reality. The movie first premiered at Toronto International Film Festival on September 6, 2019. The film was critically acclaimed, especially for the direction of Marder, as well as its sound design and screenplay, not to mention the acting of Riz Ahmed and of Paul Raci as Joe, the director of a small deaf community for the recovering addicts. Film critic Mark Kermode praises the intricacy of the world depicted in *Sound of Metal* when he states

With astonishing verisimilitude, Marder conjures a world in which every detail rings true. From the wall-of-noise ambience of Ruben's rock performances (shot live, in front of real crowds) to heated group debates conducted in American sign language (ASL), *Sound of Metal* finds universal appeal in the specifics of detail, rooted in Ahmed's thrillingly committed performance (Kermode 2021).

The film also received praise for its choice in casting. Instead of simply hiring hearing actors to portray deaf people, Marder chose to respect the experience that comes with deafness and he saw the importance of an accurate representation of what is it like to be deaf. In selecting actors for the character Joe, the mentor of Ruben, Marder repeatedly refused A-list actors in favour of someone from the deaf community. As an important character that can push the main character's growth forward, Joe needed to be played by someone who is both familiar with the hearing and the deaf and that is where Paul Raci came to play. As someone who is a child of deaf adults or CODA, Raci possesses a unique perspective of what life is as a deaf adult. He

understands that deaf culture does not necessarily link hearing loss with impairment, and they are as prone as hearing people to addiction. Therefore, the casting of actors was a major drive for the critical success of the film. In “*Sound of Metal* Star Paul Raci Challenges Hollywood: Deaf People Are Sick of Sainly Portrayals”, *Indiwire* interview Paul Raci about casting in Hollywood and how *Sound of Metal* makes a different approach and the struggles of deaf actors in landing adequate roles in Hollywood:

Indiewire: There have been so many cringeworthy stories about deafness.

What enticed you to *Sound of Metal*?

Paul Raci: My parents were deaf, so when you talk about cringe-worthy movies, I’ve been watching movies depicting deaf people my whole life. I love the way [*Sound of Metal*] used the deaf world, how it talked about addiction. So it was a perfect project for me, [but] it was quite a struggle trying to get them to even look at my tape. We worked up the audition, sent it in, and when my agent checked on it about a week later they said they hadn’t seen it yet. As matter of fact, they’re having such a hard time because they saw so many people, they [were] going to give up and go to a name [actor]. So she begged them to please look at it and find it. They did find it and five minutes later they called and said that they showed it to the director, Darius Marder, and he wanted to talk to me (2020)

On the other hand, what makes Riz Ahmed a successful casting choice is the character transition from hearing to deafness and how much Ahmed prepared for his role to depict the integration of the character Rubin in deaf culture. In an article of *The New York Times*, Kyle Buchanan reflects on Riz Ahmed as a person and how his drive and obsession, in addition to Ahmed’s intellect, amalgamated in a career-defining performance that managed to translate Marder’s vision for the character. Ahmed spent eight months in New York daily learning ASL (American Sign Language) for two hours, two hours practicing drums, and two hours with a personal trainer to achieve the desirable physique for the character. Ahmed reflects back on the process and how mentally taxing it was to deliver the necessary performance without compromising the integrity of the representation “You prepare like an obsessive psychopath,” Ahmed said, “and then you turn up like someone who doesn’t know how to tie their shoelaces and you see what happens” (Buchanan 2021).



(Sound Of Metal 00:02:25)

The film starts with a prolonged ringing noise as the main character is preparing himself with a visible nervousness since he is in the middle of a performance. He is a drummer for a heavy metal band surrounded with loud noises, the ringing transitions into a guitar riff as the female lead start singing. The following shot shows her in the spotlight with the main character in the shade, signifying their dynamic. The performance continues to escalate, with the flashing lights, the loud noises and the screaming that is often attributed to metal, highlighting the intense atmosphere that the main character is familiar with. His drumming is fast paced, reflective of his lifestyle and how he carries his life as the title of the film appears on the screen.



(Sound of Metal 00:01:36)

The following scenes shows the daily routine of the main character Ruben and his partner Lou. Ruben wakes up to prepare breakfast for both and makes a healthy mixture of herbs, showing that he cares for his body. He does his usual exercises and plays a soft tune to start his day; his home is a simple and cozy RV (Recreational Vehicle) that is also a studio for recording music. Ruben wakes up his sleeping partner that seems to scratch her arm and shows previous existing scars. Ruben stops her and the following scenes gives the viewer an overview of their relationship; they are close as they are dancing together to a slow song and they share intimate conversations about different topics showcasing how they are open and vulnerable to each another.

As they are preparing for a show and having random conversations about sales, Ruben experiences a sudden shift in his hearing. It fluctuates all over the place and it becomes muffled. Even though he is concerned about it, he dismisses it and plays his drums. At first, he is capable of hearing his drums but that changes as the performance progresses, eventually fading into the next day and what follows is Ruben trying to solve the problem by himself but failing to do so. He tries to maintain his daily routine but he is distracted and panic colors his face. He visits a local pharmacy and the scene juxtaposes between what Ruben hears and what the hearing person hears; the shots shift from Ruben's hearing perspective as a close-up to the wide shot with a clear audio to highlight the hearing loss that Ruben is experiencing.



(Sound of Metal 00:12:44)

The pharmacist refers Ruben to a close audiologist where he conducts different tests to determine the level of hearing loss and its cause. The doctor informs Ruben that his case is severe and that what he lost from his hearing cannot return. Ruben inquires about the Cochlear

implants, a procedure that may help him hear again but the doctor informs him that such procedure is complicated and expensive and cannot be covered by insurance.

The doctor recommends that Ruben avoid exposure to loud noises to prevent losing his remaining hearing but the following scene shows him ignoring the doctor's recommendations and proceeding to play another show. He experiences a panic attack and storms off mid show and Lou follows him to determine the reason of his panic. Ruben tells her that he cannot hear anything. She hugs him and tries to comfort him. The scene shifts to a dinner as Ruben and Lou are discussing the situation. At first, Ruben insists on continuing to play using signs since he is familiar with the songs they are playing but he is faced with rejection from Lou as she is worried about him exacerbating his situation. Ruben then storms outside the diner and asks a stranger for a cigarette. This alarms Lou and she calls his sponsor Hector, revealing that he is a recovering addict. She briefs Hector of the situation while Ruben is sitting next to her visibly frustrated and cynical. Hector refers them to a place for deaf people who are addicts.

There, they are introduced to Joe, a veteran who lost his hearing in the Vietnam war in his twenties when a bomb exploded near him. Joe and Ruben have a conversation through the use of a microphone that translates Joe's speech into captions. Joe is able to read lips and they speak about Ruben's past addiction. Joe then opens up about his past struggles with alcoholism and how it cost him his relationship with his wife and child. He establishes that the reason is not his deafness but his alcoholism. Joe asks Ruben if he plays music but Ruben answers that it is not the case anymore until he gets the implant.

Joe then informs Ruben that the place they are in is a program for deaf addicts that are recovering from addiction and that they belong to a larger deaf community where they benefit from their support and they work with each other in a mutually interconnected relationship. He then articulates to Ruben that the solution they seek is not for deafness but for the mind. Lou joins them and Joe suggests that Ruben stays for recovery and to learn sign language; and to find some solid ground with his condition Ruben should stay in the house separated from the outside world without any contact for a more effective process of recovery and integration. Ruben disagrees since he does not want to leave Lou alone.

Back in their RV, Ruben initially suggests to play using signs and cues. Lou appears hesitant then agrees to his proposal but wakes up to a panicked Ruben who keeps smashing his equipment from frustration. Lou tries to stop him but fails. After a while, Ruben calms down and apologizes. They then have an argument about what happens, Lou insists that Ruben goes

back to Joe's place for his recovery but Ruben does not wish to do so, yet he finally relents. As Lou is leaving to her father in Belgium, Ruben, with a shaky voice, asks her to wait for him and Lou makes Ruben promise her not to hurt himself; otherwise, she will hurt herself. After Lou left, Ruben breaks down, overwhelmed by the situation.



(Sound of Metal 00:41:43)

Ruben then joins Joe's house; at first he feels like an outsider since he does not know sign language, he attends meetings and joins them for dinner. Riz Ahmed's acting and the close-up shots translate the frustration and feeling of otherness that Ruben experiences as someone who recently lost his hearing. After a while, Ruben is given a task by Joe and that is to "Learn to be Deaf". Ruben is visibly lost since the language barrier exists and that is one of the hurdles he has to cross.

Joe takes him to a class where he proceeds to turn on and off the lights of the classroom showing Ruben one of the ways to grab a deaf person's attention. The classroom is full of deaf kids and a teacher named Diane. She teaches Ruben his name sign. The scene shifts to a different classroom where the teacher tells Ruben in sign language that there is no use of voice in class. Ruben is noticeably uncomfortable by the new experience. Back at the house, Ruben sneaks into Joe's office to see if Lou contacted him. As he sees what she sent him, his face shifts from happiness to sadness as he realizes that he misses her.

As Ruben is fixing the roof, Joe asks him to join him in his office and proceeds to tell him that he is not here to fix anything. He provides Ruben with a new assignment where he has to stay alone early in the morning writing anything and everything that comes to his mind. Ruben asks if he can draw but Joe insists on writing, he tells Ruben that no one will read his writings and if he finds it difficult, he can find him in his room doing the same task. The first time he tries to write alone in the room proves impossible as Ruben dismisses the idea.

Ruben attends the class with children but sees a child being restless. Diane, the teacher, cannot get him to stay still. Ruben offers to take the child outside, while sitting on the high and low of a slide, the two bond over drumming. The next scene shows Ruben going on a hike with the children and the teacher; it is the first time the viewer sees the captions for the sign language used, signifying that Ruben is able to use sign language. Ruben finally starts to integrate in the deaf community, and the following scenes show him participating in the different activities he found difficult at first, from chatting to his fellow members of the house during dinner to finally managing to spend time alone in the room writing his thoughts in a journal. He even introduces drumming to the deaf kids, showcasing his importance to the community where he had felt as an outsider not so long ago.



(Sound of Metal 01:05:22)

Joe then has a conversation with Ruben about how much Ruben became an integral part of the community and offers him a job in the house or with the kids in school, Ruben however seems hesitant but Joe ask him to consider the offer. Ruben sneaks again to Joe's office to check on Lou only to find out that she is performing again. Baffled by this, he spirals and sells all his equipment to a friend he made in the house and made an appointment with an Audiologist in addition to sell his RV to cover the costs of Cochlear implant. He agrees to sell the RV for a cheaper price on the condition that he can buy it back with the increase of 10% if he had the money in the period of eight weeks and the RV remains the way it is.

After he did the operation, the doctor tells him that the surgery was a success and that he will experience absolute silence, the activation of implants will be after four weeks so he meets Joe to let him know that he did the operation. Joe is visibly disappointed by Ruben's choice but Ruben tells him that life moves on quickly and if he did not do the surgery no one will care about him and he will be forgotten. After a brief period of silence, Joe tells him

JOE (ASL - SPOKEN)

I wonder Ruben, during these mornings when you have been sitting in my study-
(signs sitting)

Sitting. I wonder if you've had any moments of stillness?

JOE (ASL - SPOKEN)

Because you're right Ruben the world does keep moving and it can be a damn cruel place... But for me, that place of stillness that comes when I'm not clamoring, or running or desperately clutching... the moments where this crappy mundane world suddenly becomes radiant and magnificent, and all fear is gone... for me, THAT PLACE is the kingdom of God. (*Sound of Metal* 01:23:50, 01:24:29)

Joe sees that Ruben made his mind up, wishing him happiness. Ruben thanks him and asks Joe to lend him money to buy back his RV, but Joe refuses saying that Ruben sounds like an addict. Ruben denies that and apologizes for asking but hopes he can live in the house until he can activate the implants. Joe however refuses since the house operates on the belief that deafness is not a handicap and Ruben violated that trust by getting the implants. After Ruben leaves the house, Joe is visibly shaken by the loss of Ruben as he meant a great deal to different people in the community



(*Sound of Metal* 01:28:33)

Ruben moves to a motel awaiting his appointment with the doctor, spending weeks alone with an ashtray full of burned cigarettes.

As he met the doctor and activated the implants, Ruben's expectations are shattered by the poor hearing he got; even after a few adjustments, his hearing remains subpar to how he used to hear. The doctor informs him that the implants serve to trick the brain into thinking that he is still hearing meanwhile his ears are not functioning. She suggests he gets accustomed to how he is hearing now and not compare it to how he used to hear. Ruben is in disbelief as he has sacrificed a lot for the implants.

Ruben then travels to Paris to surprise Lou, as he walks through the busy streets of the city, he finds it difficult to get accustomed to his new hearing. He heads to the house of Lou's father named Richard whom he meets, and at first, the atmosphere is heavy and awkward, they later have a conversation about Ruben's upbringing and how he used to travel a lot due to his mother's work. Richard confesses that he did not like Ruben at first because he felt that he stole her away but admits that the blame was on her mother who took Lou after separating from Richard and then took her away again when she committed suicide. He thanks Ruben for taking care of her but assures him that she is doing well right now. Richard informs Ruben that there is a party and Lou will attend it.

After Ruben takes a brief rest, he reunites with Lou in a warm moment where they are both surprised of each other's changes. Ruben notices Lou's arm and how there are no scratches there, happy she does not seem to be unwell. Ruben joins the party but finds himself again in a situation where he feels like an outsider, people are unlike the people he gets along with, and even though Lou tries to introduce him, there is this rift between him and his surroundings so he finds a corner as he waits the party to end. Later at that party, Lou and her father play a French song her father used to sing to her as a kid. As Ruben was listening, he felt this gap widening between him and Lou as she sang this soft song unlike anything the girl who sang metal songs before he lost his hearing.

After the party ended, Lou and Ruben talked about the party and how Lou sounded amazing singing the French song; they discuss this side of Lou that Ruben never knew. Lou then talks about the gypsy life they used to live when Ruben interjects and tells her that they need to get back to their old life but Lou is visibly stressed and starts to scratch again. Ruben stops her and after a brief silence, realizes that it is better that they end the relationship since they both are different people: so they both break down crying and mourning the amazing life they had together.

Ruben wakes up the next morning, taking a long last look at the sleeping Lou and heads outside in the busy street, bothered by the bustling noises until the loud sounds of the Cathedral's bells caused him to take off his implants. And as the voices ceased to be, the film ends with a peaceful look on Ruben's face, experiencing the stillness that Joe told him about.



(*Sound of Metal* 01:56:00)

2.3. Characters

Sound of Metal delves into the stories of three individuals and how the experience of hearing loss changed their lives. Lou, the partner of the main character Ruben, is a crucial part of the film. Her mother took her as a child away from her father, leaving France to the United States where she lived. Her mother then killed herself, which shaped her character and perception of life and relationships.

2.3.1. Lou

In the film, she is introduced right after Ruben, alluding to her importance to the journey that the film takes the audience in. She wears the typical outfit of people who associate themselves with Metal genre of music. The first introduction of her character is singing in loud voice about sex and violence, in a passion that reflect her personality and her outlook of life, intense and self-destructive.

The film does not show the entire journey of Lou; in fact the audience only sees two versions of Lou, the Lou who is in a relationship with Ruben and the Lou who spent few months separated from him. Both are starkly different versions that highlight the effect they had on each other.

When she is in a relationship with Ruben, Lou exists solely as his partner. She is taken care of by Ruben. In a scene where Ruben is preparing breakfast for the both of them, Ruben wakes her up to eat. The first thing she does is to compulsively scratch at seemingly pre-

existing scars, indicating a history of self-harm, establishing the previous battles that Lou survived, showing that she is a survivor. Yet she remains a flawed person that still has a lot to deal with, and her relationship with Ruben leans more into the aspect of co-dependency than being a productive and healthy relationship.



(Sound of Metal 00:06:10)

That being said, Lou is in love with Ruben and shares with him open and intimate conversations that reveals how deep she is connected to Ruben

LOU: I used to imagine my funeral a lot when I was a kid. At school, in math.

RUBEN: FUN.

LOU: I used to day dream about my funeral then I'd make myself cry.

INT. AIRSTREAM - MOMENTS LATER

Still driving.

LOU: Uh yeah- I think I'd get cremated what about you?

RUBEN: Cremated or like just fed to the birds, you know?

LOU: Well you know now you can get ashes put into tattoo ink. My face on your back where the clown is.

RUBEN: What?!

LOU: Yeah.

RUBEN (Singing): Scary clown face. Scary clown face.

(Sound of Metal 00:08:50, 00:09:16)

The moment that changed Lou in the film is when the dynamic of her relationship with Ruben shifted. As Ruben lost his hearing, he had to rely on her instead of the other way around. This threw her for a loop where she wanted to support Ruben but did not know how. In the dinner scene where they discuss what they should do, Ruben's stubbornness about continuing to perform puts Lou in a difficult situation since she is not used to disagree with him. The acting of Olivia Cooke who plays Lou translates the mixed emotions she is going through without going overboard, grounding her acting in realism to capture the humanness of her character.

This indecisiveness carries on when Lou and Ruben visit Joe's house. Lou wish for Ruben to join the program but cannot seem to voice her decision as she waits for Ruben to make his choice. As Ruben talks to her about how to play music using signs, Lou is internally struggling between her concern about Ruben and his happiness as she knows how they are both dependent on each other so she agrees with him. It took Ruben to violently loses his temper to wake up Lou about the sobering reality of Ruben and she finally takes a strong stance with Ruben, knowing that the longer she stays the harder the split would be. For the first time in the film, Lou makes a resolute decision highlighting a pivotal point in her character, leaving Ruben with the warning that if he hurts himself, she will hurt herself too.

When Ruben meets Lou again in the third act, he discovers a different Lou, with short hair, natural-coloured eyebrows and arms that are clear of scratches; Lou is a changed person. Even though the audience does not accompany Lou in her growth as a person, the shocking contrast between first act Lou and third act Lou leaves a lasting effect on the film.

Her change reveals that the final step in the process of her healing from addiction was to take a distance from Ruben and rediscover herself without him, and the step that was definitive for her growth was to make peace with her past, rekindle her relationship with her father that got damaged by her mother. But the guilt that came with that growth is evident in the party that her father had, she realized the distance growing between her and Ruben, and she could not bring up that into discussion since Ruben sacrificed so much for her. Burdened by the debt of gratitude, her anxiety flared up and caused her to start scratching her arms again.



(Sound of Metal 01:52:29)

Eventually, it was Ruben who made that decision for her, ending a vital and core chapter of her life. In the scene where she hugs Ruben, more than saying goodbye to him, she is saying goodbye to the version of her that had accompanied Ruben for four years.

2.3.2. Joe

Joe on the other hand is a character that functions as a guiding light to the main character. Joe is a veteran in the Vietnam war, he lost his hearing when a bomb exploded near him. Joe in a scene with Ruben, describes his struggle with addiction and how it cost him his wife and child. Alcoholism is what destroyed his life and not deafness. For Joe, it was of utmost importance to start his relationship with Ruben as his mentor by establishing what Ruben needed to focus on, his mental struggle with addiction, not deafness, and Joe played a vital role to help integrate Ruben into deaf community.

Joe is a man of few words, he keeps to himself and always tries to ask questions with an open mind, he avoid judgments and he is a capable communicator. At first, Joe wanted Ruben to reach the conclusion that stillness is what he needed in his life by himself by getting Ruben to sit in a room alone with his thoughts. But when Joe discovers that Ruben got the implants, it shattered most of the expectations Joe had for Ruben. Yet Joe wanted to see if Ruben could still change his mind about the implant, however he recognized that Ruben does not want to follow his advice.

At this point in the relationship between them, Joe saw Ruben as his son, that is why the decision to ask Ruben to leave the house wounded Joe deeply. Paul Raci's acting in delivering the emotional reaction of Joe is subtle and the use of suppressed exhale as if Joe is trying his best to not crumble under the immense weight of his decision culminated in a silent sob that spoke volume about the importance of Ruben in Joe's heart. Joe ultimately chose to look at the greater picture and wished to protect the house at Ruben's expense. Joe cannot tolerate any attack on the belief he has that deafness is not an handicap and Ruben's implants are a visible attack on that belief, leaving Joe with no choice but make the difficult decision to ask Ruben to leave.

JOE (ASL - SPOKEN)

Ruben, as you know everyone here shares in the belief that being deaf is not a handicap. Not something to fix. That's pretty important around here. All of these kids, all of us need to be reminded of it every day.

(Sound of Metal 01:27:18)

Joe's impact on Ruben is immense and profound, the way Joe guided and helped him made the separation between the two characters painful for them. Yet Joe still equipped Ruben with many tools to navigate his new reality. Joe ultimately was a future version of Ruben; they both lost their hearing in a later stage of their life, they both suffered from addiction and chose to be sober. He is what Ruben could be if he accepted his deafness, a collected and wise person. A parallel of each other, they both reveal a part of their past and future for the audience.



(*Sound of Metal* 01:28:24,01:28:39)

These two characters played a crucial role in the journey of the main character Ruben, from guiding him to defining him. Ruben went through a transformative and self-seeking process of finding one's identity.

2.3.3. Ruben

Ruben is the child of a military nurse, growing up without a father, and to a working woman who was constantly on the move from one place to another; he never knew stability. As an adult, Ruben's body tattoos reflects a lot of his characteristics, from "please Kill me" tattoo painted in his chest in a large font, to the crossed guns on his wrists, Ruben identifies in the beginning of the movie with the genre of Metal, with his relationship with Lou.

Ruben is someone who seeks to control many aspects of his life, being sober for four years, he is very insistent on creating routine for himself where he exercises and eats healthy food. He cares so much about his daily habits and about his partner Lou to a borderline obsessive degree. Moving from a place to another for tours in his RV, Ruben managed to construct a warm bubble for himself and Lou.

The bubble bursts however when he loses his hearing; with the risk of losing his music, his partner and everything he created for four years. Ruben was on the brink of going back to addiction if not for the support of Lou; it was the first time when the audience experiences the shift between who takes care of the other. Ruben was in the situation where he could not control anything and that shook the foundation of his identity; his stubbornness when he did not want to follow the doctor's order, his unwillingness to part with Lou, his sneaking to Joe's office to find out information about Lou are a reflection of how Ruben tends to self-sabotage whenever things go into unfamiliar territory for him. The biggest indication of this is when he sold everything he owns, from his precious RV to his musical equipment, for the sake of the implants, knowing he will destroy most of what he worked on his stay with Joe, his contributions to the deaf community; all so he could "fix" his hearing.

Ruben had to learn to embrace the unknown throughout the movie, something that he had struggled with when he was attending Joe's program. He experienced the feeling of being an outsider at first, having to learn the sign language and integrating with other recovering addicts and kids who are deaf was such a crucial step of his growth as a person. By the end of act two, Ruben found a community to belong to and a chance to get to know himself on a deeper level when he had to sit by himself, confronting and processing his emotions, learning that being deaf was not a disability but a chance of self-reflection.

Ruben found a father figure in Joe, something he lacked as a kid. The guidance Joe showed him, the time he shared with Joe was something that Ruben desperately needed to grow more as a person. With Joe, he learned the importance of stillness, the significance of community and how he does not need to be fixed. Ruben saw that he had a chance of peace since he saw himself in Joe, he related to him and that fact has grounded Ruben. This made the conflict between him and Joe such a painful experience for Ruben and Joe alike. Ruben was fearful of being forgotten, he feared that deafness will make living more cruel than it already is, such the need to find a solution.

Ruben's relationship with Lou is torrential where it hooked Ruben and blinded him. In a conversation with Joe, Ruben reveals that he has been in a relationship with Lou for four years, the same duration of his sobriety. This alludes that Ruben replaced drugs with Lou, essentially relying on her emotionally as she has been the only thing in his life that is stable thus far. This becomes apparent when Ruben made the decision to go through the surgery to get the implants, but when he visits her, the changes in her reflect how they had been holding each other from healing completely. In a way, Ruben needed to go through the surgery in order to take the final step in healing.

When Ruben closed the chapter of his relationship with Lou, as he sits on a bench in a park in Paris, the decision he made to take off his implants and enjoy the silence symbolizes the peace that Ruben attained from choosing to accept things as they are, thus allowing him to take the first step into his new life. The ending the film then, signifies a new beginning for Ruben, with an identity that is free of outside labels. When the start of the film shows Ruben naked but restricted to tattoos, the ending pictures him fully clothed but free from labels.



(*Sound of Metal* 00:01:08, 02,00:36)

In an interview with *National Board of Review*, Riz Ahmed explains his character as he says

Yeah, the dark humor within the punk music scene was so important. Ruben is someone, like Lou, who is trying to construct his identity, as many of us do. But he's doing it very proactively—he's dying his hair blonde, he's defining himself with all these tattoos on his body, and this is who he is. This guy, his life is music, he lives in an RV with his girlfriend, tours America, that's what he does. So he has a clear but almost brittle sense of who he is, a very clear attempt to define himself. It was important to have that as a starting point. He's someone who very much has ownership and construction of his identity. That's important because by the end of the film the journey he's going on is one of realizing that you can't control anything in life, least of all who you are or who you think you are. We

thought it was really important for there to be a visual transformation of the journey of the character that is almost a stripping back of some of these masks and armor to get back to a place of simplicity and nakedness and to the core of who Ruben is outside of his labels. (2020)

Ruben's journey through the film is an exploration of what it means to lose hearing.

2.4. Deafness through the Lens of *Sound of Metal*

Sound of Metal explores deafness as a central theme, from the use of sign language to the integration of sound design, in an effort to immerse the viewer in the experience of losing one's hearing and its effect on one's relationship with others as well as oneself. The film attempts to ground the experience of deafness in reality and steer away from the common stereotypes. It chose to depict deafness as a culture instead of merely a handicap.

The film paid grave attention to how the actors used ASL. It was important for Daruis Marder to look for actors who were deaf for an authentic portrayal of sign language, since the characters who were living in the house had been deaf for a long period of time, a certain level of fluency was required for an authentic portrayal of ASL. Riz Ahmed, the actor who played the main character has learnt sign language for a long time, but his character who transitions from a hearing to a deaf person makes mistakes; therefore, Ahmed presents a believable performance. His character Ruben struggles at first to comprehend sign language and the movie chooses to connect Ruben's sense of loss to the use of captions in the movie. At first, the audience does not understand the sign language depicted in the film since there are no captions, this choice was deliberate and necessary in order to translate the emotions of Ruben to the audience. So when Ruben finally understands and communicates using sign language, the audience gets the captions and understands to a certain degree the accomplishment and sense of belonging that Ruben felt in his newfound community.

The film also uses sign language to give Ruben a new identity after he has lost his own. In a particular scene where Ruben attends a class for the first time to learn sign language, the teacher Diane teaches him his ASL. This scene is a symbol of Ruben's first step to integrate and associate with the deaf community that is shown in the film.



(*Sound of Metal* 1:51:09)

A subtle use of sign language in the film is when Ruben always spoke with his voice after he became deaf when he did not feel a sense of belonging in the deaf community. When he attended the class of another teacher to learn sign language, the teacher asks Ruben to not use his voice using only sign language but Ruben is visibly uncomfortable. This instance showcases the level of comfort that Ruben felt throughout his stay in the program. When Ruben sat with Joe to explain that he went through the surgery, Ruben used his voice instead of sign language, showcasing that such a decision alienated him from the deaf community that he once, for a brief period of time, belonged to.



(*Sound of Metal* 00:51:20)

When it comes to the film's strongest point, sound design is the driving force of *Sound of Metal* and it attempts to capture the minute details of deafness. Daruis Marder recruited Nicholas Becker for the role of sound designer to connect the visual experience with sound. Instead of simply relying on sound as an afterthought, Marder wished to get the audience to

experience the hearing loss with Ruben. A vivid example of Marder’s use of sound is by switching the perspective of what the audience is experiencing by the use of shot and the sudden shift in audio; such use really rattles the viewer into being an active participator in Ruben’s journey of deafness. The audience gets a vibrant feeling as to what it is like being deaf by the shift between deafness and hearing.



(*Sound of Metal* 00:12:56, 00:13:31)

Nicholas Becker took a realistic approach to mimic deafness. In an interview with the *Indie Wire*, Becker comments on his approach as he compares it in his previous work on the movie *Gravity*, a movie about an astronaut stuck in a shuttle in space:

“The inner world of the suits in *Gravity* is a little bit [like] when you become deaf, because it’s a world of vibration,” said Becker. “You start to feel sound through low vibrations, the low frequencies, through contact with objects. This became a breakthrough in unlocking what Ruben’s world might sound like and how it would feel. Although most people only become conscious of how their bodies feel sound

at loud event, like when the bass kicks in at a concert, or the crowd roars at a sold out stadium, it's also a key reason why sound effectively elicits emotion and memories. "It's about how the body receives the vibration from outside," said Becker. "I tried to recreate this experience. I cannot ignore the historical vocabulary of sound in cinema, which have been created for 100 years, but what is interesting to me is to come back to the real life. To come back to the experience of the real world, what is happening when you are deaf, what can you feel."(2021)

By using such approach, Marder attempted to effectively use sound to maximize the experience of hearing loss in a way that helped the audience understand the transformative journey of Ruben. It emphasized the gradual loss of his hearing not as a sudden loss of audio but by muffling and suppressing the voice. What Ruben hears was mumbled as he interacted with others.

All this process that put focus on multiple angles of portraying deafness in an accurate manner sheds light on Marder's stance on how representation of deafness matter for deaf people specifically and disabled people as a whole. The film tried its best to not victimize deaf people by portraying them as helpless victims of circumstances and that they cannot do anything without the help of hearing people. Joe's character is a symbol of how deaf people can have strong morals, especially when it comes to protecting the people he supervises from being perceived as handicapped. He belongs to a community where the film navigated the language, the customs and the solidarity of its people. It shows that deaf people are teachers, kids, drummers, mentors and everyday people with an identity of their own and problems of their own.

On the other hand, *Sound of Metal* does not idealize deafness and its impact on people and does not put deaf people on a pedestal. The film establishes that by navigating the flaws of deaf people and humanizing them with the issues that exist in the real world, such as when Joe reveals that he struggled with alcoholism in an attempt to cope with his deafness and lost his family in the process, he tells Ruben that it was not his deafness that caused his alcoholism. This highlights the nuance of how deaf people dealt with their issues and how their characters are not black and white but morally grey. This further solidifies the realism in the film where the audience may identify with the characters in the film regardless whether they are hearing, deaf or have other disabilities.

Sound of Metal also takes a brief look at the medical sphere and the interaction between the main character Ruben and the audiologist. The film depicts the monotony of the doctor in informing Ruben that he will never recover his lost hearing, and instead of accommodating the sudden shift of lifestyle in a manner that addresses his anxiety and uncertainty of the future, the doctor seemingly rushes the process to merely a simplistic way

DOCTOR: Right... Ruben... (sighs)
 I understand this is all quite shocking for you but I need you to understand something. Whether this is somehow a result of over exposure to noise or it's an autoimmune issue, your hearing is deteriorating very rapidly. Right?
 RUBEN: Well
 DOCTOR: And over the next days or even hours it will likely get worse
 RUBEN: Dude, I'm asking you what can I do?
 DOCTOR: First thing, as a precaution is I would absolutely eliminate exposure to loud noises. Then once we have run some tests and identified exactly what is going on with your ears we can have some other conversations
 RUBEN: What other conversations? About what?
 DOCTOR: Well in the event of permanent loss there are procedures we can discuss
 RUBEN: Like what? What procedures?
 DOCTOR: Like for instance. Cochlear Implants-14.
 RUBEN: What are those?
 DOCTOR: Cochlear implants?
 RUBEN: Yeah what are they? They work?
 DOCTOR: They can be very effective for people with severe hearing loss or complete deafness yes
 RUBEN: Uh huh. So let's do that then.
 (*Sound of Metal* 00:16:20, 00:17:05)

The film is not without criticism however, as they chose to cast a hearing person for Ruben and Joe. The deaf community saw that the film could have gone the extra mile and chosen a hard of hearing actor for Ruben and a deaf actor for Joe. An article by *Disability Horizons* stated that Jade Bryan, a Deaf filmmaker who founded the #DeafTalent movement, articulates the problem as a failure of representation: "There was a Deaf cast, which is a good thing. However, I felt they were in the movie as a crutch to support a story about the main character." (2021)

Darus Marder however had a passionate desire to represent the deaf culture as he stated in an interview with *Little White Lies*

I invited everyone to always tell me when something felt full of s*** – there were so many moments like that, which was great because the film always got better, always got truer. Little things you wouldn't expect, like a computer or TV would never have the sound on in a Deaf household. I had written a scene where Ruben gets his name sign, and I met various members of the deaf community who said, 'That's not really the way it works. It just happens.' Having their involvement meant it was so much better than anything I wrote on my own. (2021)

Such dedication to deliver a proper representation to the deaf community received a wide acclaim especially since the film received many accolades in 2021 including an Academy

Award for Best Sound and many other prestigious awards that cemented the film as a landmark for the representation of deafness.

2.5. Conclusion

Sound of Metal delve into the issue of the representation of deafness by navigating the life of Ruben Stone and his journey into accepting deafness as a part of his identity and examines his old and new relationships with Lou and Joe, their significance in his growth as a person and the lessons they provided him as he attempt to learn his place in life. The film also employs sound design and sign language to better the experience of learning about deafness for an audience who otherwise may not be familiar with such way of life.

General Conclusion

Sound Of Metal strives to present a faithful iteration of deafness in a way that has rarely existed in preceding media. Its dedication to portraying deafness without glorifying nor victimizing it establishes a precedent in cinema where a disability can be a main theme of the film instead of sidelining and minimizing it to a mere tool. *Sound of Metal* makes use of brilliant sound design to immerse the viewer in the experience of deafness in an unheard way, illustrating the creativity that derives from the pursuit of authenticity. From the main character actor striving to learn sign language to making sure the cast is full of deaf actors, all the way to creating a vivid world where the representation of deafness extends beyond lack of sound, *Sound of Metal* navigates the delicate experience of a recovering addict's personal journey of growth, the pursuit of stillness and intricacy of relationships in furthering one's healing journey.

The film highlights the beginning of a new era where representation of disability as a whole and deafness especially should come from people who have a connection and are privy to the experience of deafness. Not only is the movie cast, and consultation by deaf actors, but the extent to which the director goes in order to safeguard the integrity of the film suggests the ability of creating a compelling piece of media that can resonate financially, emotionally and critically with both the academic and social sphere without jeopardizing the authenticity of a given experience.

The film also explores the deaf community and their customs, it highlights the language, the unity and flaws that exist within it. Through the perspective of Ruben, the viewer gets a front seat row in a world where people use their bodies to converse, creating a more intimate and direct communication relationship that is otherwise difficult to find in today's society.

Sound of Metal is a unique experience that paves the way to a new way of representation by the hands of people who are personally and professionally tied to the experience. It pushes the boundary of what is possible in regard to deafness and how deaf people value and take pride in their identity by rejecting the shame associated with deafness, by humanizing and grounding the experience of disability in reality.

Bibliography

- Albrecht, G. L., Snyder, S. L., Bickenbach, J., Mitchell, D. T., & Schalick, W. O., III. *Encyclopedia of Disability*. Sage Publishing, 2006.
- Blakeney, Katherine. "An Analysis of Film Critic Andre Bazin's Views on Expressionism and Realism in Film." *Inquiries Journal* 1.12 (2009), <<http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=86>>
- Buchanan, Kyle. "Losing Control With Riz Ahmed." *The New York Times*, 28 Jan 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/28/movies/riz-ahmed-sound-of-metal.html#:~:text=So%20the%20London-based%20Ahmed,day%20with%20his%20acting%20coach>
- Catliff, Suzy and Jennifer Granville. *The Casting Handbook: for Film and Theatre Makers*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Cox, Damian and Michael Levine. "Psychoanalysis and Film". *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (2018). doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198789703.013.31
- Davis, Lennard J. *The Disability Studies Reader*. London and New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006.
- Davis, Lennard J. "The Ghettoization of Disability. Paradoxes of Visibility and Invisibility in Cinema". In: Anne Waldschmidt, Hanjo Berressem and Moritz Ingwersen (eds.) *Culture - Theory - Disability*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2017, 39-50. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839425336-005>
- Haegle, Justin Anthony, and Samuel Hodge. "Disability Discourse: Overview and Critiques of the Medical and Social Models." *Quest* 68, no. 2 (2016): 193–206. doi:10.1080/00336297.2016.1143849.
- Hogan Andrew J. "Social and Medical Models of Disability and Mental Health: Evolution and Renewal". *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. 2019 Jan 7,191(1): E16-E18. doi: 10.1503/cmaj.181008.
- Kermode, Mark. "Sound of Metal Review – Riz Ahmed Excels as a Drummer Facing Deafness." *The Guardian*, 12 May 2021, www.theguardian.com/film/2021/apr/11/sound-of-metal-review-riz-ahmed-olivia-cooke-darius-marder.

Little White Lies. “Darius Marder: ‘I Wanted to Show and Capture Deaf Culture.’” *Little White Lies*, 12 Mar. 2021, lwlies.com/interviews/darius-marder-sound-of-metal.

Lopez, Kristen. “IndieWire.” *IndieWire*, 8 Dec. 2020,

www.indiewire.com/features/general/sound-of-metal-paul-raci-1234598013.

Nario-Redmond, M.R. (2024). Ableism: The Many Manifestations of Disability Prejudice. In: Bennett, G., Goodall, E. (eds) *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Disability*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-40858-8_8-1

Nbr_Admin. “Q&a With Darius Marder and Riz Ahmed - National Board of Review.”

National Board of Review, 23 Dec. 2020, nationalboardofreview.org/2020/12/qa-with-darius-marder-and-riz-ahmed.

Paalman, Floris. “Film and History: Towards a General Ontology”. In *Research in Film and History. Sources – Meaning – Experience* (2021-01-28), No. 3, 1–41. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15454>

Purcell, Emma, and Emma Purcell. “Sound of Metal: A Film Criticised for Its Representation of Hearing Loss to a Hearing Audience.” *Disability Horizons*, 10 Feb. 2021.

Remael, Aline. “For the Use of Sound. Film Sound Analysis For Audio-Description: Some Key Issues”. *MonTI* 4 (2012), 255-276. <https://doi.org/10.6035/MonTI.2012.4.11>

Romeis, James C. “Alienation as a consequence of disability: contradictory evidence and its interpretations”. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 5 (1) 1983, 25–41. doi:10.1111/1467-9566.ep11340052

Safran, Stephen P. “The First Century of Disability Portrayal in Film”. *The Journal of Special Education*, 31(4) 1998, 467–479. doi:10.1177/002246699803100404

Samaha, Adam. “What Good Is the Social Model of Disability? ”. *University of Chicago Law Review* (2007), 1251-1308.

Saunders, Bernadette J. et al. “Friend or Foe: The Media’s Power to Inform and Shape Societal Attitudes towards People with Acquired Brain Injury.” *Disability & Society* 33, no. 6 (2018), 932–53. doi:10.1080/09687599.2018.1466692.

Tavares. “What Is Cultural Studies Film Theory?” *BeverlyBoy Productions*, 19 Apr. 2021,

beverlyboy.com/filmmaking/what-is-cultural-studies-film-theory/#:~:text=Cultural%20Studies%20in%20Film&text=That%20are%20established%20in%20the,and%20are%20seen%20in%20film.

disabilityhorizons.com/2021/02/sound-of-metal-a-film-criticised-for-its-representation-of-hearing-loss-to-a-hearing-audience.

Summary:

This dissertation aims to explore the way cinema portrays disability through the movie *Sound of Metal* (2019), directed by Darius Marder by analyzing the authenticity of deafness and the way it is portrayed through the use of various tools such as casting, sound design and sign language.

Résumé :

Ce travail de recherche vise à explorer la manière dont les productions cinématographiques dépeignent le handicap à travers le film *Sound of Metal* (2019), réalisé par Darius Marder, en analysant l'authenticité de la surdité et la façon dont elle est représentée à travers l'utilisation de différents outils tels que le casting, la conception sonore et la langue des signes.

ملخص

تهدف هذه الرسالة العلمية إلى استكشاف الطريقة التي يصوّر بها وسائل الإعلام الإعاقة من خلال فيلم "صوت المعدن" (2019)، من إخراج داريوس ماردر وذلك من خلال تحليل مصداقية الصمم والطريقة التي يتم فيها تصويرها من خلال استخدام أدوات مختلفة مثل الممثلين، وتصميم الصوت، ولغة الإشارة