Stephanie Gironda

Deafness in the Media

The first film that I watched was Four Weddings and a Funeral, in which the main characters’ brother was deaf. The plot of the story surrounds Hugh Grant, who plays Charles. He attends many weddings himself but is afraid of commitment. Although his deaf brother, David, doesn’t play a large role in the film, he does affect the outcome of the story in that he has a profound influence on his brother and the choices he makes. The comedy appears to relate mostly to the hearing world considering David is the only deaf character and Charles is the only person who is able to sign to him. As far as this film having a message to the Deaf culture, I believe it represents a deaf person in a hearing culture. David is portrayed as being happy, living around people who aren’t deaf. It also appears that when he wants people to know what he has to say, Charles must translate for him. This happens in many scenes that David is in. One such scene is with Carrie, the woman who Charles falls in love with; David talks to her through Charles and when he makes a comment about her having “beautiful breasts”, Charles has to quickly think of a way to cover up what David said through his provocative signs. Charles also has to awkwardly translate what David says when he “speaks up” during Charles’ wedding. Regarding the message to the Deaf culture, unfortunately, I believe under the circumstances of the environment it is positive. Although, it would prove to be more so if there were other people surrounding David that could speak with him. One example of someone making the effort to communicate is a woman who likes David. She tries to learn sign language so that they can talk to each other. From that point onward, when the audience sees David, he is with her.

The second film I watched was Mr. Holland’s Opus. The main character in this movie, Mr. Holland, has a son who is born deaf. Mr. Holland is a high school music teacher with a
dream of composing a brilliant piece of music that will one day make him rich and famous. His life highly revolves around music. The viewer first realizes this when he compares his wife’s getting pregnant to falling in love with John Coltrane all over again. When Mr. Holland found out his son was deaf, it truly affected him, because he felt as though his son was not normal. The message to the deaf culture clearly reflects the time-period in which the film took place. Deaf people, or those who were hard of hearing, were considered by some medical professionals as being similar to retarded. They were thought of as being less intelligent. And even though they would not be able to speak, it was more accepted than letting them sign. Cole’s deafness is portrayed as the cause of many problems in the film. Mr. Holland doesn’t understand that his son is the same as him, except that he cannot hear. Mr. Holland believed that Cole couldn’t appreciate music, which is what his life revolved around. Cole got aggravated at his father’s ignorance and in one instance exploded at him. When Mr. Holland came home one day, upset at the death of John Lennon, Cole wanted to know what was wrong. But Mr. Holland tells Cole he wouldn’t understand. Cole finally yelled at his father through signs, stating that he knows who John Lennon and The Beatles are and accuses his father of not actually knowing him at all.

Towards the end of the film, as fifteen and thirty years pass, the viewers notice the development of the Deaf culture. Sign language is no longer thought of as unacceptable. The school Mr. Holland works for now has translators for those in the audience who are deaf. The broad message of the film to the deaf culture is that, over the years, the attitude towards the deaf had evolved into people thought of as being equal to those who can hear. They were no longer looked down upon.

In response to the question, “How are individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing portrayed in the popular press/media?”, I would say in the modern-era film *Four Weddings and
a Funeral, the deaf individual is portrayed as a regular guy and a good brother. David is portrayed as someone with wisdom. When it came to parts of the movie that matter, his brother Charles listened to what he had to say and confided in him as well. This is seen when David breaks up Charles’ wedding by telling him he thought the groom was in love with another woman. Charles could have chosen not to say out loud what David signed but he knew David was right, looking out for his best interests, so he listened and acted on his advice. He was always around, observing what was going on, and harmoniously living his own life as well. I believe the perspective of the hearing culture would highly agree with the way the deaf individual is portrayed here. However, the Deaf culture might see a difference in the portrayal. As I stated in the summary of the plot, David was not included in a large portion of the movie. Although he was truly a significant character, he was not in many scenes. I believe the Deaf culture might see this portrayal as a negative one, because it may make the deaf character seem less significant. Also, besides Charles and the woman who learns sign language because she is interested in David, no one else is shown signing in the movie. The Deaf culture may also see this as a negative portrayal of David because he is always around hearing individuals with none of them communicating with him. This can be viewed as another way in which David looks insignificant. Oddly, even the other characters in the movie who are David’s friends don’t speak to him without Charles translating.

In the majority of the film, Mr. Holland’s Opus, the individual who is deaf is initially portrayed as a problem and someone of less aptitude. Even more strangely, Mr. Holland doesn’t learn sign language to communicate with his son. Rather, he communicates through his wife. The reason for this could easily be thought of as him not believing his son was as smart as him, or that he would have anything worth saying. I don’t believe the deaf individual is necessarily
negatively portrayed, as opposed to being seen under a negative light because of the way others around him reacted to the deafness. The Deaf culture would be livid at the way the deaf individual was treated during most of this film. When the doctor diagnosed Cole as being ninety percent deaf, it was communicated in a highly negative fashion. He stated that the parents shouldn’t respond to Cole’s gestures but yet somehow should force him to use his voice and lip-read. In addition to the way people thought of deafness back then, Cole’s deafness also caused many altercations. For example, Mr. Holland and his wife fought about what they should do with him. Cole and his father fought because of the lack of communication and understanding of each other. As the movie progressed, and the years passed by, the deaf individual was portrayed in a more positive light that I believe the hearing and Deaf cultures would agree upon. Towards the end, Mr. Holland sings as well as signs a song dedicated to Cole in front of the entire school. This represents a new appreciation for his son. The deaf individual is no longer portrayed as a problem and someone with less intellect. Rather, he is now seen as being equal and having just as much significance as everyone else in the movie. At this point, the media made him seem more “normal”; it did this by showing him alongside his father and mother and by including a translator who signs to the entire audience, portraying the individual as an ordinary part of life.

In comparison, I think that the films portray the deaf characters in very different ways. Family plays a big role in both movies. In Four Weddings and a Funeral, Charles and David have a very good relationship. Charles obviously learned sign language so that he could communicate and be close with his brother through their lives. Even when Charles is mad at David for breaking up the wedding, it is portrayed in a comedic manner. The audience is aware that he is actually grateful for what David did. In Mr. Holland’s Opus, however, Mr. Holland and Cole have a very poor relationship for the first fifteen years of Cole’s life. Mr. Holland
neglects Cole and clearly resents him for being deaf. This neglect is apparent in the scene when Iris, the mother, tells Mr. Holland that he should have came to the science fair, explaining how disappointed Cole was that he never showed up. His neglect is also apparent in the fact that he never learned sign language until Cole was fifteen years old. Prior to that time, it is difficult for them to communicate because Mr. Holland speaks while sparingly using the wrong sign. This was exemplified when Cole was trying to help him pick up his sheet music and Mr. Holland yelled at him not to touch, but actually used the sign for sit. It is very noticeable that they did not develop a loving or accepting relationship with each other until much later in the movie. In order for father and son to talk they needed the mother to be there to translate. It was a very bad family relationship for the majority of the film. Finally, as I previously said, in the last few minutes of the movie, Mr. Holland develops an appreciation for his son. The drastic differences in family issues seen in the two movies are part of the reason I believe the films portray the deaf individual so differently. Another way the films are different is the generational issue. Mr. Holland’s Opus begins in 1965, the year Cole is diagnosed. The mother states in the film that the doctor insinuates that being deaf is like being retarded, which Cole clearly is not. I believe deaf people were thought of that way in that time because they did not have much of an understanding about deaf people and the Deaf culture as they do in recent generations. As seen in Four Weddings and a Funeral, which takes place in the 1990’s, the deaf person was much more accepted. The thirty year difference plays a role in the way deaf people were viewed and the difference is shown in comparing the two films.