

### Horror and the Manipulation of the Cinesthetic Subject in *A Quiet Place*

Cinematic academia historically focuses on psychoanalytically theorising cinema as a consciously-interpreted illusion (e.g. Benjamin 1935; Baudry 1975; Elsaesser 2009), while academia exploring cinema's sensory impact developed relatively recently (e.g. Marks 2000). Theories like Vivian Sobchack's 'cinesthetic subject' combine these approaches, arguing that consciously-cognitive interpretation and unconscious sensory impact interchangeably inform each other (2004, p.67). This allows Sobchack's unconscious understanding of consciously-confusing unfocused images (p.63), or Laura Marks' proposed ability of images to invoke taste, smell, and texture's 'memories' through 'haptic visuality' (2000, p.2; p.22). Similar studies investigate cinematic sound's corresponding haptic influence on interpretation (e.g. Lovatt 2013), given sound's 'tactile' ability to physically vibrate the body (Coulthard 2012, p.18) and create "haptic auralty", or sound's evocation of conscious memory and the unconscious sensorium.

Comparably, horror cinema's academia primarily deconstructs the genre psychoanalytically and ideologically (Schneider 2004, p.131). However, given the genre's definition as media which 'violates' the 'subject/victim[s]' 'expectations of the world' (Solomon 2003, p.53), recent literature explores how horror cinema employs 'a carnival of noise' to do this (Diffrient 2004, p.57). This "carnival" arguably harnesses and expands Sobchack's cinesthetic subject, using sounds needing '[cognitive] and [physical]' interpretation to 'create the visceral responses necessary for horror cinema' (Whittington 2017, p.176). John Krasinski's 2018 science-fiction horror *A Quiet Place* demonstrates this harnessing of the cinesthetic subject, through its minimisation of both diegetic and non-diegetic sound to encourage not only "haptic visuality", but the more recently-explored "haptic auralty", for cross-sensory horrific effect. Therefore, I argue Krasinski's sound design emblematises how horror cinema manipulates the cinesthetic subject to horrify them.

Krasinski's film follows a family surviving after lethal sound-hunting creatures invaded Earth. The film's near-silence creates an uncanny verisimilitude, which forces viewers to interpret traditionally-aural cues visually through haptic visuality. This allows Krasinski to better harness haptic auralty later, and is established in the film's first act (0:00:50-0:10:25). Sparse, low-toned non-diegetic music plays over a black screen captioned 'Day 89', before both cut to quiet, diegetic sounds playing over establishing shots of an abandoned city. These include a pharmacy, and a close-up of "missing" posters. By framing this ambiguous, visual exposition with foreboding music and quiet diegetic sound that conventional "carnivals of noise" would not leave audible, Krasinski encourages a tense visual focus. Viewers cannot look away like voiceovers or dialogue allow, and the quiet yet existent diegetic sound implies the silence is purposeful, encouraging listening. While it is almost 'a silent movie' (Cooper 2018, p.28), Krasinski uses non-diegetic music at key points as atmospheric signalling (Winter 1941) to still create a semi-conventional 'cinematic experience' without contradicting silence's impact, rather than a counter-cinematic 'silence experiment' (Prudom 2018), as demonstrated above. Thus, these first shots nurture a visual focus which allows a greater harnessing of the cinesthetic subject later on.

The family's visual introduction compounds this. Silent chiaroscuro long shots and close-ups of the youngest son Beau and daughter Regan ambiguously silhouette them as they move through the pharmacy, merging with the silence to mask their humanity. Combined with the silence's ambiguous visual focus, tension builds as viewers can interpret the silhouettes as monsters, until their visible reveal with the family. Shortly after, a long shot of Marcus, the

older son, sat grimacing pans into a close-up of medicine bottles which the mother, Evelyn, carefully inspects, silently explaining the pharmacy setting. Furthermore, the family communicates in subtitled sign-language, with later two shots showing Regan and Beau silently play with chalk, and Regan carefully pack bags with her father, Lee. This character-building exposition continues forcing a tense visuality, while also foreshadowing the film's later haptic visuality by foregrounding the physicality of objects and bodies through packing and sign-language. It also increases suspense by further avoiding the expected aural dialogue that conventionally introduces characters, uncannily violating the viewer's expectations by suppressing the 'human urge to communicate' (Cooper 2018), and provoking questioning of the silence. Thus, the establishing scene's visual substitution of dialogue and exposition among the silence almost replaces sound with visual cues.

The first act's final part transforms this visuality into an interconnected haptic visuality and aurality to further harness the cinesthetic subject. Like other haptically aural films, Krasinski's demonstrated silence '[amplifies] environmental sounds' until 'they become almost denaturalized' to sensually '[heighten] their affective power' (Lovatt 2013, p.62). However, given the film's visually-substituted "sound", its heightened diegetic sound instead becomes haptically disorientating, as demonstrated when Beau drops an electronic toy spaceship: the unexpected sound violates viewers' expectations of the diegesis, its haptic crash and physical immediacy creating a visceral tension. Regan desperately catching the toy before it hits the floor, and the family freezing in a fear-laden wide shot at Beau again holding the toy before removing its batteries, increases this tension by suggesting that sound's possibility is as dangerous as sound itself. This is confirmed when Beau secretly replaces the batteries, later activates the toy's contextually deafening sound, and is killed by the creatures. Viewers are consequently encouraged to aggressively monitor possible sounds alongside the family to prevent more deaths. Resultantly, a constant relationship between the viewers' haptic visuality and hearing is created to identify potential and actual auditory threats. Similar to Sobchack's unconscious sensorium interpreting *The Piano*'s unfocused fingers before she could consciously (2004, p.63), the viewers' increased visual focus and awareness of sound's danger thus causes their retrospective haptic visuality to subconsciously evoke possible sounds before they consciously occur.

This haptic visuality is demonstrated and connected to haptic aurality in later scenes. After a silent family dinner, one such interior scene (0:18:58-0:21:39) uses silent close-ups to show dice rolling onto carpet, and Monopoly being played with woolly counters by the children. These close-ups encourage the aforementioned haptic visuality to retrospectively evoke soft, muffling textures, reinforcing a relaxing, sound-free atmosphere. However, in a two shot framed by an oil lantern, this lantern is loudly toppled, igniting the carpet. Again the unexpected noise shatters the silence, horrifically violating the viewers' expectations of a silent diegesis that was encouraged by the haptically-implied sonic safety. While Lee extinguishes the fire, an expectant silence falls, illustrated by close-ups on the characters' worried faces. After approximately a minute, the silence is broken by a sudden, tangible crash, short non-diegetic instrumentation, and scratching from the roof.

Haptic aurality is now encouraged, as the haptic impacts on the roof's wood and metal evoke the creatures' aggressive physicality. However, these sounds 'do not offer enough information' for 'intellectual evaluation': viewers and characters can hear them, but the sounds 'sonically [represent] the fear of the unknown' as they cannot visually reveal the creature (Whittington 2017, p.177). Given sound's earlier-established fatality, this enigma becomes deathly tense, and Krasinski harnesses this by revealing the sound to be raccoons. A

similar scene occurs when the children are later trapped in a corn silo (Krasinski 2018, 1:08:55): loud, violent smacks haptically mirror the physical damage the creatures cause, but do not reveal the creatures until, this time, a creature attacks (1:09:41). Therefore, Krasinski's foregrounded diegetic sound incites viewers to simultaneously emulate sound through haptic visuality, and use haptic aurality to represent physical threats, increasing both suspense and verisimilitude.

This interconnected haptic visuality and aurality is maximised when Krasinski uses it to connect Evelyn's sensorium to the viewers' during her childbirth scene (0:44:10-0:52:06). After her waters audio-visually break the previous scene's serenity, non-diegetic bass drums and treble strings intensify as Evelyn rushes to the basement, unnaturally stifling pained cries. A long tracking shot tilts into a close-up as Evelyn rushes down the stairs, travelling faster than her, and reveals a protruding nail moments before she steps on it. Given the viewers' encouraged haptic visuality, this close-up likely evokes uncomfortable memories of underfoot pain, memories reinforced by another close-up of Evelyn removing her foot, which lingers on the blood-soaked nail. While visual injury and blood conventionally appears in horror, like *Hellraiser's* cult-classic torture scenes (Barker 1987), Krasinski compounds viewer discomfort through their interconnected haptic aurality: as Evelyn steps on the nail, the non-diegetic music stops to allow her impaling, her scream, the smash of the picture she was holding, and the blood-soaked nail's removal to be audible. These conventionally "raw" sounds, like Evelyn's stifled moans, torn flesh, and dripping blood, differ from the creatures' earlier haptic sounds: viewers are biologically '[wired]' for "raw" sounds to evoke physical pain (Whittington 2017, p.176-177), causing viewers' and Evelyn's sensoria to physically reflect one another through the film's audio-visual communication. Furthermore, Krasinski's film-spanning nurturing of viewers' haptic aurality and removal of non-diegetic sound means these effects are further '[heightened]' for them (Lovatt 2013, p.62), reflected further in a close-up of Evelyn audibly crying before forcing silence.

Krasinski abuses this established audio-visual haptic connection between Evelyn's and the viewers' sensoria by endangering Evelyn in the next shot's abrupt revelation of creatures around her (0:46:01). The ensuing close-ups follow Evelyn limping, grimacing, searching for escape methods, and silently avoiding the growling creatures. These close-ups, often framed by shelving, create a haptically enclosed atmosphere akin to *American Honey* (Arnold 2016), but the horror context instead traps viewers in a tactile claustrophobia among Evelyn and the creatures, more comparable to *Alien* (Scott 1979). These close-ups' chiaroscuro lighting reflects this, creating a visible divide between the direction Evelyn faces and the creatures behind her, between life and death, on Evelyn's face. This visual tension is compounded by Evelyn's stifled cries, and the creature's audible growling. The growling was created by the distorting and displacing of a 'root sound' (here a stun-gun) conventionally used in horror to cause 'uncertainty' (Whittington 2017, p.169; James 2018), resulting in a harnessing of the cinesthetic subject reflecting Sobchack's experience: like the body recognising itself in unfocused images, the sensorium unconsciously recognises the sound's organic qualities and context. However, the sound's mechanical root makes it sound uncannily wrong, sparking fear through the sound's uncanny otherness. This allows it to better contrast Evelyn's haptically accessible cries, which emphasises both Evelyn's pain and the creatures' inhumanity to viewers, stressing the situation's danger. Overall, this intimate fear for Evelyn is enabled through the connection to Evelyn's pained sensorium established in the scene before.

This tense connection climaxes during the birth itself. After escaping the creatures, intimate close-ups and mid-long shots continue the claustrophobia as Evelyn painfully reclines into a bathtub, while intense non-diegetic strings and horns continue the tense atmosphere. However, this music is quieted to ensure Evelyn's increasingly loud, tactile cries are audible as she writhes inside the bathtub while it fills with blood. The resulting aural and visual emphasis of Evelyn's physical pain, opposing psychoanalytical interpretations of birth, foundationally creates tension by harnessing the haptically-connected sensoria between Evelyn and viewers. This focus evokes female viewers' memories and the cultural understanding of childbirth's pain, not just visually (Marks 2000), but aurally, further connecting Evelyn's and the viewers' sensoria. Growling then interrupts as a creature approaches, causing the music to return as focus shifts to the creature's proximity, and Evelyn's desperate silence becomes more suspenseful through the haptic understanding of her increasing pain. The film's multi-strand narrative now coincides in montage, as Marcus lights something in the grass outside; Lee loads a gun; the creature audibly cracks the wall in Evelyn's background; and the lights over Evelyn flicker in reflection of both her and the viewers' painful anticipation.

This tactile, plot-marking scene ends in a cathartic, sensory explosion as Marcus triggers fireworks, allowing Evelyn's "raw" scream. Despite the scene's intense music and haptic cries creating a relative "carousel of noise" compared to the film's otherwise near-silence, these two new sounds arguably overload the earlier-established sensitive abilities of sound-emulating haptic visuality and touch-emulating haptic aurality. These otherwise-conventional diegetic sounds are impactful as their scarcity and diegetic danger in the film heightens their fear-inducing, disorientating power similar to Beau's toy, and their contextually-enhanced volume also means they are among the film's few sounds likely to physically vibrate viewers in theatres (Coulthard 2012, p.18). Evelyn's scream is additionally jarring as it is one of the film's few "raw" human vocalisations, and emblematises both her and the viewer's pain, relief, and fear in the scene. Overall, the scene's haptic portrayal of Evelyn's pregnant sensorium, when interconnected with the viewers', demonstrates not only silence, but "raw" tactile sound's emphasis through contextual silence, can arguably invoke 'the horror of our [...] subjectivity' and mortality (Coulthard 2012, p.28) by connecting viewers with the pained sensorium of a mortally-threatened character.

Conclusively, Krasinski's film emblematises how horror manipulates the cinesthetic subject to create fear, through his use of sound design to foreground the visual and aural techniques horror traditionally uses to do this. Krasinski achieves this foregrounding by establishing a sound-emulating focus on visual imagery and haptic visuality, before blending this with haptic aurality, and connecting both to Evelyn's pained, endangered sensorium to maximise fear. While horror's traditional sound is louder and ironically less noticeable, Krasinski's film demonstrates this sound's understudied significance through its almost counter-cinematic, emphatic sound design. This clearly illustrates how sound creates tension and informs the cinesthetic subject's interpretation of horror, and by extension all, cinema.

### **Filmography**

Arnold, A. 2016. *American Honey*. UK: British Film Institute.

Barker, C. 1987. *Hellraiser*. UK: Film Futures.

Krasinski, J. 2018. *A Quiet Place*. USA: Platinum Dunes. Available on Netflix [Accessed 26/04/20].

Scott, R. 1979. *Alien*. USA: Brandywine Productions.

## **Bibliography**

Baudry, J.L. 1986. 'The apparatus: Metaphyschological approaches to the impression of reality in cinema'. In: Rosen, P. (ed.). 1986. *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press. Pp.299-318.

Benjamin, W. 1969. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. Translated by Harry Zohn, from the 1935 essay. In: Arendt, H. (ed.). 1969. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books. Pp.1-26. Available at: <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf> [Accessed 05/06/20].

Cooper, R. R. 2018. 'Silent & Deadly: "A QUIET PLACE"'. In: *Commonweal*, 145. Pp. 27-28. Available at: <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2035635040?accountid=17256> [Accessed 06/06/20].

Coulthard, L. 2012. 'Haptic Aurality: Listening to the Films of Michael Haneke'. In: *Film Philosophy*, 16(1). Pp.16-29. Available at: <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/10.3366/film.2012.0002> [Accessed 06/06/20].

Diffrient, D.S. 2004. 'A Film Is Being Beaten: Notes on the Shock Cut and Material Violence of Horror.' In: Hantke, S. 2004. *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi. Pp. 52-85. Available at: [https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ZTOtnZg\\_j3gC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ZTOtnZg_j3gC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false) [Accessed 06/06/20].

Elsaesser, T. 2008. 'The Mind-Game Film.' In: Buckland, W. (ed.). 2008. *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*. Chichester: Blackwell Publishing. Pp.13-41. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781444305708> [Accessed 05/06/20]

Gorbman, C. 1980. 'Bibliography on Sound in Film'. In: *Yale French Studies*, (60). Pp.269-286. Available at: [www.jstor.org/stable/2930016](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930016) [Accessed 04/06/20]. While not referenced in-text, this is in my bibliography as I used it to inform my research.

James, D. 2018. "'A Quiet Place": When noise equals death, every little sound matters'. *latimes.com*. Published 13/10/2018. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/la-en-mn-crafts-quiet-place-sound-20181113-story.html> [Accessed 09/06/20].

Lovatt, P. 2013. "'Every drop of my blood sings our song. There, can you hear it?": Haptic sound and embodied memory in the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul'. In: *The New Soundtrack*, 3(1). Pp.61-79. Available at: <https://dspace.stir.ac.uk/bitstream/1893/16974/1/sound.2013.pdf> [Accessed 06/06/20].

Marks, L.U. 2000. *Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment & the Senses*. Durham; USA: Duke University Press. Pp.1-23. Available at: [http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/results?vid=1&sid=8bb4bd39-612c-4c30-8875-538235c57d3b%40sdc-v-sessmgr02&bquery=\(JN+%22Skin+of+the+Film%3a+Intercultural+Cinema%2c+Embodiment+%26+the+Senses%22\)+AND+FT+Y&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWlwLHNoaWImZGI9ZjNoJnR5cGU9MSZzZWZyY2hNb2RlPVN0YW5kYXJkInNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/results?vid=1&sid=8bb4bd39-612c-4c30-8875-538235c57d3b%40sdc-v-sessmgr02&bquery=(JN+%22Skin+of+the+Film%3a+Intercultural+Cinema%2c+Embodiment+%26+the+Senses%22)+AND+FT+Y&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWlwLHNoaWImZGI9ZjNoJnR5cGU9MSZzZWZyY2hNb2RlPVN0YW5kYXJkInNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d) [Accessed 06/06/20].

Prudom, L. 2018. 'A Quiet Place: John Krasinski and Emily Blunt on the Challenges of Making an Almost Silent Movie'. ign.com. Published 15/03/2018, Updated 21/03/18. Available at: <https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/03/15/a-quiet-place-john-krasinski-emily-blunt-silent-movie-sound> [Accessed 06/06/20].

Schneider, S. 2004. 'Toward an Aesthetics of Cinematic Horror'. In: Prince S. (ed.). 2004. *The Horror Film*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. Pp. 131-149. Available at: [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hj2bp.10](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hj2bp.10) [Accessed 04/06/20].

Sobchack, V. 2004. 'What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh.' In: Sobchack, V. 2004. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press. Pp. 53-84. Available at: [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnx76.7](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnx76.7) [Accessed 04/06/20].

Solomon, R.C. 2003. 'Real Horror'. In: Schneider, S.J.; Shaw, D. (eds.). 2003. *Dark Thoughts: Philosophic Reflections on Cinematic Horror*. Oxford: Scarecrow Press Inc. Pp.230-265. Available at: <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=7Ukm-CfwCW0C&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false> [Accessed 07/06/20].

Whittington, W. 2017. '10 – Horror Sound Design'. In: Benshoff, H.M. 2017. *A Companion to the Horror Film*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons. Pp.168-183. Available at: <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=oelnDQAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false> [Accessed 04/06/20].

Winter, M. 1941. 'The Function of Music in Sound Film'. *The Musical Quarterly*, 27(2). Pp.146-164. Available at: [www.jstor.org/stable/739462](http://www.jstor.org/stable/739462) [Accessed 04/06/20].