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## FROM DEAF TO CULT FILM: *DEAFULA*'S UNAUTHORIZED TRANSFER

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**Abstract:** Peter Wechsberg's *Deafula* (1975) marks one of the few fully accessible movies for deaf and hard of hearing audiences produced in the decades between the industry's shift to talkies and the emergence of video- and digital film production.<sup>1</sup> Following the film's initial theater run across the U.S. and Canada, *Deafula*'s viewership shifted from deaf audiences to cult movie enthusiasts. This new and notably mostly hearing spectatorship took the film's alleged limitations—its low-budget aesthetics and origin in the deaf community whose cultural habits were unfamiliar or seemed obscure—as either a cult asset or an invitation to mockery. This essay presents a comparative analysis of *Deafula*'s initial exhibition records vis-à-vis the discourse surrounding the film's later circulation in hearing cult film communities. Focusing on this involuntary change in primary audiences, I posit the film's implementation of classic horror tropes within a primarily deaf screen world as the dominant force behind hearing viewers' interest in it. Moreover, I explore the importance of *Deafula*'s cinematography, voice dubbing, and sign language use for its subsequent acceptance into the cult film circuit, and the cultural, political and aesthetic discrepancies that arose with such transition. To this end, this essay contributes to a differentiated understanding of the ways *Deafula*'s circulation—both authorized and unauthorized in this case—has facilitated exchanges between deaf and hearing film cultures.

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In February 2001, deaf film director Peter “Wolf” Wechsberg sued the United States Government for unlawful copying and distribution of his 1975 film *Deafula*. In the suit, Wechsberg alleged that the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), to whom he sold twelve 16mm prints

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<sup>1</sup> Early Deaf Studies publications commonly capitalized “Deaf” when referring to a cultural and linguistic community, and de-capitalized “deaf” when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing. More recent scholarship makes a compelling case for refraining from this distinction through capitalization, as it is “potentially problematic for scholars (both deaf and hearing) to ‘label’ deaf people as Deaf, if these deaf people do not label themselves as such” (Kusters, De Meulder, and O’Brien, 2017: 14). In line with this proposition, this essay capitalizes “Deaf” only where it is grammatically necessary and in cited passages that use this form.

of *Deafula* in 1977 for educational distribution, had transferred and subsequently circulated the film on VHS without prior notice or agreement.<sup>2</sup> Although HEW's semi-clandestine act of transference was acknowledged as an unauthorized use of creative work that could warrant compensation, Wechsberg's case was ultimately dismissed for a lack of proof that any major financial damage has resulted from HEW's actions.<sup>3</sup> Despite this ruling, *Deafula*'s medium migration prompted a far-reaching transformation of the film's status as a cultural text, exceeding a simple switch from film reel to video tape.

Shot in American Sign Language (ASL) with an accompanying voice track, *Deafula* marks one of the few fully accessible movies for deaf and hard of hearing audiences produced before the emergence of video- and digital filmmaking. Its transfer and circulation on a consumer-friendly format like VHS took the film beyond the contained viewership of institutions that have access to government-lent films. Pirated copies of *Deafula* soon landed on bootleg circuits, sparking the interest of rare film collectors as well as oddball/psychotronic/B- and cult movie enthusiasts—a new and mostly *hearing* audience for the film. This audience took *Deafula*'s low-budget aesthetics and origin in the deaf community, whose cultural habits were unfamiliar or seemed obscure, as both a cult asset and an invitation to mockery. The possibility of accelerated bootlegging through the film's migration to VHS was not part of Wechsberg's lawsuit narrative in 2001. Yet, it is precisely this unauthorized transfer performed by HEW that enabled *Deafula*'s sub-legal circulation on video and other media formats such as DVD-R, as well as its occasional appearance on platforms like *YouTube*.

Examining *Deafula*'s initial press- and exhibition records housed at Gallaudet University Archives in dialogue with the discourse surrounding the film's continued prominence in hearing cult film communities, I explore how this film's circulation—both authorized and unauthorized—has facilitated exchanges between deaf and hearing film cultures. I show that *Deafula*'s rarity, along with its implementation of early horror tropes and deaf culture-specific humor, voice dubbing, and sign language use significantly aided its transition from deaf to cult film, revealing substantial discrepancies between deaf and hearing perceptions of the film. Ultimately, cult

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<sup>2</sup> HEW continued to circulate the movie on both film and VHS until October 13, 1998, when Wechsberg registered *Deafula* with the United States Copyright Office—notably after he became aware of his film's migration to VHS.

<sup>3</sup> In October 2002, the case was resolved without any compensation for Wechsberg because *Deafula*'s copyright registry—a prerequisite for statutory damages—was initiated over thirty years after the film's release (Wechsberg v. United States, 2002).

viewers' simultaneous appreciation and ridicule of *Deafula*, largely rooted in a lack of familiarity with deaf cultural and aesthetic practices, often reduces it to little more than a bad movie spectacle.

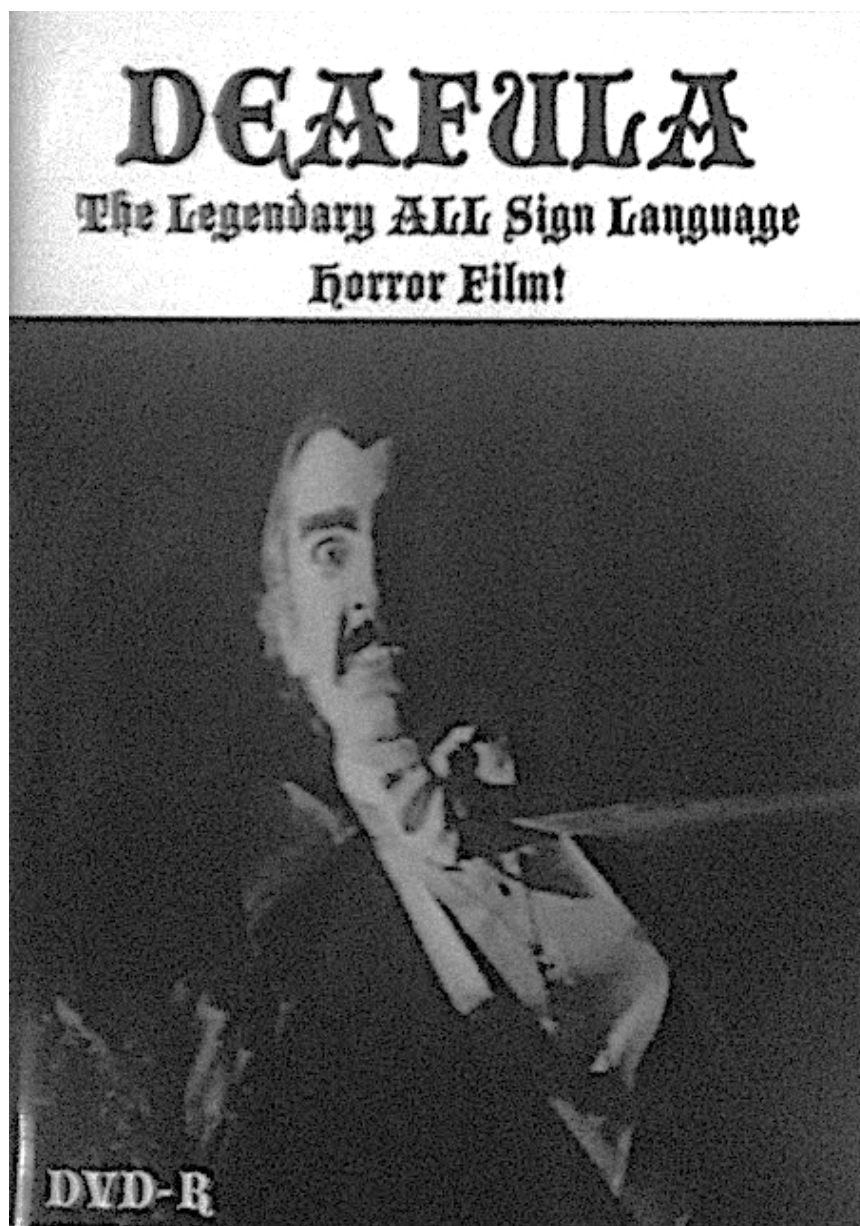


Fig. 1: A bootlegged DVD-R copy of *Deafula*. Image courtesy of John Moret.

## An Ambiguous Example of Deaf Cinema

Despite aiming for a deaf (or at least sign language-savvy) audience first and foremost, *Deafula*'s producers promoted it as entertainment that can be “enjoyed by everyone, hearing or non-hearing” (Wechsberg, *Deafula Press Release*, 1974:1). At the same time, the film carries many defining features of cult film strangeness that put it on par with an emerging 1970s zeitgeist where exploitation, horror and other transgressive film genres were becoming ironic or genuinely humorous entertainment in the eyes of young filmgoers.

Upon its initial release, *Deafula* was overtly marketed as the *first* feature film shot completely in ASL, even though other sign language films have been in U.S. circulation since the early twentieth century (see Schuchman, 1988; Weinrib, 1994). Nonetheless, *Deafula* is a staple of deaf cinema—a film created “by and for individuals within Deaf Culture” (Yates, 2020: 81). In this context, *Deafula*'s merging of vampire folklore and a deaf setting exemplifies a surprisingly



**Fig. 2:** Two bootlegged VHS copies of *Deafula*. Notably, the VHS box art uses images from *Young Deafula*, while the sticker on the cassette tape uses images from Wechsberg's *Deafula*. Image courtesy of Instagram users *boxoffbuttholes\_* (left) and *video\_macabro* (right).

recurrent theme across deaf cultural production.<sup>4</sup> *Deafula* is one of three deaf vampire movies made before the emergence of digital filmmaking, preceded by *Return of Dracula* (1967) directed by British hobby filmmaker Stephen Pink, and followed by *The Young Deafula* (1977), a sign language vampire film created at MacEwan University in Alberta, Canada.<sup>5</sup> This triad of deaf vampire films has caused considerable confusion for hearing audiences, where *Young Deafula* often mistakenly appears as an alternative title for Wechsberg's film.<sup>6</sup> But unlike *Deafula*, neither *Return of Dracula* nor *The Young Deafula* travelled beyond the deaf community, and, to my knowledge, have not surfaced in any rare film collector offerings or become available online.

Working as a deaf filmmaker in movies and television since the 1960s, Wechsberg made a point of putting the entertainment needs of the deaf community at the front and center in his early work, winning two (local) Emmys for his deaf-focused productions in 1971.<sup>7</sup> For *Deafula*, he founded Signscope Ltd.—a company set to specialize in films conducted in ASL.<sup>8</sup> Signscope followed *Deafula* with another deaf feature, *Think Me Nothing* (1975), described as a “dirty movie” about parties and excess “typical for that time” (my translation, “Gehörlos in Hollywood”). *Think Me Nothing* found little appeal among deaf audiences, causing Wechsberg to seek employment in the hearing film industry. After numerous hearing productions—feature films, shorts, commercials, and documentaries—Wechsberg returned to deaf filmmaking in the late 1990s, directing *I Love You But...* under Peter Wolf Productions in 1998, and another deaf/hearing feature titled *King Peddler* in 2008 (“Perspective of New Video Anchors,” 2016: 14).

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<sup>4</sup> Aside from Wechsberg's film, “Deafula” also exists as a prominent ASL ABC story—a poetic genre where letter handshapes are used in alphabetical sequence to tell a short narrative. In the story, an “unconventional encounter” with a vampire causes the narrator to become deaf (Zizna, 2008: 4/16). Wechsberg's film, however, does not draw on the ABC story's symbolic alignment of vampirism and deafness, marking their shared title a coincidence rather than pointing to a possible adaptation.

<sup>5</sup> No library, archive, or deaf club in Canada or the U.S. has been able to find any detailed records of *The Young Deafula* upon my request. The film is, however, listed as an individual item in *WorldCat*, indicating that it has existed, was screened, and is distinct from Wechsberg's *Deafula*.

<sup>6</sup> Miquel Zueras (2011) and Kim Newman (2020) suggest that Wechsberg renamed his film into *Young Deafula* in an attempt to build on the success of Mel Brooks's 1974 comedy *Young Frankenstein*, not realizing that the title *Young Deafula* belongs to a different film production. John Moret (2013) and Vintage Shack (“Deafula,” n.d.) use *Deafula* and *Young Deafula* interchangeably in reference to Wechsberg's film. Indeed, Vintage Shack advertises Wechsberg's *Deafula* with a poster publicizing a screening of *Young Deafula*. King of the Witches (“King of the Witches Deafula DVD,” n.d.) uses the same image from the *Young Deafula* poster in its DVD product description but refrains from advertising the film as “Young Deafula.”

<sup>7</sup> Wechsberg won Emmys for 1) the NBC-TV Special *My Eyes Are My Ears* and 2) *Newsign-4*, the nation's first news and commentary show for the deaf on KRON-TV in San Francisco (Wechsberg *Deafula Press Release*, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> Aside from feature films, Signscope was also set to “support the development of educational materials for deaf schools” (Holstrom in White, n.d.).



Fig. 3: *Deafula* Premiere Poster. Image courtesy of the Gallaudet University Archives.

*I Love You But...*'s online presence emphasizes that the film will only play in theaters, never to be released on consumer formats, echoing SignsScope's initial plans for *Deafula*.<sup>9</sup>

Filmed on a small budget in Oregon, *Deafula* brought together a mixed film crew and cast of deaf, hearing, professional, and amateur workers, highlighting hearing individuals involved in the production through italics in the closing credits. Premiering at Portland's Broadway Theater, the film generated a considerable amount of press excitement about the film's on-location shooting

<sup>9</sup> Wechsberg's promotion of *I Love You But...* proclaims: "WARNING: Come watch in the theater...We won't make DVDs! Theatrical Release Only, Never To Be Released On DVD Or Any Digital Distribution [sic]" (Wechsberg "Peter Wolf Productions," n.d.).

at prominent Oregon spots as well as Signscope's production of a deaf film as an "Oregon first" ("Full Length Film for Deaf to Open," 1975: 49). In *Deafula*'s press release, producer Gary Holstrom vowed that Oregon's deaf community fully supported their project. Moreover, early reviews suggested that *Deafula* could become as significant for deaf cinema as *The Jazz Singer* (1927) had been for talkies if it was given the attention it deserves, speculating about a surging interest in sign language films for years to come (Starrett, 1975: B5). Wechsberg and Holstrom, however, never aimed for a commercial release, taking *Deafula* to community institutions such as deaf clubs, schools, colleges, and various sponsored events around the country instead (Josephson, 1974: 7).<sup>10</sup> Wechsberg's 1977 deal with HEW, moreover, ensured a steady screening schedule of *Deafula* at various community venues well into the late 1980s.<sup>11</sup>

Demonstrating a commitment to deaf audiences while also accommodating hearing ones, *Deafula* opens with a spoken announcement about its voice track set against a static image of the Signscope logo:

This motion picture was produced for deaf and hard of hearing audiences. Sign language is totally visual, with a unique grammatical structure. Its interpretation into modern English would destroy much of the effect of this form of communication. With this in mind, we will provide as literal a voice track as possible to help you follow the story.

(Off-screen narrator in *Deafula* 1975)

The absence of a visual equivalent for the voiced statement signals that the announcement should only be *heard*, not seen. Such uneven presentation suggests that the creators approached hearing and non-hearing viewers' access needs as two firmly separate realms. Although the film's foregrounding of sign language affirms that it is made for deaf and signing audiences, *Deafula* does not visually acknowledge the presence of the voice track provided to hearing viewers, effectively obscuring its existence for spectators who cannot hear. This lack of transparency poses a curious oversight in the film's broader commitment to appeal to deaf and hearing viewers alike.

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<sup>10</sup> In addition, Carl Koch—owner of the Broadway Theater—aimed to "make the bookers, owners, operators, and hearing clinics aware that this new motion picture is available and it will take word-of-mouth to get the information to the necessary institutions and theatres in appropriate areas" (1975: W9).

<sup>11</sup> For instance, *Deafula* was shown in Baltimore, Maryland in 1980; Oshkosh Wisconsin in 1981, Shreveport, Louisiana in 1982; and Elmira, New York in 1985.





**Fig. 4: Peter Wechsberg as Steve Adams (left) and Deafula (right). Screengrabs from *Deafula*.**

After the opening sequence, we meet Steve Adams (played by director Wechsberg), an aspiring clergyman who cannot control his bloody cravings, periodically turning into the vampire Deafula who stalks and kills a number of characters in slasher-like sequences throughout the film. As the body count grows, two detectives—one a good friend of Steve, the other detective Butterfield from Britain—open an investigation. Steve remains on the sidelines of the case but eventually becomes a suspect. In the meantime, Steve’s father falls ill and, before his death, reveals that Steve’s mother had an affair with Count Dracula during her pregnancy, explaining Steve’s dual existence as human and vampire. Following this revelation, Steve seeks council from a witch and her hunchbacked servant to find his vampiric father Dracula. After killing Dracula with the help of his mother’s ghostly apparition, Steve surrenders to the detectives and dies in the church whose ministry he assumed after his father’s passing.

*Deafula* contains many plot holes that are left unexplained, making it challenging to provide a comprehensive narrative summary. In its attempts to resolve any underlying ambiguities, the film relies on intertextual references to pre-existing genres and iconic characters that aid in setting up story logic and stylistic composition. Shot in black and white, *Deafula* takes up many visual qualities of classic horror cinema. Aside from its clear nod to Tod Browning’s *Dracula* (1931), the film aesthetically draws on the expressionist cinematography of *Nosferatu* (1922) and incorporates many other horror elements into a present-day detective story, creating an intertextual muddle that sprawls across varying genres and time periods of cinema history. The film’s stylistic



choices clearly underline an effort to entertain a deaf audience first and foremost, often subverting compositional features commonly established in hearing films. For instance, in order to grant sufficient visibility for the signed monologues and dialogues, *Deafula* is not affected by sunlight, while the camera angles chosen in each scene ensure an unobstructed view of the signing characters, often contradicting traditional cinematography rules and techniques of continuity editing. As a result, *Deafula* refrains from defining itself against any possible “hearing norm” in terms of both content and form. Deaf is the *modus operandi* of the film world and production in its entirety, albeit one that is never addressed or acknowledged by the characters. Perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, *Deafula* is also not a soundless film. Rather, its audio-visual aesthetics simultaneously honor and parody classic horror film tradition without losing track of the varying registers that aid deaf and hearing audiences’ comprehension. Such selective modification of the film’s sonic ambiance inevitably responds to the historical relationship between deaf culture and film sound.

In his seminal book *The Voice in Cinema*, Michel Chion proposes to more accurately label early film as deaf, against the many propositions of Mitry, Adorno, Bresson and Bazin who discuss early film productions as variously silent or mute (1999: 6). Chion reminds us that films of the “silent” era were not necessarily devoid of diegetic sounds. In fact, the screen worlds of early cinema were quite noisy: Spectators could imagine the sounds of pistols shooting, trains moving, babies crying, and above all, people talking based on the visual representation of the respective action. Chion maintains that such sounds *did* exist in these filmic realms, and crucially points out that spectators did not have access to them. In other words, the constraints on film sound recording and synchronization in early cinema imposed a deaf perspective on hearing audiences.

The shift from production to perception in Chion’s proposed labeling of cinema as deaf points to the possibility that hearing and deaf individuals could equally follow and understand the actions on early film screens where meaning was mediated primarily via gestures, facial expression, and intertitles. Indeed, this predominantly visual mediation of content did have an accommodating effect: Schuchman observes that cinema was a deaf-friendly consumer medium prior to the emergence of talkies and deaf actors could work in Hollywood without major

restrictions.<sup>12</sup> When spoken dialogue became possible through the implementation of synchronous sound, however, studios lost most use for the few deaf actors operating in the industry and were hesitant to implement accommodations such as closed captioning to maintain cinema's formerly inclusive character. This was largely due to the high cost of such procedures, which the small revenues gained from screening captioned films could not offset. The exclusion of deaf individuals from the film industry after the popularization of sound cinema was therefore twofold: deaf acting talent was not sought for on film sets, and deaf audiences were unable to fully participate in watching movies at the theater.

Russell L. Johnson argues that the emergence of talkies was, furthermore, closely intertwined with the shift to oralism in deaf education throughout the early twentieth century. Johnson shows that the oralist prioritization of lip-reading and vocal speech for better integration into the hearing world was also symbolically evident in the realm of film entertainment, where talkies enforced a certain type of perceived normalcy in language and communication in the same way oralism enforced normalcy in education (2017: 3). He also suggests that “the transition from silent to oral and aural communication at the cinema contributed to the aesthetics of *human disqualification* associated with deafness and vice versa,” pointing to the rhetoric surrounding the emergence of talkies, where silent cinema was deemed “primitive” and sound pictures a sign of “progress” and “civilization” (my emphasis, 2017: 3/12).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Schuchman suggests that in retrospect, the inclusive character of early cinema was more of a happy accident than a conscious effort toward accessibility.<sup>14</sup> More often than not, deaf film enthusiasts in the sound film era were left to watch foreign movies with subtitles or guess the narratives of non-subtitled films until captioning initiatives began to counteract this loss of access.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Schuchman writes that “silent films represented a golden era of equal access for deaf individuals,” and lists Grandville Redmond, Emerson Romero (stage name Tommy Albert), Albert Ballin, Louis Weinberg (stage name David Marvel), and Carmen de Arcos as the most prominent deaf actors of the silent film era (1988: 22/23).

<sup>13</sup> In *Deafening Modernism*, Rebecca Sanchez also highlights the perceived late nineteenth/early twentieth century fascination with “languages of gesture” as forerunners of all language, confirming the association of sign language with primitivism in that period (2015: 15).

<sup>14</sup> Schuchman writes that “Hollywood had not planned to accommodate deaf viewers—it had just happened” (1988: 22).

<sup>15</sup> Film captioning emerged as a deaf-led non-profit initiative, eventually establishing a lending library for deaf viewers (Schuchman, 1988: 6). Captioned Films for the Deaf, initiated in 1950, became a federally sponsored program in 1958. However, accessing captioned films was a task riddled with obstacles, where film availability was delayed significantly due to the process of captioning itself, as well as the circumstances surrounding the purchase or leasing of films by the U.S. Department for Education (Kovalik, 1992: 106). Commercial restrictions imposed on the

Wechsberg was firmly aware of this gap in entertainment opportunities for deaf people and pronounced it a central motivation for making *Deafula*.<sup>16</sup> As we learn quickly, diegetic sound is largely absent from the film. This time, however, it is not technological constraint that deafens the audience. Most diegetic sounds are simply not part of the world imagined by the deaf creators. Nevertheless, the film has a diverse soundscape. Aside from its voice dubbing, *Deafula* also features non-diegetic musical accompaniment. But this soundtrack is not only meant to be heard. The vibrations resulting from the film's sound design add a haptic dimension to the viewing experience for hearing, hard of hearing, and deaf spectators alike, but crucially help the latter identify narrative punctuations, making it easier to follow the mood of a scene. Indeed, Holstrom states that whenever possible during early screenings, additional loudspeakers were put in the theater and the deaf audience would "scream with excitement" (Holstrom in White, n.d.). In contrast, the film's spoken voice track remains plainly functional, lacking intonations, emphases, and changes in speed or volume—all of which typically aid a hearing audience's emotional understanding of the dialogue. This lack of affect in *Deafula*'s voice dubbing, alongside the film's emphasis on sign as the primary language, drew vastly different responses from the viewership.

### **Becoming a Cult Film**

Unlike early cinema audiences, *Deafula*'s generation of hearing spectators had grown up with sound film as the default standard for cinematic exhibition. Thus, *Deafula*'s production team was well aware of the difficulties in appealing to both deaf and hearing audiences, acknowledging and partially explaining their approach in the film's program booklet and press interviews (Wechsberg, *Deafula Program Book*, 1974; Mahar, 1975; White, n.d.). Survey results from *Deafula*'s early circulation demonstrate that within a predominantly deaf demographic, the film received largely positive reviews and people wanted to see more productions like it. Holstrom and Wechsberg also speculated that the West Coast deaf community's enthusiasm for the film would enable them to

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circulation of captioned films dictated their use by deaf people only, and further mandated that only groups of three of more deaf individuals qualify for free film loans (ibid: 107).

<sup>16</sup> In *Deafula*'s press materials, Wechsberg explains that "[there] is an abundance of films about the deaf, but there was nothing for the deaf [...] I wanted to do something that would make life a little more enjoyable for other deaf people. All the special films about the problems are fine, but they're as anxious to be entertained as anybody else. So this film is mostly for them" (Wechsberg, *Deafula Press Release*, 1974: 7).

make Portland the deaf filmmaking capital of the world, announcing Signscope's plans to follow *Deafula* with other genre films set in deaf screen worlds (Josephson, 1974: 7).

Audience reactions to the film during its early circulation varied significantly based on the spectators' affiliation with deaf culture, where many visual jokes as well as signed one-liners did not come through for the majority of hearing audiences (Holstrom in White, n.d.). Furthermore, the choice to provide a literal and porous, rather than interpretative and smooth translation of the signing—notably, the script for the voiced dialogue was written after the final cut of the movie—

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"I really enjoyed the movie. The acting was good and the idea of a modern, scientifically and medically documented *Deafula* is good. There were some fine touches" - B. Goldberg, Seattle, Wa. (hearing)

"Excellent drama!" - D. Mesurvey, Seattle (Deaf)

"The film was very well done, and I encourage you to continue! This is the first film for the deaf we have seen, and it helped us, as hearing people to better read the signing." M. Wert, Kent, Wa. (hearing)

"Excellentlly filmed - Very creatively done when COMPARED WITH MUCH OF THE "HEARING" PRODUCED films of today" - T. Wert, Kent, Wa. (hearing)

"Great - and a pleasure to see deaf sign language in movies - for the first time" - A. Bogen, Seattle, Wa. (Deaf)

"Very beautiful way to give speaking people a chance to see sign language. Wonderful movie. Good luck on future films. Waiting for more." - G. Adams, Renton, Wa. (hearing)

"MAGNIFICENT, I enjoyed the show. Make other movies." - Unknown (Deaf)

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**survey results**

We surveyed 96 people in Seattle to test their reactions. They rated *Deafula* on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest). The results:

7 and higher	81 responses
9 and 10 (highest)	52 responses

"It was something REALLY different.. Not like other *Dracula* movies with the same plot behind it." - C. Bocock, Seattle Wa. (hard of hearing)

"DON'T MISS IT" - J. DeMers, Bellevue, Wa. (Deaf)

**Fig. 5: Survey responses from *Deafula*'s early screenings included in *Deafula*'s press kit. Image courtesy of the Gallaudet University Archives.**

was envisioned as an educational incentive for hearing spectators to learn about “this language of the deaf.”<sup>17</sup> The exaggerated special effects and pacing, on the other hand, supported the theatricality of the film as a sign language production, described by Holstrom as an effort to create visually what deaf people could not hear (Josephson, 1974:7).

Somewhat surprisingly, *Deafula*’s blood-and-gore effects are not as daring as one would expect from a visually-centered production, but the film makes up for it with a multitude of tilted and dynamic camera angles, close-ups, and rapid shot/reverse shot oscillations during tense scenes. Here, *Deafula*’s victims display high degrees of urgency and panic accompanied by correspondingly stressful music. But their visible screams often remain inaudible, reaffirming the film’s cultural origin in the deaf world. *Deafula*’s audio set-up therefore recreates the inaccessibility of diegetic sound and visual accentuation for its hearing audiences, reinstituting this film as an example of deaf—rather than silent—cinema as defined by Chion. This distinction, however, was mostly lost when *Deafula* entered the cult film circuit.

In the 1980s, popular books on horror cinema began taking interest in *Deafula*’s rendition of the Dracula figure, bolstering the film’s reputation as a considerable rarity and thus luring the interest of cult film viewers.<sup>18</sup> Then, in the 1990s, *Deafula* started appearing in curated film programs at academic and artistic institutions: UC Berkeley’s Pacific Film Archive screened *Deafula* as part of their “Severely Labeled: New Images of Disability” series in September 1993, while the Museum of Modern Art in New York City included it in their “Cinema Dracula” program in May 1997.<sup>19</sup> Occupying these multiple positions in low or high culture outlets and venues, *Deafula* fell into the realm of what Jeffrey Sconce terms *paracinema*—a cinema marked by a “counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus” (2008: 101). Sconce’s understanding of *paracinema* is twofold: On the one hand, it is an “elastic textual

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<sup>17</sup> “Of the choices open to the *Deafula* producers, a literal, rather than interpretive translation of the film’s sign language was chosen. The interpretive version would have been more normal sounding to the hearing audience, but would not afford nearly the opportunity to learn about this language of the deaf. So, at the risk of alienating a large hearing (and paying) audience, Signscope stayed with the dream” (Wechsberg, *Deafula Program Book*, 1974: 2).

<sup>18</sup> For example, see Stanley (1981), Cox (1990), and Jones (1993). In all of these, *Deafula* is acknowledged as a film that exists without providing much detail.

<sup>19</sup> There are varying positions on the alignment of deafness and disability in cultural, social, and political contexts, where some deaf activists and scholars foreground an understanding of the deaf community based on cultural and linguistic difference, distancing themselves from any affiliations with a disabled demographic (Bienvenu, 1991: 318). Therefore, the inclusion of *Deafula* in a disability-themed screening series at the Pacific Film Archive is an ambiguous choice.

category” encompassing a variety of films that remain below “legitimate” film culture’s radar (ibid). On the other hand, it serves as a “reading protocol” that valorizes “all forms of cinematic trash,” employing a “textual/critical sophistication similar to the cineastes they [paracinematic audiences] construct as their nemesis” (ibid). *Deafula*’s role as a work of paracinema is multiple, building on its aesthetics, its circulation, and its discussion in subcultural cinema circles.

Beyond its inclusion in monster film books, *Deafula* often appears as a fringe item in movie lists or review collections focused on paracinematic and cult texts. Identifying “list-mania” as a prominent tool of cult cinema culture, Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik suggest that such inventory-like assemblages help build alternative film canons but also serve as a means to demonstrate subcultural capital through deep expert knowledge of obscure films (2008: 6). *Deafula*’s perpetual position as a brief mention, rather than central text, on such lists points to its function as an item that primarily satisfies a drive to completism found in cult cinema communities, since it is seldom praised as an accomplished work of filmmaking in its own right. But aside from its subcultural value, *Deafula* also adheres to many other features that have been commonly identified as markers of cult cinema throughout both amateur criticism and film scholarship. For instance, Mathijs and Mendik (2008) write of four major elements at stake in a film’s qualification as cult (1): Anatomy (the film and its intrinsic features); Consumption (the film’s reception and further public engagements with it); Political Economy (the film’s material and institutional trajectory); and Cultural Status (the film’s relationship to its own historical and cultural landscape and how its perception changes when it enters unfamiliar environments). Notably, the attribution of cult value does not follow a singular formula composed of these elements. Indeed, my reading of the ways hearing viewers discuss *Deafula* demonstrates that its cult status derives from all four of these areas to varying extents.

Lacking an official commercial release, there were constraints on *Deafula*’s theatrical exhibition, thus significantly limiting opportunities to develop any collective rituals for watching the film—often a prominent feature of cult film viewing practices.<sup>20</sup> However, a certain ritual character in the ways cultists engage with *Deafula* crystallizes nonetheless. Reflections on *Deafula* often begin by recounting the common doubts about the film’s existence, implicitly adding prestige

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<sup>20</sup> Mathijs and Mendik trace the importance of ritual in cult film consumption to behavioral features derived from the religious undertones of the label ‘cult’: on the one hand, these are active celebrations of the films themselves; on the other hand, they are means to build collective film experiences, usually during public screenings (2008: 16).

to the author's eventual acquisition of it. For instance, *Deafula* has been labeled the “white whale” (Moret, 2013) or “holy grail” (ogopogo3, 2005) of obscure films.<sup>21</sup> Others discuss it as an example of how the thrill of the chase can be much more exciting than the final capture, which, in the case of Wechsberg's film, turned out to be disappointing. For instance, Paul Carter confesses that “[for] some reason, I was obsessed with locating a copy [of *Deafula*] on video, and when I actually found a copy—I watched in utter boredom. But I was still satisfied in the fact that I had finally discovered a copy” (2011: 153). Similarly, an anonymous author at *Schock Cinema* writes that *Deafula* was “[n]ever as bizarre as I'd hoped, it's an excruciating 95 minutes of talent-barren Mutesploitation” (“*Deafula* (Just for the Hell of it; 1975,” 2001: 12).

Throughout *Deafula*'s unauthorized circulation after its HEW-initiated VHS transfer, most of its (cult) hearing viewers did not find the explanatory context for the film's negotiation of deaf/hearing cultures and cinematic conventions initially highlighted in the press releases accompanying *Deafula*'s official exhibition across deaf venues. Since a good portion of cult fan-criticism has shifted from print publications to online-based interactive media maintained by “citizen reviewers”—individuals with no professional film criticism credentials, as it were—engagements with *Deafula* outside of deaf cinema contexts continue to turn up periodically in digital media outlets such as film (maga)zines, personal blogs, discussion forums, film databases like *Letterboxd*, and podcasts.<sup>22</sup> Here, many reviewers disclose their praise or skepticism about the format of the production, often misunderstanding Signscope to be a novelty technology that may or may not be necessary or even legitimate. For instance, Alanna McFall (2019) understands Signscope's concept as not centered on the signing, but the voiced translation of the signing, while Kim Newman (2020) uses an alternate name for Signscope altogether, calling it “Sign-O-Vision”

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<sup>21</sup> *Psychotronic Video*'s review of *Deafula* starts off as follows: “Some doubted this unique b/w sign language vampire movie... actually existed” (“*Deafula*,” 1999: 71). Brian Thomas introduces *Deafula* as “[...] one of the rarest of all vampire films, which you see listed in a lot of movie guides but not many people have seen it” (“*Deafula*,” 1996). The podcast *Portland at the Movies* claims in its episode description that “‘*Deafula*’ was almost lost to time, and not even available at Portland's venerable Movie Madness [a video rental store with mainstream and paracinematic inventory]” (Kidd, Middleton, and Werkhoven, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Mathijs and Mendik identify three periods of alternative film criticism: “[the] aesthetes of the 1930s to 1960s, the fan critics of the 1970s to 1990s, and the citizen reviewers of the twenty-first century” (2008: 375).



(likely taking his cue from Smell-O-Vision, a flopped experimental technology set to introduce smells into the theater-watching experience in the 1960s).<sup>23</sup>

Beyond entertaining the film's incomprehensibility like earlier print publications did, newer contributions discuss *Deafula* along the lines of other parameters set for the assessment of obscure cinema titles. *Popcorn and Fever Dreams* ("Deafula," 2019), for instance, evaluates a film's "truth in advertising"—to what extent the title adheres to the content of a film, giving *Deafula* a solid five out of five—while *All Star Video* comments on the quality of purchased bootleg DVD-Rs. In the latter, John Moret suggests that *Deafula*'s deleterious journey of medium-migration, in fact, adds to the overall effect of the film. For him, there is "no need for a high definition *Deafula*" (2013).

While reviewers seldom reference fellow/prior examinations of *Deafula*, the rhetoric and talking points are often so closely aligned that it almost seems like there is a formula to reviewing this film. The majority of commentators agree that *Deafula* is "bad" for a number of reasons: the disproportionate amount of random plot information that is never resolved; the contradictory logic of many narrative events; the paper-thin flatness of most characters; the amateurish acting and voiceover; and finally, the awkward special effects. Such explicit commentary on the film's incomprehensibility speaks to cult fandom's gate-keeping mechanisms, working to maintain its own taste hierarchies that often are consciously defined in opposition to mainstream and legitimate cinema. Indeed, Mark Jancovich writes that cult movie fandom "emerges from a need to produce and protect a sense of rarity and exclusivity" (2008: 151). Beyond subcultural prestige—"defined against the supposed obscene accessibility of mass culture" (ibid)—the mere acquisition of a rare film appears to serve as an authorization to review it in ridiculous, humorous but at times also malicious terms.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, *Too Weird Didn't Watch*—a podcast discussing films based solely on their *Internet Movie Database* description without watching them—questions whether there is need to create an "entire technological-named gimmick after [the centrality of signing to deaf films]" through something like Signscope (Berg, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> *Shock Cinema* writes: "Obviously aimed at a selective audience, the film should defy normal criticism, but hell, that won't stop me from tearing it to shreds, because while it might initially sound good for a laugh, you'll regret it afterwards" ("Deafula (Just For the Hell of It; 1975," 2001: 12). In a similar vein, Peter Hanson (2016) declares that "*Deafula* is an embarrassment. Peter Wolf [...] evidences little talent in any of his craft areas, so the movie is amateurish, boring, and discombobulated." Another review suggests that "good intentions go horribly wrong in this film" ("Bad Movie Page," 2011). Dennis Dermondy (2018) was reminded of the "limitless- and idiotic- possibilities of cinema" after watching *Deafula*. Finally, McFall (2019) declares that *Deafula* "fails boldly, on its own terms, and must be respected for that."

Some of *Deafula*'s reviews dislike the all too literal spoken translation of ASL. Others take the film's situation in the deaf world and the signed dialogue as its primary merit, its most prominent special effect, and, in agreement with cult cinema's chase for originality, praise it as something they have never seen before. In that sense, ASL and its voiced dubbing in *Deafula* works as an element of what Kristin Thompson (1999) labels cinematic *excess*—filmic components that lack sufficient narrative or compositional motivation within the film's internal logic. *Deafula*'s use of ASL, however, is easy enough to explain: In a work of deaf cinema, ASL as the primary screen language does not need extensive justification. The roots of ASL's excessive value for hearing audiences thus need to be sought elsewhere—in this case, in the reviewers' own, often admitted, insufficient familiarity with sign language and deaf culture.<sup>25</sup> Lacking the ability to “read” sign as gestures and mimics that signify concrete concepts and follow a set grammatical structure, cultists are unable to adequately grasp the “unity” of the film, as Thompson would have it, and are left with a somewhat incomplete and consequently, excessive impression of the film. Moreover, a non-signing audience's necessary reliance on the monotonic voiceover for comprehension exposes its lack of theatricality as an additional component of excess, where the absence—or poor execution of—speech as a supplementary, but no less crucial feature of the film for hearing viewers leaves one comprehension gap among many. In cult film discussions of *Deafula*, these gaps tend to be filled with laughter.

### Horror and Deaf/Hearing Humor

Historically, deafness and partial hearing have often been understood as conditions of loss in need of correction or improvement, with little consideration for possible benefits that come with being deaf.<sup>26</sup> Representationally, this has translated into flat and one-sided displays of deaf characters in

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<sup>25</sup> Jinx and Scott Foy (2021) praise the film's arthouse cinematography, but also chronologically dissect *Deafula*'s incomprehensive narrative, highlighting many deaf culture-specific inserts as obscurities. For instance, they deem the use of a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD) as unusual, albeit acknowledging that their overall comprehension of this deaf film is strongly compromised by their unfamiliarity with deaf culture.

<sup>26</sup> The term “deafness” itself—due to its origins in medical terminology—has been criticized for its connotative reduction of deaf people to their hearing loss. Bienvenu, for instance, takes issue with the term (1991: 318). A more empowering and flexible alternative emerged with the term “Deafhood.” In Paddy Ladd's words, Deafhood is “not seen as a finite state but as a process by which deaf individuals come to actualise their deaf identity, positing that those individuals construct that identity around several differently ordered sets of priorities and principles, which are affected by various factors such as nation, era and class” (2003: xvii). In addition, H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph

cinema, where the absence of hearing itself is rendered tragic, but still often serves as basis for punch-down comedy. Schuchman observes that “[in] Hollywood’s view there is little or no humor in deafness” outside of stereotyping jokes about hearing loss (1988: 100). For instance, early cinema’s deaf characters (seldom played by deaf actors) end up as the butt of a joke, run into issues with their hearing aids, or appear oblivious to something happening outside their vision (ibid: 34). Such jesting gestures predictably stand in opposition to the deaf community’s own humor traditions.

While the bond between humor and self-assessed superiority of hearing audiences prevails throughout the history of deaf characters on screen, MJ Bienvenu (1989) writes that early sound cinema unintentionally provided deaf audiences with many opportunities to laugh. In her discussion of deaf humor and *King Kong* (1933)—a film where Ann Darrow’s audible screams and Max Steiner’s original soundtrack work as primary mediators of fear for hearing audiences—Bienvenu suggests that without the sonic indicators in tone, key, and volume dynamics, the characters’ physical expressions of terror as seen by deaf viewers are exaggerated and therefore amusing.<sup>27</sup> Beyond this, there is reason to believe that the trope of deaf spectators’ humorous interpretation of early cinema even precedes the emergence of talkies. In 1914, Ralph Bacon’s poem “Envy,” published in *Motion Picture Magazine*, describes an encounter between a hearing protagonist and an inappropriately amused man in a movie theater:<sup>28</sup>

While loitering round the town the other day,  
I dropped into a Moving Picture play  
And sat beside a man of silent mien,  
Who so intently watched the moving screen  
And laughed so often where there was no fun,  
(As when the minister had just begun  
To preach the funeral of the hero dead,  
He laughed as tho the things the preacher said  
Were jokes culled from the latest vaudeville).

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M. Murray coined “Deaf Gain” as a concept that highlights intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of deaf experience. Intrinsic benefits center on the gains of deaf and signing individuals, and extrinsic benefits demonstrate the useful contributions of deafness and sign language for the greater good of humanity (2017: 242/243).

<sup>27</sup> Bienvenu writes that “[to] many deaf people, the world is filled with comical signs. But the humor is not always apparent to the majority of hearing Americans” (1989: 99).

<sup>28</sup> Many thanks to Professor Maggie Hennefeld for bringing this poem to my attention.

That I turned round and asked him to be still [...].

(Bacon, 1914: 86)

The man who laughs turns out to be deaf, leading the narrator to speculate about whether his ability to read the actors' lips helps him find amusement in their inaudible utterances. The poem's expressed envy, then, rests on the assumption that "to the deaf mutes all the movies talk" (ibid), recalling fears about early cinema actors' mouthing of "secret messages" or "obscenities" in their silenced dialogues, which deaf viewers were thought to easily comprehend due to their assumed lip-reading capabilities.<sup>29</sup>

Aside from such deliberations on humor through hidden messaging or partial access to a film's audio-visual set-up, there are further content and context-based discontinuities between humor in deaf and hearing communities. Rachel Sutton-Spence and Donna Jo Napoli point out that the formal qualities of humor's mediation vary significantly, showing that deaf humor is first and foremost visual and not always punchline-oriented (2012: 315). Further, they suggest that the performance of deaf jokes often counts more than their content, where humor originates in elaborate gestural/facial movement, variations in speed, or "conceptual creativity"—modifications to the internal structure of signs (ibid: 316/320). All this indicates that signed humor relies on visual grammar and visually expressive tone just as much as content. In a film like *Deafula*, a mediation between two humor cultures whose familiarity is uneven and contingent upon two different registers of communication requires explicit qualification.

Despite a conscious emphasis on sign language theatricality, *Deafula*'s humor works on more than mere exaggeration to evoke the deaf and hearing audience's laughter. Here, the film's often unexplained versatility in genre, story, and characters serves as another driving force behind cultural misunderstandings that then find release in amusement. For instance, *Deafula* employs a detective story whose pairing of investigators is marked by animosity, where the local investigator perpetually dismisses and ignores detective Butterfield. Here, humor emerges through this sabotage of deaf conversational etiquette. For instance, one (crime) scene opens with a shot of the local detective urinating into the bushes while Butterfield is awkwardly suspended from a cliff to

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<sup>29</sup> A common and widely assumptive take on this issue is that deaf and hard of hearing individuals are inherently superior lip-readers. The fear of obscene hidden messages mouthed by actors led to a minor moral panic among early deaf and hearing film enthusiasts alike, where an expert lip-reader was hired by the National Moving Picture Film Censors to monitor film releases in 1911. For more on this, see Schuchman (1984: 60/61).



**Fig. 6: Zork startled by Steve. Notice Zork's tin-cans for hands. Screenshot from *Deafula*.**

examine the dead bodies of two bikers who rode off the road per Deafula's hypnotic command. The local detective's lack of involvement and refusal to coherently communicate with his partner remain prominent throughout the rest of the story, giving audiences many opportunities to laugh about this flawed investigative partnership.

A different visually-mediated joke about communication register occurs with the witch's house servant, Zork, whose hands are covered in tin cans. His appearance in the film enables a divisive sub-genre of deaf humor, where disabled people are commonly rendered an "out group" to make fun of (Sutton-Spence and Napoli, 2012: 313). Indeed, Zork's character perpetuates images of compulsory able-bodiedness often found in depictions of disabled characters throughout cinema history, as Travis Sutton puts it (2012: 87). The strong visual expressiveness of his difference-as-disability performance, then, emblematically produces him as an outsider to the dominant screen population. Alongside his limp and hunched back, Zork's can-hands—signifying "muteness" through his inability to communicate in the dominant language of the setting—render him the noble "freak" of the film: an inferior, docile, and therefore, ideal character for punch-down comedy.

Cult reviewers identify both the investigators' dysfunctional collaboration and Zork's tin-canned muteness as prominent secondary vehicles of humor throughout *Deafula* and often are unsure about the intentionality of these characters' comedic effect.<sup>30</sup> Many engage in deep speculation about the cans-for-hands trope, deeming it bizarre and inexplicable, while others are most enthusiastic about Zork's appearance, calling for a spin-off movie centered on this character.<sup>31</sup> Adding to the contradictory monstrous traits embodied by *Deafula*, secondary humor elements like the detective dynamic and Zork expand the ambiguity and disorganization of *Deafula*'s film world. Noël Carroll draws such tension between contradictory and coherent story elements as one of the primary causes for humorous perceptions of horror films, observing that laughter, as a response to horror, attempts to resolve any anatomical or narrative contradictions and impossibilities presented on screen (1999: 153). At the same time, laughter serves to reinstitute the spectators' domination over the film text.

It is worthwhile to consider the varying dynamics of humor at play in cinematic works. In this context, Rob King lays out two further distinctions for the study of film humor, separating comedy from what is comic. Arguing that the latter primarily works as a descriptor of response, while the former describes a genre that is required to live up to certain aesthetic and performative codes, King emphasizes the social nature of comedy's role in establishing discursive group dynamics, distinguishing between audiences who do and do not get the joke (2016: 296). The ability to "see through" a film's discontinuity, then, facilitates an ironic reading of its incomprehensive elements. Such a dynamic marks a thoroughly dominant sentiment among cultists writing about *Deafula*. Despite the high paracinematic prestige gained from "knowing" *Deafula*, their final evaluations often remain caught up in a paradox of being disappointed or bored by the film, yet still glad to have seen it. Such cursory pleasure, however, often turns out to be contingent upon the hearing viewers' lack of literacy in deaf film culture and humor.

Ahead of *Deafula*'s release, Janel Josephson speculated about the peculiarities of creating a deaf film about vampires: How do you translate a Transylvanian accent into sign language? How

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<sup>30</sup> *Psychotronic Video* writes that the "short, balding (comic relief?) visiting Scotland Yard inspector is pretty odd"; *Schock Cinema* points out that "an inspector from Scotland Yard(?) suspects Steve [...] but is never allowed to finish signing a complete sentence" ("Deafula," 1999: 12).

<sup>31</sup> Jinx and Foy (2021) discuss the possibility of a Zork spin-off film, and Kidd, Middleton, and Werkhoven (2018) excerpted clips of Zork at their live recording of the episode at the Portland Podcast Festival, where the audience's laughter is prominently featured in the background while Zork's scene is playing.



**Fig. 7: Deafula confronting a drug-addict biker. Notice the make-up and prosthetic nose. Screenshot from *Deafula*.**

will a hearing audience respond to the primarily visually conveyed melodrama (and humor) of the picture? To this end, *Deafula*'s producers very consciously intended their film to be a hybrid between light horror and light comedy (Holstrom in White, n.d.). Indeed, the monochrome aesthetics, mise-en-scène, and the vampire's hunting sequences all utilize horror cinema tools such as interplays between surprise and suspense in narrative, revelation and concealment in editing, mobile camera movement, as well as contrasting use of shadow and lightning. The film's costumes, dialogue, and uneven pace, on the other hand, shift its mood to humor. As it turns out, *Deafula*'s horror elements were not always sufficient even for its early audiences: In a 1975 letter to Signscope, Archie Stack of the Washington State School for the Deaf writes that some children were disappointed because the film was "not horrible enough" (Wechsberg, *Deafula Press Release*, 1974: 5). *Deafula*'s greatest visual gag that undermines the film's horror, however, is Deafula himself, whose transition from human to vampire is marked by a disproportional growth of his nose, change in hair color, and exaggerated make-up. While these prosthetic amplifications speak to the prominence of visual caricature in deaf folklore and comedy as outlined by Sutton-Spence and Napoli, such visual—that is, non-linguistic—ridicule of the vampire's traditionally graceful demeanor simultaneously offers itself up to the amusement of hearing audiences.





**Fig. 8: Gary Holstrom as Dracula. Screengrab from *Deafula*.**

Toward the very end, *Deafula* builds a joke on the premise of vampiric grace through a predominantly sound-based intertextual parallel. Since Tod Browning’s *Dracula*, Bela Lugosi’s “Transylvanian” accent and the slow pace of his speech have become sonic icons for the vampire figure across many remakes and spin-offs of the Dracula story. This is also true for Wechsberg’s film. Whereas the lack of performativity in *Deafula*’s voiced translations overall has been a prominent point of ridicule, Dracula’s dubbed voice in *Deafula* (spoken by Dan Becker) attempts to mimic the slower tempo and accent of Lugosi’s speech. But since the voice track is only intended as a literal interpretation of the signed dialogue, the origin of this stylistic choice needs to be recognized as rooted in the character’s use of sign, following the spoken announcement accompanying the film’s opening.

*Deafula*’s Dracula is performed by producer Holstrom—a hearing person—who, like Lugosi, moves at a very slow pace, conveying a familiar intensity of the vampire character through rigid body movements and suspenseful gesticulation. Furthermore, Holstrom’s measured signing—although possibly contingent upon his command of ASL—sets him apart from the other signers in the film. Like Browning’s Dracula, Wechsberg’s, too, is not supposed to have native

command of the film's dominant language, where both his signing and the voice track modify his "speech" and mark him as foreign. These modifications make for a joke that deaf and hearing audiences may not directly share, but still experience in similar ways.

Reviewers rarely comment on Becker's iteration of Dracula's voice or the fact that his voiced accent stands out from the other vocal performances in the film. Whenever his voice comes up as a humorous element, the pleasure of pointing out its accent—or performing a similar accent, in the case of podcasts—prevails over discussions about its difference from the other dubbed voices in the film, suggesting that *Deafula*'s iteration of Dracula does not sonically stand out among this iconic character's many cinematic iterations. As a theatrical addition to the plain interpretation of signing, this accent marks a crucial point where hearing audiences seem to forget *Deafula*'s distance from the hearing film world and its specific novelty as deaf film. Here, the unfamiliarity with deaf culture and potential misunderstandings that facilitate laughter matter less because the focus of this humorous element is itself a tradition of hearing culture's interpretation of the vampire figure. This, in turn, transfers the voice's entertainment value to a recognition of sameness with prior vampire films, in contrast to many other elements in *Deafula* that are distinctly discussed as signifiers of the film's difference rooted in deaf culture. The combined forces of *Deafula*'s intertextuality, genre hybridity, and diversified humorous traits appealing to only deaf, only hearing, and both deaf and hearing spectators, therefore, determine this film's ambiguous positions in deaf and cult cinema alike.

### **Conclusion: An Ambiguous Example of Cult Cinema**

In 2022, *Deafula* is hardly a film rarity anymore. It takes little effort to find detailed information, screengrabs, excerpted clips, as well as documentation of Wechsberg's lawsuit against HEW somewhere online.<sup>32</sup> While only one 16mm print of *Deafula* is publicly listed to be in institutional care, some libraries, including those of prominent deaf higher education venues such as Gallaudet University and the National Technological Institute for the Deaf, hold VHS or DVD-R copies of *Deafula* in their catalogues.<sup>33</sup> At Gallaudet, *Deafula* is directly integrated into course syllabi,

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<sup>32</sup> Notably, *Deafula*'s *Wikipedia* entry, established in 2007, has seen extensive activity and additions throughout 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Baltimore's Pratt Library lists *Deafula* as one of its 16mm Film Collection Highlights ("16mm Film Collection," n.d.).

where it is taught as both vampire text and deaf text.<sup>34</sup> Other than that, the film has drawn little analytical attention in deaf, disability, and film scholarship. Indeed, most scholarly references to *Deafula* remain cursory, acknowledging it as a unique example of deaf filmmaking in analyses that center on other deaf or disability films. Lawrence Carter-Long, for instance, mentions *Deafula* in a list of “[o]bscure, irreverent flicks [that are] a lot more interesting (and fun)” than mainstream depictions of disability (2019: 27), while Samuel Yates writes that *Deafula*’s voice dubbing exemplifies an “attention to access not only for hearing spectators, but also for audiences who might rely on auditory instead of visual modes of storytelling” (2020: 83). The only in-depth reading of *Deafula* comes from Travis Sutton, whose content analysis argues that the film “ends up reaffirming and upholding the desirability of heteronormativity and able-bodiedness, despite having been made by Deaf filmmakers,” only marginally engaging the film’s broader trajectory throughout deaf and cinema history (2014: 83).

*Deafula*’s currently most accessible format as a third-party upload on *YouTube*—a digital file obtained from a DVD-R, which likely was migrated from either a HEW-produced VHS transfer of the film print, or copies thereof—adds yet another level of data deterioration to the often already low qualities of bootlegged images and sound. Signscope and Wechsberg, however, remain fairly protective of their product. Bootleg merchants receive “cease and desist” messages for trading *Deafula* DVD-Rs, and the film’s occasional full-length appearances on *YouTube* are swiftly taken down due to copyright claims.<sup>35</sup> Thus, if Wechsberg, over the course of tracking his film’s now much more frequent unauthorized appearances online, has become aware of *Deafula*’s accomplished yet ambiguous position in cult cinema canons, he does not seem to be interested in engaging with it.

Most interviews and artist profiles of Wechsberg focus on his overall career in filmmaking, where *Deafula* often remains a sidenote with very little background information. For instance,

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<sup>34</sup> Sharon Pajka and Jane Nickerson (2012) teach *Deafula* in their interdisciplinary English course *Vampires: Their Historical Significance in Literature, Film, and Pop Culture* at Gallaudet University.

<sup>35</sup> According to Quot at *Rock!Shock!Pop!* (2012), Signscope claimed to be in the process of remastering the film for an official rerelease on home viewing formats, and thus, asked for bootlegs to be taken out of circulation. An official release is still pending as of 2022. Copies of *Deafula* have been circulated through *Vintage Shack*, a website working to “help connect people with hard to find movies and shows,” and *Trash Palace*, whose representative emphasizes that their movies are “all believed to be in the public domain and are sold from one collector to another. No rights are given or implied! What I am selling is the service of duplicating the tape or disc [...]. If a particular title does become commercially available in the U.S. I must and will discontinue selling it immediately” (“Collector’s Movies F.A.Q.’s,” n.d.).

Wechsberg's prominence reached beyond the U.S. deaf community in 2009, when German television channel Bayerischer Rundfunk dedicated an episode of their deaf culture program *Sehen statt Hören* (*Seeing rather than Hearing*, my translation) to his work, yet the interview features only a brief reference to *Deafula* and the positive response it received from the deaf community in the 1970s. Thoroughly saturated with clips from hearing films on which Wechsberg worked as director of photography, his early newscasting, as well as excerpts from *I Love You But...* and *King Peddler*, the episode does not show any *Deafula* footage. Notably, Wechsberg's public appearances mostly happen in deaf settings, rarely in hearing ones.<sup>36</sup> Among the latter, I have been unable to find any cult or paracinematic outlets that had direct contact with the director.

While *Deafula*'s opening run created momentum for deaf filmmaking, its later transition into hearing circuits, which disregarded or lacked access to information for sufficiently contextualizing stylistic and narrative choices, resulted in the film's often-simplistic reduction to low-budget spectacle. Although Wechsberg initially set out to create entertainment for deaf people when he felt there was none, *Deafula*'s internal fluctuation between the extremes of aesthetic lack and excess turned it into a paracinematic artifact that became a point of curiosity, ironic celebration, and mockery among many hearing cult film enthusiasts. For them, *Deafula*'s entertainment value is often not rooted in the film itself but in the pleasure derived from finding and retelling all of its incomprehensibilities. Commonly, such audiences perceive the films' deaf-friendly and hearing-accessible features—the characters' signing and dubbed voiceover; the absence of diegetic sound; the predominantly brightly lit cinematography that supports signing visibility—not as necessary and original elements of a deaf cinema production, but as flashy gimmicks that feed the film's curiosity. Such lurid commentary often drowns out the small number of cultists who see the film's origins in deaf culture as something more than novelty value, acknowledging it as a framework that facilitates earnest innovation in film form conventions which, historically, were established with hearing spectators in mind.<sup>37</sup> Thus, even among the

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<sup>36</sup> In a film-tech interview, Wechsberg and his partner Margaret Sych discuss film equipment first and foremost, with clips from *I Love You But...* interspersed, and no mention of *Deafula* (Failes, 2011). Wechsberg was also interviewed about his career in filmmaking for Deaf History Month in 2014, without mentioning *Deafula* (Sorenson, 2014). Likewise, his profile in *TDI World* lays out his overall career with only a brief gesture toward *Deafula* ("Perspective of News Video Anchors," 2016). Finally, Wechsberg's own website only mentions *Deafula* as "the first feature film produced in sign language" ("Peter's Bio," n.d.).

<sup>37</sup> Moret (2013), for instance, earnestly praises *Deafula*'s cinematography in his review, while EegahInc (2007) writes that "[we]'ve got a real movie on our hands here, one with a serious and somber tone, made by people who know what they're doing."

revered detritus assembled in cult and paracinema canons, *Deafula* remains an oddity that hearing spectators often despise or admire, but seldom respect.

*Deafula*'s cult status, as many hearing reviewers discuss it, perpetually falls back on its "badness"—a badness that, in a manner typical of cult fandom, has been retroactively assigned by audiences largely absent from the film's historical and cultural origins. However, it is important to acknowledge that these communities' sustained engagement with *Deafula* likely helped carry the film's memory into the present day, where it continues to draw the attention of deaf, hearing, high-, and low-culture audiences. *Deafula*'s (re)discovery by cult film communities therefore illustrates both gains and losses for a deaf film's transition into hearing circuits. The growing interest in deaf representation across mainstream cinema—evinced by a surge of deaf actors appearing in recent medium-to-big-budget films such as *Sound of Metal* (2020), *CODA* (2021), or even *A Quiet Place* and *A Quiet Place Part II* (2018 & 2020)—presents an opportune occasion to further spotlight the history of deaf talent *behind* the camera.<sup>38</sup> In that context, Wechsberg's pioneering work in the 1970s, and *Deafula* in particular, would exemplify accomplished feature-length cinematic productions made on predominantly deaf terms.

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<sup>38</sup> Such history is partially being written by the numerous national and international deaf and disability film festivals that have emerged over the last few decades. To my knowledge, however, *Deafula* has not been part of any recent film festival proceedings.

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