

# Selling “Silence” in Contemporary Horror: Krasinski’s Quiet Consumers

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## Selling “Silence” in Contemporary Horror: Krasinski’s Quiet Consumers

Selma A. Purac

John Krasinski’s 2018 horror film *A Quiet Place* broke through the noise of a box office dominated by blockbusters and pre-existing properties.<sup>1</sup> Acclaimed by critics, the relatively modest production, which cost only 17 million dollars to make, went on to gross over 340 million dollars worldwide (*AQP Numbers*). In part, this success is rooted in the film’s focus on the horror soundscape, which is central to its very premise. *A Quiet Place* opens eighty-nine days after an alien invasion has decimated the world’s population. The invading creatures are sightless monsters with hypersensitive hearing and hunt using sound. We follow one family’s struggle to keep silent and stay alive. The Abbotts seem especially well equipped for survival in this world; because their eldest child, Regan, is deaf, they can already communicate silently using American Sign Language. Regan’s supposed disability therefore serves as a tool for family survival. However, in a world where sound is deadly, Regan’s deafness would also seem to intensify her vulnerability. Because she does not hear, she is likelier to find herself in a compromising position, unaware when a sound has endangered her or when the creatures are close. This threat is highlighted in the film’s opening sequence, when Regan gives her little brother a toy rocket which he recklessly activates. Failing to understand the necessity of silence, he is promptly killed off.

The family’s grief is literally unspeakable, and the need to keep quiet amplifies the breakdown of communication that they experience while in

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay was presented as a video lecture for the Montreal Monstrum Society in December 2020. The lecture is available online through the society’s website: <https://www.monstrum-society.ca/>.

mourning.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, the film is fundamentally a meditation on the complexity of communication—whether signed, spoken, or left unsaid. However, this thematic concern extends beyond the film’s narrative; much like the Abbotts, the creators behind *A Quiet Place* had to figure out how to communicate with prospective audiences using a limited range of tools. The film’s script and its marketing represent the difficulty of telling a story, and of selling it, when quiet is key. Focusing on the movie’s original speculative screenplay and the marketing of the finished feature, I explore the ways in which this largely dialogue-free film navigates the sonic conventions of horror, reading it as a work that exploits the strategies of both silent and sound cinema to communicate horror to the audience.

Critics commonly frame the film in terms of its relationship to silence. *A Quiet Place* has been called a “silent movie in the twenty-first century” (O’Reilly 2018), an example of the “new silent era” in cinema (Gilbey 2018), a film that “plays like a silent movie” (Howell 2018), a “silent horror” (Fedak 2018), a “nearly silent thriller” (Rao 2018), and “the closest thing to a silent movie since *The Artist*” (LaSalle 2018). These phrases highlight the film’s complex relationship to sound, with some critics remarking upon how the movie plays with the conventions of silent cinema and others identifying it *as* silent. Indeed, the work’s original screenwriters, Scott Beck and Bryan Woods, locate its origins in “the silent film era” (Sargent 2018), noting the influence of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and F.W. Murnau. In interviews, they identify the work as a “silent film” (Beck and Woods 2018), even referring to it as “*Our Silent Film*” (Mulcahey 2018). However, while the film’s soundscape is notably subdued, it is anything but silent, containing diegetic ambient sound, carefully planted sound effects, and an affective non-diegetic musical score by Marco Beltrami. These comments, as misleading as some of them may be, serve as a tacit acknowledgement that the film leans into the traditions of the silent era. More important perhaps is the way in which this horror movie draws our attention to the genre’s long-standing experimentation with sound. *A Quiet Place* borrows heavily from the sonic conventions of the horror genre—and many of these conventions stretch back to the silent era.

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<sup>2</sup> Ironically, while the father, Lee, seeks to connect with other survivors through the radio, he has trouble connecting with Regan. Her feelings of guilt, combined with both Lee’s stoicism and his well-intentioned but problematic effort to ‘fix’ Regan’s hearing aid—and thus her—distance the two characters. In one of the film’s few spoken lines, Lee is admonished by his remaining son, Marcus: “You still love her, right?...You should tell her” (Beck, Woods, and Krasinski, 35-36). Only in his final moments does Lee manage to find the words.

While movies of the silent period were routinely accompanied by live music and sound effects,<sup>3</sup> Murnau identified the distinct importance of sound in horror when he subtitled his silent classic *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922).<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, Hans Erdmann's soundtrack for the film consisted of pieces with titles like "Ghostly," "Unchained," and "Distraught," designed to reinforce the emotional tenor of the film (Patalas 2001).<sup>5</sup> Thus, even the silent film era recognized sound's ability to disturb audiences. Unsurprisingly, the rise of talkies expanded this role.

In *Uncanny Bodies* (2007), Robert Spadoni examines the impact of this new filmmaking technology on horror movies of the sound transition period, such as Tod Browning's 1931 *Dracula*. Released only three-and-a-half years after the coming of synchronized sound, Browning's film exploits the disturbing uncanniness of this relatively new cinematic form. For audiences of the time, the combination of the still strange phenomenon of synchronous sound and the movie's supernatural themes made for a particularly potent experience. The eeriness of *Dracula's* "voluminously empty soundscape" (Spadoni 78), the "sensuous strangeness" (63) of Bela Lugosi's speech, and moments in which characters' voices are divorced from onscreen speakers, all unsettled early moviegoers. Poor recording technologies of the time, which resulted in grainy sound that seemed to come from a great distance, also had the effect of "*re-estranging* synchronized speech," making onscreen characters seem "cold and lifeless" (Spadoni 60). Spadoni argues that this temporary peculiarity of sound is deeply etched in the horror genre itself.

Recognizing the significance of the horror soundscape, Kevin J. Donnelly (2005) points out that horror films tend to offer less a traditional film score than "a coherent atmospheric package that embraces both music and

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on sound accompaniment and silent-era cinema, see *Music and Sound in Silent Film: From the Nickelodeon to The Artist*, edited by Ruth Barton and Simon Trezisa.

<sup>4</sup> Murnau's awareness of sound's importance is also evidenced in his titling of his 1927 film *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*; however, only *Nosferatu* recognizes an explicit link between sound and genre.

<sup>5</sup> The same is true of other silent horror films. Upon its 1920 release, *The Golem: How He Came into the World*, co-directed by Paul Wegener and Carl Boese, was accompanied by an opulent orchestral score composed by Hans Landsberger specifically for the film. David Robinson (1997) notes that Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) was similarly accompanied by music designed to match the movie's dark mood. When the film came to America, the theatrical entrepreneur Samuel Lionel Rothafel hired a conductor to score the film, saying that the music needed to make listeners "eligible for citizenship in a nightmare country" (49).

sound effects” (94). He writes that horror films “are created as whole environments that the audience enters, equating a mental state with a sonic construct. Indeed, more than any other film genre, they construct a whole sound system, a musicscape, as well as embodying a distinct sound effects iconography of horror. In fact, this is distinct in much the same way as the image repertoire of horror films” (Donnelly 94). The sonic repertoire to which Donnelly refers is instantly recognizable: in horror, quiet often acts as the platform for startling sounds. Jump scares, stingers, and music that amplifies tension through drones and ostinato are common codes of the horror soundscape, though other genres use these strategies as well.<sup>6</sup>

In “Horror Sound Design,” William Whittington (2014) expands upon some of the genre’s more distinctive sonic characteristics.<sup>7</sup> Calling upon the work of Linda Williams (2009), who identifies horror as a “body genre” that exploits our fear of physical vulnerability through spectacles of “excess” (602-3), Whittington notes that sound in horror is designed to induce a visceral, physical response in audiences, which it often achieves through an evocation of the body. Sounds such as heartbeats, breathing, cracking bones, and punctured flesh are used to “acoustically get beneath the skin of both characters on the screen and filmgoers, and render an understanding about the fragility of the human body” (176). This sonic grammar is neurologically motivated: terror, Whittington explains, is registered in the amygdala, which triggers our fight-or-flight response, resulting in “increased adrenaline flow, rapid breathing, and an elevated blood pressure and heart rate” (176). By incorporating sounds that

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the ‘horror’ designation didn’t exist until Universal’s 1930s horror cycle. Both Ian Conrich (2004) and Rhona J. Berenstein (1996) note that earlier films that would be categorized as ‘horror’ today were at the time labelled ‘uncanny,’ ‘thriller,’ ‘mystery,’ and ‘gothique’ (see Conrich 46). These origins point to the close relationship between horror and other cinematic genres even today, most particularly between ‘horror’ and ‘thriller.’ [Editor’s note: See also Gary Rhodes, “‘Horror Film’: How the Term Came to Be,” in *Monstrum* 1 (April 2018), pp. 90-115 (<https://www.monstrum-society.ca/monstrum-1-2018.html>).]

<sup>7</sup> Whittington points out that the sonic grammar of early sound horror films was born of necessity: small budgets and postproduction time constraints meant that films often relied on a library of stock sounds—such as the ‘castle thunder’ sound of 1930s Universal horror movies or, later, the famed ‘Wilhelm scream’ (175). Early on, sonic distortion and claustrophobic sound design were the result of recording technologies which nonetheless added to the disorientation of horror cinema. More recently, multichannel mixing is used in the genre to increase the immersive terror of the theatre environment, and such sonic strategies are further complicated by horror’s thematic interest in the afterlife: “Within the horror genre, disembodied voices and ghosts linger in the surround channels” (Whittington 2014, 179).

evoke the body, horror sound designers “preemptively trigger the physical pathways in the filmgoers’ brains and cause a perceptual matching telling the body acoustically to feel fear” (Whittington 177). Because it can unsettle us on a primal, physiological level, sound is an especially potent tool in the horror genre, where it can be paired with images that are equally unsettling or shocking.<sup>8</sup>

In keeping with these sonic conventions, Beck acknowledges that in the horror genre, there is no better tool to scare an audience than sound. Recounting the origins of *A Quiet Place*, he explains that he and Woods were “talking about how cool it would be to do a silent film. We also felt like we could weaponize that specific tool against the audience. If we could turn sound itself into the shark from *Jaws*, that would be potentially really terrifying” (Larned 2018). Beck effectively articulates a strategy that is used by most horror films here, wherein sound becomes a weapon wielded against the vulnerable: characters are startled by the unseen thing that goes bump in the night, as in Robert Wise’s *The Haunting* (1963), or their location is given away through some unintended noise, as in John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978). Long before *A Quiet Place*, horror has shown us that in a hushed environment, the slightest sound can become deafening.

Numerous critics have framed *A Quiet Place*’s relationship to sound in terms of its innovation, commenting on the film’s “unique soundscape” (Desowitz), claiming that its sonic experimentation has resulted in “a unique and unsettling horror” (Crouse), and also calling it a film that “broke the mold of the traditional horror movie” (Bitette), an “innovative addition to the horror genre” (Palmer), and “the most innovative horror film since *Blair Witch Project*” (Commandeur). However, rather than innovate and invent, what *A Quiet Place* does is heighten our awareness of horror’s abiding sonic strategies.

It is worth noting, however, that there are three distinct moments of silence in the film. The movie includes what Krasinski calls “sonic envelopes”

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<sup>8</sup> These claims align with the work of evolutionary biologist Daniel T. Blumstein (2010), who examines the effective incorporation of nonlinear sound in horror films to trigger audiences on a primal level. Because we are hardwired to associate sounds such as crying infants, distressed animal calls, and screaming females with danger and duress, our instinctual fear response is triggered when we hear not only such noises but large wavelength analogues that have been altered and distorted—and which are often included in horror films. See Mark Evans (2009) “Rhythms of Evil: Exorcising Sound from *The Exorcist*” for a handling of horror’s use of such sounds. Additionally, Steve Goodman (2009) examines the unsettling impact of infrasound on us—low-frequency sounds that we cannot hear but which are elicited by natural phenomenon such as wind and earthquakes, which humans are wired to associate with impending danger. Such sounds are occasionally incorporated in films.

(Trenholm 2019)—these are discrete ‘pockets’ of sound in which the film’s viewers are granted access to a character’s sonic perspective. Most notable is Regan’s sonic perspective wherein the hearing audience is given temporary access to her unique experience of the world, allowing them to empathize with her. When her cochlear implant is in place, the audience hears a low muffled hum punctuated by Regan’s heartbeat. However, when Regan turns the implant off, we experience a rarity in cinema: “total digital silence” (Walden 2018). Whittington points out that this kind of complete silence is rare; instead, we tend to find quiet which “is filled with both noise and meaning”; thus, “silence’ is often represented by ambient footfall recorded at a distance or ‘white noise’ culled from the sounds of traffic, wind, or air conditioning” (183). Whittington writes that in horror, this quiet “is still cause for alarm. When the wind stops or the footfalls cease, death is near. So now more than ever, characters must listen if they are to survive” (138). These comments highlight not only the genre’s sonic patterns, but also the scarcity of complete digital silence. *A Quiet Place’s* veteran sound designers, Erik Aadahl and Ethan Van der Ryn, draw our attention to the rarity of this approach when they point that they have never done this before, but they acknowledge that the technique allows for “the most shocking and in many ways the most intimate moments in the movie” (VanDerWerff 2018).<sup>9</sup> Despite the emotional impact of these sequences, they are but discrete moments of silence in a film that otherwise resonates with sound.

What *A Quiet Place* lacks is not sound but spoken dialogue. Only nine minutes of its ninety-minute runtime include dialogue—the majority of which is signed and subtitled. Here, we witness the work’s indebtedness to silent cinema, where dialogue is limited and is often visualized through intertitles.<sup>10</sup> The film critic Roger Ebert (1997) notes that the lack of dialogue in classic silent horror cinema adds to our sense of dread. *Nosferatu’s* characters, he writes, “are confronted with alarming images and denied the freedom to talk them away. There is no repartee in nightmares. Human speech dissipates the shadows.”

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<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that the highest-grossing film of 2017, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, incorporates a moment of total digital silence. During what is now known as the ‘Holdo Maneuver’ sequence, as two ships collide in the vacuum of space, the film is stripped of sound for 5 seconds. Because explosions that occur in space are routinely heard in the film franchise, this unique moment of silence highlights the emotional impact of Holdo’s sacrifice. The inclusion of this technique in the film, alongside *A Quiet Place*, perhaps gestures towards the more mainstream incorporation of what has otherwise been a relatively rare practice.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, intertitles were not restricted to dialogue alone, since they could also serve a narrative function. For an in-depth consideration of their role, see Katherine Nagels (2012).

Muteness, then, amplifies the horror, and *A Quiet Place* uses this idea to its advantage. In creating the screenplay, Beck and Woods (2018) “wondered if you could fold the silent visual techniques of the early twentieth century into the context of a modern-day genre film.” As a *sound* homage to silent cinema, *A Quiet Place* plays with a sonically stripped-down environment as a means of heightening tension. That so many critics have persisted in characterizing the film in terms of its ‘silence’ shows us the extent to which contemporary cinema is reliant upon the spoken word.

In his consideration of sound in cinema, Michel Chion (2007) notes that our sonic attention is fundamentally “voice-centered”; the voice, he claims, “attracts and centers our attention” in the same way “as the human face in the image of a film” (206). Chion explains that the voice “is also the main, if not the exclusive vehicle for the text ... most of the time in cinema the presence of language is central. It is a determining and privileged component ... language can determine, regulate and justify the overall structure of a film” (207). Given Chion’s claims, it is perhaps unsurprising that early sound films were called “talkies.”<sup>11</sup> Since the advent of sound cinema, dialogue has been a central means of telling the story; however, before the film is even released, dialogue is a key ingredient in selling the film as well. Accordingly, its relative absence in *A Quiet Place* posed challenges both in terms of the film’s script and its marketing. While the film’s lack of dialogue heightens the audience’s awareness of the genre’s abiding experimentation with sound and silence, its initial script and marketing prove to be less traditional. Ultimately, these unique paratexts succeed in selling—first to producers and then to the public—what was otherwise a conventional, albeit intriguing, film, and they did so through their own experimentation with sound.

## A “Silent” Script

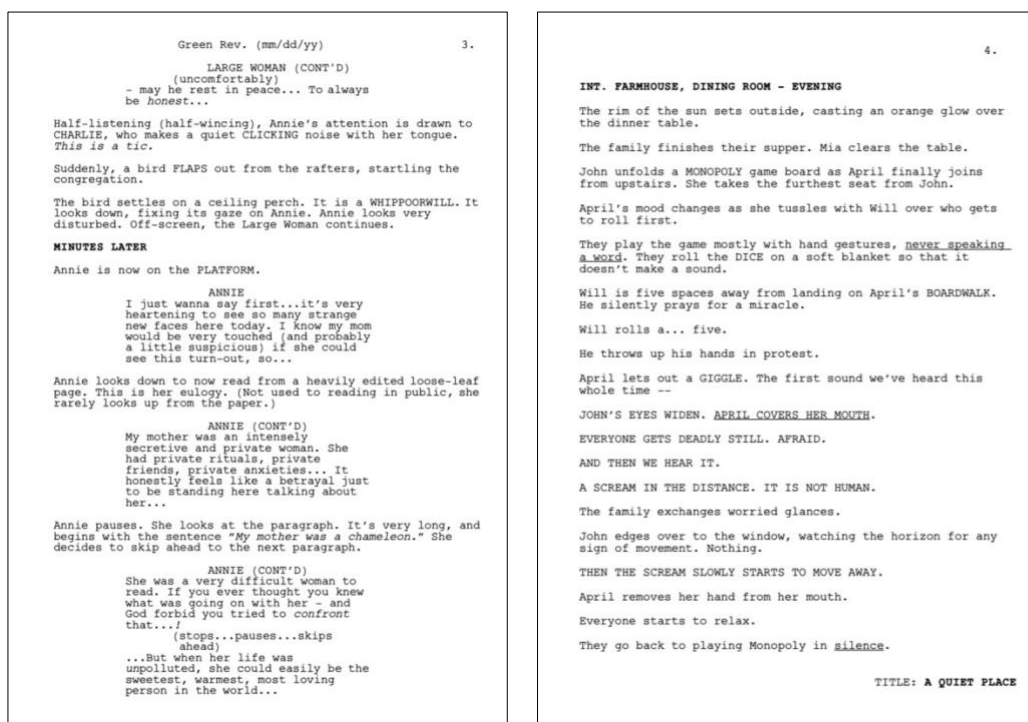
In interviews, Beck and Woods (2018) have noted the struggles of writing a script with little dialogue: “Writing a silent movie isn’t easy,” they claim. “You can’t use dialogue as a crutch. And you can’t bore the reader with blocks of description.” Woods points out that “Usually in a screenplay, dialogue is the easiest to breeze through. It’s smaller on the page. It’s confined. You can

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<sup>11</sup> In Billy Wilder’s 1950 classic, *Sunset Boulevard*, the silent film actress Norma Desmond famously decries the rise of talkies by asserting, “We didn’t need dialogue. We had faces!” Desmond expresses her disdain towards an industry that has reoriented itself around the human voice.



kind of flip through the pages” (Sargent). Woods refers to the standard formatting of dialogue in screenplays wherein spoken language is indented on the page and widely spaced, making it immediately identifiable when flipping through the pages of a script (Figure 1). Without the ease of communication offered by dialogue, the writers of *A Quiet Place* were concerned that theirs “would not be a readable screenplay” (Mulcahey). Woods adds, “How do you communicate backstory, motivation and theme without dialogue?” (Mulcahey). The original screenplay for the film demonstrates how the writers grappled with these challenges; in doing so, they created a script that is visually distinct from the Hollywood standard (Figure 2).



Figures 1 and 2: On the left, page three from Ari Aster’s *Hereditary* screenplay demonstrates the typical formatting of the medium, wherein spoken words are offset on the page and minimal sound cues appear. On the right, page 4 from Beck and Woods’ speculative screenplay shows how the work breaks from conventional formatting.

Working from an idea they had in college, Beck and Woods wrote a short sixty-seven-page speculative screenplay or ‘spec script.’ The purpose of the spec script is to showcase the story through action, structure, and dialogue. Unlike shooting scripts, these streamlined screenplays do not include the technical details necessary to film the story, such as numbered scenes, camera work, and

sound effects, as well as other details that are determined by the creative vision of the director. Rather, the spec script offers a lean, simplified version of the story; written with no guarantee of a readership, they are designed to hook the attention of producers or executives who may go on to purchase and greenlight the production.

The speculative screenplay for *A Quiet Place* marks a departure from the convention of dialogue-driven scripts which contain minimal details, very few sound cues, and no images. Much like the characters that Beck and Woods have created, the writers themselves were forced to rely upon alternative modes of communication. Not only does the screenplay's narrative raise the issue of communication challenges, but the screenplay itself also exemplifies it. Because the script is stripped of dialogue, it compensates by placing a greater emphasis on sound design and visuals to communicate the story. Ebert notes that such a strategy is common to silent cinema more generally. "Silent films," he claims, "like black-and-white films, add by subtracting. What they do not have enhances what is there, by focusing on it and making it do more work" (1997).

Ebert's claim recalls Rudolf Arnheim's (1969) assertion in *Film as Art* that silent film concentrates "the spectator's attention more closely on the visible" (110). He writes, "From its very silence film received the impetus as well as the power to achieve excellent artistic effects" (106). In the absence of recorded sound, silent cinema developed a visual vernacular that amplified the expressive potential of what is shown onscreen, allowing spectators to surrender themselves to the power of the image.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, Arnheim praises silent film's "great artistic purity of expression" (cited in Grundmann, 2001)—a phrase that aligns with what Beck and Woods (2018) say of the silent era: "Cinema had never felt so pure." In part, it is this 'purity' that the writers sought to capture in their spec script. Because it shifts attention away from dialogue, the script to *A Quiet Place* focuses on visuals and elements of sound design that do not include speech. Thus, the work consciously deviates from the accepted practice of standard screenplay formatting.

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<sup>12</sup> Arnheim (1969) uses the example of unheard music in a silent film: the music is conveyed by how the characters react to it. The audience focuses their attention on the human response to the music, not the music itself, thereby highlighting the most "important part of this music—its rhythm, its power to unite and 'move' men" (108). Thus, Arnheim claims that where silence expands the "artistic potentialities" (109) of film by forcing filmmakers to express themselves visually in unique and creative ways, spoken dialogue "narrows the world of the film" (226)—it "paralyzes visual action" (228) by "interfer[ing] with the expression of the image" (228), acting as an expedient shorthand. Arnheim therefore contrasts the "visually fruitful image of man in action" to "the sterile one of the man who talks" (229).

Sound cues in spec scripts tend to be rare, restricted to only what is necessary to the story. Michael Tucker (2018), the filmmaker behind the YouTube channel “Lessons from the Screenplay,” points out that, consequently, “most screenwriting material has very little to say on the subject of sound.” For instance, he cites Syd Field’s *Screenplay: The Foundation of Screenwriting* (1979) in which sound is dismissed as a final post-production step in the filmmaking process. Accordingly, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2012) note that we tend to frame our discussions of film in terms of visual attention. They write, “we speak of ‘watching’ a film and of being movie ‘viewers’ or ‘spectators’—all terms which suggest that the soundtrack is a secondary factor. We are strongly inclined to think of sound as simply an accompaniment to the real basis of cinema, the moving images” (292). However, the *A Quiet Place* screenplay demonstrates the extent to which sound is built into the very blueprint of the film. Beck and Woods offset the script’s lack of dialogue by elevating the role of this often-overlooked cinematic tool—certainly as far as screenplays go—and in doing so, they create a unique script that highlights the remarkable significance of sound in horror.

In the spec script, the film’s pre-title sequence, which contains no dialogue, is four pages long and includes over fifteen details pertaining to sound design. Taking viewers through a single day on the Abbott farm, the sequence gestures towards the ways in which quiet has been integrated into their daily lives. As is standard in screenplay formatting, significant details—including necessary sound cues—appear in full caps. In this spec script, many sonic details are further accentuated through underlining, stressing the core importance of sound design. We discover that the family wears “SHOE COVERS” (Beck and Woods n.d., 1), Regan wears a “HEARING AID” (1), and the dog wears a “MUZZLE” (1). They ensure that their actions do not “make even the slightest sound” (1) as they move about “quietly” (2) in a home with walls covered in “THICK PADDING ... FOAM ... WOOL INSULATION” (3). The father “MIMES” eating to his daughter to indicate that she should join their meal—a meal that they eat with “plastic” cutlery (3). These script details emphasize the conscious need for quiet in the world of the film—an idea that is highlighted at the end of the sequence when the daughter “GIGGLE[S]” during a silent game of Monopoly, thereby making the “first sound we’ve heard this whole time” (4). In response to this sound, “[THE FATHER’S] EYES WIDEN. [THE DAUGHTER] COVERS HER MOUTH. EVERYONE GETS DEADLY STILL. AFRAID” (4). The scene is based upon the principle of the sonic disruption: a quiet moment of family bonding is unexpectedly unsettled by sound. This pattern of quiet followed by the sudden intrusion of sound has the

effect of rendering familiar noises, such as a joyful giggle, threatening, and the act of muzzling oneself reminds us of the need to control sound in this world. The script's lack of dialogue is an extension of this idea; so fearful is the family of making any noise that they do not speak. As the script makes clear, *A Quiet Place* encourages its audience to fear the basic soundscape of everyday life—including dialogue.

Sarah Kozloff (2000) identifies dialogue as “the most important aspect of film sound” (6), arguing that it anchors a film’s characters and diegesis and is a key means of communicating narrative causality. Bordwell and Thompson similarly assert that in most cinema, sound effects and music are “subordinate to dialogue,” calling dialogue the primary “transmitter of story information” (298). While such critics as Spadoni and Donnelly would dispute these claims, there is much scholarship that highlights the centrality of dialogue in cinema. In the 2013 collection *Film Dialogue*, Jeff Jaeckle takes a more measured approach, pointing out the importance of understanding cinematic language for its aesthetic, narrative, and cultural dimensions; he writes that in film, “the look has its equal in listening” and “images are understood and appreciated through their interaction with words” (1). Jennifer O’Meara makes a similar claim in *Engaging Dialogue* (2018), focusing on what she calls “cinematic verbalism” (2) in the work of individual writer-directors. As this verbalism often originates in the script, it is perhaps unsurprising that screenwriters should remark upon the particular significance of dialogue in film. For instance, in his guidebook on screenwriting, William Miller (1997) notes that dialogue “provides information and advances the story. It manages time through rhythm, tempo, and pacing. It defines characters ... it reveals characters ... it reveals emotion” (193). Such statements, while debatable, nonetheless draw our attention to dialogue as a multi-faceted cinematic tool.

In their script, Beck and Woods met the challenge of conveying these story elements without dialogue by experimenting with page formatting and typography. This incredibly uncommon practice immediately distinguishes their screenplay from others, which follow a rather rigid industry standard. For instance, a striking example of the script’s control of pacing occurs during one particularly tense sequence. The father (who is called ‘John’ in the spec script) finds himself in a perilous position: he must get from the house to the shed to help his family, but one of the monsters blocks his path. As he makes his way towards the shed, the creature senses his presence but cannot hear him. The sequence begins by explicitly drawing our attention to ambient sound, such as the blowing wind and rustling leaves which muffle John’s footsteps. To emphasize the tension of this moment, the phrase “THIS IS THE LONGEST

WALK OF HIS LIFE” (Beck and Woods n.d., 15) is both capitalized and underlined. As we turn the page, John’s walk towards the shed begins, but his coverage of these seemingly meagre thirty feet unfolds in a series of five pages, each page containing a single line of text which appears in an increasingly larger font:

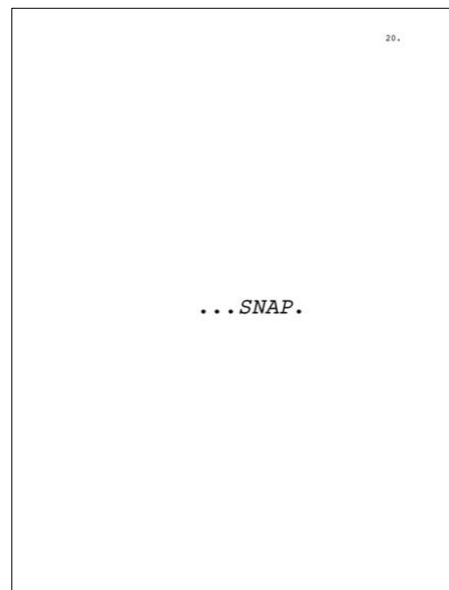
John is 30 feet away from the  
shed... (16)

20 feet away... (17)

10 feet... (18)

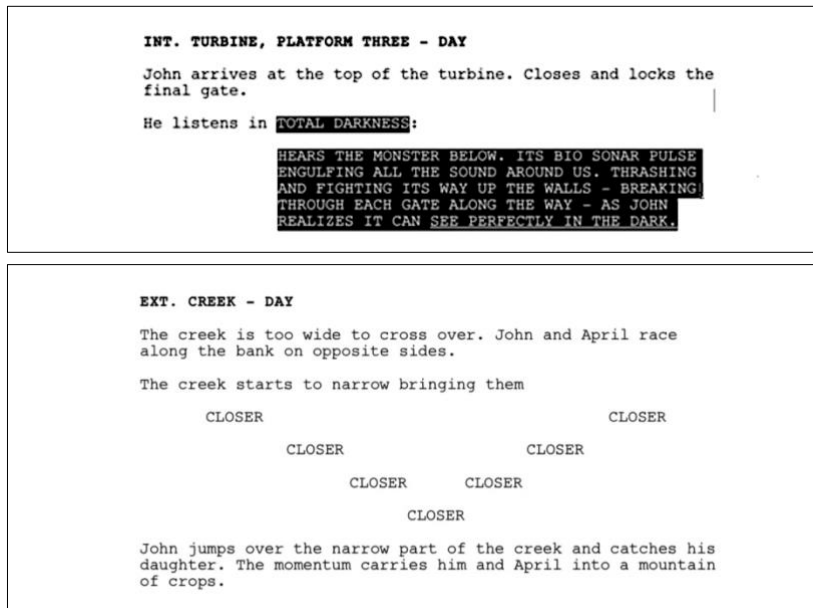
5... (19)

...SNAP. (20) (Figure 3)



This unique strategy allows the screenplay to visualize John’s “longest walk” by stretching it across multiple pages, literally extending its length. The increasing font size both parallels John’s perspective as he gets closer to his destination and makes the sudden intrusion of sound all the more striking, for it suggests that his long walk is interrupted by not just any sound, but a *loud* one. Without dialogue, the pacing and tension of this sequence is visualized on the page, building towards a sonic breaking point. Such strategies transform the screenplay into a more three-dimensional experience, which is uncommon in the medium. As Beck and Woods state, “we determined the script must feel as cinematic as the best version of the final film”; this process, they explain, forced them to “[throw] formatting styles to the wind” (2018).

Accordingly, the spec script does something extraordinarily rare: beyond the fact that its typography and formatting suggest such elements as rhythm, pacing, volume, and even lighting (Figure 4), the script also incorporates actual images. Most screenplays are only visually suggestive, allowing the director’s vision to take precedence; however, the speculative screenplay for *A Quiet Place* is filled with images. Some of these consist of stylized text, such as handwritten notes, overlapping newspaper headlines, and even a sequence that resembles concrete poetry (Figure 5), while others are more pronounced.



Excerpts from script pages 57 (Figure 4, top) and 60 (Figure 5, bottom)

For instance, page twenty-eight features an image of the family’s Monopoly boardgame, which has been converted into a make-shift map, picturing the layout of the family’s environment, complete with their house and shed, as well as the nearby lake and turbine (Figure 6). This hacked game board is a tool that John uses to hatch a plan; unable to explain his ideas to his family through dialogue, he uses the board as an alternative to spoken words. In this instance, the screenplay itself enacts the family’s struggle to communicate without dialogue.

Later in the script, the screenwriters use images to convey the gravity of a task John faces. He must scale the heights of a wind turbine before a pre-set alarm goes off. The script explains that the turbine is “just an abandoned

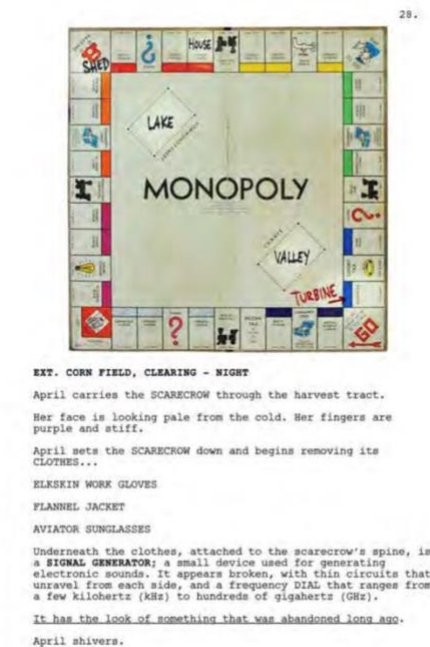


Figure 6

monolith that stretches an astounding 330 ft into the sky” (Beck and Woods n.d., 53). “To put this in perspective” (53), however, the screenplay includes a diagram that dominates the page, comparing the size of the turbine to notable landmarks (Figure 7). Without dialogue to impress upon the script-reader the pressure of John’s undertaking, Beck and Woods convey the urgency visually.

53.

John proceeds cautiously. It’s like crossing a MINE FIELD.  
One wrong step... one crunch of foliage... could end it all.

**EXT. WIND FARM, TURBINE - DAY**

John arrives at the base of the nearest WIND TURBINE.

He gazes up at the towering structure in front of him. It’s a modern windmill of sorts; once used to convert kinetic energy from the wind into electrical power.

Now, it’s just an abandoned monolith that stretches an astounding 330 ft into the sky. To put this into perspective...

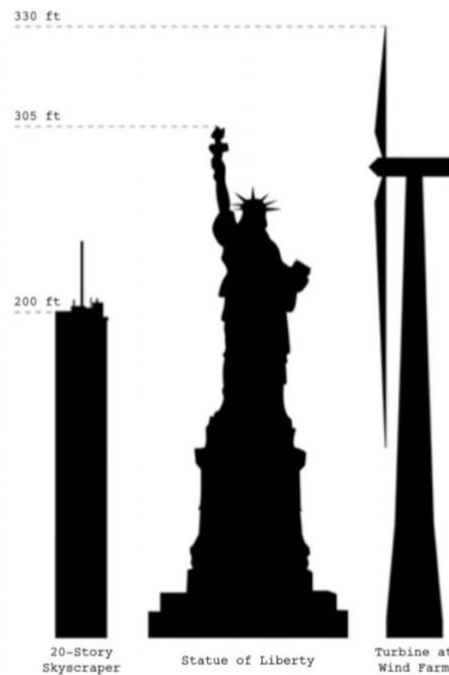


Figure 7

Recall Ebert’s (1997) claim that silent films ‘add by subtracting’. Ebert notes that what they lack “enhances what is there, by focusing on it and making it do more work.” In part, he refers to the fact that visuals carry more weight in silent cinema—an idea that is echoed by Beck and Woods (2018) who call silent-era filmmakers “masters of visual storytelling, needing not one line of dialogue

to communicate character, emotion, or intent.”<sup>13</sup> Beck points out that it was important “to communicate that kind of silent film experience on the page” of their own script (Sargent). Through its incorporation of actual images, the spec script for *A Quiet Place* reflects the greater prominence that visuals take in cinema that lacks spoken dialogue. Beck calls their unique screenplay a “roadmap for essentially what is a dialogue-free movie that is still going to convey a very visual but also a sonic adventure” (Boone 2019). Here, he highlights the two ingredients—image and sound—that take on a more significant role in both the film and its screenplay due to their dearth of dialogue. In this regard, both the film and the script are exercises in communication.

The spec script also highlights *A Quiet Place*'s role within a larger horror tradition. As a prototype for the film, the original screenplay emphasizes the significance not just of visuals in cinema, but of sound and silence in the horror genre more specifically. As I have noted, horror films have long recognized the importance of sound design, but in keeping with convention, this significance is downplayed in film scripts. By flouting the conventions of the script medium, Beck and Woods produce a unique screenplay that is in many ways more innovative than the film based upon it.<sup>14</sup> They have acknowledged the challenges of writing the screenplay, calling their script “unorthodox,” “odd,” and “weird” (Beck and Woods 2018). They worried that it would be a “really tough read” (Renee 2018) and asked themselves, “Is this script going to bore people to tears?” (Sargent). These concerns are rooted in the difficulty of telling the story, but also of selling it. Spec scripts are notably also known as ‘selling scripts.’ As I have already noted, these works are written with the hope that they will be purchased by independent producers or studios who may then go on to

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<sup>13</sup> Notably, we once again see the equation of sound with dialogue here—a misconception that both the script and the marketing of *A Quiet Place* play into.

<sup>14</sup> After numerous rejections, Beck and Woods’ agent sent their speculative screenplay to Michael Bay’s Platinum Dunes, and Bay agreed to produce the film on the strength of the spec. With Bay attached, Paramount purchased the script, which Krasinski then read. His wife, actress Emily Blunt, had just given birth to their second child, so this script about trying to protect your children in a dangerous world resonated with him. Krasinski revised the script to emphasize the family’s struggle, hence his co-writing credit on the shooting script, and he went on to direct and star in the film, alongside his wife. It is worth noting that the revised screenplay is more conventional than the original spec script; the rewritten script contains no images, it does away with much of the unique formatting that I discuss in my essay, and it incorporates dialogue that is both signed and spoken. The finished film, which is based upon the revised script, is accordingly itself more conventional, pulling not only from the traditions of horror cinema, but also of sci-fi and B-movie creature features.



greenlight the productions. The concern that Beck and Woods express regarding the script's readability is therefore a concern regarding its salability as well. Just as the screenwriters turned the absence of dialogue into an advantage, so too did the film's marketers. Quiet is indeed the film's currency.

## Marketing "Silence"

Of all the tools that a film has to promote itself, the trailer is perhaps the most important, particularly as digital platforms have expanded both their shelf-life and dissemination. As Jonathan Gray (2010) puts it in his study of film promos, "If a film triumphs in its opening week, good promos will have played a significant role in this victory" (49). *A Quiet Place* was expected to gross roughly 20 million dollars in its opening weekend; however, it made a triumphant debut at the box office, earning over 50 million dollars (*AQP Numbers*). In part, this strong opening points to the trailer's success in enticing the buying public.<sup>15</sup>

Stephen Garrett (2012)—the founder of Jump Cut—an advertising company that specializes in film promotion—summarizes the role of the movie trailer by claiming that it "pitches the promise of the premise."<sup>16</sup> These

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<sup>15</sup> To understand the importance of marketing to the success of a film, one need look no further than the amount of money invested in it. While *A Quiet Place* cost only seventeen-million dollars to make, it was released by a major studio (Paramount Pictures) and allotted an impressive marketing budget of eighty-six-million dollars (D'Alessandro 2018). This money funded the film's wide ranging social media campaigns, its custom promos and trailers, and their placement in coveted time-spots. For example, the trailer played in theatres during previews for the highest-grossing film of 2017—Rian Johnson's *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*—and new teaser footage debuted during the 2018 Superbowl pregame, which was watched by over 100 million viewers.

<sup>16</sup> In their qualitative and quantitative research on film trailer audiences, Fred L. Greene, Keith M. Johnston, and Ed Vollans (2016) question the reading of trailers as linear paratexts that exist only in relation to the feature films they are intended to sell. Rather, the researchers recognize the significance of the trailer today as a complex media form in its own right, noting that audiences interact with trailers in ways that differ from other promotional materials: newspapers such as *The Guardian*, media websites such as *Den of Geek*, and industry publications such as *The Wrap* all commonly feature breakdowns of new trailers. Industry award shows like the Golden Trailer Awards and the Clio Key Art Awards recognize these works as "creative artefacts" (58), and sites such as *Honest Trailers* and *Trailers from Hell* reframe the media as a form of cult entertainment that is analyzed and deconstructed. Moreover, trailers that have been recut or spoofed are a popular feature of YouTube, Vimeo, and other social media platforms (58). Yet, despite this complexity, Greene et al. acknowledge the surprising "ferocity" with which respondents clung to the idea that trailers offer "an accurate 'free

promotional clips build anticipation for the film by offering a sampling of its emotional experience, but their short run-time—usually about two-minutes in length—means that they must rely upon recognizable tropes to convey the film’s emotional core quickly and effectively. In her work on this media form, Charlotte Jensen (2014) points out that trailers consequently prioritize genre, incorporating familiar visual hooks and sound cues so that the audience knows what to expect from the finished film (123). Lisa Kernan (2004) claims that this focus on genre facilitates “the film’s positioning as a commodity” as it allows audiences to clearly understand the nature of the product for sale (14). The first trailer for *A Quiet Place*, however, resists this clarity by deliberately blurring the line between horror, thriller, and suspense in order to move its appeal beyond fans of a single genre. By knowingly playing with the conventions of its own medium, the trailer stands out in an oversaturated market of movie promos. The trailer for *A Quiet Place* is one facet of a unique marketing campaign that plays into the film’s relationship with sound and dialogue.



Click the image above to view the 2018 teaser trailer on YouTube.

Garrett (2012) claims that trailers are cut around two basic building blocks: a “dialogue string” and a “visual string.” These components allow the trailer to advance the story, set the mood, and share emotion. However, Garrett’s formulation poses a challenge for *A Quiet Place*. The film’s lack of dialogue means that the marketing department did not have the usual tools that

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sample’ of the future film” (79), thereby recognizing the link between the trailer and the film it sells.

are used to sell a movie at their disposal. As the film's producer, Brad Fuller, put it, "The movie doesn't have the classic genre exposition, a couple of minutes of dialogue which you would always see in the marketing of the movie to hang your hat on" (Schwerdtfeger 2018). The first trailer's 'visual string' is similarly restrained, for it strategically denies viewers any glimpse of the film's antagonists. Brice Tidwell, vice-president of brand strategy at Paramount, explains, "We said from early on: 'Let's not show what this monster looks like.' That becomes the price of admission" (Bitette 2018). Lacking both dialogue and identifiable antagonists, the debut trailer holds back more information than it conveys;<sup>17</sup> we only know that a family is hunted by a pervasive menace that is vaguely identified by the pronoun "they" in intertitles. The cryptic nature of the threat makes the trailer an 'open-text,' straddling the boundaries of horror, thriller, and suspense, while also making it difficult to categorize the film in terms of a specific horror subgenre. Where Kernan (2004) identifies genre as the key to commodifying movies, with *A Quiet Place*, it is the trailer's hybridity that widens the pool of the film's potential viewership. The promo's genre-bending is ultimately rooted in its marketability. Kozloff (2000) also makes the point that genre is the most powerful force that shapes film dialogue. She claims that certain genres, such as Westerns and melodramas, "evinced verbal patterns" (136), using dialogue in distinctive and recognizable ways. If we apply this logic to the first trailer for *A Quiet Place*, then its lack of dialogue would contribute to the difficulty of locating the film's genre. The absence of spoken words plays another significant role, however: it amplifies the film's soundscape. Without dialogue to command our attention, even the slightest sound is granted a new potency. The privileging of muteness over silence allows the trailer—like the film it is designed to promote—to foreground sound's significance.

The film's first trailer was released in November 2017, six months in advance of the film itself. The trailer opens on a note of quiet; though viewers do not yet realize it, they momentarily occupy the deaf daughter's sonic envelope. Low, unsettling non-diegetic sounds, such as strings and clicking, then begin as the trailer moves viewers through scenes of the family's routines. We see them laying sand trails, tiptoeing around the house, eating dinner while they sign to one another, and playing a board game with soft pieces. Despite the calm of these moments, additional images—alongside non-diegetic sound—suggest

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<sup>17</sup> Two key narrative details are withheld from the audience here: Regan's deafness and her mother's pregnancy—details that would undoubtedly add to the tension of the trailer. However, by withholding this information, the trailer allows sound/visuals, rather than narrative, to bear the weight of the audience's anxieties. The focus consequently remains on the high concept of the film.

that something is awry: abandoned buildings, a rudimentary memorial, and enormous scratches etched into the plaster of a wall. Between these sequences are intertitles that lay out the rules of this world for us: “Listen closely. Move carefully. And never make a sound. If they can’t hear you, they can’t hunt you” (AQP Teaser).

The trailer highlights the film’s sonic strategies, including the weaponization of sound. The lack of diegetic sound as the family moves through their day lends the trailer an air of quiet which is broken over halfway through by the jarring diegetic smash of a knocked over gas-lamp. In response to the noise, the family hush themselves in fear; the trailer holds the quiet of the diegesis for a beat before banging emanates from an unseen threat.<sup>18</sup> After another tense silent pause, both the pace and the volume of the trailer pick up, but it denies viewers an expected jump scare. Instead, a series of quick-cuts cycle the viewer from shot-to-shot, accompanied by a staccato rhythm of non-diegetic strings and drumming. This combination creates a flashing effect that builds intensity over the latter half of the trailer. As we shift between shots in this final sequence, the sound is slightly offbeat with the visuals, and this dysrhythm adds to the viewer’s sense of disorientation.

Many horror trailers end with a short sequence after the title card—a final jump scare or unsettling image designed to invoke fear. However, this trailer concludes on a note of quiet, with intertitles that announce the film’s name, release date, and the phrase “Silence is survival” (AQP Teaser). Though it ends by asserting the importance of silence, the trailer itself demonstrates just how effective sound is in unnerving an audience. Indeed, what is sold here is less a film ‘narrative’ than a ‘concept’ revolving around the need for quiet. These deviations from the standard horror trailer—the lack of dialogue and exposition, the visual restraint, and the subdued conclusion—paired with the trailer’s genre-hybridity, expand the film’s potential viewership.

As Paramount’s president of domestic distribution, Kyle Davies, puts it, the film—and its trailer—was “playing to everyone” (Barnes 2018). Where the horror genre tends to attract viewers between the ages of eighteen and thirty (Smith 2018)<sup>19</sup>, thrillers and suspense films appeal to the fifty-plus moviegoer—

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<sup>18</sup> Chion (2009) identifies this technique as “acousmatic,” which he defines as “the auditory situation in which we hear sounds without seeing their cause or source” (465). Because it remains enigmatic, acousmatic sound creates feelings of unease, confusion, dread, and terror in audiences.

<sup>19</sup> Movio is a marketing data analytics company specializing in moviegoer data. Based upon the attendance history of over 100 million US moviegoers in 2018, Movio finds that the average age of horror audiences is younger than the overall moviegoing crowd. Movio divides

a moviegoer who is much less likely to see a horror film than other age groups, but far more likely to see an art-house film or a family drama (Smith 2017, 8). The trailer for *A Quiet Place* was designed to appeal to both of these audiences. Its hybrid approach to genre, which is supported by its lack of dialogue, therefore acts as a clever marketing tool. Additionally, dialogue-free trailers are often used to promote dramas and thrillers that are coded as being more ‘sophisticated’ or intellectually complex. In other words, because they lack dialogue, such trailers demonstrate a faith in their audience’s intelligence by withholding exposition and trusting viewers to fill in the gaps on their own. For instance, the teaser trailers for Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* (2010) and *Tenet* (2020) are free of dialogue, as are the trailers for David Fincher’s *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), Jonathan Glazer’s *Under the Skin* (2013), and Luca Guadagnino’s art-house remake of *Suspiria* (2018).<sup>20</sup>

Gray points out that trailers set up and frame our interaction with films; he explains that “these promos will have already begun the process of creating textual meaning, serving as the first outpost of interpretation” (2010, 48). Thus, trailers become an integral part of the films that they promote, coding the way in which viewers read the finished product.<sup>21</sup> The dialogue-free trailer for *A*

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horror fans into two distinct audiences: Paranormal Horror fans (who tend to be younger, with an interest in titles such as *The Nun*, *Slender Man*, and *The First Purge*) and Sci-Fi Horror fans (who tend to be older, with an interest in films such as *Annihilation*, *It Comes at Night*, and *Life*). According to their data, Paranormal Horror tends to attract a younger audience, and there is a near gender parity: 49% female and 51% male. This gender division becomes more pronounced with Sci-Fi horror, however, with 33% of the audience being female and 67% male. By comparison, blockbuster films tend to attract an audience that is 56% male and 44% female. In their report on *A Quiet Place*, Movio notes that the film “broke out by attracting a wider audience compared to more traditional horror movies, behaving and evolving in a similar way to most blockbusters” (Smith 2018).

<sup>20</sup> These filmmakers/films are known for their complexity (see reviews of these works). It is also worth noting that there are a number of horror teasers that lack dialogue; these works amplify feelings of dread by providing no exposition. The teasers to critically-acclaimed horrors such as Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979) and Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980) feature no dialogue, which sets the promotion of these movies apart from trailers for other genre films released at the same time, which are narrator-driven (i.e. trailers for *The Amityville Horror* [1979], *Salem’s Lot* [1979], *Dracula* [1979], and *Friday the 13th* [1980], among others). More recently, the trailers to *The Omen* (2007) and *The Hills Have Eyes II* (2007) are dialogue-free. As these films are remakes and sequels (much like Guadagnino’s *Suspiria*), they recycle already known storylines, making the lack of exposition less innovative than it may otherwise seem.

<sup>21</sup> Greene, Johnston, and Vollans (2016) point out that “cinema has been usurped by individual online viewing in current trailer viewing habits” (63). Of the respondents in their study of film trailer viewership, 60% admitted to watching film trailers online, where only 27.7% watch

*Quiet Place* is a masterclass in tension, lacking gore, focusing on the plight of a single family, and highlighting the importance of sound design. Its distinctiveness is evident in comparison to the promo for *Blumhouse's Truth or Dare* (2018)—the other horror release in theatres at the same time as Krasinski's film. This trailer, which features college-aged characters, dialogue-heavy exposition, jump scares, gore, and violence, clearly abides by the conventions of the slasher subgenre. While both films are PG-13 horrors, the trailer for *A Quiet Place* plays a role in producing and performing what we might term 'sophistication' in order to attract an audience that extends beyond the standard consumer of horror.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, twenty percent of the film's viewers were over the age of fifty (Bitette). Paired with a record of advance ticket sales and a

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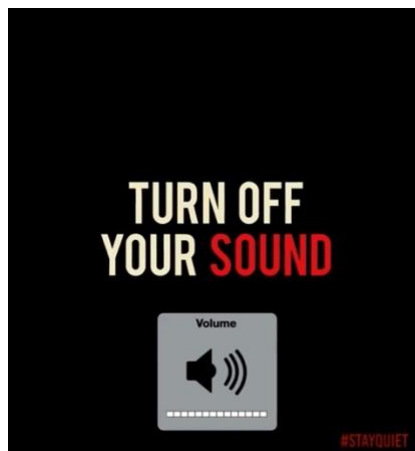
trailers in theatres. While these numbers gesture to the dominance of online trailer viewership, they also indicate that 87.7% of respondents watch trailers, highlighting the significance of these media texts. Indeed, the original full-length trailer for *A Quiet Place* has over 19 million views on YouTube, and the second trailer over 30 million views. Greene et al. point out that online trailers raise the issue of "individual impetus" (63): viewers specifically seek out trailers to watch online. In their study, respondents offered 4 primary reasons for this impetus: 1) to develop/deepen their knowledge of a film, 2) to judge the quality/aesthetics of the film, 3) external recommendations (personal or via social media), 4) preference for a pre-existing element (star, director, or story). The researchers point out that the smallest proportion of participants listed a preference for pre-existing elements in the film as a reason for watching a trailer, where recommendations were "a strong force in the individual impetus" (65) of respondents. These details draw our attention to the complexity of contemporary viewership, where the film and trailer experience is no longer restricted to theatres and TV screens. One must therefore ask the question whether or not these paratexts change for a film when it is no longer viewed in a crowded theatre.

<sup>22</sup> In interviews, Krasinski uses the rather loaded qualifier "elevated" to describe the horror films that influenced *A Quiet Place*. The screenwriter April Wolfe points out that this term is often used in Hollywood to distinguish recent horror films from the shock value and graphic violence of the much maligned slasher subgenre; Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014), David Robert Mitchell's *It Follows* (2014), Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015), and Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) have all been labelled 'elevated horror'—however, other tags are also used: 'post-horror,' 'smart-horror' and 'horror-adjacent,' among them. Wolfe notes that the 'elevated' label represents an attempt to distance films from their horror lineage—a practice that belies the long-standing prejudice against horror, which is often framed by critics as cheap, exploitative fare. In fact, William Friedkin famously insisted that *The Exorcist* (1973) was 'a film about the mystery of faith' rather than a horror, much as Ari Aster pitched *Hereditary* as a "family tragedy that curdles into a nightmare" (Mallory 2018). As Nicholas Barber asserts, these labels are often a means of framing the horror as a prestige production. In distancing themselves from the negative connotations of the genre, such films may find it easier to secure not only funding and wider distribution, but critical acclaim and industry awards as well.

strong performance in matinees, these consumer patterns are uncommon for horror audiences (Schwartzel 2018). As Davies claims, “the film broke free of any genre box. The story about family is what’s connecting. With adults, it’s that primeval need to protect your family” (Schwartzel).

This attempt to broaden *A Quiet Place*’s audience continued with its second official trailer. Initially teased during the 2018 Superbowl pre-game, the full trailer made its debut on the daytime talk show *Ellen Degeneres*, ensuring that the promo would reach a vast and varied audience. Featuring the hashtag #stayquiet, this trailer heralds one of the innovations in the film’s marketing: its interactivity. While promotional language for the movie consistently used direct address and the imperative voice, social media amplified this participatory approach. The film’s official twitter account implored audiences to “Stop talking” (@quietplacemovie, March 27, 2018) and to “STFU” (@quietplacemovie, April 3, 2018). “Sssh.....” (@johnkrasinski, November 16, 2017), it warned, and the feed asked viewers, “Could you survive?” (@quietplacemovie, February 4, 2018). To connect with a younger demographic, Paramount released a range of social media teasers and mini-trailers. The absence of spoken dialogue in the majority of these promos allowed them to highlight the ways in which the film plays with sound, exposing a new generation of fans to horror’s sonic strategies.

For instance, one twenty-second ad which was posted on Instagram begins with an intertitle asking the viewer to “Turn off your sound” (AQP Turn Off); the phrase appears onscreen alongside the volume app, which shows that the volume is currently turned up—a fact that is confirmed by a non-diegetic ringing sound (Figure 8). The ad continues by performing this action for us, muting itself. Accordingly, the app shows that the volume has now been muted as images from the film begin to play in complete silence (Figure 9) along with the phrase “Because if they hear you.” However, despite suggesting that the sound



Figures 8 (top) and 9 (bottom)

has been turned off, loud music and sound effects suddenly overtake the silence as the phrase “They hunt you” appears onscreen. This ad teases viewers into a false sense of security, assuring them that the device is muted, only to subvert the safety offered by silence. The ad cleverly transforms our own devices into dangers. Viewers are pulled into the premise of the film only to be compromised by the eruption of sound through silence, rendering both terrifying.

This strategy of participating in the film’s premise is one of the key features of its sound design. Horror films—like comedies and thrillers—are largely defined by the reactions they are intended to elicit in audiences and therefore rely upon engaging their audiences to a greater degree. In the case of horror cinema, we are meant to feel the fear of the characters onscreen. Such films are participatory experiences, and sound is one of the devices through which horror achieves this participation. Audiences hold their breath, hush themselves, and gasp alongside the film’s characters. Aadahl and Van der Ryn explain how they achieve this sense of sonic involvement in *A Quiet Place*: in designing the film’s sound, they started the movie with a more traditional sound level, which they achieved by raising the first reel by several decibels (VanDerWerff). Then, that sound level was slowly pulled back to a lower baseline. This shift occurs during the film’s opening sequence; as the audience is settling in, opening their bags of candy, and rustling through their popcorn, the film enters a sonically spartan environment. Suddenly, every noise stands out—not just onscreen, but in the theatre as well. This technique enforces an awareness of the noise that the audience itself is making.

Aadahl and Van der Ryn assert that sound and volume is “like a security blanket. What happens is, people lean back in their movie-theatre seats, and the sound can push the audience back a little bit. When you take away that security blanket, when you get so quiet, people start to lean forward, and they start to hold their breath and get quiet themselves and become aware of the sounds they are making” (Bishop 2018).<sup>23</sup> Thus, the audience mirrors the behavior of the film’s characters, and the boundary between what is happening onscreen versus

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<sup>23</sup> Aadahl and Van der Ryn frame the film in terms of its intended viewing format: as a theatrical release, *A Quiet Place* was intended to be watched in quiet movie theatres where advanced multichannel sound technologies showcase the film’s sound design best. In his tellingly titled article “Yes, ‘A Quiet Place’ Is Effective Home Viewing, But You Have to Do Your Part” (2018), Joe Reid notes that the film’s VOD release demands that home viewers create a dark, silent, distraction-free atmosphere for the film to retain its power of sonic engagement. Looking forward—particularly in a COVID-era environment—as more and more audiences watch releases from home and on varied devices, studios may need to rethink these strategies for sonic engagement beyond the theatrical environment.



in the theatre becomes blurred. Chion (2009) draws our attention to this participatory experience when he writes that “every instance of silence is disarming since it seems to expose our faculty of hearing; it’s as if a giant ear were turned toward us ready to pick up the tiniest sounds we make. We are no longer just listening to the film; we are being listened to by it” (148). The hearing audience is pulled into the conceit; because they are both listening and *being listened to*, they fear to make a sound lest they attract the monsters. The lower volume and lack of dialogue in *A Quiet Place* deprives the audience of their security, forcing them to readjust their own sonic baseline.

This participatory feature of the film—and of horror more generally—was captured in the film’s online marketing. For instance, the film’s promotion included the ‘Quiet Place Detector,’ an interactive web application which allows

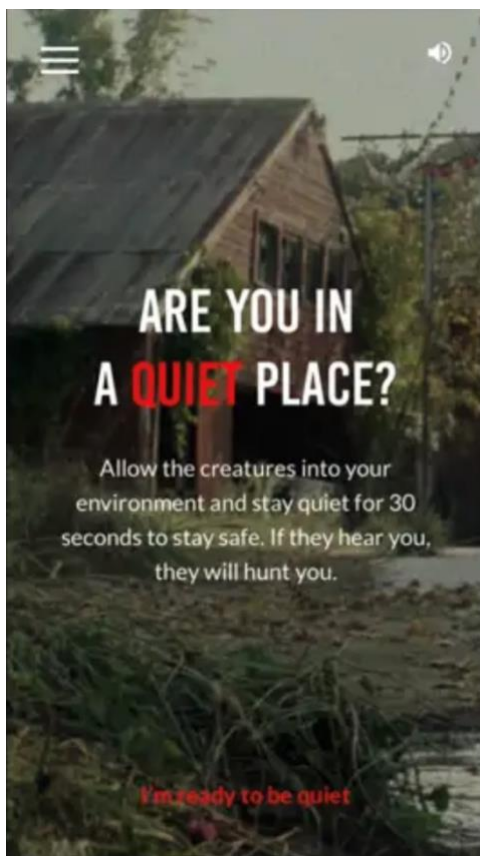


Figure 10

users to test their own environment to determine if they would be safe or hunted (Figure 10). In the digital age, when the timbre of daily life is accompanied by a cacophony of rings, beeps, and chirps, this message of quiet is particularly potent. The app works through the user’s microphone, activating it so that the device reads the average volume of the user’s environment, which it sets as a baseline (Lee 2018). Users are then challenged to stay quiet for a period of time, and based upon the results, one either lives or dies. If they die, they are given the option to try again, but users are also prompted to share what caused the sound that killed them. Conversely, if they were safe, the app asked them to take a photo of their quiet place and share it on social media. Essentially a simple web game, the app had users actively participate in the film’s central concept, making them as aware of sound as the Abbotts. In keeping with Woods’ claim

that the screenwriters sought to weaponize sound against the audience, this app weaponizes the sound of one’s actual environment in real-time. Creative

marketing gave audiences a sampling of the film experience before the movie had even been released.

Krasinski says that he sought to create a “tense, emotional and *participatory* experience for audiences” of the film: “I want the audience to be asking the whole way: What would I do in this situation? How would I stay quiet?” (AQP Pressbook 2018, 2, 14). The app, and the marketing of the movie more generally, actualizes this element of the film, literalizing Chion’s claim that instances of ‘silence’ in cinema position the audience as figures who both listen and are listened to. The film’s marketing therefore heightens our awareness of sound’s importance in horror.

While *A Quiet Place*’s lack of dialogue may seem like an innovation, this strategy draws our attention to the film’s indebtedness to horror cinema’s long sonic legacy—a legacy that spans the silent era. Of all the genres, horror is the one that most sustains the aesthetics of the silent period; its soundscapes—however sparse they may be—are tools to unsettle and disturb, and *A Quiet Place* capitalizes on this tradition. The film’s promotional paratexts do something similar, but the legacy of sonic experimentation in scriptwriting and digital marketing is much shorter, granting these works a greater uniqueness. Yet, the film, the script, and the movie’s transmedial marketing all revolve around the central role that sound plays in the communication of horror. By recognizing this fact, *A Quiet Place* managed to connect with audiences and speak volumes at the box office.

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