



## Abstract

Deafness and hearing impairments pose sound cinema in front of a crucial problem: is a non-ableist representation possible? At first, the issue might seem related to the kind of narratives that sound cinema tailors around disability, and it is indeed mostly from this perspective that it has been investigated. However, there is more to it. How is a non-ableist representation *at all* possible, when sound cinema constructs practices of listening that, apparently, always imply a spectator “able” to listen? In other words, is it possible for sound cinema to construct practices of listening that are (at least) open toward the infinite range of shifting possibilities that constitute embodied listening, instead of adhering to and shaping the norm of an idealised “perfectly” hearing ear?

In my thesis, I want to explore the apparent paradox that emerges by letting deafness, hearing impairments and sound cinema encounter: the (im?)possibility of an *audiovisual* representation that accounts for what the Cambridge Dictionary problematically defines as “the quality of being unable to hear.” To do so, I intend to move interdisciplinarily between Audiovisual Studies, Critical Disability Studies, and Critical Feminist Studies, and along their intersections. First, I explore a theoretical framework which allows me to argue that sound cinema represents *specific* hearing/listening practices as *universal*, shaping for its films aural dimensions informed by arbitrary criteria, while rarely dealing with such an arbitrariness and often silently proposing it as the norm. By letting this theoretical framework resonate with critical interventions on deafness, cochlear implants, and embodied listening, sound cinema’s mainstream listening practices will be coloured with deeply ableist tints. Second, I assert the necessity of a new theory of audiovision—one that truly strives to take into account the contributions of Critical Disability Studies—in order to both understand the processes of aural mediation proposed by existing audiovisual objects and construct new ones. I commence the building of this new theory by discussing and reshaping the concepts of “point of audition” and “aural diegetic space.” The theory is then tested against *A Quiet Place*, a high-concept horror film which fascinatingly constructs its audiovisual codes in conformance to the deafness of one of its main characters. Finally, I reflect on the possible directions that audiovision might take when exposed to the perspective of deafness and hearing impairments. This reflection is constituted by two components: a short film, striving to further research through artistic practice what explored on a theoretical level, and a verbal/written critical assessment of the choices that led (and those that could have led) the short film’s creation.

By attempting to understand the issues proposed to sound cinema by deafness and hearing impairments, my thesis does not want to chase the possibility of audiovisual representations that imagine disability for “able” people. Instead, this project seeks to explore the limits of oral/aural listening practices as indicated by the epistemological shifts proposed by deafness and hearing impairments, in an effort to indicate new directions for a broader debate concerning the processes of audiovisual mediation.

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## Introduction

Deafness and hearing impairments pose sound cinema in front of a crucial problem: is a non-ableist representation possible? In the first instance, the problem might seem related to the kind of narratives that sound cinema tailors around disability, and it is indeed mostly from this perspective that it has been investigated. However, I believe that there is more to it. How is a non-ableist representation *at all* possible, when sound cinema constructs practices of listening that, *apparently*, always imply a spectator “able” (quotation marks needed to hint at the extremely problematic character of this purported ability) to listen? In other words, is it possible for sound cinema to construct practices of listening that are (at least) open to the infinite range of shifting possibilities that constitute embodied listening, instead of adhering to and shaping the norm of an idealised “perfectly” hearing ear? In this thesis, I explore the limits and the possibilities of these questions. The lines of thought that I investigate, challenge, and elaborate, are shaped as following.

Sound cinema constructs practices of listening: from choosing and positioning a microphone during the production of a film to arranging the spatial distribution of multiple sound sources during its projection, from mixing together different aural stimuli to synthesising new ones, choices are made that imagine what, during the experience of a film, might be audible and how what is audible might be heard. Practices of listening embody specific epistemologies. As noted by Jonathan Sterne, “Haraway famously used vision to describe perspective as a constitutive feature of epistemology, but one could use audition just as easily.”<sup>1</sup> What we hear and how we hear it contribute to and shape our understandings of what we experience. Specific epistemologies, as argued by Sylvia Wynter, set the boundaries of what it means to be human, overrepresenting a specific genre of human being as *the* human.<sup>2</sup> Pulling together the threads that I just started to unravel, then, sound cinema, through the creation of specific listening practices, might construct specific genres of human being as *the* human.

In my thesis, I want to explore how deafness and hearing impairments, within sound cinema, can challenge the governing codes of audiovision, expose them as discursively constructed, and potentially disrupt them, in turn contributing to a new understanding of the very processes of hearing/listening. To do so, I structure my thesis along four written chapters and one audiovisual object. In the first chapter, I explore the theoretical grounds on which my proposal can be formulated and my research questions can emerge. The second chapter moves toward the development of a new theory of audiovision, striving to take into account the theoretical framework developed within the first chapter and, more generally, the contributions of Critical Disability Studies. My theoretical grounds are then tested in the third chapter,

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Sterne, “Sonic Imaginations,” in *The Sound Studies Reader* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2012), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” *Forum N. H. I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1, no. 1 (1994): 42–73.

where I analyse a case study in order to investigate the relationships between deafness, hearing impairments, and sound cinema as enacted by an existing film. Finally, within my fourth chapter I critically assess the process of researching such relationships through artistic rather than academic practice. The result of this process is presented in the form of a short film, giving shape to my thoughts on deafness, hearing impairments, and audiovision by expressing myself, in self-reflexive fashion, audiovisually rather than verbally. But let me step back, for a moment. Let me broaden my perspective, slow down the pace of my arguments, and further detail my proposal. In the following paragraphs, I will give a closer look at each of my thesis' chapters, elaborate on my methodology, and address my problematic position as a normatively "hearing" person.

## Chapter 1. Sound cinema and the construction of hearing/listening

Informing my thinking with Sylvia Wynter's work, I argue that mainstream sound cinema overrepresents *a* genre of hearing/listening (and, thus, *a* genre of human being) as *the* process of hearing/listening (and, thus, as *the* human being). Moreover, still following Wynter, I argue that sound cinema discursively institutes practices of hearing/listening *as if they were* representations of purely biological human functions, rather than discursive constructions of particular configurations of those functions.<sup>3</sup> In this context, deafness and hearing impairments constitute characteristics of bodily configurations that are designated as more or less lacking humanness, in respect to an ideal "all-hearing" human assumed as the norm of audiovisual representation. In other words, sound cinema *can* contemplate practices of hearing/listening that do not conform to an assumed "all-hearing" standard, but generally does so only to (often implicitly) rank these bodily configurations as more or less inferior, in contrast with its ableist norm of ideal human body.

Sound cinema's overrepresentation of *aural practices* (where "aural" attempts to include both hearing and listening) works in a system of aural overrepresentations, which the works of Jennifer Lynn Stoever and Mara Mills help me to define. Stoever examines phenomena of race and racism in the US from an aural, rather than a visual perspective, thus demonstrating how the boundaries of what it means to be human can also be set, by a dominant group, through the shaping and the imposition of hearing/listening practices.<sup>4</sup> Mills, on the other hand, investigates the processes of construction of a hearing/listening practice by deconstructing the politics of aural mediation ingrained in the technology of cochlear

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<sup>3</sup> For Wynter's formulation of Man's discursive institution of itself as if it were a purely biological being, that I here propose in relation to sound cinema's listening practices and that I will further explore throughout the first chapter, see Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 9–89.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

implants.<sup>5</sup> If, with Stoeber, I can argue that sound cinema contributes to a system of aural overrepresentations, with Mills I can better identify the specificity of sound cinema's process of aural mediation and its attempt at hiding or ignoring the discursive nature of the aural practices that it represents.

While the important similarities between the processes of aural mediation shaped by cochlear implants and those shaped by sound cinema identify a crucial aspect of sound cinema's "contribution" to the system of aural overrepresentations, the essential difference between the two technological apparatuses (cochlear implants and sound cinema) prompts me to more precisely define how sound cinema constructs aural practices. To do so, I turn to the work of Peter Szendy, who shows how discursively constructed practices of hearing/listening can crystallise into cultural artefacts (in his case, in the "works" of Western art music).<sup>6</sup> These artefacts, in turn, exert an influence on the very processes of discursive construction of such practices. Sound cinema, I will argue, constitutes both a powerful means of representing/constructing practices of hearing/listening and a rich research field where to encounter and critically assess these practices. In other words, sound cinema allows me to listen to someone's listening.

It is at this point of the theoretical path that the central concern of my thesis can finally, clearly emerge. Once recognised that sound cinema potentially both represents and constructs specific, racialised, gendered, and ableist practices of hearing/listening, and thus has the power of contributing to set the boundaries of what it means to be human, is it possible to imagine processes of audiovisual mediation that do not overrepresent an idealised "all-hearing" ear as *the* ear, and thus *a* human being as *the* human being? Setting the field for my understanding of the relationships between deafness and sound cinema, and prompting me to address the formal, rather than the narrative/representational level of sound cinema's construction of hearing/listening practices, is a rather heterogeneous corpus of academic works dealing with the encounters between disability and cinema, and, more specifically, between deafness and cinema. I conclude this chapter by briefly exploring these works in order to argue that a shift from a narrative/representational focus to a formal one is necessary to question sound cinema's potential essential ableism.

## Chapter 2. Toward a new theory of audiovision

After exploring a theoretical framework in which to ground my ideas about the discursive constructions of practices of hearing/listening, their construction within sound cinema, and their relationship with deafness and hearing impairments, I need to reassess the theory of audiovision that leads my understanding of the processes of audiovisual mediation. More precisely, I argue for the

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<sup>5</sup> Mara Mills, "Do Signals Have Politics? Inscribing Abilities in Cochlear Implants," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, ed. Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Szendy, *Listen. A History of Our Ears* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

necessity of a new theory of audiovision that truly strives to incorporate the contributions of Critical Disability Studies. In other words, we need a new theory of audiovision that does not assume a normative body as the touchstone of audiovisual experience. In the second chapter of my thesis, then, I select two concepts from the field of audiovisual studies, discuss and reshape them in order to move toward the development of this new audiovisual theory.

First, I examine the concept of “point of audition,” as formulated by Rick Altman and Michel Chion, and discussed by Anahid Kassabian.<sup>7</sup> While I reject Altman’s conception of point of audition as “point-of-audition sound”—one possible tactic within sound cinema—I embrace Chion’s understanding of point of audition as the aural equivalent of “point of view,” with the consequent double meaning of *spatial* point of audition and *subjective* point of audition, and as an element that is always constitutive of audiovision. This way, I argue for the necessity of recognising the always constructed nature of audition in sound cinema. However, I diverge from Chion on two points. In contrast with the French theorist’s position, I argue that: 1. it is possible for *spatial* points of audition to clearly articulate a sense of space between profilmic elements and between these elements and the viewer/listener’s virtual ears; 2. it is possible for *subjective* points of audition to exist within the soundtrack alone, prior to the interaction between the aural component and the visual one. My argumentation in support of my position leads me to a second concept, again drawn from Chion: aural diegetic space.

Chion formulates the concept of aural diegetic space in order to deny its possibility at the level of the soundtrack and, eventually, to deny the very existence of the soundtrack: “there is no place of the sounds, no auditory scene already preexisting in the soundtrack—and therefore, properly speaking, *there is no soundtrack.*”<sup>8</sup> According to Chion, the audiovisual scene only exists at the level of a film’s visual component, with the aural component only existing *in relation* to the visual one. While I indeed agree that the dialectical relationships between aural and visual components are a fundamental aspect of audiovisual mediation, making a film an audiovisual object rather than an aural+visual object, I argue that these relationships can unfold in the way they do *because* of the spatial consistency constructed already at audiovision’s aural level. There does exist a place of the sounds, an auditory scene preexisting in the soundtrack, and a soundtrack. The existence of these elements sets a norm, within audiovision: a same space, within a same scene, should be listened to by a single “ear.” The “one-space-one-scene-on-ear” norm, in turn, shapes a normative understanding of what it means to hear and to listen.

To hear the existence of these elements and to hear this norm, however, an epistemological shift is fundamental: from aurality to visuality. It is at this point that I anticipate a portion of my analysis of *A*

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<sup>7</sup> Rick Altman, “Sound Space,” in *Sound Theory/Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 46–64; Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision. Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Anahid Kassabian, “Rethinking Point of Audition in The Cell,” in *Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound*, ed. Jay Beck and Tony Grajeda (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 299–305.

<sup>8</sup> Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 68.



*Quiet Place* in order to introduce my usage of spectrographic visualisations (see the penultimate section of this *Introduction* for a more detailed look at my methodology) and demonstrate in practice what I argued in theory.

### **Chapter 3. *A Quiet Place*: reimagining the governing codes of audiovision**

*A Quiet Place* is a 2018 American horror movie directed, co-written, and co-produced by John Krasinski (who also stars as one of the film's protagonists).<sup>9</sup> In the fictive reality of the film, life and death are intimately tied to sound, to its presence and to its absence. The movie tells the story of the Abbott family: Lee (John Krasinski) and Evelyn (Emily Blunt)—husband and wife—and their three children Regan (Millicent Simmonds), Marcus (Noah Jupe), and Beau (Cade Woodward). The group strives to survive in a world invaded by creatures with hypersensitive hearing that attack anything producing sound. Pivotal to the family's ability to survive is its knowledge of American Sign Language (ASL), presumably acquired in order to communicate with Regan, who is deaf, and now utilised for (almost) every communication. After the dramatic death of Beau, presented at the beginning of the movie, the plot unfolds along one main thread: Evelyn's pregnancy. As the due date gets closer, the movie explores the Abbotts' strategies of existence, asking its audiences to witness the difficulties entailed by living without sounding and to "experience" the dangers that constantly surround the protagonists. Within my analysis, I investigate how this audiovisual object's representation of a deaf character—Regan, interpreted by deaf actress Millicent Simmonds—shapes the formal characteristics of the film at a structural level and, in turn, how these formal characteristics place the film in a complexly problematic position in the context of a reflection concerned with the relationships between deafness, hearing impairments, and sound cinema.

### **Chapter 4. Audiovisual practice as a reflection on audiovision's normativity**

Finally, I turn to a critical reflection upon the process of realising a short film that both represents an interview with two twin brothers, born deaf and utilising hearing aids, and, at the same time, strives to reflect on its very possibility as an audiovisual object to fairly represent deafness and hearing impairment. The reflection revolves mainly around three aspects: the problematic relationship between what should be heard, and subtitles' and captions' modal "translation" of that into written traces; the constructed nature of audiovisual associations, subjected to the mediation processes of recording and editing; the built environment shaped by dominant audiovisual codes, turning the conformity between audiovisual modes of representations and normative hearing/vision into an "ability."

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<sup>9</sup> John Krasinski, *A Quiet Place* (United States: Paramount Pictures, 2018).

## Methodology

Two methodological approaches shape the analytical parts of my thesis. The first consists in watching the film's aural component by visualising it in form of a spectrogram. The second entails engaging with the practical process of creating audiovisual objects. Let me further detail these two approaches.

In order to investigate the relationship between deafness, hearing impairments, and listening practices in sound cinema, I utilise the software Sonic Visualiser to examine the soundtrack of *A Quiet Place* as an image.<sup>10</sup> More precisely, I extract the aural data from the audiovisual object, which I then process with Sonic Visualiser. The software, in turn, allows me to visualise these aural data in the form of a spectrogram. A spectrogram is a graph mapping what frequencies resonate at what intensity at any given moment. In the graph, frequencies (measured in hertz [Hz]) are mapped on the vertical axis, while time (expressed in hours, minutes, and seconds [hh:mm:ss]) on the horizontal one. A third dimension is added by the colours' opacity, representing the frequencies' intensity (measure in decibels [dB]). The reader might take a peek at *Figure 1*, within *Chapter 2*, for an example of the spectrographic visualisations that I will use throughout my thesis.

Utilising spectrographic visualisation to explore an audiovisual object's aural component is nothing new. Frank Lehman, for example, shows how "spectrograms provide a detailed score for otherwise unrepresentable cues, and can divulge details of timbre that would be otherwise difficult to describe concretely (or even to clearly notice in the first place)."<sup>11</sup> While I acknowledge the usefulness of this technique when it comes to deal with the absence of a score, what interests me most about utilising spectrograms is their potential to re-ontologise the aural component of a film and, by extension, the whole film. As I will further explore toward the end of *Chapter 2*, when I will first apply this methodological approach to my case study, a spectrogram, by creating a frame that contains the film's sonic stimuli, counteracts the temptation of approaching a film's soundtrack as a-spatial, and allows for the identification of points of audition and aural diegetic spaces *within* the soundtrack alone. Utilising spectrographic visualisations of a film's soundtrack is, if not necessary, at least fundamental for reassessing the codes of audiovision.

Spectrograms also allow me to describe the aural component of *A Quiet Place* by referring to elements potentially visible by both me and my readers in the spectrographic visualisations. On the difference (or the sameness) of referring to potentially visible elements rather than to potentially audible ones, an entire thesis could be written. Here, suffice it to say that, within this written work, it seems more convenient and more efficient to support my analytical observations on aural phenomena with data potentially

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<sup>10</sup> Chris Cannam, Christian Landone, and Mark Sandler, "Sonic Visualiser: An Open Source Application for Viewing, Analysing, and Annotating Music Audio Files," in *Proceedings of the ACM Multimedia 2010 International Conference*.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Lehman, "Methods and Challenges of Analyzing Screen Media," in *The Routledge Companion to Screen Music and Sound*, ed. Miguel Mera, Ronald Sadoff, and Ben Winters (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 497–516.

observable on the spectrograms. Importantly, such a possibility lets me shape an understanding of the concept of audibility beyond its necessarily subjective character. Throughout the text, when I refer to an aural stimulus as “audible,” I do not intend, in the most absolute way, to imply that everyone experiencing the film will *hear* said aural stimulus. I instead refer to the intensity of the aural stimulus, measured in dB, that indicates the potential audibility of said aural stimulus to some ears. For the task of determining the potential audibility of an aural stimulus, I do not rely on my own, specific ears, but rather on the visualisation of the aural component, mediated by Sonic Visualiser.

Doing audiovision, instead, allows me to test my theories and my analytical observations against the practical processes of developing an audiovisual medium. The processes’ results, in turn, demand a reassessment of the theories and produce new analytical observations. Most importantly, engaging with the making of an audiovisual object powerfully reveals the ableist assumptions that, while critiqued within my thesis’ project, linger in me and inform some of my creative decisions. Within *Chapter 4*, I will explore these claims in depth.

## **My position as a “hearing” person**

Before delving into the first chapter, a fundamental premise is necessary. My position is problematic. I am, in normative terms, a hearing person, orally/aurally educated. Moreover, I am what a normative eye would define as an “able” person. How do I position myself, when exploring the possibilities and the constraints afforded by deafness and hearing impairments? I do not have “solutions” to this problem. However, there are two actions, entailed by Alison Kafer’s political/relational model of disability, that I try to follow as directions for this project.

The first action inspiring my work is described by Kafer as “claiming crip”: “a way of acknowledging that we all have bodies and minds with shifting abilities, and wrestling with the political meanings and histories of such shifts.”<sup>12</sup> As Kafer explains, “claiming crip” is an action attentive to “the histories and effects of disability claims, the different availability and viability of disability identification,” thus reframing the “well-intentioned but deeply ableist declaration that ‘we are *all* disabled.’”<sup>13</sup> I do not want to claim that there is no difference between my practice of listening and the (still infinitely different) ones embodied by deaf or hearing impaired people. Quite the contrary. What this project strives to explore is the myriad of possible listening practices, amongst which different degrees of hearing impairment and deafness exist, urgently asking for a critical evaluation of the limits of an idealised oral/aural listening practice. It is, however, crucial for me to acknowledge that the position from which I “claim crip” is privileged, insofar as my impairments, for the moment, do not constitute disabilities, given my conformance to dominant societal codes.

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<sup>12</sup> Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Kafer, 13.

The second action described by Kafer consists in reimagining “‘disability awareness’ simulations [...] to focus less on the individual experience of disability—or imagined experience of disability—and more on the political experience of disablement.”<sup>14</sup> Following Kafer’s recommendation, this project does not look for a sound cinema that wears “a blindfold so that [it] can ‘understand’ what it means to be blind.”<sup>15</sup> I do not want to imagine how it must be to be deaf and I thus refuse the possibility of audiovisual representations that imagine disability for “able” people. What I want to explore is, instead, whether or not it is possible for sound cinema to be politically engaged with deafness. By attempting to understand the challenges proposed to sound cinema by deafness and hearing impairments, my project seeks to explore the limits of oral/aural listening practices and of the dominant codes of audiovision, as indicated by the epistemologies shaped by deafness and hearing impairments, in an effort to indicate new directions for a broader debate concerning the processes of audiovisual mediation. Throughout this effort, my ignorance about sign languages constitutes an important obstacle to my understanding, as I will further explore within *Chapter 4*.

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<sup>14</sup> Kafer, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Kafer, 4.

## Chapter 1

### Sound cinema and the construction of hearing/listening

Sound cinema, I argue, represents *specific* hearing/listening practices as *universal*, shaping for its films aural dimensions informed by arbitrary criteria, while rarely dealing with such an arbitrariness and often silently proposing it as the norm. In other words, sound cinema *overrepresents* a hearing/listening practice as *the* hearing/listening practice. Within this chapter, I shall explore how Sylvia Wynter's deconstruction of the overrepresentation of Man can work as a theoretical framework within which to pose a question about the universalising tendency of sound cinema's processes of aural mediation. Moreover, I will contextualise such a tendency within a system of aural overrepresentations, extending beyond sound cinema and, at the same time, interacting with sound cinema, which the works of Jennifer Lynn Stoeber and Mara Mills, amongst others, can help me to define. With Stoeber, I will argue that sound cinema shapes a sonic auditory line and constructs a listening ear, thus contributing to a system of aural overrepresentations. Given that sound cinema's listening ear has as its object listening itself, I will turn to Mills in order to compare the aural mediation shaped by cochlear implants with that of sound cinema. Not content, however, with comparing two processes of aural mediation that, although importantly similar, are essentially different, I then recur to Peter Szendy's work on the processes of listening to Western art music in order to more precisely define how sound cinema constructs practices of listening. Finally, I examine what Critical Disability Studies and Film Studies have already observed about the relationships between sound cinema and disability, concluding that a shift from a narrative-representational focus to a formal one is necessary in order to question sound cinema's potential essential ableism.

#### Sound cinema overrepresents aural practices

Sylvia Wynter's theorisation of the overrepresentation of Man allows me to argue that sound cinema discursively institutes and holds as a norm specific practices of hearing/listening *as if they were* representations of purely biological human functions, while they indeed are discursive constructions of particular configurations of these functions. I would like to begin from the process of overrepresentation, to then tackle the tension between biology and discourse. Along this movement, from overrepresentation to biology/discourse, the continuity and the differences between processes of aural overrepresentation in general and sound cinema's ableist constructions of hearing/listening practices in particular will also be defined.

Wynter identifies, throughout the history of Western culture, major subsequent onto-epistemological shifts which designated *a* specific genre of human being as *the* human being, each time setting a "norm" of "being human," in relation to which every other configuration of human forms of life is "necessarily"

to be considered as more or less lacking “humanness.”<sup>16</sup> These constructions of what it means to be human are shaped and supported by corresponding “systems/orders of knowledge.”<sup>17</sup> As Wynter powerfully argues in her “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter to my Colleagues,” the tragic explanation to how public officials of the Los Angeles’ judicial system could apply the acronym N.H.I.—meaning “no humans involved”—to cases which saw the breaking of black men’s human rights, is to be sought in the system of knowledge in which these men (the Los Angeles’ judicial officers) were educated. Which is to say, the conditions for the violent conception of what it means to be human held by the Los Angeles’ judicial officers were posed in in the order of knowledge that the academic world—and the Humanities and Social Sciences in particular—shaped and to which the academic world took part.<sup>18</sup>

My main concern, following Wynter, takes the shape of two questions: what *genre* of hearing/listening, and thus of human being, might be overrepresented as *the* universal hearing/listening, and thus as the universal human being, by sound cinema’s mainstream hearing/listening practices? What system of knowledge might allow for such an overrepresentation to happen in and be reinforced by sound cinema? I believe that an assessment of sound cinema’s role in what Wynter defines as overrepresentation of Man is possible only in the context of what appears to me as a system of *aural overrepresentations*.

I define “aural overrepresentation,” after Wynter, as a process of universalisation that silently designates particular modalities of sounding/hearing/listening as the normative modalities of sounding/hearing/listening. These processes pervasively affect human existence, contributing to the shaping of categories such as race, gender, and disability. Phenomena of aural overrepresentations have received some academic attention.<sup>19</sup> Here, two authors in particular can help me to refine the issues I am raising: Jennifer Lynn Stover, whose book *The Sonic Color Line* deconstructs race and racism as not only visual phenomena but as, also and importantly, aural phenomena, and Mara Mills, who unveils the politics of aural mediation inscribed in the technology of cochlear implants.<sup>20</sup> If these two works might seem only distantly related to my central problem (that is, the possibility for sound cinema to shape non-ableist representations of hearing/listening practices), I hope that the following paragraphs will reassure the reader by showing, first, how sound cinema takes part to what Stover recognises as a process of aural overrepresentation of what it means to be human, and by tying sound cinema’s co-responsibility, then, to the violent attempts to “include” Deaf People into the majoritarian oralist community, explored by Mills.

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Max Hantel, “What Is It Like to Be a Human? Sylvia Wynter on Autopoiesis,” *PhiloSOPHIA* 8, no. 1 (2018): 62-64.

<sup>17</sup> Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” 10.

<sup>18</sup> Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter to My Colleagues.”

<sup>19</sup> Together with the works I explore within this thesis, see also, for example, Christine Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape. Women and Broadcasting in Argentina and Uruguay, 1930-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Bill Kirkpatrick, “Voices Made For Print: Crip Voices on the Radio,” accessed May 28, 2019, <http://www.billkirkpatrick.net/scholarship/cripvoices/>.

<sup>20</sup> Stover, *The Sonic Color Line*; Mills, “Do Signals Have Politics? Inscribing Abilities in Cochlear Implants.”

First, then, following Stoever, through Wynter, I argue that specific strategies for constructing aural realities in cinema are not and cannot be considered as devoid of specific epistemological assumptions. In particular, I mobilise, within the context of audiovision, two concepts introduced by Stoever—“sonic color line” and “listening ear”—in order to define how sound cinema sets the boundaries of what it means to hear/listen (and, thus, to be human), establishes a hierarchy between more and less “human” modalities of hearing/listening, and silently shapes very particular ears to interpret reality.

Stoever’s “sonic color line” arises from an aurally-attentive engagement with W. E. B. Du Bois’ “color line.”<sup>21</sup> By collecting the “aural echo” that Du Bois’ work leaves behind, Stoever theorises two phenomena within her sonic color line. On the one hand, the sonic color line stands for “the process of racializing sound—how and why certain bodies are expected to produce, desire, and live amongst particular sounds.”<sup>22</sup> Particular aural characteristics, as well as specific listening practices, are attached to particular bodies: these aural characteristics and listening practices do not emerge dynamically from subjects that express them, but rather constitute impositions on subjects-turned-objects through representations-turned-“reality.” On the other hand, the sonic color line indicates the racialization process’s “product, the hierarchical division sounded between ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness.’”<sup>23</sup> Once particular aural expressions/experiences have been deemed “others,” a regime of sounding and listening is constituted that divides these from the “norm,” ranking them as hierarchically inferior in respect to this latter. The process of racializing sound establishes a hierarchy between the aural expressions/experiences that it differentiates, sonically separating a “whiteness” from a “blackness.”

The crucial issue seems to be the assumption of a particular sounding/listening practice as *the* sounding/listening practice:

Whiteness [...] is notorious for representing itself as “invisible”—or in this case, *inaudible* (at least to white people). The inaudibility of whiteness stems from its considerably wider palette of representation and the belief that white representations stand in for “people” in general, rather than “white people” in particular. [...] As dominant listening practices discipline us to process white male ways of sounding as default, natural, normal, and desirable [...] they deem alternate ways of listening and sounding aberrant and—depending upon the historical context—as excessively sensitive, strikingly deficient, or impossibly both.<sup>24</sup>

Following Stoever’s lead, then, I argue that, within sound cinema, hearing/listening practices (and, in particular, as we will later see, *ableist* hearing/listening practices), often represent themselves as inaudible. By remaining inaudible, they *overrepresent* themselves as *the* hearing/listening practice, rather than as, in Wynter’s terms, *genre-specific* hearing/listening practices (that is to say, specific to *a* genre of human being, rather than pertaining to the whole of humanity).<sup>25</sup> While such inaudible dominant listening practices

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<sup>21</sup> Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 9-10.

<sup>22</sup> Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> For Wynter’s conception of “genre-specific,” see Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” and, in particular, pp. 18-24; 25-33.

shape the processes of audiovision, they rank alternative listening practices as inferior. This mechanism is evident when thinking about a common case of representation of a non-idealised “all-hearing” ear within sound cinema: a damaged sense of hearing, consequence of some sort of explosion. Take, for example, the opening scene of Jerzy Skolimowski’s *Essential Killing*.<sup>26</sup> The film’s protagonist is wounded by an explosion at the very beginning of the movie. The first scenes following the explosion are shot from the protagonist point of view and present the protagonist’s point of audition. This latter is constructed by muffling every aural stimulus in order to simulate the damage caused by the explosion to the character’s sense of hearing. As time “passes,” a “normal” sense of hearing is gradually restored, until the film’s aural component, even when presenting the protagonist’s point of audition, stops proposing muffled aural stimuli. This restored “normal” point of audition dominates the rest of the film. While the representation of a damaged sense of hearing does open sound cinema’s listening practices toward an alternative to its dominant sound, it does so only to deem this alternative as an undesirable, inferior hearing/listening status, implicitly compared to the “all-hearing” ear that dominates every other scene of the film.

Sound cinema, then, traces a line which is very similar to Stover’s one. I would like to refer to sound cinema’s sonic line as to the “*sonic auditory line*.” Similarly to the sonic color line, sound cinema’s sonic auditory line both defines particular hearing/listening practices in relation to different bodies and then sets a hierarchy between them, silently assigning to a few the status of “norm,” while designating the others as aberrant in comparison to such purported norm. If it is obvious that Stoever’s line and mine differ, as the first has to do with race and racism, while the second with normative embodiments and, in particular, with ableist understanding of what it means to hear and to listen, these two lines can of course intersect at any moment.

Moreover, Stoever observes, “the sonic color line also codifies sounds linked to racialized bodies—such as music and the ambient sounds of everyday living—as ‘noise,’ sound’s loud and unruly ‘Other.’”<sup>27</sup> Similarly to how Stoever’s sonic color line makes into noise whatever sound it attributes to an aural “blackness,” sound cinema’s sonic auditory line suppresses and/or categorises as noise any sound that would prevent intelligibility, as imagined for an idealised “all-hearing” ear. On the one hand, this suppression is structural: the practice of sound mixing imposes that choices be made in order to establish a hierarchy between sound sources, thus defining some of them as “to be heard” and others as “to be secondary or unheard.” In other words, what cinema’s listening practices define as “noise”—here standing for every sound deemed “Other” than the aural stimuli that grant a sense of intelligibility—is ruled by the very practice of constructing a soundtrack by mixing together different sound sources.<sup>28</sup> On

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<sup>26</sup> Jerzy Skolimowski, *Essential Killing* (Poland, Norway, Ireland, Hungary: Syrena Films, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> For an overview of the techniques of sound recording, editing, and mixing within sound cinema see Jean-Pierre Geuens, *Film Production Theory* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 197-224.



the other hand, suppression works representationally: cinema's dominant listening practices do not imply necessarily the absence of noise, but they often do represent noise, if present, as an attack against intelligibility, against the audience's virtual ears constructed as idealised "all-hearing" ears, against the audience's device for comprehension and empathetic engagement, and thus deem it "undesirable."

If Stoever's sonic color line and sound cinema's sonic auditory line both overrepresent, although in different ways, genre-specific listening practices and rank every alternative as inferior, it is the "listening ear" that Stoever identifies as what *drives* the sonic color line, and it is something (again) very similar to Stoever's listening ear that, I argue, drives my sonic auditory line.<sup>29</sup> Stover's concept of "listening ear" works as "an aural complement to and interlocutor of the gaze [...]: a socially constructed ideological system producing but also regulating cultural ideas about sound."<sup>30</sup> As with the gaze, the listening ear functions as a disposition and as an action: it *bears* in epistemologically specific ways and it *makes listen* in epistemologically specific ways. With Stoever, the listening ear is a crucial component in the process of racializing sound, by constructing modalities of hearing and listening to determined sounds. When thinking about sound cinema and normative embodiments, the listening ear seems to work in a slightly different way.

In sound cinema, the listening ear does not only "produce and regulate cultural ideas about sound": it constructs the very process of listening. Indeed, racializing sound and hearing also affects practices of hearing and listening, as it tries to determine their nature. However, the process of racialization has an "object" to be heard and to be listened to: race. Sound cinema's sonic auditory line and its correspondent listening ear, on the contrary, do not have any particular "object" rather than listening itself. In other words, sound cinema's listening ear drives the sonic auditory line by constructing *listenings of processes of listening*. If Stoever's listening ear unveils the construction of how listening to "whiteness" and "blackness" is made to sound, sound cinema's listening ear points to the construction of how listening *in general* is forced to sound. In other words, sound cinema's listening ear goes beyond the sounds in order to construct the listening. I am about to further unpack this latter point. First, however, it is necessary to recall the steps walked so far.

Stoever's sonic color line and listening ear, devised in order to unveil the processes of racialisation of sounding and hearing/listening, can be usefully mobilised in the context of audiovision in order to explore how films' aural components both silently overrepresent specific practices of listening, while deeming the others as "abnormal," and construct a system of listening practices that mediates and produces aural experiences of reality. In the first case, I chose to adapt the sonic color line into a sonic auditory line, in order to move away from the relationships between sound and race toward those between sound cinema and hearing/listening. In the second case, I began to notice a difference between

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<sup>29</sup> Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 13.

a system that produces and regulates aural ideas concerning sounds—as with Stoever’s listening ear—and one which affects the very understanding of what it means to hear and to listen—as with the listening ear that, I argue, drives sound cinema’s sonic auditory line. I need to further explore this difference, which is crucial for my thesis. To do so, it is necessary to proceed in that movement, sketched at the beginning of this chapter, from overrepresentation to biology/discourse, in order to better understand how sound cinema constructs practices of listening as if they were representations of purely biological human functions, while they indeed are representations of discursively constructed, genre-specific configurations of these functions.

According to Wynter, one of the main problems with the current Western construction of what it means to be human (which she labels “Man2” or “*homo oeconomicus*”) is that human beings are conceived as natural organisms, on the same line of every other “purely biological species,” with the result that one can speak of “naturally selected” and “naturally dysselected” beings.<sup>31</sup> On the contrary, Wynter argues, “the human is, meta-Darwinianly, a hybrid being, both *bios* and *logos*.”<sup>32</sup> The implications of Wynter’s position are huge: while Man2 overrepresents itself as *the* human, biologically selected as the “ideal” being, compared to which every other being more or less lacks humanness (other human beings tragically included), it is actually confining into invisibility the discursive construction of itself, without which it would not exist, and which is nevertheless necessary to motivate its purported superiority. As I already argued, Wynter’s theorisation can function as a framework for a critical assessment of the overrepresentation of specific listening practices operated by sound cinema.

Sound cinema proposes aural components which implicate specific practices of listening. The problem arises when these practices are not treated as genre-specific configurations of listening, but rather as *the* process of listening. When sound cinema silently overrepresents one listening practice, it is actually shaping an understanding of listening as a purely biological human function, while hiding the process of discursive construction that instituted the very listening practice which is being overrepresented. As mentioned earlier, sound cinema’s overrepresentation of specific listening practices is not a phenomenon which happens in isolation, but, instead, it is part of a system of aural overrepresentations. With Stoever, we began to explore this system. We also began to notice, however, that sound cinema has the potential of constructing not only a practice of listening to certain sounds, but, also and most importantly, the very process of listening. Which prompts us back to our initial, Wynter-influenced question, only partly answered by mobilising the conceptual tools devised by Stoever: what is the system of knowledge in which sound cinema can perform a construction of the very process of listening? In order to attempt a

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<sup>31</sup> Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” 16-17.

<sup>32</sup> Wynter and McKittrick, 16.

more complete answer to this question, it is necessary to turn our attention to Mara Mills' work on cochlear implants' politics of listening.

## Sound cinema constructs the process of hearing/listening

My argument is that sound cinema constructs practices of listening in a very similar way to how—Mills argues—cochlear implants construct practices of listening. Both cochlear implants and sound cinema, although in different ways, treat listening as a purely biological function, of which some sort of universal, ideal state can be objectively reproduced.

Mills, in her exploration of the development of cochlear implant technology, observes that “CI [cochlear implant] signal processors embody a range of cultural and economic values, some of which are deliberately ‘scripted’ into design, others of which accrete inadvertently.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, choices have been made that determine how cochlear implants translate the received impulses into signals to be transmitted to the user's brain: what aural stimuli will be made audible and how, and what will remain silent. As a consequence, cochlear implants do not provide their users with *the* “ability” to listen: instead, they construct a very specific listening practice, shaped in accordance to someone's desires. These desires privilege “speech over music, direct speech over telecommunication, nontonal languages over tonal ones, quiet ‘listening situations’ over noisy environments, and black-boxed over user-customizable technology.”<sup>34</sup>

It seems to me that the aural mediation proposed by cochlear implants and that constructed by cinema's sound share a few desires. To begin with, they both privilege speech over music. Michel Chion defines sound cinema as “voco- and verbocentric,” alluding to the centrality, within films' soundtracks, of the human voice and, in particular, of the verbal voice.<sup>35</sup> Jay Beck, more than ten years after Chion, observes that even the possibilities offered by Dolby's multi-channel, spatially extended sound ended up being constrained by the “necessity” of an uttered language's centrality.<sup>36</sup> Even though Chion's voco-/verbocentrism has been problematised, the central role assigned to the verbal voice by *mainstream* audiovisual representations still shape sound cinema's listening practices.<sup>37</sup> Verbocentrism does not only shape the aural representations of reality proposed by sound cinema, but it is also imposed as *the* listening modality to those who, in various degrees, experience vibrations differently. Whose listening is being proposed when the voice of a film's character is made audible over other voices and over other sounds, from a multitude of different points of view, and is given the power of leading the spectator's

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<sup>33</sup> Mills, “Do Signals Have Politics?,” 323.

<sup>34</sup> Mills, “Do Signals Have Politics?,” 323.

<sup>35</sup> Chion, *Audio-Vision. Sound on Screen*, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Jay Beck, “The Sounds of ‘Silence’: Dolby Stereo, Sound Design, and The Silence of the Lambs,” in *Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound*, ed. Jay Beck and Tony Grajeda (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 68–83.

<sup>37</sup> For a critical assessment of Chion's “voco- and verbocentrism,” see, for example, Justin Horton, “The Unheard Voice in the Sound Film,” *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 4 (2013): 3–24.

understanding of the diegetic world? From this perspective, cinema's verbocentrism monopolises the representation of aural realities by imposing a single listening practice: an ableist, oralist one. Sound cinema and cochlear implants, then, share the principle of shaping a singular listening practice, focused on the emission/reception of sounds-worked-as-language.

Privileging quietness over noisy environments constitutes another trait, characteristic of one specific listening practice, that is shared by cochlear implants and cinema's sound. As Stoeber points out, quietness does not only stand for the scarcity of aural stimuli, but it can also be defined against that which is made into noise. While complex, layered soundtracks are not infrequent in films, their "quietness," I argue, resides in the careful hierarchy with which these different layers are organised, so that even chaos emerges merely as a controlled illusion. Quietness, then, materialises in the ability of controlling and directing sound sources, in a listening practice that seeks and is given directions rather than options. In the same way as cochlear implants' signal processors are programmed so that they will deem certain impulses "noise" and will thus suppress them, so cinema's dominant listening practices shape aural realities through a clear-cut definition of quietness and noise, materialised at every layer of the mixed soundtrack.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Philippa Lovatt proposes the presentation of a single sound source at a time as an alternative to the dominant practice of constructing sound in cinema. While analysing Liu Jiayin's *Oxhide*, Lovatt notices that the film differentiates itself from more commercial productions when it comes to its soundtracks: it avoids the construction of a complex, multilayered aural component, and prefers to let each single diegetic sound resonate in isolation, before being followed by another one.<sup>38</sup> While it might seem counterintuitive to narrow the selection of aural stimuli in order to shape sounding/listening practices alternative to cinema's dominant sound, as long as technological constraints impose the establishment of a hierarchy through sound sources' mixing, such a strategy could work toward a disruption of normative codes of audiovision in two ways: by eliminating the process of definition-as-difference that shapes sound in opposition to noise, intelligibility in opposition to chaos, "hearing" in opposition to deafness and hearing impairments, and by consciously gesturing toward the artificiality of cinema's aural mediation.

This last point brings us to the last desire shared by sound cinema's dominant listening practices and cochlear implants: the privileging of black-boxing over user-customization. Mills evidences how, in contrast with the desires of Charles Graser—one of the first portable cochlear implants' user, whose experimental adoption of the device has, otherwise, profoundly influenced the technology's development—cochlear implants have been shaped with a single control dial, thus preventing their users

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<sup>38</sup> Philippa Lovatt, "'Slow Sounds': Duration, Audition and Labour in Liu Jiayin's *Oxhide* and *Oxhide II*," in *Slow Cinema*, ed. Tiago de Luca and Nunos Barradas Jorge (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 192–203; Liu Jiayin, *Oxhide* (China: dGenerate Films, 2005).

from customising the device according to their personal needs, and making them dependent upon physicians and engineers.<sup>39</sup> If contextualised within cinema's sound, my first understanding of "black-boxing" would point to the fact that films do not allow their audiences to choose what and how they want to hear. However, I would like to expand, for a moment, my understanding of the term, and make it also stand for the concealment of technology to its users: pretending that cinema's listening practices *are* aural reality means rendering invisible the technological apparatus that mediates reality through audiovision. Hearing and listening are never *just* hearing and listening: as both Stoever and Mills show, the specific listening practices through which human beings approach reality are immersed within specific epistemologies. Sound cinema constructs listening practices tailored to genre-specific epistemologies, in turn pointing to a genre-specific conception of what it means to be human.

It is important to notice that cochlear implants do interfere with what sounds and how, but they do so while attempting to construct a process of listening rather than a sound. Even more importantly, they proceed in their construction as if it were possible to reproduce listening as such, as a purely biological function pertaining to the whole of humanity (at least, the part of it "lucky" enough to have been genetically selected as being "able" to hear). As Mills shows, however, cochlear implants bear witness to the fact that listening *is* discursively constructed, and that an attempt to reproduce a listening practice will give shape to a rather precise indicator of what this discourse is.

Following Mills, I take sound cinema as an attempt to reproduce the process of listening, and, thus, as a bearer of the discourses that shape the very understanding of what it means to listen. We have seen, with and around Stoever, how representations of sound and listening contribute to the constitution of categories such as race and normative embodiments. With Mills, we moved beyond the representation of sound and listening to the construction of listening itself. However, a problem persists. Cochlear implants "listen" for their users, simulating a process of aurally experiencing vibrations for persons whose sonic experiences do not pass, partly or at all, from their ears.<sup>40</sup> The listening that sound cinema does for its viewers/listeners is clearly different. What do I mean, then, when claiming that sound cinema constructs practices of hearing/listening, and when positing such a construction in the system of aural overrepresentations sketched above?

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<sup>39</sup> Mills, "Do Signals Have Politics? Inscribing Abilities in Cochlear Implants," 329-332.

<sup>40</sup> Here and throughout the thesis, I distinguish between "aural experience" and "sonic experience." With "aural experience" I would like to refer to that part of a "sonic experience" which is mediated by the ears. With "sonic experience" I would instead like to gesture toward the complexity of experiencing sonic vibrations through the human body, which does not happen solely through the ears. For a study on listening as a multisensory experience, see Steph Ceraso, "(Re)Educating the Senses: Multimodal Listening, Bodily Learning, and the Composition of Sonic Experiences," *College English* 77, no. 2 (2014): 102-23.

## Listening to listenings within sound cinema

I argue that sound cinema allows the apparently impossible operation of listening to someone's listening. I consider sound cinema as a repository of listening practices. Each decision concerning what and how, of the diegetic world, should be audible contributes to the construction of a specific listening practice. I am therefore thinking about sound cinema's constructed practices of listening as determined by processes of *making certain sound sources audible, while making others inaudible*, and as processes of making audible/inaudible sound sources *in genre-specific ways elevated as universal practices*.

In order to think along these lines, it will be useful to turn to Peter Szendy's work on listening and the history of our ears.<sup>41</sup> Szendy is mainly concerned with the processes of listening to Western art music. His concerns are prompted by a doubt: "how can a listening become *my own*, identifiable as *my own*, while still continuing to answer to the unconditional injunction of a *you must?*"<sup>42</sup> On the one hand, then, Szendy is interested in the subjective process of listening: "I would like to point out, to identify, and to share such-and-such sonorous event that *no one besides me*, I am certain of it, has ever heard as I have."<sup>43</sup> On the other, he cannot help but feeling that the space for subjective listening is at least limited by a specific practice of listening, somehow preceding the listening itself: a "you must." In other words, Szendy seems caught up in a contrast between a subjective level of listening, at which he does not feel governed by any sense of duty, and an externally imposed "regime of listening" that demands him to *listen*, and to do so *in a certain way*.<sup>44</sup>

To a certain extent, Stoever is also similarly concerned. When addressing her concept of the listening ear, Stoever identifies a tension between the listening ear and what she describes as the "embodied ear," a tension between a "singular [...] way to process information" and "how individuals' listening practices are shaped by the totality of their experiences, historical context, and physicality, as well as intersecting subject positions and particular interactions with power (the listening ear)."<sup>45</sup> Stoever's embodied ear, similarly to Szendy's "unique" listening practice, stands for the complexity of subjective aural experiences, escaping singular notions of what it means to hear (and, with an important addition to Szendy, mobilising aural perception, from the ear to the whole body). Stoever's embodied ear cannot but be in contrast with the listening ear, which, similarly to Szendy's "you must," constitutes a socio-cultural construction of sound that imposes an epistemologically specific listening practice as *the* listening practice.

I am, too, concerned in a similar way to how Szendy and Stoever are concerned. I consider sound cinema's listening ear as a silent "you must," as a regime of listening, as a socio-cultural construction which pretends to universally stand for the infinite possibilities of embodied listening and, thus, reduce

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<sup>41</sup> Szendy, *Listen. A History of Our Ears*.

<sup>42</sup> Szendy, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Szendy, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Szendy, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 15.

such infinite possibilities to a constricting, normalising overrepresentation. While I, Stoever, and Szendy clearly deal with different issues, our problems seem to be similar: where does this “must,” this “regime of listening,” this specific practice of listening come from?

The reason why I turn to Szendy is precisely because of *where* he looks for an answer to the question just posed. This “where,” when investigating both the process of subjective listening and the imposition of a regime of listening, constitutes an important issue: where do we look—or, more precisely, where do we listen—for traces of practices of listening? As Szendy remarks,

Whereas the activity of the sense that is sight can take itself as object, whereas one can look at someone looking (another person, or oneself in a mirror), in short, whereas sight can thus be *reflexive* or *reflective*, it seems impossible to listen to someone listening. Common sense (but what sense?) would have it that someone listening doesn’t make any sound; or else, if he does, it is only secondary (leaning over, for example, or moving around) and not *as a listener*. Listening *as such* is thus *silent*, it cannot be heard.<sup>46</sup>

The silence of listening—the apparent absence of traces left by listening—is what complicates any investigation on any listening practice, which is why, at the beginning of this section, I defined as “apparently impossible” the operation of listening to someone’s listening. Moreover, recalling what argued with Stoever concerning whiteness’ invisibility and inaudibility, listening’s silence contributes to the danger of overrepresentation, as it becomes difficult for a listening practice to *self-reflexively* listen to itself and acknowledge itself as that particular listening practice rather than listening in general.

To bypass the problem of the purported silence of listening practices, Szendy listens for their echoes in two fields. First, amongst the pages of the “forensic history of music”—the legal apparatus that, throughout the history of Western art music, regulated the rights of various actors involved: “my rights and my duties [as a listener], since they have never been explicitly codified, stem implicitly from laws that, little by little, have ended up ruling musical life: authors, adaptors, arrangers, publishers, record producers, interpreters.”<sup>47</sup> Even more interestingly, however, as far as my thesis is concerned, is Szendy’s attention to how practices of listening can be found in the “works” themselves.

Together with the traces left by specific regimes of listening in the meta-textual apparatus surrounding musical compositions, the formal characteristics of the musical compositions themselves indicate—Szendy argues—a specific implied listening practice: “*works configure in themselves their reception, their possible appropriation, even their listening.*”<sup>48</sup> These formal characteristics do not only point toward specific assumptions concerning a genre of listening, but also contribute to the construction of, in Stoever’s terms, a listening ear, thus prompting Szendy to ask: “what is, as it is outlined and destined in the works, the *subject* whom music addresses, or rather the one it *constructs*?”<sup>49</sup> Such a question profoundly resonates with my own, concerning the genre of ear/hearing/listening constructed by sound cinema. It is therefore

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<sup>46</sup> Szendy, 141.

<sup>47</sup> Szendy, 4-5.

<sup>48</sup> Szendy, 7. The extensive emphasis, here and below, is always Szendy’s, unless differently indicated.

<sup>49</sup> Szendy, 8.

worthwhile to explore three examples proposed by Szendy, in order to understand what tools his approach might share with mine, and in what, instead, it might differ.

To begin with, let us turn our attention to Szendy's listening of two passages from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, in order to argue that sound cinema can imply and construct listening practices at multiple levels: representationally, formally, and hybridly—representationally *and* formally at the same time. Let me further detail my argument.

According to Szendy: “there is no ideal way of listening to *Don Giovanni* [...] since *this opera makes us hear several different listenings*. We listen to *some* listenings (characters, ‘types’ listening).”<sup>50</sup> Szendy is referring to two moments from the fifth (and last) scene of the opera's second act: Don Giovanni's meal, accompanied by a “compilation” of then-popular opera tunes, and the Commendatore's arrival. These two moments are read by Szendy as the opposition between two practices of listening; in Adorno's terms, entertainment listening and structural listening.<sup>51</sup> These two practices of listening, however, are represented within the music in two rather different modalities. In the first case, as Don Giovanni enjoys the presence of well-known music while consuming his meal, a “distracted” listening, aiming at a sort of sensorial recreation rather than seeking artistic engagement, is conveyed by the representation of the practice itself: the opera shows Don Giovanni eating while enjoying some “popular” music. On the formal side, the “entertainment” listening practice is constructed by means of an assemblage of rearranged pre-existing works. In the second case, an attentive listening practice is constructed in a subtler way. When the Commendatore, at the end of the opera, demands that Don Giovanni listen, he does so by sounding motives heard during the opera's beginning, throughout the Overture. According to Szendy, the formal characteristics of this passage demands a practice of listening that, ideally, hears everything and forgets nothing: only such a listening practice can conform to the Commendatore's demands. At a representational level, conforming to the Commendatore's demands is chartered on the side of symbolic life, while disrespecting them on that of symbolic death (Sylvia Wynter's terms), as exemplified by Don Giovanni's (questionable) faith.<sup>52</sup>

What fascinates me about Szendy's listening to these two *Don Giovanni's* moments is that it powerfully explores how a particular practice of listening can be implied and constructed by a musical composition at different levels: on a representational one, when Don Giovanni is shown (and sounded) while he recreationally “consumes” some music; on a formal one, as the music consumed by Don Giovanni is presented in the form of an assemblage of rearrangements; on a hybrid representational/formal one, when the structure of the opera *implies/constructs* a listener “able” to be attentive and to remember

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<sup>50</sup> Szendy, 102.

<sup>51</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

<sup>52</sup> Szendy, 105-110. For Wynter's conception of symbolic life/death, see Wynter and McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” and, in particular, pp. 33-39.



throughout the whole work, while at the same time symbolically coding as inadequate listening practices, like Don Giovanni's recreational one, other than the one implied/constructed.

Along the same lines, as hinted above, I see sound cinema as capable of constructing listening practices representationally, formally, and hybridly representationally/formally: in the first case, by showing and sounding specific listening practices; in the second, by shaping and mixing specific aural stimuli for specific listening practices; in the third, by presenting a soundtrack that, given its formal characteristics, implies and constructs *a* particular ear/listening practice as its possible listener, at the same time symbolically coding every other ear/listening practice as incapable of listening and, therefore, inadequate.

If in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* Szendy hears representations of "types' listening," it is in Wagner's arrangement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and in Schönberg's orchestration of Brahms' Piano Quartet in G Minor, that he identifies the construction of "listening regimes" merely within the formal characteristics of the musical compositions. This move, from the representation of a listening practice to the implication of a listening practice solely at the formal level of the composition, is fundamental for my thesis, as it allows me to argue that sound cinema can propose aural components that construct practices of listening by shaping a virtual ear within the soundtrack itself. I shall further explore this latter point within the following paragraphs.

Wagner—Szendy argues—arranges Beethoven with a listener in mind. Since Beethoven, due to his deafness, was able to compose otherworldly music but had not been able to write it in such a way that it could be "understandable" for a "hearing" ear (an ear, then, different than his own), it was up to Wagner to rewrite these ideas with a "hearing" listener in mind. "By arranging Beethoven," Szendy writes, Wagner "contributes to *recomposing listening* (to making a new ear, like the good instrument-maker of hearing that he is). That is to say, he sets up and establishes a *regime of listening* under which *the melodic idea no longer suffers from any discontinuity*."<sup>53</sup> With Schönberg, it is a matter of having a *genre* of listening in mind. That is to say, in Szendy's interpretation, Schönberg's operation, when orchestrating Brahms, would not consist in raising certain musical components to the listeners' attention, so that, for example, a melodic idea could be better "understood" by them, but rather in making *everything bearable*, in making sure that the work configures in itself the structural listening practice that it deserves: "the listening in question here is not that of a given listener, or of a category of listeners one has to *take into account*; it is rather *structural listening* in Adorno's sense."<sup>54</sup>

What interests me in these latter examples is that Szendy is not pointing to cases of representations of the action of listening, but rather to formal characteristics of the music that imply and construct a specific listening practice. It is clear that Wagner's and Schönberg's arrangements can be listened to by infinite different ears in infinite different ways. But what Szendy argues is that *within* these arrangements,

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<sup>53</sup> Szendy, 125.

<sup>54</sup> Szendy, 127.

due to what the composers *made audible or inaudible*, there is a listening practice already implied and constructed: a “you must” corresponding to the desires of Wagner’s and Schönberg’s ideal listening practice. This arrangement of a listening practice, shaped in accordance with the desires of the arranger by emphasising certain aural stimuli while suppressing others, resonates loudly with Mills’ observations on cochlear implants’ process of aural mediation, and, in turn, with my argument concerning the parallels between cochlear implants and sound cinema.

Following Szendy, I reinforce the argument I had already made with Mills: sound cinema, by deciding what aural stimuli have to be audible, and which ones should instead be varyingly less or inaudible, respond to a specific idea of listening practice, and the ensuing soundtrack constructs and implies that specific idea of listening practice as *the* listening practice. While sound cinema mediates aural experiences of reality differently than cochlear implants do, it still shapes processes of listening in a very similar way, imposing them as *the* aural reality (that of the film’s diegetic world), while actually presenting *an* aural reality that conforms to the desires of those who shaped it.

Finally, Szendy turns to cinema and, in particular, to Mauricio Kagel’s *Ludwig Van* (West Germany, 1970). Kagel’s film imagines a revenant Beethoven visiting 1970s Bonn. Szendy’s interests in this film are various, but one in particular strongly resounds with mine: that of the listening practice reproduced by the film’s soundtrack. In fact, as observed by Szendy, “the film, which turns us into *clairvoyants* (by assigning us, by means of the camera’s eye, the point of view of the Master [Beethoven] ‘himself’), also, correlatively, makes us into *hearing-impaired* people.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, during the film, not only the visual component reproduces a subjective point of view, that of Beethoven the film’s protagonist, but the aural component as well reproduces a subjective “point of listening.” “Beethoven’s” subjective point of listening, however, catches Szendy’s ears, since it is not *any* point of listening (even though, I would ask, what would “any” mean here?), but rather *a* specific point of listening: Beethoven’s (or rather, oddly enough, Beethoven’s ghost’s) “deafened” one. I will soon address Szendy’s problematic observation about the film “making us [who?] into *hearing-impaired* people.” For the moment, however, let us focus our attention on the fact that a film’s aural component is heard as constructing a specific listening practice, not by substituting itself to the listener’s ears, but rather by proposing to these ears a set of aural stimuli. Moreover, such a construction is noticed in the moment that the represented point of listening/listening practice stands out as subjective, peculiar, *non-normative*.

Along the lines of what is heard by Szendy in Kagel’s *Ludwig Van*, it is tempting to argue that sound cinema fascinatingly reproduces embodied listening practices. *But does it, really?* We reached, here, what might appear as a breach in the regimes of listening proposed by sound cinema’s dominant listening practices: the representation and the construction of a listening practice that implies a non-idealised “all-hearing” ear. But it is exactly here, it is exactly when sound cinema tries to deal with non-normative

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<sup>55</sup> Szendy, 138.

embodiments, when it encounters deafness and hearing impairments, that my question seems more urgent. What is sound cinema doing, when muffling a few sounds in order to represent deafness? Is it possible to see in such an operation the affirmative answer to my question “can sound cinema open itself toward the infinite possibilities of embodied listening?” Or is this an ableist take on deafness, made through an essentially ableist medium? At the intersection of Film Studies, Sound Studies, and Disability Studies, these questions still have to be explored.

## Sound cinema’s essential ableism

The reason why my questions, at the intersection of Film Studies, Sound Studies, and Disability Studies, have yet to be explored, is that the problem of disability in cinema, as I will show in the following paragraphs, has been mainly seen as a problem of how disability is *narrated*. While the contributions ensuing from such a thesis have been fundamental in shaping critical assessments of the relationships between disability and audiovisual mediation, here I intend to shift my focus from sound cinema’s *narrative representation* of disability to sound cinema’s *formal construction* of disability. Which is to say, together with examining the roles that disabled characters play in films, or how their disability is portrayed, and so on, I wish to analyse how audiovisual techniques formally construct these representations: what kinds of shots are adopted to convey the point of view of a disabled character? What kinds of sounds are made to convey her voice? How are, say, focal length and color used to construct what a visually impaired character is supposed to see? As far as my thesis is concerned, then, I want to investigate how sound recording, editing, and mixing are used, within sound cinema, to construct films’ aural components that, interacting with their correspondent visual components, strive to represent the embodied listening practices of deaf and hearing impaired characters. I believe such a shift is necessary, insofar as it questions what might be an *essential ableism* of audiovisual media. While it seems possible to imagine a film, the narrative of which does not represent a disabled character in an ableist way, I here question the possibility of sound cinema of shaping non-ableist constructions of deafness and hearing impairment at a formal level, given the technical means at disposition of such a medium.

In a 1985 essay by Paul K. Longmore, identified by Marja Evelyn Mogk as “the earliest landmark essay on disability and film,” a point central to the interests around which Disability Studies and Film Studies intersect is quickly established with a question: “why are there so many disabled characters [in film and television] and why do we overlook them so much of the time?”<sup>56</sup> The same issue, approached from a

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<sup>56</sup> Marja Evelyn Mogk, ed., *Different Bodies. Essays on Disability in Film and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers, 2013), 1; Paul K. Longmore, *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 132, quoted in Mogk, *Different Bodies*, 1. Longmore’s essay has a slightly complicated editorial history. The version quoted by Mogk is the most recent. This latter is a slightly modified re-edition of the first one, that appeared in *Social Policy* 16 (Summer 1985): 31-37. Inbetween its first and its latest edition, the essay has been reprinted (following the first edition) twice: in Alan Gartner and Tom Joe, eds., *Images of the Disabled/Disabling Images* (New York: Praeger, 1986), 65-78, and

slightly different angle, is put forward in the introduction of Sally Chivers's and Nicole Markotić's *The Problem Body. Projecting Disability on Film*—a collection of essays concerned with disability and cinema—where they note that “filmic *narrative* fictions rarely ignore disability. [...] Disability is highly and continuously present on-screen. However, it is not always agential.”<sup>57</sup> Even though Longmore's observation evidences a fallacy on the side of the spectators, while Chivers and Markotić highlight an issue of representation, all three authors converge on the identification of an imbalance between disability's “importance,” in terms of “quantity,” within the context of cinematic representation, and its misrecognition, its “invisibility” (in Longmore), and its exploitation as subject turned into non-agential object (in Chivers and Markotić).

The “imbalance” problem presented by disability in audiovision is, in the works cited, invariably investigated at the level of “filmic narrative.” Again Chivers and Markotić write: “filmic *narrative* often aligns the bodies it represents with an elusive and ideal norm of the human body.”<sup>58</sup> Leaving aside, only for a moment, their powerful observation concerning the normative force of cinematic representation, Chivers's and Markotić's words would suggest that the problem of disability in cinema is a problem of how disability is narrated. Such an impression is reinforced by the overview of the main methodological approaches that Mogk, following Mitchell's and Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, identifies in the field of Disability Studies in Film: an “image-analysis approach” investigates the narrative roles tied to films' disabled characters, and consequently unveils a series of stereotypes surrounding disability; a “social realist approach” opts for an examination of how faithful cinematic representation of disability is (or, more frequently, is not) to the lived experiences of disabled people; a “new historicist approach” is devoted to evidencing patterns of social ideology within the representations of disability, striving to extend such an investigation across cultures and across histories.<sup>59</sup>

These approaches have been and are crucially important for a critical examination of the relationships between disability and audiovisual mediation. As different as they might be, they all fight against the construction of normative embodiments. Chivers's and Markotić's already quoted observation, expanded with what follows, serves as a good example of how the “norms” shaped by audiovisual representation are destabilised by Disability Studies in Film: “most bodies are presented [within filmic narratives] as *normative* by default, implicitly—self-evidently, or so it might appear to a viewer—*achieving the norm*, while other bodies are designated ‘*abnormal*,’ failing to achieve, or even to aspire to, that norm.”<sup>60</sup> Such a statement, which strongly resonates with the arguments made in the chapter's previous sections, can be

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in Christopher E. Smit and Anthony Enns, eds., *Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 1-18.

<sup>57</sup> Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić, eds., *The Problem Body. Projecting Disability on Film* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2010), 1. Emphasis mine.

<sup>58</sup> Chivers and Markotić, 1. Emphasis mine.

<sup>59</sup> Mogk, *Different Bodies. Essays on Disability in Film and Television*, 6-7; David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 15-45.

<sup>60</sup> Chivers and Markotić, 2. Emphasis mine.

reformulated within Wynter's terms in order to argue that cinematic representation, by assuming *specific* forms of embodiment as *the* norm, can be (co-)responsible for the very construction of such a norm: (co-)responsible for the overrepresentation of *a* genre of human being as *the* human being, in relation to which every other genre is ranked as inferior, according to a presumed lack of "humanness." Moreover, the assumption of a norm is undertaken *implicitly*, thus rendering invisible and silent the process of overrepresentation as long as the specific order of knowledge, within which said process occurs, is in place.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, alongside these foundational and fundamental contributions, I would like here to argue for a different perspective. While critical analyses of representational issues concerning disability in audiovisual objects constitute a necessary and indispensable means of deconstructing the normative embodiments against which every other bodily configuration is measured, what urgently asks to be explored is the construction of such a norm at the formal level of audiovisual mediation. In other words, I am here interested in how the portrayal of disability sketched by sound cinema at a narrative level is constructed also, and sometimes primarily, at sound cinema's formal level.

There are a few scholars, at the intersection of Film and Disability Studies, whose works, even though posing problems different than mine, pave the way to the questions I raise. It is thus worthwhile to conclude this chapter by briefly addressing three of them, with whom a confrontation is here necessary. Let me begin, then, by accounting for Russell L. Johnson's exploration of the transition from silent cinema to sound cinema from the perspective of disability history.<sup>61</sup>

While Johnson's approach ensues from historiographical research, and thus follows different directions than mine, what interests me is that it considers sound cinema from the perspective of disability *beyond* a focus on cinema's narratives. Even more importantly, as far as my thesis is concerned, it questions sound cinema's *essential ableism*, thus reinforcing my questions on the relationships between deafness, hearing impairments, and sound cinema. According to Johnson, "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."<sup>62</sup> After having argued, together with Joanna Bourke, that the capacity for audible speech has constantly been assumed as a norm of humanness throughout the history of Western culture, Johnson offers a parallel reading of two pivotal moments concerning the relationship between orality/aurality and visibility.<sup>63</sup> In the context of late 1920s USA, he points toward a peak in the enforcement of oralism, in opposition to manualism, within deaf education, and toward the transition from silent cinema (movies) to sound cinema (talkies). Following Lennard J. Davis, then, Johnson argues

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<sup>61</sup> Russell L. Johnson, "Better Gestures: A Disability History Perspective on the Transition from (Silent) Movies to Talkies in the United States," *Journal of Social History* 51, no. 1 (2017): 1–26;

<sup>62</sup> Johnson, "Better Gestures," 3.

<sup>63</sup> Joanna Bourke, *What It Means To Be Human. Reflections from 1791 to the Present* (London: Virago, 2011), 29–60.

that, in the same way as enforcing an oralist education was a way to “enforce normalcy” on the deaf, so transitioning from movies to talkies similarly enforced normalcy on cinema’s language and communication.<sup>64</sup> It seems clear that, for Johnson, as for the numerous sources to which he gives voice, the possibility of a non-ableist cinema (from the perspective of deafness and hearing impairments) was damaged by the transformation of cinema into an *audiovisual* art.

Such a perspective, which recognises an essential opposition between deafness and audiovision, thus further motivates my need to explore how deafness and hearing impairments can reformulate audiovisual codes. Moreover, it importantly includes the element of technology in the discussion concerning the relationships between cinema and disability. Katherine Ott observes:

The particular differences that have marked people as disabled have varied widely over time as the invention, adoption, and discarding of technologies altered thresholds of human capacity and competency. For example, the wide availability of eyeglasses shifted thresholds of sight, and in the early twentieth century, adoption of the radio created new forms of aural exclusions.<sup>65</sup>

Following Ott’s and Johnson’s lines of thought, sound cinema as a technological apparatus has contributed to the construction of yet new disabling conditions for deafness. The question of the formal characteristics of sound cinema’s ableism thus emerges with renovated emergency.

Finally, it is necessary to account for two rather different works whose objects of study partially overlap, and which approach the problem of disability and cinema from a perspective substantially similar to mine: Jenny Chamarette’s exploration of the “complex embodiments” that cinema can represent when engaging with disability, and Ruth Kitchen’s essay on the relationship that Jacques Audiard’s films entail with disability and the disabled body.<sup>66</sup> The two texts converge when Chamarette shifts her attention to Audiard’s *Sur mes lèvres*.<sup>67</sup> This film narrates the relationship between Carla, a deaf woman utilising hearing aids, suffering from loneliness and isolation both in her private and professional life, and Paul, an ex-convict hired by Carla as her assistant. The two, sympathetic toward each other because of their shared, although differently characterised, status of social outcast, become close, fall in love, and participate in an improbable robbery.

Both Chamarette and Kitchen, when analysing *Sur mes lèvres*, are prompted to investigate the cinematic representation of deafness on a formal level. In other words, they not only critically assess how Audiard approaches deafness at a narrative level, but they also explore the technical characteristics that shape the

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<sup>64</sup> Johnson, “‘Better Gestures’: A Disability History Perspective on the Transition from (Silent) Movies to Talkies in the United States,” 2; Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy. Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London and New York: Verso, 1995).

<sup>65</sup> Katherine Ott, “Material Culture, Technology, and the Body in Disability History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History*, ed. Michael A. Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, and Kim E. Nielsen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 126.

<sup>66</sup> Jenny Chamarette, “Overturning Feminist Phenomenologies: Disability, Complex Embodiment, Intersectionality, and Film,” in *Rethinking Feminist Phenomenology: Theoretical and Applied Perspectives*, ed. Sara Cohen Shabot and Christinia Landry (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 187–208; Ruth Kitchen, “The Disabled Body and Disability in the Cinema of Jacques Audiard,” *Studies in French Cinema* 16, no. 3 (2016): 229–47.

<sup>67</sup> Jacques Audiard, *Sur Mes Lèvres* (France: Pathé, 2001).

audiovisual object in question, once deafness becomes one of its main thematic components. Kitchen notices that, in *Sur mes lèvres*, Carla's deafness is simulated by softening and muffling the aural stimuli sounded by the film's aural component, in correspondence with Carla's removal of her hearing aid from her ear.<sup>68</sup> She then concludes that "Audiard's cinema uses *both content and form* to propose alternative, contemporary and affirmative views of the disabled body and a challenge to stereotyped social perspective and narratives about disability."<sup>69</sup> Chamarette, proposing a similar analysis of the audiovisual construction of Carla's deafness, claims that "reading the film [*Sur mes lèvres*] purely in terms of its narrative structures leaves out its more complex sensory representations, where *aesthetic form, rather than narrative structure*, produces an intersection between complex embodiment and phenomenological experience."<sup>70</sup>

I strongly agree with Chamarette's affirmation of the necessity of assessing films' representations of complex embodiments at the level of audiovisual mediation's "aesthetic form." I, moreover, notice with interest the technical procedures, observed by Chamarette and Kitchen, used by Audiard in order to construct Carla's deafness, which I intend to keep in mind when analysing the construction of deafness operated by *A Quiet Place*. However, I remain dubious about the conclusions that the two authors reach.

Is softening and muffling a film's aural component a fair formal construction of deafness, or is it rather an ableist exercise of phantasy on how deafness might sound like to "hearing" ears? Can we really claim that, "alongside its historical incompetencies, cinema also has the capacity to innovatively revise disability narratives, particularly where films focus closely on the embodied experiences of characters and individuals living with impairments"?<sup>71</sup> Do the codes of audiovision that govern sound cinema actually have this capacity?

I want to engage with these questions by analysing how deafness and hearing/listening are formally constructed in *A Quiet Place*. Throughout this chapter, I explored a theoretical framework which allows to pose questions concerning sound cinema's aural overrepresentations, audiovisual mediation's construction of listening practices, and film's potentially essential ableism. Within my analysis, I will verify how such a theoretical framework responds, when confronted with an existing audiovisual object. To do so, however, it is first necessary to tackle the theoretical core behind my understanding of how audiovision works. As I will argue, in order to investigate the relationships between audiovisual mediation and disability, in general, and deafness, hearing impairments, and sound cinema, in particular, a new theory of audiovision is necessary.

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<sup>68</sup> Kitchen, "The Disabled Body and Disability in the Cinema of Jacques Audiard," 232.

<sup>69</sup> Kitchen, 233. Emphasis mine.

<sup>70</sup> Chamarette, "Overturning Feminist Phenomenologies: Disability, Complex Embodiment, Intersectionality, and Film," 199. Emphasis mine.

<sup>71</sup> Chamarette, 192-193.

## Chapter 2

### Toward a new theory of audiovision

We need a new theory of audiovision. We need a theory of audiovision that seriously strives to understand the processes of audiovisual mediation in light of the contributions of Critical Disability Studies. Which is to say, we need a theory of audiovision that does not assume a normative embodiment as the touchstone of audiovisual experience. Only when audiovisual theory makes an effort to expand its conception of what it means to hear and to listen, to see and to watch, it can begin to critically assess governing codes of audiovision, recognise their ableist assumptions, and even contribute to the development, if possible, of an audiovision striving to escape ableist constructions.

While the development of such a theory is, clearly, beyond the scope and the possibility of my thesis, I want nevertheless to commence, within this chapter, a movement toward it. To do so, I examine, discuss, and attempt to reshape two concepts that will prove to be crucial in the analysis of the construction of deafness and hearing/listening in *A Quiet Place*. These two concepts are “point of audition” and “aural diegetic space.” Since I cannot conceive a development of a theory which does not confront itself with practice, the reader will have to bear with me as, toward the end of this chapter, I anticipate a portion of the analysis that I will fully present in *Chapter 3*.

#### Point of audition

Within this section, I argue for the necessity of reassessing the concept of “point of audition.” As I will show, such a concept, as it is now mainly understood, implies the possibility of representing an objective modality of hearing/listening, compared to which subjective practices of listening—subjective points of audition—can be distinguished. Such an understanding supports and is supported by an aural overrepresentation of a listening practice, in turn overshadowing the construction of a listening ear that constricts the infinite possibilities of embodied listening into a normative, singular conception of hearing/listening. In the next paragraphs, I will further explore what just claimed.

“Point of audition” constitutes a complex conceptual tool, proposed and elaborated by scholars such as Rick Altman, Michel Chion, and Anahid Kassabian as a complement to the concept of “point of view.” What interests me, about points of audition, is how they construct and imply, at the level of a film’s formal characteristics, the virtual ear/practice of listening of the film’s viewers/listeners. Altman introduces the concept within his formulation of “point-of-audition sound.”<sup>72</sup> According to Altman, “point-of-audition sound is identified by its volume, reverb level, and other characteristics as representing sound as it would be heard from a point within the diegesis, normally by a specific character or

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<sup>72</sup> Altman, “Sound Space,” 60.



characters.”<sup>73</sup> Altman’s position establishes that, within a film, there exist multiple kinds of sounds, the “point-of-audition sound” being one of these kinds. In Anahid Kassabian words, “for Rick Altman [...] point-of-audition sound is a tactic, one among many in the world of film sound.”<sup>74</sup> A point-of-audition sound would then be operative, within a film’s soundtrack, *only* when the film’s aural component explicitly aligns the spectators’ virtual ears with those of a character. What about, then, every other moment within the film’s soundtrack? Can we discard the concept of point of audition whenever it is not clear, within the context of audiovisual representation, from whose ears we are listening?

Altman claims that, when a point-of-audition sound shapes a film’s aural component, “we are asked not to hear, but to identify with someone who will hear for us. Instead of giving us the freedom to move about the film’s space at will, this technique locates us in a very specific place—the body of the character who hears for us.”<sup>75</sup> The problem, I argue, following what observed in the previous chapter, is that someone *always* hears for us. The “freedom to move about the film’s space at will” cannot be mistaken for the freedom to hear for ourselves. At every moment, within sound cinema, one hears in infinite different ways, as infinite are the possibilities of embodied listening, but one always hears the listening practice constructed by the film’s makers. While I agree with Altman that there is indeed a difference between an aural component that explicitly articulates itself as the subjective aural experience of a film’s character, and one that instead proposes itself as aligned with an external (objective?), narrator-like perspective on the diegetic space, I reject his decision of defining only the first kind as point-of-audition sound.

Identifying point of audition as an audiovisual “tactic” rather than as a constant (as, we will see, with Chion) results in overlooking that audition in sound cinema is always constructed and, more importantly, risks assuming that, whenever this tactic is not employed, sound cinema’s aural component represents some sort of objective modality of hearing. As long as one agrees with what has been stated so far in this thesis, an objective listening practice is to be held as inexistent, given the fact that there is no such thing as *one* practice of listening that can be assumed as *the* objective practice of listening. When “we are asked not hear,” that is, when Altman hears a point-of-audition sound, “we” are actually asked to pretend that, before that moment of explicit articulation of the film’s aural component as representative of a subjective listening practice, we were free to listen *as if* not already immersed in someone else’s (the film’s makers’) constructed listening practice.

In sum, while I would like to adopt Altman’s distinction between a sound that “makes us hear” from a character’s ears, and one that does not clearly align the spectators’ virtual ear with any particular represented listening practice, I need a conceptual tool that allows to recognise the constructedness of

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<sup>73</sup> Altman, 60.

<sup>74</sup> Kassabian, “Rethinking Point of Audition in The Cell,” 302.

<sup>75</sup> Altman, “Sound Space,” 60.

both these aural moments within audiovisual representation. Michel Chion's formulation of the same concept comes closer to this purpose.

Chion develops his position by attempting to sketch the concept of "point of audition" in closer (with respect to Altman) parallel to "point of view." As he observes, point of view, in cinema, has two different meanings: it can refer to the perspective from which the spectator "sees" or to the alignment of what the spectator "sees" with what a film's character is supposed to see.<sup>76</sup> It follows that it is *always* possible to identify a point of view within a film: while the identified point of view will always represent the position of the spectators' virtual eyes within the cinematic space, sometimes this position will be explicitly aligned with a character's practice of seeing/watching, thus allowing a *subjective* point of view (more on this problematic definition later). When thinking about an equivalent to the concept of point of view for films' aural component, then, it will be possible to operate the same distinction between "a spatial sense: from where do I hear," and "a subjective sense: which character, at a given moment of the story, is (apparently) hearing what I hear."<sup>77</sup> Chion thus imagines the concept of "point of audition" as being *always* in place within a film's soundtrack, thus allowing me to adopt this tool to listen to the *always constructed practices of listening* proposed by sound cinema.

With respect to Chion, however, I beg to differ on two points. First, Chion claims that "the specific nature of aural perception prevents us, in most cases, from inferring a point of audition in space based on one or more sounds."<sup>78</sup> According to Chion, sound and listening, unlike light and sight, are omnidirectional; it is therefore not possible to determine, just by listening, from where in the space one is listening. Leaving aside the question of the solidity of Chion's position, it would seem that he is conflating the relationship between listener and surrounding space with that between listener and sound source. Examining one of his examples will reinforce the impression of such a conflation. He imagines "a violinist playing in the center of a large room": whatever the position of the listeners in the room—he claims—they "will all hear roughly the same sound."<sup>79</sup> Besides the fact that such a statement is false in terms of acoustics, Chion forgets to mention that what would make a difference, even in his terms, is if a listener would face away from the violinist, or if she would listen to the violinist from a distance of one meter rather than twenty, and so on. In other words, it is possible to identify from where one is listening to a particular sound source just by listening, even though how this positioning relates to the surrounding space is not always clear just based on the available aural data.

Or is it? Following the lines of thought he has sketched thus far, Chion argues that "it is the image that always creates the point of audition."<sup>80</sup> Just by listening to a film's soundtrack, it would not be

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<sup>76</sup> Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 89.

<sup>77</sup> Chion, 90.

<sup>78</sup> Chion, 90.

<sup>79</sup> Chion, 91.

<sup>80</sup> Chion, 91.

possible to identify from where, within the diegetic space, “our” virtual ears are listening, nor whether what one hears is heard by one (and which one?) of the film’s characters. In order to establish a point of audition, the film’s visual component would be needed, so that it could show what the virtual ears’ position might be, based on the displayed sound sources, and whether what is sounded by the film’s soundtrack might be heard only through the ears of a represented character. Given the dominant codes of audiovision characterising contemporary mainstream cinema, however, Chion’s position needs to be reassessed.

The problem with these two last arguments by Chion is not that they are, by themselves, implying a normative conception of what it means to hear/listen and to see/watch. However, they do understand audiovision in a way that overshadows a deeply ableist norm governing audiovisual codes. Points of audition, I argue, *are* established within the soundtrack. That points of audition be established within the soundtrack is required by the specific, ableist, normative codes of audiovision that construct contemporary cinematic representation. To recognise why and how, differently than what is claimed by Chion, sound cinema constructs points of audition first at the (formal) level of a film’s aural component, means, then, to recognise the very ableist codes of audiovision governing the processes of audiovisual mediation. In the two following sections, I will thus further explore Chion’s position, in order to then elaborate on why I disagree with it and show what the ableist norm governing audiovision is.

## **Do aural diegetic spaces exist?**

As I will extensively discuss in *Chapter 3*, I argue that *A Quiet Place*’s representations of multiple aural practices within the same diegetic space destabilises the normative codes governing audiovision, which usually require for a “same” space, within a same scene, to be listened to by one, single, often implicit pair of “ears.” The soundtrack of *A Quiet Place* offers numerous moments that explicitly articulate what is audible as the subjective aural experience of one of the film’s characters. When listening to a particular point of audition in *A Quiet Place* as the representation of a character’s subjective aural practice, one of the factors contributing to such an interpretation consists in the discrepancy proposed by a diegetic space that is visually uniform but aurally fractured: while preserving visual continuity, the film sounds substantially different aural experiences of the “same” space within the same scene.

The very existence of such a discrepancy implies that a diegetic space can have some sort of uniformity and autonomy not only on a visual level, but also on an aural level. Which is to say that in sound cinema there is the possibility of creating aural diegetic spaces. The aural uniformity and autonomy of a diegetic space, in turn, implies that *it is not* the image that “always creates the point of audition.”

However, since the “single-space-single-scene-single-ear” norm governing audiovision, the existence of aural diegetic spaces, and the aural autonomy of points of audition are mutually necessary, and since the existence of aural diegetic spaces and the aural autonomy of points of audition are an object of debate

within audiovisual studies, before exploring how my case study problematises what I see as normative audiovisual codes it is here necessary to establish whether aural diegetic spaces, aurally autonomous points of audition, and relative audiovisual norm exist at all. In the following paragraphs I shall thus discuss Chion's denial of the existence of aural diegetic spaces and aurally autonomous points of audition, so that I will then have the possibility to motivate my disagreement with Chion and evidence the existence of the aforementioned norm.

Michel Chion writes: "there is no place of the sounds, no auditory scene already preexisting in the soundtrack—and therefore, properly speaking, *there is no soundtrack*."<sup>81</sup> The French theorist's position on the matter is, more than it would appear from the words just quoted, complexly formulated, scattered throughout his work, and it leaves space for reassessments. In order to argue why I tend to believe that there does exist, in sound cinema, a place of the sounds—an auditory scene preexisting in the soundtrack—it is here necessary to briefly summarise Chion's thoughts on aural diegetic spaces in audiovision.

The point of departure for Chion's arguments stands in the concept of "audiovisual counterpoint." Audiovisual counterpoint is defined as an interaction between a film's visual and aural component where "sound and image would constitute two parallel and loosely connected tracks, neither dependent on the other."<sup>82</sup> According to Chion, what is often deemed as audiovisual counterpoint, in sound cinema, should rather be seen as audiovisual dissonance, as it would not consist in the interaction between two independent horizontal tracks but rather in the temporary contradiction between two vertically interdependent voices.<sup>83</sup> In other words, the concept of audiovisual counterpoint would seem to be utilised only in order to describe an aural component that sounds "wrong" or "inappropriate" *with respect to* the associated image, instead of pointing toward the coexistence of two autonomous contrapuntal voices. What would predominate, then, in the context of audiovision, is the vertical, dialectical relationship between what is heard *in relation to* what is shown: "these relationships are much more direct and salient than any relations the audio element could have with other sounds."<sup>84</sup> Chion illustrates his argument with the example of offscreen sounds: an offscreen sound can be heard as such not thanks to the horizontal relationships that wave that sound with the rest of the soundtrack, but only when confronted with its respective image, that *shows* that sound as being out of the screen.

Critiquing the concept of audiovisual counterpoint is necessary for Chion in order to argue that the so-called soundtrack does not actually constitute a properly independent, internally coherent track. While the term "soundtrack" is technically justified by the material presence of a "sound channel that runs the length of the film," its conceptual validity is undermined by the fact that "the sounds of a film, taken

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<sup>81</sup> Chion, 68.

<sup>82</sup> Chion, 35-36.

<sup>83</sup> Chion, 35-39.

<sup>84</sup> Chion, 40.

separately from the image, do not form an internally coherent entity on equal footing with the image track.”<sup>85</sup> What sets apart the “image track” from the soundtrack is the existence of a *frame*. Chion introduces the element of the frame here, but immediately abandons it in order to compare image and sound in the context of editing, coming back to it only in the following chapter. For the sake of clarity, however, let me subvert the order of his arguments.

In sound cinema—Chion theorises—there exists one essential difference between the visual and the aural component, thus allowing to refer to a singular film’s image, while making it difficult to speak about a singular film’s sound: “there is no auditory container for film sounds, nothing analogous to this visual container of the images that is the frame.”<sup>86</sup> While the frame is always there, setting the boundaries for every successive image, sounds find no spatial boundaries *within* the soundtrack: sounds’ spatial boundaries have to be sought in the image. As a consequence, audiovisual scenes would exist only at a visual level, defined by the frame, while at an aural level every audible stimulus, until it is confronted with the spatial boundaries provided by the image, could be, at the same time, in or outside the scene.

Chion, however, provides two examples of exceptions that both clarify his position and point toward a different conception of the problem. Jean-Marie Straub’s and Daniele Huillet’s *Les yeux ne veulent pas en tout temps se fermer ou Peut-être qu’un jour Rome se permettra de choisir à son tour* and Jacques Rivette’s *Suzanne Simonin, La Religieuse de Diderot*, in fact, do seem to indicate how “a sound scene or an auditory container-of-sounds might be.”<sup>87</sup> In the first case, “actors [...] often give long monologues offscreen, and yet such voices are not perceived as the traditional offscreen voice entirely determined by the image. Their voices seem to be ‘in the same place’ as voices of actors we do see, *a space defined by the background noise*.”<sup>88</sup> In the second case, “*the reverb around voices* [...] has a similar role of enveloping and homogenizing the voices, inscribing them in a space.”<sup>89</sup> As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, and as I will soon further explore, the aural diegetic spaces created by ambient noises and reverb, noticed by Chion, constitute, at least in the aural practices shaped by contemporary mainstream sound cinema, the norm rather than the exception. Such a norm is, in turn, indicative of a normative understanding of what it means to hear, since a uniform aural diegetic space can ensue only by a diegetic space “listened to” by a single pair of “ears.” The aural component of *A Quiet Place*, with its multiplication of aural practices, profoundly destabilises such a normative understanding, fascinatingly reimagining aural diegetic spaces in sound cinema. Before (finally) moving to my argumentation, however, it is necessary to account for two more observations proposed by Chion, which will provide me with important points for my critique.

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<sup>85</sup> Chion, 39-40.

<sup>86</sup> Chion, 68.

<sup>87</sup> Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet, *Les Yeux Ne Veulent Pas En Tout Temps Se Fermer Ou Peut-Être Qu’un Jour Rome Se Permettra de Choisir à Son Tour* (West Germany, Italy: Les Cinémas Associés, Forum Distribution, Cinémathèque française, 1970); Jacques Rivette, *Suzanne Simonin, La Religieuse de Diderot* (France: Rome-Paris-Films, 1967); Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 68.

<sup>88</sup> Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 68. Emphasis mine.

<sup>89</sup> Chion, 69. Emphasis mine.

Chion remarks that, when it comes to cinema's aural component, there does not seem to exist an equivalent to the visual shot, to that cinematic unit that structures the visual component. First of all, aural segments, even in the rare cases in which they are clearly distinguishable as such (e.g., a musical segment, abruptly interrupted by the sounds of a plane taking off), do not seem to have the possibility of establishing an "abstract and structural relationship [...] the way you can between shots."<sup>90</sup> The examples provided by Chion in this case (eyeline match and establishing shot) seem to imply that the structural impossibilities of "sound shots" mostly concern the cinematic shaping of a space through time.<sup>91</sup> An example of a structural relationship between two sound shots would then have to be imagined as such: a complex soundscape, in which multiple aural stimuli are audible (a sort of establishing shot), being followed by an increase in intensity of one of these sonic stimuli, moving our ears through the aural diegetic space and, in turn, constructing the space through our ears.

Secondly, Chion argues that, even though films' sounds and films' images are both edited, visual cuts are (generally) visible and can be taken as points of reference in order to subdivide the visual flow into units, while aural cuts are mostly inaudible and do not constitute units that structure the soundtrack as shots do for the "image track." The consequence is that, in sound cinema, "we hear as usual, in units not specific to cinema that depend entirely on the type of sound and the chosen level of listening (semantic, causal, reduced)": we hear a melody or a sentence, but these units are musical and linguistic rather than cinematic.<sup>92</sup> Let me argue, within the following section, why I partly disagree with Chion on his points explored thus far.

## **Aural diegetic spaces exist and shape a normative audiovision**

I here anticipate a portion of my analysis of *A Quiet Place* in order to argue for the existence of aural diegetic spaces, the aural autonomy of points of audition, and the normative character of the audiovisual codes ensuing from aural diegetic spaces and points of audition. *Figure 1* shows a spectrographic visualisation of the sonic stimuli constituting the aural component of *A Quiet Place* from 00:34:40 to 00:41:37. In other words, it shows the sound-track of one sequence of the film. It is, indeed, a way of visualising soundtracks different from what Chion had in mind when writing about a "sound channel that runs the length of the film."<sup>93</sup> In a way, it is also a visualisation of something else: digital data. Nevertheless, it similarly proves, in accordance with Chion, that soundtracks in sound cinema, at least on a technical level, exist. The difference in the kind of visualisation, however, points toward a few other characteristics of the soundtrack, thus shaping my partial disagreement with Chion.

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<sup>90</sup> Chion, 43.

<sup>91</sup> Chion, 43-44.

<sup>92</sup> Chion, 45.

<sup>93</sup> Chion, 39.

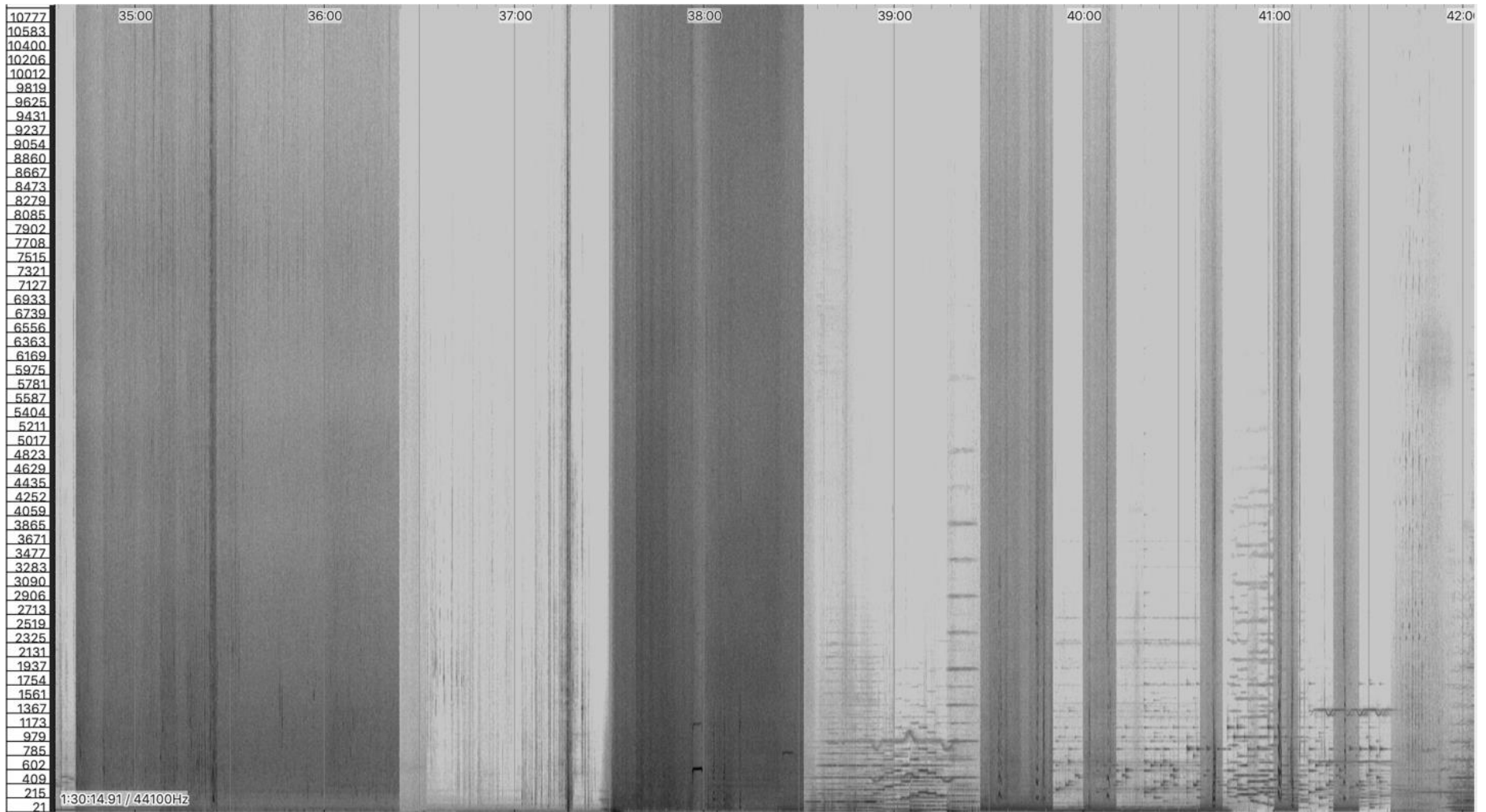


Figure 1. A spectrographic visualisation of a sequence from *A Quiet Place* [00:34:40-00:41:37]. Frequencies (Hz) are mapped on the vertical axis; time (hh:mm:ss) on the horizontal one. The colours' opacity represents the frequencies' intensity (dB). The graph shows what frequencies resonate at what intensity at a specific moment.

My argument is that this visualisation appears as it does only because there exists a norm, governing the codes of audiovision, which constructs hearing and listening in a normative way: as idealistic, ableist “all-hearing” ears, silently implied as *the* predominant listening practice. This norm, in turn, is shaped by the existence of aural diegetic spaces and by the aural autonomy of points of audition. By observing *Figure 1* it is possible to notice (more and less) clearly delimited segments. These segments owe their visual uniformity to (more and less) homogeneous backgrounds, spanning within their borders and embracing the other aural events happening throughout the segments’ duration, thus drawing a distinction between a background and visual elements that emerge from the background. These backgrounds, in turn, correspond to reverbs and ambient noises that unify diegetic spaces *at an aural level*. If sound cinema would not, by default, imply a singular listening practice as its predominant listening practice, cinematic diegetic spaces would not be unitary at the aural level of audiovision, because multiple ears would listen in different ways to those spaces and break the aural uniformity of the reverbs and the ambient noises. The fact that a single diegetic space *is*, by default, listened to by a single pair of “ears” allows for aural diegetic spaces to exist, and produces a spectrogram that visually translate them as segments with homogeneous backgrounds. In the following paragraphs I will detail my argument and further explore the aural autonomy of points of audition, which is made possible by the existence of aural diegetic spaces. Let us remember, for now, that we are not visualising anything else but the set of aural stimuli forming *A Quiet Place*’s soundtrack during a specific sequence, captured not as unfolding through time, but rather as unfolded and never vanished.

Each segment visible in *Figure 1* corresponds to a specific diegetic space. *Figure 2* reproduces the same visualisation of the same sequence but labels each segment with its corresponding space and with the characters inhabiting that space. Of course, these labels include information that is not present in the soundtrack alone. What is fundamental to notice, however, is that cuts to new diegetic spaces are not only visible when watching the film, but are also visible when *watching the film’s aural component*. The sequence in question cuts back and forth between three sets of scenes unfolding contemporaneously: Lee and Marcus go for a hike along a river and a waterfall (set 1, space 1A-C); Regan wanders away from the house, toward the bridge where one of the film’s opening scenes was set (set 2, space 2A-B); Evelyn engages with various tasks in and outside the house (set 3, space 3 A-B and 4). Almost every scene, unfolding in its diegetic space, is visible as a unit already within the soundtrack.

Some scenes present clearly marked aural boundaries: the aural diegetic spaces 1A-C (along the river; behind and in front of the waterfall; by the lake at the bottom of the waterfall), for example, are clearly distinct from the other diegetic spaces. Their backgrounds span, vertically, the frequency spectrum: translated in aural terms, this aural diegetic space is marked as such by the constant audible presence of the water flowing and falling. Others are less specifically aurally characterised, but still clearly distinguished from the surrounding ones: the aural diegetic space 2A (an exterior space outside the



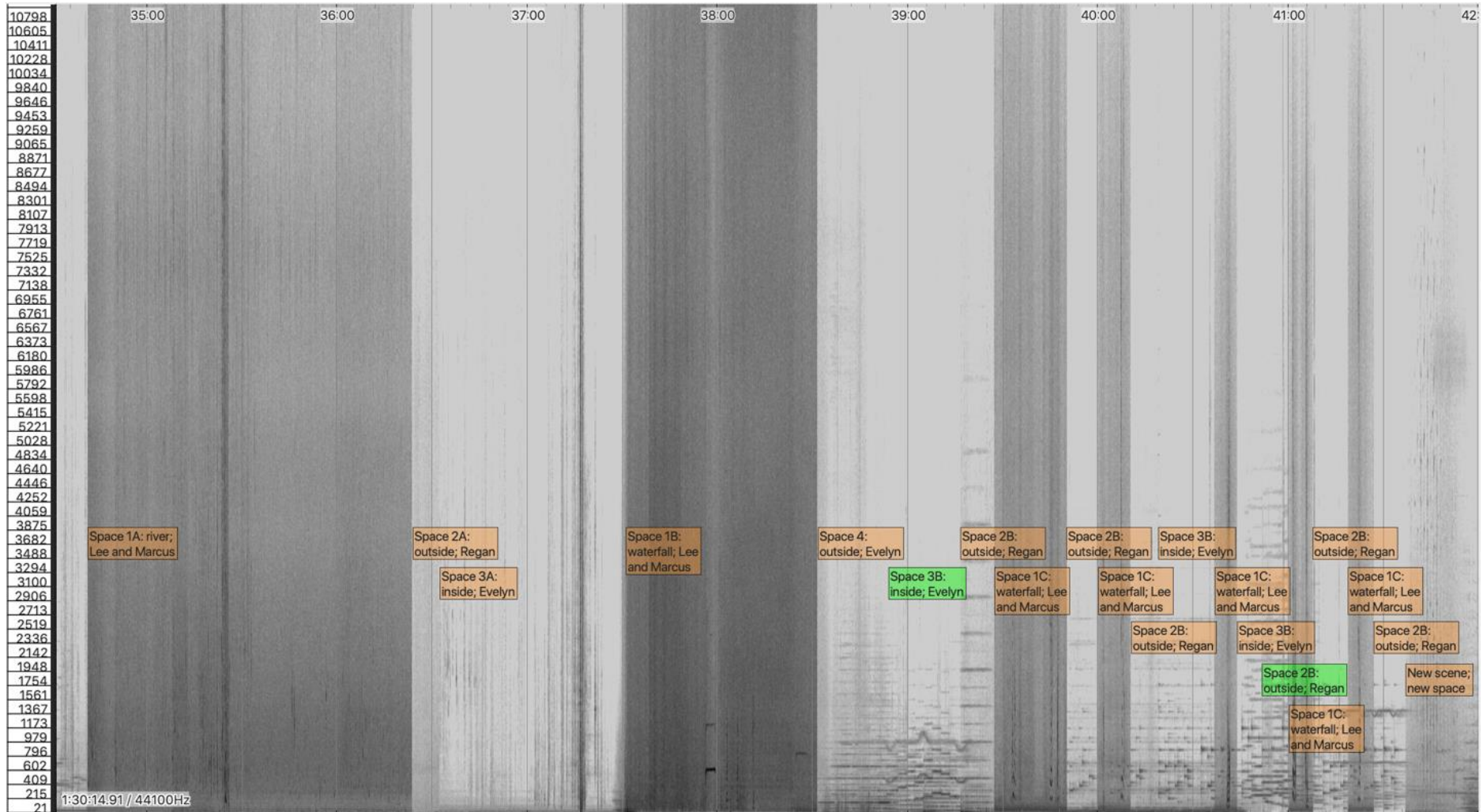


Figure 2. The waterfall sequence: diegetic spaces are aurally visible.

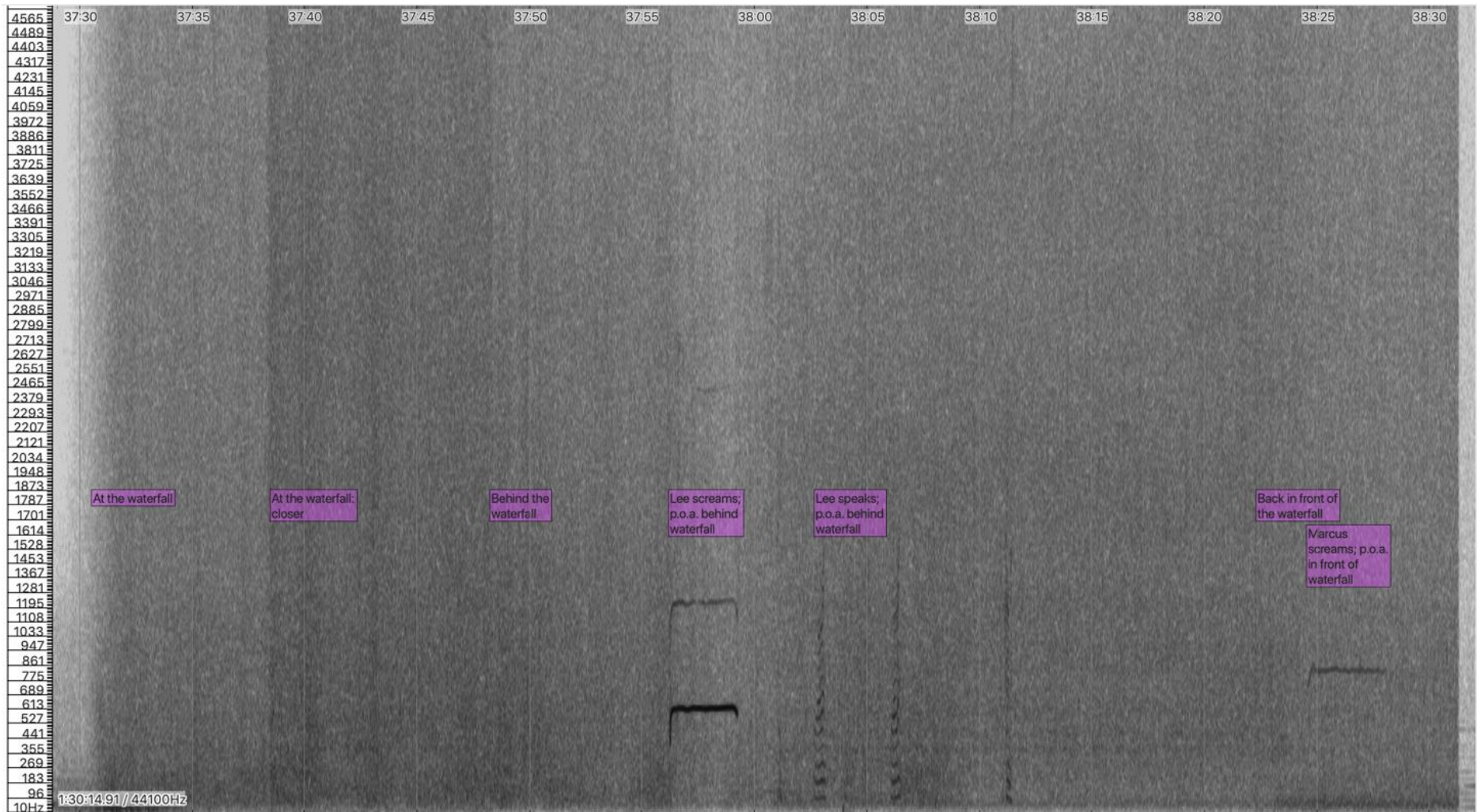


Figure 3. Zoom-in on a segment.

Abbotts' house, through which Regan is walking to get away from her family), marked by a soft reverb spanning almost over 8000 Hz, is noticeably separated from the aural diegetic space 3A (the interior space of one of the house's rooms, where Evelyn is washing some clothes), defined by an almost absent reverb that is clearly visible only at the very bottom of the frequency spectrum. Finally, a few diegetic spaces that are distinct when observing the film's visual component are hardly visible on the spectrogram (green labels in *Figure 2*): observe, at 00:38:53, how the passage from space 4 (an exterior space just outside the Abbotts' house, where Evelyn is hanging some laundry) to space 3B (Beau's room inside the house, where Evelyn sits) does not change the background in a way that clearly marks two distinct segments corresponding to two distinct diegetic spaces.

These aural backgrounds do not only mark the boundaries of aural diegetic spaces, setting them apart from what precedes and what follows: by providing a (more or less) constant aural presence (an audible "silence"), they also offer a sort of *frame within the soundtrack* against which the characteristics of other aural events can be perceived: they allow for points of audition to be constructed within the soundtrack. Take, for example, the fourth segment showed in *Figures 1/2* ("Space 1B: waterfall; Lee and Marcus"; see *Figure 3* for a zoom-in on the segment). The beginning of this aural diegetic space is characterised by the overwhelming noise produced by the water falling. This noise, however, increases in intensity after a few seconds, thus darkening the colour of the background. The increase in intensity suggests a closer proximity to the sound source: it moves our ears within the space established at the beginning, not dissimilarly from how a detail would bring our eyes closer to a portion of space shown during an establishing shot.<sup>94</sup>

Within the same segment just discussed, another interesting spatial relationship is set aurally: at 00:37:56, Lee screams from behind the waterfall. A few seconds later, Marcus screams, also from behind the waterfall. However, while the first scream resonates loudly, clearly emerging from the waterfall's roar, the second sounds more muffled, still audible but more submerged into the waters. On the spectrogram, the first scream appears as a vividly black mark, contrasting with the background, while the second one is noticeably lighter and more dispersed into the noise. This example shows that spatial relationships can be set, on the aural level, not only between "pro-filmic" elements, but also between these latter and the spectator's ears. If the visual shot's frame constitutes the spectator's eyes—her point of view—the aural background constitutes the spectator's ears: her point of audition. Which brings us to the distinction set by Chion between (existing) visual shots and (non-existing) aural shots.

What is a shot? Chion writes that "when we talk about a shot we are lumping together the shot's space and its duration, its spatial surface and its temporal dimension. While for sound pieces the temporal

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<sup>94</sup> For the relationship between aural stimuli's intensity and proximity to the sound source, see William W. Gaver, "What in the World Do We Hear?: An Ecological Approach to Auditory Event Perception," *Ecological Psychology* 5, no. 1 (1993): 1–29.

dimension seems to predominate, and the spatial dimension not to exist at all.”<sup>95</sup> In other words, the term “shot” can indicate two entities: a duration, theoretically defined by one uninterrupted segment of time; a space, constructed by the camera’s position in the diegetic space. According to Chion, while with images it is possible to assume the shot both as a unit of duration (determined by the cuts that precede and follow it) and as a spatial construction, with audio the predominating temporal dimension cannot be subdivided according to the cuts (that are inaudible) and the spatial dimension does not exist if not in relation to the images. I believe, however, that it is necessary to solve this conflation between space and time and reconsider the possibilities of aural shots.

I argue that it is necessary to clearly distinguish between a shot as a duration and a shot as a space. In the first case, what defines the shot is a technical element: the beginning and the interruption of a unitary segment of time by starting/stopping a recording or by cutting (analogically or digitally) a specific portion of the recorded material. When it comes to shot as duration, what differentiates a visual shot from an aural shot is merely the higher facility with which it is possible to make a cut imperceptible when it comes to sounds. This, however, does not mean that an aural shot cannot be audible or that a visual shot cannot be invisible. Take, for example, the famous depth shots of Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*: “many of *Kane*’s depth shots used optical printing to combine sharply focused planes that had been filmed separately.”<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, think about the segments shown by *Figures 5/6*: the clear-cut changes in texture are not just visual phenomena, setting visual delimitations to these segments (and I will come back to this issue soon), but rather and most importantly aural phenomena—sudden, profound modifications of the whole film’s aural component. In other words, the beginnings and the ends of these segments make audible a technical cut within the aural component, thus providing us with an example of audible aural shot.

In the second case, a shot can be interpreted as a different perspective on a diegetic space: different eyes on the diegetic space. An aural shot, then, would have to be a different aural perspective on the diegetic space: different ears/a different point of audition. When considering a shot as a space, then, the main difference between visual and aural shots resides in a sound editing practice that rarely strives to “listen” to a diegetic space with different ears, instead constructing an aural dimension as homogeneous as possible, so that a more heterogeneous visual component can be held together. However, even an increase in intensity of the waterfall’s roar, as described above, could be considered as a cut to a new shot, in the same way as a close-up following a long shot can be considered as a cut to a new shot.

Chion writes from a historical position that makes it difficult to conceive as radically distinct the layered construction of a point of view or of a point of audition, on the one hand, and the change of

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<sup>95</sup> Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 44.

<sup>96</sup> Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane* (USA: RKO Radio Pictures, 1941); Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 205.

point of view or point of audition, on the other. The fact that soundtracks were, by norm, layered even before the spread of digital technology, while layering the “video-track” was more complicated and not the norm before digital recording, facilitates the mistake of considering a non-noticeable cut equivalent to a non-existent shot. Digital technology more decisively solves the confusion, but does not add anything completely new: a shot, within its borders, can always be composed of different layers of visual data, recorded during different times and even in different spaces; when the layering is well executed, the co-existence of heterogeneous material is not noticeable, in the same way as layers of aural elements can be put together without their layering being actually audible.

As I anticipated above, even though I refer to visual characteristics of the spectrogram, I do not refer to merely visual phenomena, but rather to aural ones: the phenomena visible on the spectrogram are visual translations of aural phenomena, so that, for example, a darker colour on the spectrogram is a visual translation of an aural stimulus resonating with stronger intensity. I do believe, however, that utilising spectrographic visualisations of a film’s soundtrack is, if not necessary, at least fundamental for re-evaluating the role of aural diegetic spaces in sound cinema. I partially agree with Chion that a sonic container, whether it is defined by a unifying reverb or by a constant ambient noise, has more fleeting borders than the frame’s visible ones. What a spectrographic visualisation does, then, is to build a clear-cut frame for the sounds out of aural characteristics: the frequency spectrum delimits the space vertically, time horizontally, and intensity provides it with depth. In other words, a spectrographic visualisation, by re-ontologising the soundtrack as a visual phenomenon, allows for an easier spatial comprehension of a temporal phenomenon. Moreover, differently from a waveform visualisation that represents the whole of a film’s sounds as a single signal, graphed as a function of time, a spectrogram translates visually and maps into a space every frequency that resonates within a film’s soundtrack at every moment of time. While a waveform still points toward some sort of segmentation, it does not tell much about what distinguishes these segments. Most importantly, a waveform does not provide its viewers with the same sense of space allowed by mapping aural stimuli over the frequency spectrum and along the axis of time (see *Figure 4*).

In conclusion, denying the possibility of aural shots means to not recognise that aural shots are mostly inaudible because of the genre-specific way in which hearing and listening are constructed in audiovision. If aural shots seem mostly inexistent, it is because films’ aural components are shaped as homogeneously as possible. The homogeneity of films’ aural components is a consequence of the normative codes governing audiovision, which silently adopt a specific-listening practice as *the* listening practice and establishes it as the predominant set of ears of the film, elevated to the status of objective, ideal, “all-hearing” listening practice, compared to which subjective, “abnormal” listening practices can be distinguished. The construction of such a homogeneity, shaped as a “single-space-single-scene-single-ear” norm, allows for diegetic spaces to exist already within the soundtrack, which is to say that it allows

for aural diegetic spaces to exist and for points of audition to be aurally autonomous. While audiovision obviously ensues from the interaction between a film's aural and visual component, and does not exist autonomously within any of the two, some of the elements constituting audiovision can *also* exist autonomously in just one of the two components, as it is the case with aural diegetic spaces and points of audition. Recognising their autonomy does not mean to deny the importance of their interaction with the visual elements of audiovision, but rather to indicate their specific role in constructing processes of audiovisual mediation based on normative, ableist understandings of what it means to hear, listen, see, and watch, and thus on normative understandings of what it means to be human.

In the next chapter, I will analyse how *A Quiet Place*, in the effort of representing the subjective aural practices of some of its characters—amongst which the deaf Evelyn—moves toward a destabilisation of the normative understanding of hearing and listening governing mainstream audiovisual objects, fracturing aural diegetic spaces and multiplying its points of audition.



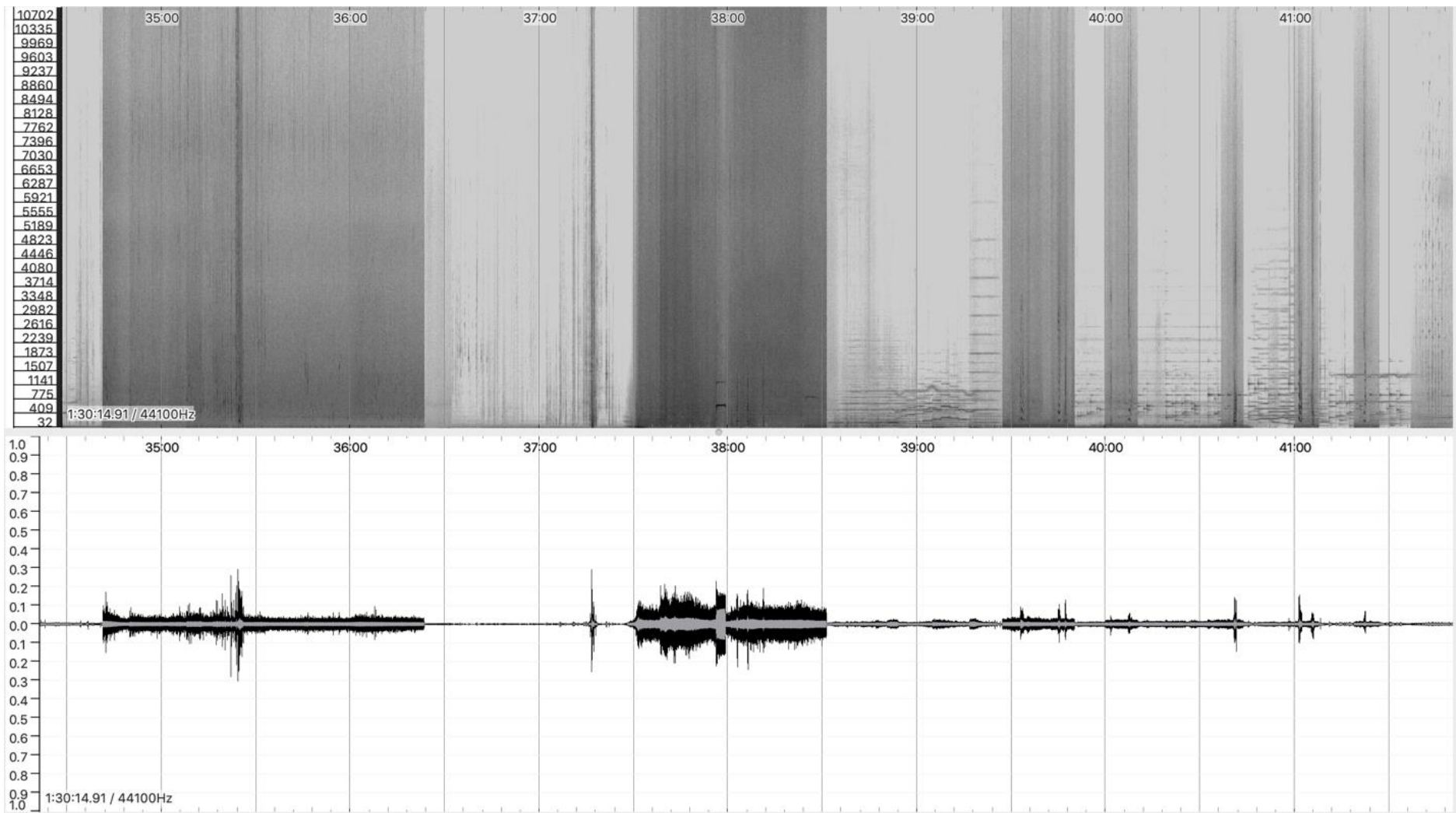


Figure 4. A comparison between a spectrographic visualisation and a waveform one.

## Chapter 3

### *A Quiet Place*: reimagining the governing codes of audiovision

What fascinates me about the narrative shaped by *A Quiet Place* is that its diegetic world imagines a reality where the relationship between aural practices and the governing code of symbolic life and death (in Sylvia Wynter's terms) is brought to the fore.<sup>97</sup> In other words, the regime of existence imagined by *A Quiet Place*, where *every* sound results in (the risk of) non-existence, merely brings to extremes the actual connections intertwining genres of aural expressions and dominant practices of existence. It is worth remembering, here, Jennifer Lynn Stoever's words quoted in *Chapter 1*: "as dominant listening practices discipline us to process white male ways of sounding as default, natural, and desirable [...] they deem alternate ways of listening and sounding aberrant and—depending upon the historical context—as excessively sensitive, strikingly deficient, or impossibly both."<sup>98</sup> Not sounding "white," *i.e.* producing sounds listened to as "non-white," at least in the United States of America, charts your aural practice on the side of symbolic death and can result in actual death, as dramatically exemplified by the cases that open Stoever's reflection.<sup>99</sup> Sounding and listening, life and death, are intimately linked not merely in the fictional world of *A Quiet Place*.

Adding a further layer of interest is the role played by deafness in the reimagined reality of *A Quiet Place*. Amongst the perils of sounding, "the biological, social, and cultural implications of being deaf are not automatically defined simply by *loss* but could also be defined by *difference*, and, in some significant instances, as *gain*."<sup>100</sup> Within this chapter, I will assess what this means in terms of both the film's formal and narrative/representational characteristics. First, I will briefly explore how in *A Quiet Place* deafness complexly lives within a space defined by loss, difference, and gain at the film's narrative/representational level. Then, I will account for the film's multiplication of aural practices and analyse how multiple points of audition are constructed at the level of the film's formal characteristics. The multiplication of aural practices/points of audition, I will argue, results in a fracture running through the aural consistency of *A Quiet Place*'s soundtrack, thus showing how an audiovisual representation that strives to explode a normative aural practice into the infinite possibilities of embodied listening profoundly unsettles the governing codes of audiovision, in turn reinforcing my argument concerning the existence of such codes. Finally, I will address the still problematic traits of the film's representation of deafness, discussing the relationship between hearing, ears, and silence, questioning the distinction between subjective and

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<sup>97</sup> Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?: Or to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations." Interview with Katherine McKittrick," 33-39.

<sup>98</sup> Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 12.

<sup>99</sup> Stoever, 1: Michael Dunn's murder in Jacksonville, Florida, in 2012; Sandra Bland's arrest and subsequent suicide in the Waller County Jail, in 2015; the violence exerted by a police officer on a black girl at Spring Valley High School, in 2015.

<sup>100</sup> H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray, "Deaf Gain. An Introduction," in *Deaf Gain. Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xv.



objective points of audition, and identifying in the usage of extra-diegetic music a dangerously ableist construction.

## **Deafness as gain, difference, and loss in *A Quiet Place***

Gain: insofar as existing as a deaf person prompted Regan to develop visual ways of being, her modality of existence constitutes a significant advantage in the particular context depicted by the film, where aural ways of being are no longer the norm for survival. Significantly, Regan's deafness constitutes a gain not only because it materialises visual means of communication, but also insofar as it heightens the awareness of what sounds and how. In other words, Regan's deafness makes sounding and listening "visible" as it destabilises their normative codes. As we will see, such a process extends beyond the film's representational level, insofar as Regan's deafness destabilises listening's normative codes also *within* audiovision, at the level of its formal characteristics. Moreover, Regan's deafness represents a gain also for her family, whose aural practices, interacting with that of Regan, reveals their peculiarities and their limits, fascinatingly illustrating Kafer's claim that "disability is experienced in and through relationships; it does not occur in isolation."<sup>101</sup>

Difference: Regan's deafness does set her apart from the rest of her hearing family, sometimes bringing to the fore conflictual, rather than collaborative, dynamics. If, on the one hand, her mode of existence is embraced by the other family members, on the other it sometimes seems to be experienced in contrast with their aural practices. Significant, in this respect, is a scene where Lee involves a reluctant Marcus in an excursion, supposedly meant to improve the boy's survival skills, while precluding Regan from the possibility of coming along, notwithstanding her being decidedly more interested than her younger brother in joining the expedition. Lee brings Marcus in the proximity of a waterfall, where the two, protected by the loud roar produced by this latter, can scream and speak, activities in which they engage with a sense of almost cathartic liberation. Their exchange, one of the very few non-signed in the entire movie, revolves around the conflictual relationship between Regan and Lee. While Regan, in this example, does not seem to be excluded as an explicit consequence of her being deaf, the symbolic value of the scene strongly points toward the difficulties that her mode of existence poses to the relational dynamics between her and the rest of the family: Lee wilfully keeps Regan away from a different aural reality, where he and Marcus can interact according to "normative" hearing conventions.

Loss: notwithstanding the interesting directions explored by *A Quiet Place* in addressing deafness not merely as a lack of hearing, its narrative is not devoid of an ableist preoccupation with being deaf as an *inability* to hear, represented by Lee's efforts dedicated to repairing Regan's no-longer-functioning cochlear implant. While the father's concern for his daughter's means of survival can be seen as a

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<sup>101</sup> Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 8.

powerful drive guiding his actions, the value with which Lee charges Regan's adoption of the cochlear implant resonates problematically with the history of violent "inclusive" strategies that strongly informed the development of cochlear implants and hearing aids: the importance of Regan's usage of a functioning cochlear implant, according to Lee, would reside in the consequent possibility for her to reconnect with her family. Throughout the following sections, I am going to explore how the narrative articulation of Regan's deafness as gain, difference, and loss can be traced and critically assessed at the formal level of the film.

## **Multiplying aural practices**

### **Regan's point of audition**

One minute and fifty-three seconds into *A Quiet Place*, the audience is confronted with an aurally striking phenomenon: a sudden change alters, for a few seconds, the soundscape of the scene, as if a new pair of ears had abruptly substituted those shaped during the film's previous moments. What happened?

The movie opens its visual component with a few images of what seems to be an abandoned town, rapidly bringing our eyes into the interiors of a just as apparently abandoned shop. A diffused light, filtering from the outside, frames the silhouettes of two kids, who stealthily run and walk around. The aural component accompanying these images mixes the wind's rocking sighs (preponderant while outside; a pale background murmur while inside) with occasional human breaths (presumably, the kids') and the soft, percussive sounds produced by the kids' steps. Every aural stimulus is lightly dispersed in a delicate, barely present reverb (see *Figure 5*). At 00:01:47, the figure of one of the two kids—Regan—distinctively appears in the background of a medium-long shot: the aural dimension of the scene is left almost unchanged, with the subtle exception of the suppression of a relatively high-pitched breeze.

And here we are, at 00:01:53: a cut to a close-up frames Regan's profile, her cochlear implant now clearly visible; almost every aural stimulus is, all of a sudden, suppressed; the reverb is dramatically reduced, nearly absent if not for an almost inaudible presence in the very low-end of the frequencies' spectrum; one percussive sound, resonating at a low frequency with a regular pace, becomes audible.<sup>102</sup>

As the content of the film's aural component suddenly changes, I make sense of the event by imagining that the newly-shaped point of audition attempts to reproduce the subjective aural experience of the character framed by the shot: I assume that I am hearing and listening through the ears (and I will later address such a problematic simplification) of one particular character, in the same way as, when confronted with a subjective point of view, I would assume that I am seeing and watching through the eyes of one particular character. Contributing to my interpretation of the event, on the visual component side, are: the unity of space existing between the medium-long shot with Regan in the background and

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<sup>102</sup> Refer to the "Methodology" section of the *Introduction* for my definition of audibility within this context.

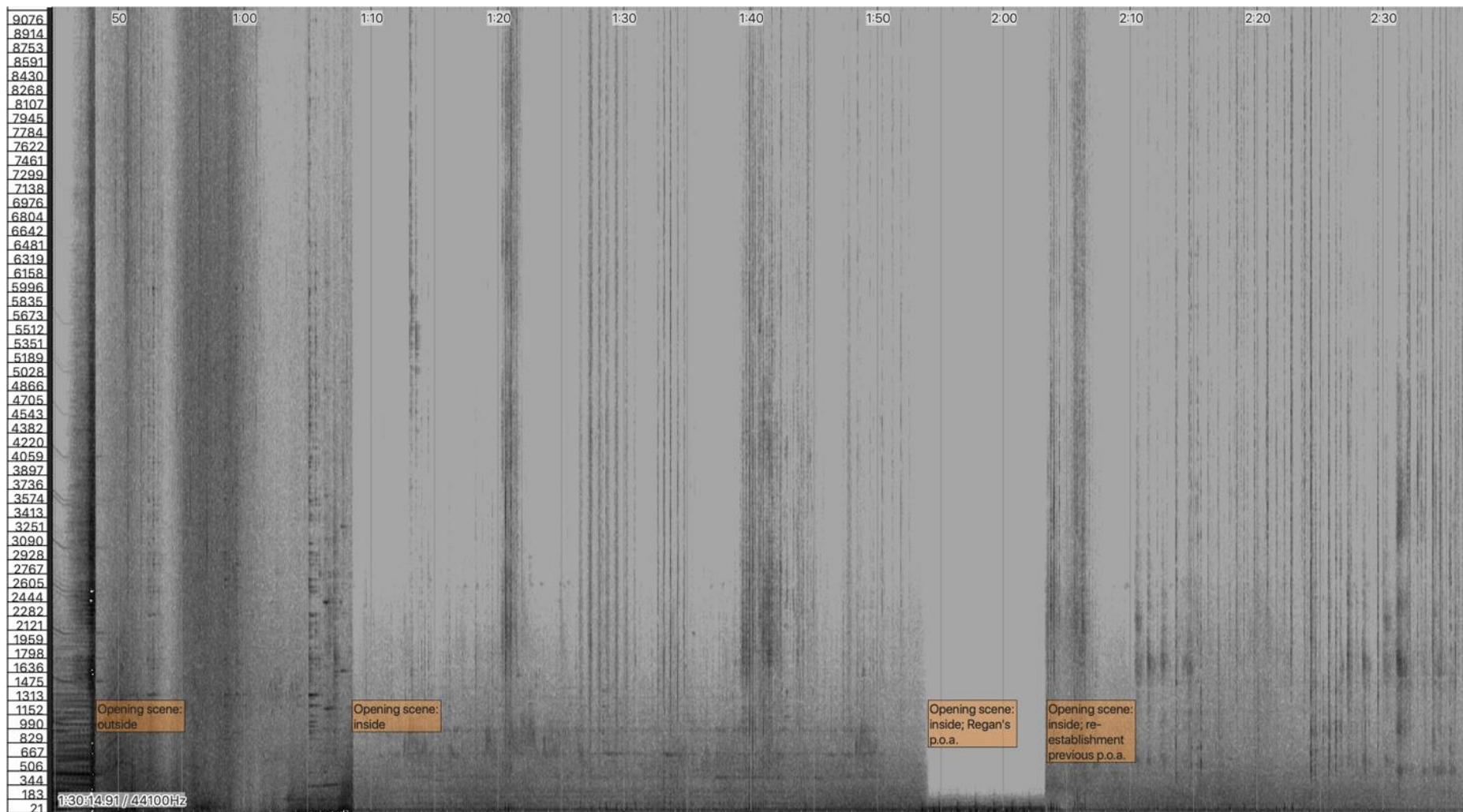


Figure 5. Regan's point of audition is introduced.

the close-up framing Regan's profile; the visualisation of a cochlear implant attached to Regan's head. The unity of space prevents me from considering the change in the content of the aural component as a consequence of a change in the represented space (and, thus, of the soundscape). The cochlear implant provides me with a possible explanation for the abrupt suppression of almost every aural stimulus and leads my interpretation concerning the "nature" of the represented aural practice.

Both points pose urgent questions concerning the governing codes of audiovision and, thus, require a further exploration. First, however, it is useful to account for the other occurrences, within *A Quiet Place*, of subjective points of audition.

### **The creatures' point of audition**

Regan's aural practice is not the only subjective point of audition represented by *A Quiet Place*. In two instances, the film's aural component is shaped by the creatures' heightened hearing. At 00:47:42, *A Quiet Place* offers to its audiences a rather tense scene: Evelyn, whose water just broke (in conformance to a horror cinema's *cliché*), is trapped in the basement, where a creature is hunting for aural stimuli. In order to escape, she devises a strategy to distract the creature: setting a timer and waiting for the ringing alarm to cover the sounds of her flight. The aural component of the scene contributes to the narrative tension: an almost completely silent soundscape, textured with a soft reverb, allows the rare but dangerously charged aural stimuli—Evelyn's breathing and the creature's movements and breathing—to resonate loudly. The visual component alternates close-ups of Evelyn to medium shots framing the creature from Evelyn's point of view.

At 00:48:55, a cut to an extreme close-up of the creature focuses our attention on what might appear to be the creature's ear. At first, the aural component seems to be the noise produced by the creature's ear opening and dilating. As the camera keeps zooming into the ear, however, the insistent ticking of the timer, inaudible until now, suddenly fills the soundscape. It would seem that *A Quiet Place* is constructing here another aural practice: the creature's, characterised by a heightened perception of the aural stimuli available in the diegetic space. With a cut to a zoom toward the timer, we are confronted with yet another point of audition: one from which the ticking of the timer becomes gradually and rapidly more and more audible, as the camera gets closer to the object.

Presuming that the timer has been ticking throughout the whole scene, three points of audition seem to follow one another: the first one makes audible the sounds produced by Evelyn and the creature, but does not capture the timer's ticking; the second one makes hyper-audible the timer's ticking; the third one allows the timer's ticking to be heard, but differently from how the second one had listened to it.

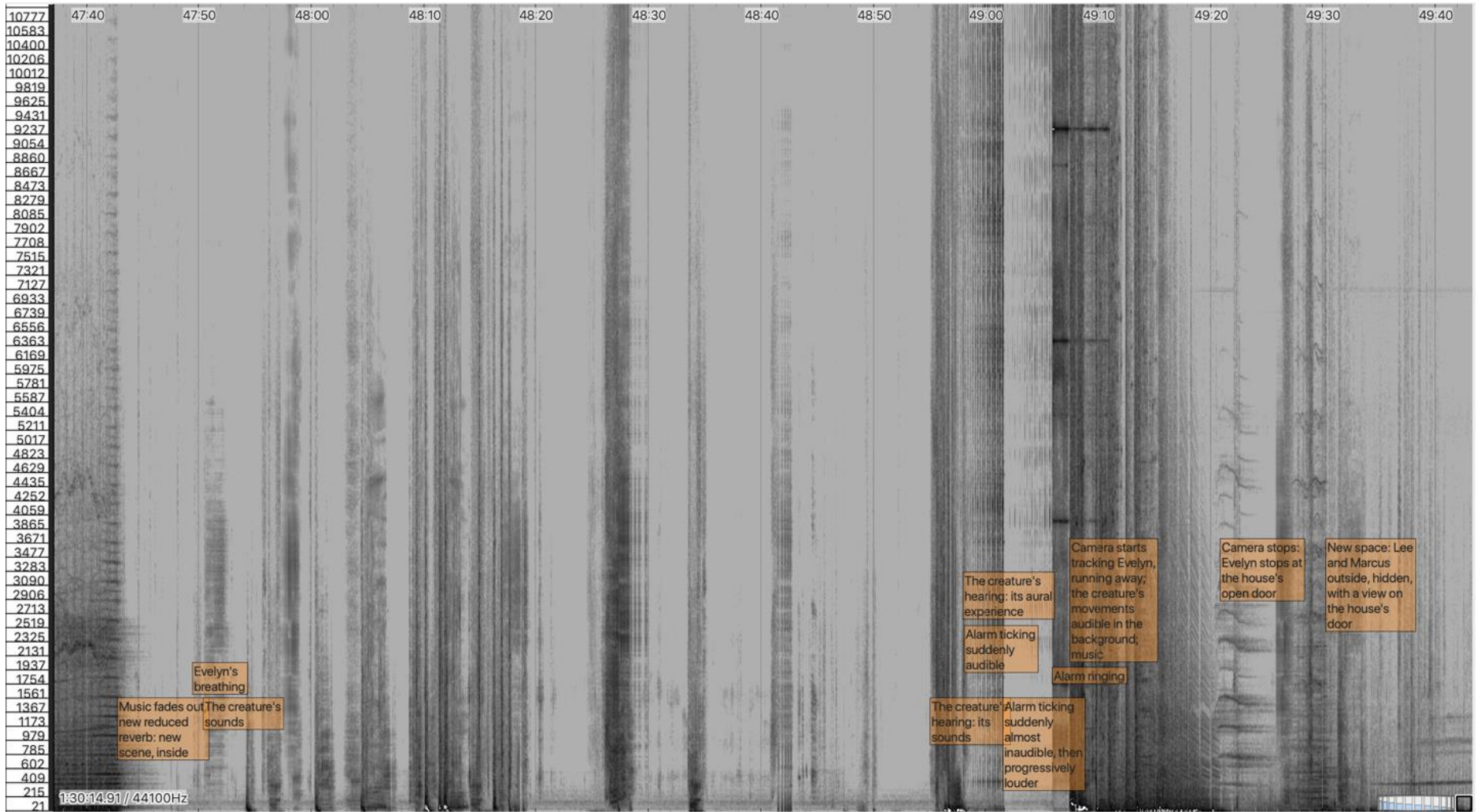


Figure 6. The creature's point of audition is introduced.

The second moment during which the film's aural component is shaped by the creature's point of audition occurs at 00:56:49. The scene had started a few seconds earlier, at 00:56:17: Regan wanders around a field, looking for her brother; the aural component is dominated by the stridulating sounds presumably produced by crickets. At 00:56:26, the point of audition switches to Regan's: as earlier in the film, every aural stimulus is suppressed in favour of a very light reverb and the heartbeat's percussive sounds. While the aural component is still shaped by Regan's aural practice, the visual component, framing Regan in the foreground, lets us spot the silhouette of a creature, emerging from the darkness in the background. A cut to an over-the-shoulder shot framing the creature from behind coincides with a reestablishment of a "hearing" point of audition, allowing for the sounds produced by the creature's movements and breathing to become audible. The next cut introduces a close-up on the creature's ear, almost identical to the one described in the paragraph above, allowing, again, for the creature's point of audition to shape the film's aural component: the stridulation of the crickets becomes, suddenly, the loud protagonist of the soundscape. At this point, something curious happens.

While the camera is still focused on the creature's ear, the insistent presence of the cricket's stridulation abruptly ceases to resonate, substituted by a high-pitched upwards glissando. A cut to a close-up framing Regan shows her in pain, with a hand on her cochlear implant, suggesting that the glissando consists in feedback produced by the cochlear implant, somehow resonating with the creature's ear. The cut to Regan's close-up matches with a modification of the glissando's aural characteristics: the sound keeps rising, but its intensity slightly diminishes, thus suggesting that the point of audition is now different, possibly that of Regan. A (visual) cut back to the creature's ear bears, for a moment, no change in the aural component, thus weakening the distinction between the creature's and Regan's points of audition. However, as soon as the creature shuts down what would appear to be its earlids, the feedback ceases to be audible, while the sounds produced by the creature's suffering fill the soundscape, now apparently experienced from a re-established "hearing" point of audition.

Before proceeding with the account of the audiovisual relationships unfolding within the rest of the scene, let me briefly summarise what has been encountered so far: a "hearing" point of audition makes audible the stridulation of the crickets, as well as the creature's sounds, but renders inaudible the cochlear implant's feedback; Regan's point of audition is characterised, first, by the suppression of almost every aural stimulus, then, by the painful presence of the cochlear implant's feedback; the creature's point of audition reproduces a heightened aural perception that makes hyper-audible, first, the stridulation of the crickets, then, the feedback. In the last case, the feedback would seem initially louder for the creature than for Regan. However, right before the creature closes its earlids, the feedback resonates with equal intensity for both Regan and the creature.



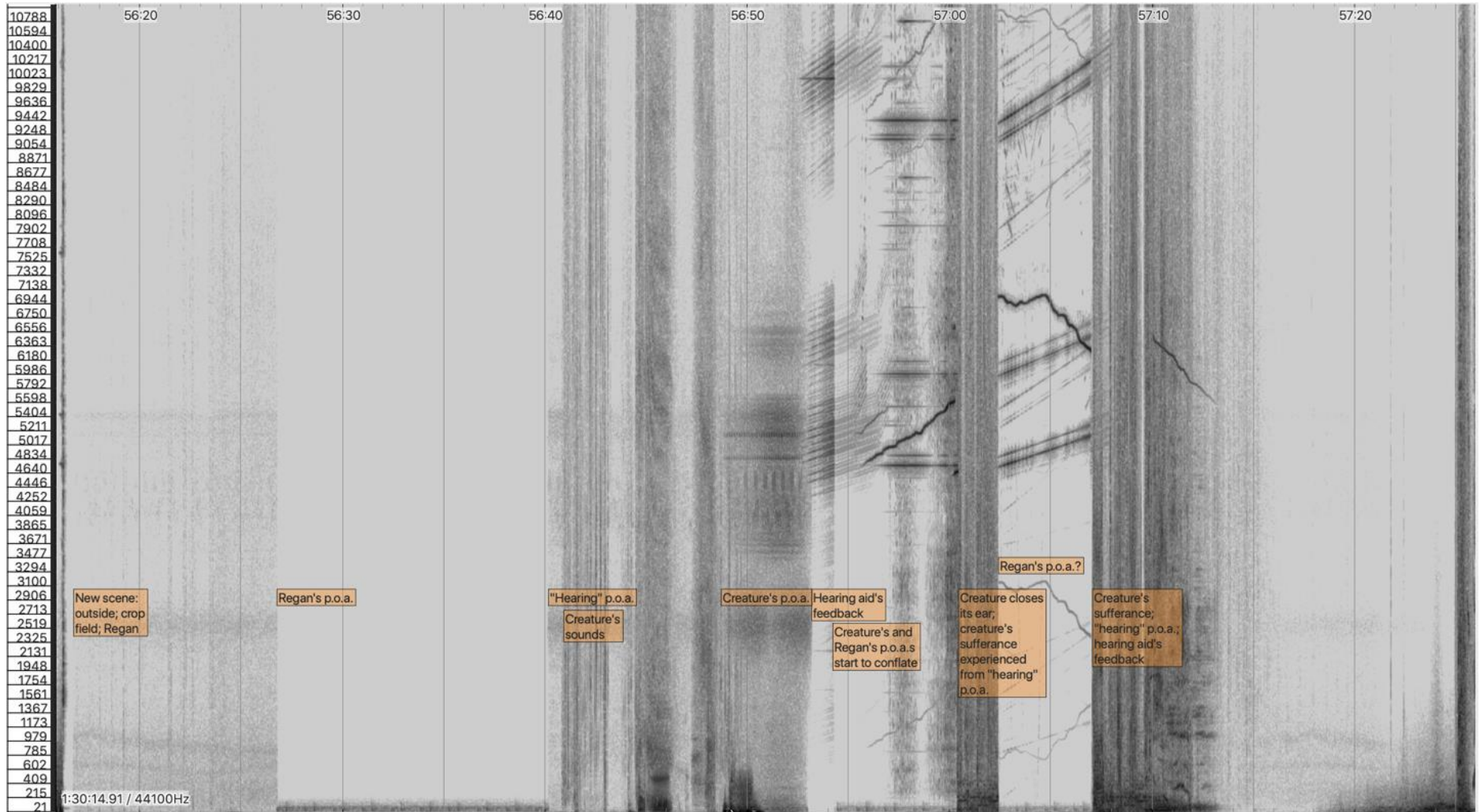


Figure 7. The creature's and Regan's point of auditions complexly interact with the cochlear implant's feedback.

At 00:57:10, things get even more complicated. A few seconds earlier, I experienced the creature's suffering from a "hearing" point of audition; then, again, the cochlear implant's feedback from Regan's point of audition (with consequent suppression of every other aural stimulus); finally, once again, the creature's agony from a "hearing" point of audition (with consequent suppression of the cochlear implant's feedback). At this moment, however, as the creature appears overwhelmed by the pain and runs away, the cochlear implant's feedback resonates once more, *together with* the aural stimuli that have been constructed as audible by the "hearing" point of audition: a final conflation occurs between all the three point of auditions/ears/aural practices presented by the scene.

Why do I listen to the segments of the film's aural component that enhance the audibility of certain aural stimuli as shaped by the creature's point of audition? A mixture of elements informs my interpretation: the unity of space in contrast with the heterogeneity of aural stimuli; the relationship between the visual and aural components; the information at my disposal concerning the diegetic world. The problem of a unitary diegetic space producing an expectation for a unitary *aural* diegetic space emerges, here, once again, thus renovating the urgency of exploring it. I, however, have to postpone these explorations one more time, in order to first account for one final subjective aural practice represented by the film.

### **Lee's point of audition?**

At 00:21:57, we are inside the Abbotts' house, in the basement, where Lee is working on a cochlear implant for Regan. The soundscape is characterised by a gentle reverb that masks a constant buzzing, presumably produced by the numerous electronic devices present in the room, and a few occasional sounds of Lee's work on the cochlear implant.

A first ambiguous aural stimulus resonates when Lee plugs the implant's transmitter into the microphone/processor: a high-pitched feedback becomes audible. How is any aural stimulus produced by the cochlear implant audible from a point of audition that is not that of the cochlear implant's user? In fact, a cochlear implant, through its external components, receives acoustic stimuli thanks to a system of microphones, processes them, and transmits them across the skin to the internal component *as electric signals*; the internal component, in turn, directly stimulates the cochlear nerve. A cochlear implant, contrary to a hearing aid, does not amplify acoustic stimuli *as acoustic stimuli* through a system of speakers. In other words, a cochlear implant cannot make acoustic stimuli audible for individuals who have not been implanted and who are not using that cochlear implant in that moment. Lee is not shown reacting in any particular way to this aural stimulus, thus allowing to imagine that the feedback is audible from some sort of machine's point of audition. Such a hypothesis, however, sounds like a stretch. It seems more likely that presenting the cochlear implant's feedback at this point of the narrative arc serves as an anticipation of what happens later when the feedback somehow defeats a creature.



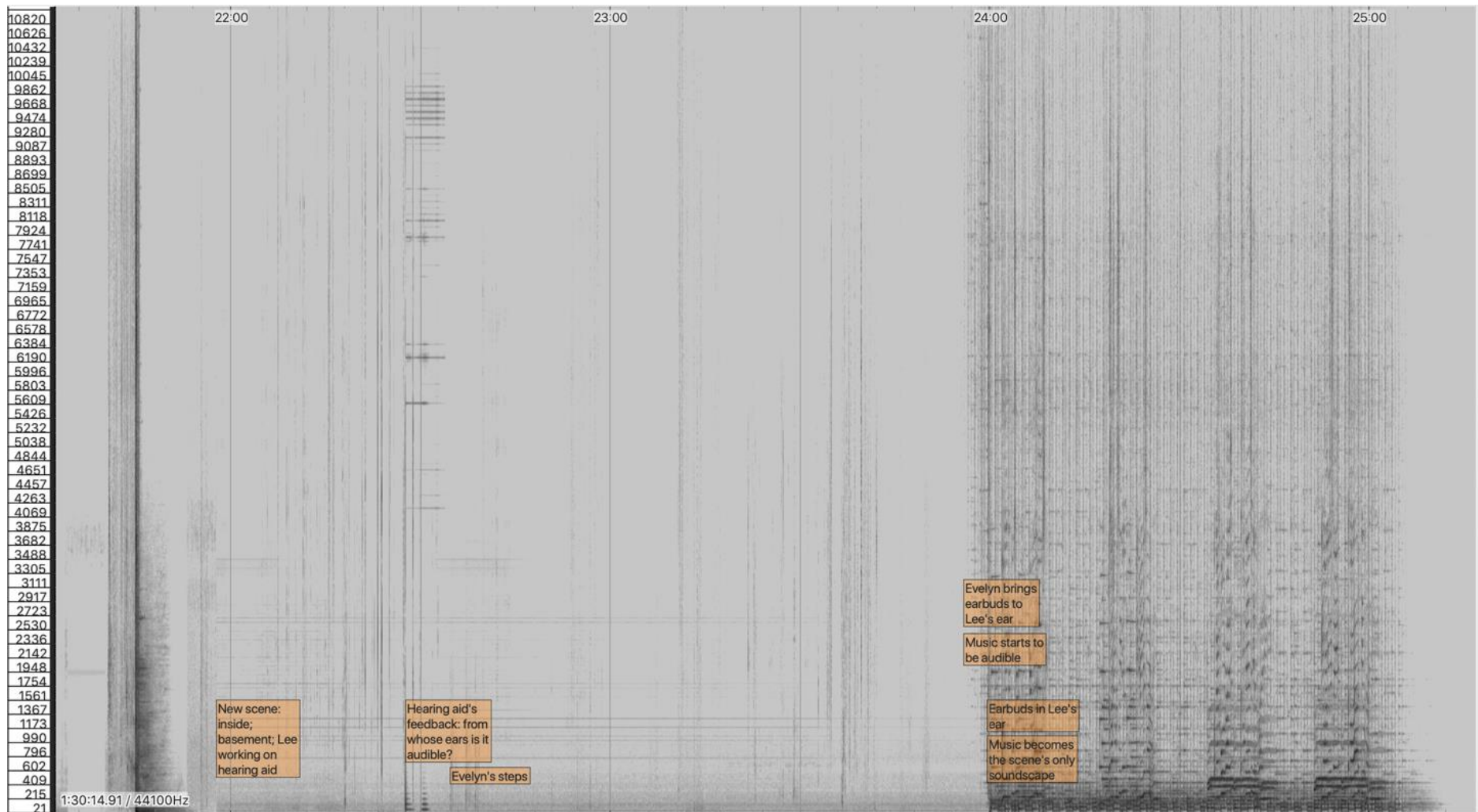


Figure 8. Diegetic music becomes audible through Lee's point of audition.

Right after the feedback has resonated, Evelyn enters the scene. She walks toward Lee, who is working, sitting at a desk, and hugs him from behind. She is shown wearing earbuds, but the scene's soundscape is not affected by any aural stimulus that could be produced by them. It would seem reasonable to assume that the constructed point of audition is that of a "hearing" ear positioned in the room, not aligned with any character's aural practice in particular. Things, however, are not that simple.

Evelyn manages to distract Lee from his work. Lee stands up and the two walk to the middle of the room, where they start a slow dance. A cut to a close-up brings our eyes close to Evelyn's and Lee's heads, with this latter shown from behind. Evelyn takes an earbud out of her ear and brings it to Lee's ear. As she does so, the music starts to become increasingly audible, first superimposed on the existing soundscape, then, when the earbud is in Lee's ear, becoming the only soundscape of the scene. What was, then, our point of audition until that moment? What is it now?

Hypothesising an "external," "objective" point of audition is possible only until the earbud is inside Lee's ear: as Evelyn pulls one earbud out of her own ear and the music starts to be audible, imagining an external point of audition is still plausible; when the earbud is inside Lee's ear and the music completely fills the soundscape, however, it becomes evident that Lee's subjective aural experience is influencing the scene's aural dimension, otherwise the music would be inaudible for the spectator, as it was when the earbud was in Evelyn's ear. However, if the music-dominated point of audition would be Lee's, the room's soundscape should still be audible, captured by Lee's ear without an earbud. What is, then, the scene's point of audition?

Two initial considerations. First, it is possible to imagine that the point of audition has been Lee's throughout the whole scene, insofar as changes in the film's aural dimension, when the point of audition is aligned with that of Lee, can happen without noticeably subverting what might be perceived as a familiar aural practice, thus allowing for the distinction between Lee's subjective point of audition and the film's "objective" point of audition to be almost absent. It is clear, then, that the whole distinction between "objective" and "subjective" points of audition is based on something very different than "objectivity" and "subjectivity." Second, music wreaks havoc in the film's aural component, rendering very ambiguous the boundaries of distinct points of audition. I will come back to both these points.

We have seen how *A Quiet Place* constructs points of audition that, sometimes, seem to align with the subjective aural practices of the film's characters. However, we need to explore some of the questions raised by the film's aural component. What makes it possible to listen to the segments of the film analysed above *as if* one is listening from a character's ears? What are the audiovisual codes that allow a point of audition to emerge as subjective? Moreover, what about the rest of the film? From whose ears is one hearing when a subjective point of audition does not seem to be in place? Are these latter moments constructing an aural practice that might be heard as "objective"? Let me address these questions in the following sections.

## Fracturing aural diegetic spaces

I believe that the multiplication of aural practices attempted by Krasinski's film is particularly telling of how sound cinema usually constructs "ears" that normatively listen to the diegetic space. If I was prompted to describe the sudden switch to Regan's point of audition, at the beginning of the film, as "striking," and if such a technique would constitute, in the words of the film's production notes, a manner of "using auditory cues in innovative ways," it is because fracturing the continuity of aural diegetic spaces in sound cinema profoundly unsettles the governing codes of audiovision explored in *Chapter 2*.<sup>103</sup>

Let me remind us of the first time *A Quiet Place* introduces its audiences to a multiplicity of points of audition within the same scene/diegetic space (see above, *Figure 5*): the camera is moving our eyes within an abandoned shop; the aural component offers sparse aural stimuli, immersed in a soft reverb (on the spectrogram, the background noise consistently spans throughout the segment over almost 700 Hz); suddenly, in correspondence with a close-up of Regan (who had already appeared in a previous shot and who is shown moving in the same space represented by the previous shots), the aural component drastically changes: the reverb is reduced to almost nothing, every aural stimulus previously characterising the diegetic space is suppressed, only (what might be heard as) a heartbeat becomes audible in the silence.

Why do I listen to this change as the subjective representation of Regan's point of audition, rather than as a change in the aural dimension of the diegetic space? Because, together with a visual spatial continuity, I expect an aural spatial continuity. An aural spatial continuity usually runs throughout scenes in the form of ambient noise and reverb: if the aural continuity is broken, while the visual continuity is preserved, I seek for an explanation of what I perceive as a discrepancy outside of the established relationship between space and sounds: in this case, the explanation is sought in a different modality of listening to such a relationship.

In order to achieve a spatial unity of sound, the aural component of a film needs to construct a consistent "ear" throughout a scene: each represented space has to be listened to by a single ear, with the consequence that the listening practice proposed to the audience is singular. As observed by Mary Ann Doane:

The drama played out on the Hollywood screen must be paralleled by the drama played out over the body of the spectator—a body positioned as unified and nonfragmented. The visual illusion of position is matched by an aural illusion of position. The ideology of matching is an obsession which pervades the practice of sound-track construction.<sup>104</sup>

What happens during the first minutes of *A Quiet Place*, however, is that a singular space, within the same scene, is listened to by different "ears." The multiplication of aural practices thus proposed significantly

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<sup>103</sup> "A Quiet Place. Production Notes" (Paramount Pictures, 2018), 3.

<sup>104</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "Ideology and the Practice of Sound Editing and Mixing," in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (London: Macmillan, 1980), 55.

alters the system of aural overrepresentations explored in *Chapter 1*. By constructing two different aural practices within a same scene, the film (momentarily and not unproblematically, as I will soon argue) breaks the sonic auditory line. In other words, the overrepresentation of a genre-specific hearing/listening practice—an ableist, normative, idealised “all-hearing” aural practice, usually silently shaping the processes of audiovisual mediation—is destabilised by its explosion into a multiplicity of hearing/listening practices. Such an explosion deconstructs the listening ear, deconstructs the socio-cultural construction usually enforcing a regulation of the very understanding of hearing/listening, and expands such understanding toward the infinite possibilities of embodied listening. This way, hearing wind and steps, or hearing one’s heartbeat can be represented as two possible configurations of hearing/listening, two embodied listening practices, rather than two conditions to be ranked in comparison to an ideal “all-hearing” ear. *A Quiet Place’s* multiplication of aural practices points toward the discursive institution of what it means to hear and to listen, trying to reshape such a discourse beyond the pretence of representing a purely biological human function.

The audiovisual consequence of such an operation, on the other hand, consists in a fracture running through the aural consistency of the scene: by listening to the scene without watching its visual component, or by watching its aural component without the support of the visual one, there would be no way to assume that the audiovisual space coinciding with Regan’s point of audition is the same as that coinciding with the previous and following soundscapes. In other words, a multiplication of aural practices, a breach into the sonic auditory line, and a deconstruction of the listening ear produce and necessitate a destabilisation of the governing codes of audiovision. By proposing two points of audition within the same diegetic space, during the same scene, the autonomy of the aural diegetic space within audiovision is compromised. To be clear, my argument is not that the dialectical relationships between aural and visual components are not important unless the formal characteristics of a film break the aural autonomy of diegetic spaces. Audiovisual dialectical relationships are, indeed, always fundamental, making the film an audiovisual object rather than an aural+visual object. My point is rather that these relationships can usually unfold in the way they do *because* of the spatial consistency constructed already at the film’s aural level. If, as claimed by Chion, one would not have any aural spatial awareness and would not make sense of consecutive aural segments as units, but rather forget about them as soon as they vanish, one would not seek an answer to Regan’s point of audition in the character’s subjective aural practice—in a new aural practice lived in the same diegetic space—but rather forget about the preceding soundscape and assume the present as the new soundscape, to be defined by new sound sources within the visual scene.

The deconstruction of a singular ear begun by *A Quiet Place*, however, is still surrounded by one important doubt concerning the normative nature of sound cinema’s aural practices. By examining the occurrences throughout the film of “alternative” points of audition, one characteristic emerges, bringing

them all together: a change to a subjective point of audition only happens when the point of view has established a visual proximity to the character whose ears we momentarily borrow. Close-ups of Regan, of Lee, and of the creatures allow a shift to their respective points of audition. It would seem that a visual justification is needed in order to alter a governing aural practice, in respect to which these “subjective” points of audition constitute an alternative. But an alternative to what, exactly?

The problem with *A Quiet Place*'s proposal of multiple subjective points of audition resides in the temptation of defining the aural practice governing the rest of the film as “objective.” There still exists a tension, in other words, between embodied listening and a listening ear, between hearing/listening as an epistemologically-charged, genre-specific construction and hearing/listening as someone's desires represented as universal, between a subjective level of listening and a “you must.” Remember Rick Altman's formulation of his “point-of-audition sound”: when a point-of-audition sound is operative, “we are asked not to hear, but to identify with someone who will hear for us. Instead of giving us the freedom to move about the film's space at will, this technique locates us in a very specific place—the body of the character who hears for us.”<sup>105</sup> When encountering Regan's or Lee's or the creatures' points of audition one is prompted to realise that what is audible is the particular, “embodied,” subjective aural practice of one single character. The aural dimension that accompanies the rest of the film, however, is depersonalised, and risks being received as “natural,” thus becoming normative, while it is, of course, as constructed as the subjective points of audition. Why do we never experience a whole scene through Regan's aural practice? To what do we return after a few seconds of quasi-total silence and heartbeats?

As I argued, with Stoeber, within *Chapter 1*, normative hearing/listening practices often represent themselves as inaudible within sound cinema. It would seem that a normative point of audition is still in force throughout the majority of the film: a “hearing” point of audition, invisibly at work when no “striking” audiovisual phenomenon catches the spectator's attention, suggesting that there does exist a “normal” way of listening, in respect to which Regan's and the creatures' aural practices represent an exception. I purposefully set a distinction between the presentation of Regan's and the creatures' points of audition and that of Lee's, because in the last case the shift happens according to a modality that reinforces a normative understanding of what it means to listen: while with Regan and the creatures the shift happens abruptly, with Lee the music slides into the aural dimension as the earplug reaches his ear, in continuity rather than opposition with the governing soundscape. After all, Lee's hearing is as “normal” as the “objective” point of audition's one.

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<sup>105</sup> Altman, “Sound Space,” 60.

## Imagined deafness

What are the political consequences of the ways in which *A Quiet Place*'s representation of Regan's aural practice shapes the audiovisual object's structural level? I believe that we can explore this question along a continuum, at the extremities of which stand, on one end, the process of exploding the category of aural practice into a set of infinite possibilities, and, on the other, the imagination of deafness and of hearing impairments from an ableist perspective.

On the one hand, the film's effort to open its aural dimension toward modalities of listening that do not imply an "able," "all-hearing" ear as *the* ear from which every sonic stimulus should be perceived appears as a significant step toward a process of recognising a multiplicity of embodied aural practices within the context of audiovisual representation. After having experienced *A Quiet Place*, then, it would be tempting to join Chamarette's conclusion, already mentioned at the end of *Chapter 1*: "alongside its historical incompetencies, cinema also has the capacity to innovatively revise disability narratives, particularly where films focus closely on the embodied experiences of characters and individuals living with impairments."<sup>106</sup> On the other hand, the process through which the focus on the embodied aural experiences of Regan is materialised might have dangerous political consequences.

First of all, Regan's aural practice is represented as silence. No aural stimulus is audible when her point of audition shapes the film's aural component. The low, regular, percussive sound—presumably Regan's heartbeat—faintly audible during the scene described above, would complexify such a problematic choice. However, a close examination of all the occurrences of Regan's point of audition reveals that the heartbeat is audible only when audition is represented as mediated by Regan's malfunctioning cochlear implant: at 00:32:59, Regan detaches her cochlear implant from her head, in order to try a new cochlear implant her father had been working on; right before this moment, the aural dimension was already being shaped by Regan's point of audition, with every aural stimulus suppressed besides the heartbeat (and a few muffled aural stimuli produced by the contact of Regan's hand with the cochlear implant). As soon as the cochlear implant has been detached from Regan's head, however, the film presents a rare moment of *complete* silence: not a single sonic stimulus is visible on the frequency spectrum (see *Figure 9*). The subsequent activation of the new cochlear implant (also malfunctioning) brings back the heartbeat and the delicate reverb that characterised the previous occurrences of Regan's point of audition.

The complete silence with which Regan's aural practice is represented by *A Quiet Place* constitutes a particularly problematic point in the context of the movie's relationship with deafness: it assumes that, as long as a person's ear does not process sonic vibrations, *no sonic vibrations at all* are experienced by the person's body. The heartbeat, that could have been a highly interesting case of a phenomenon made audible as a sonic stimulus within the context of the audiovisual representation, pointing toward an

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<sup>106</sup> Chamarette, "Overturning Feminist Phenomenologies: Disability, Complex Embodiment, Intersectionality, and Film," 192-193.

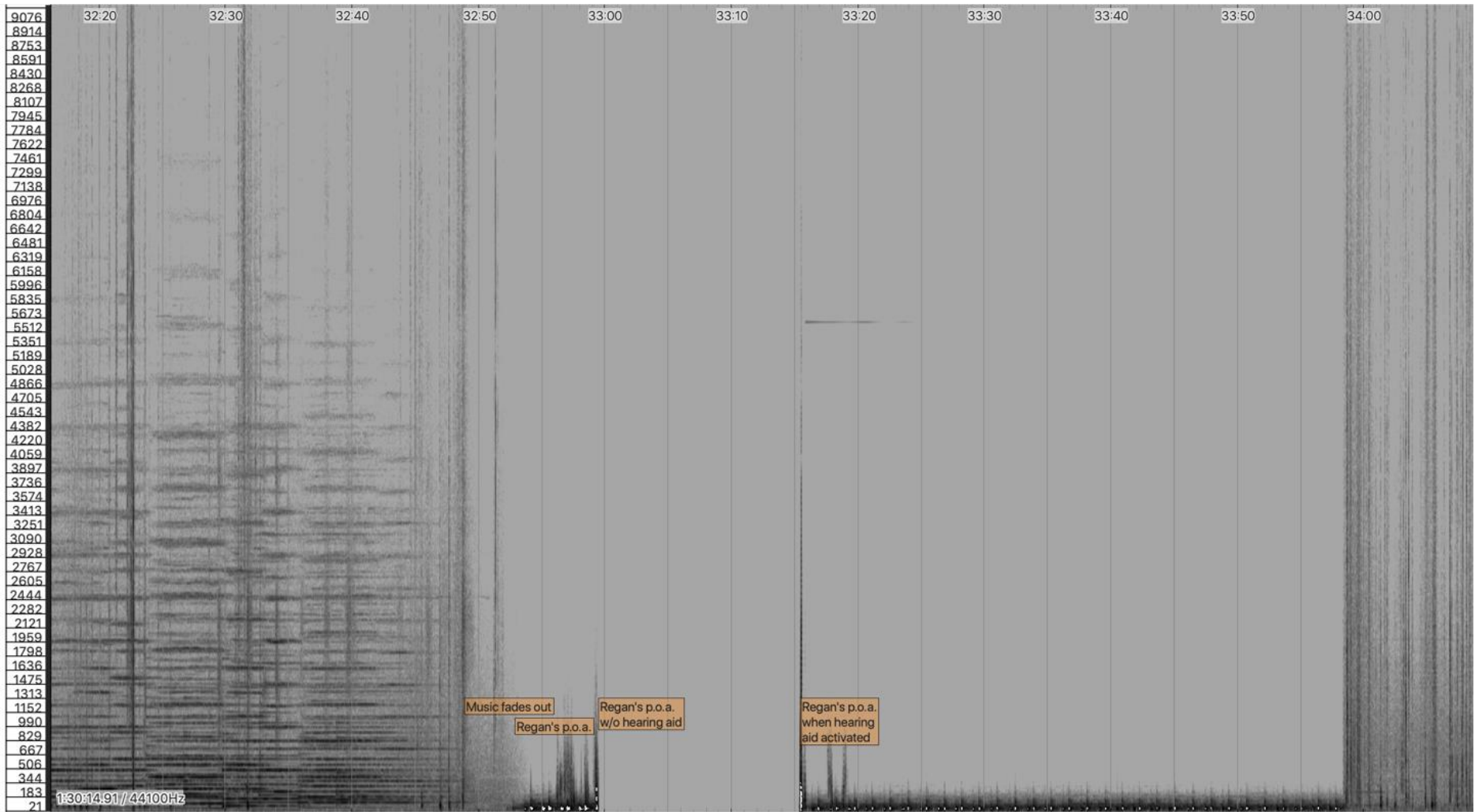


Figure 9. Regan's complete silence.

embodied aspect of a deaf person's aural practice that does not pass through the mediation of the ear, is instead represented as audible *only if* mediated by the cochlear implant, unequivocally reinforcing the connection between hearing and ear and thus stumbling upon a deeply ableist assumption. As illustrated by Steph Ceraso, "it is also possible to feel sound in one's stomach, throat, legs, and other areas of the body [...]. Identifying the ear as the body part that enables listening does not capture all that is involved in experiencing a sonic event. Listening is a multisensory act."<sup>107</sup>

There might be, however, another issue with *A Quiet Place's* representation of deafness, preceding and surpassing any problem related to the content of such a representation. Throughout *Chapter 1*, I had expressed doubts concerning the possibility, for audiovisual mediation, of "making" its spectators, even though momentarily, deaf or hearing-impaired. For this reason, I had questioned Szendy's analysis of Kagel's *Ludwig Van*. For the same reason, I was sceptic in front of the representation of a deaf character's listening practice in Audiard's *Sur mes lèvres*, noted by both Kitchen and Chamarette. Here, I reiterate and expand those doubts: what are the political consequences of proposing an embodied experience of deafness as something that, from a hearing perspective, can be understood by suppressing every aural stimulus? Alison Kafer observes:

Disability continues to be seen primarily as a personal problem afflicting individual people [...]. This individual model of disability is embodied in the disability simulation exercises [...]. Students are asked to spend a few hours using a wheelchair or wearing a blindfold so that they can "understand" what it means to be blind or mobility-impaired. Not only do these kinds of exercises focus on the alleged failures and hardships of disabled bodies (an inability to see, an inability to walk), they also present disability as a knowable fact of the body. [...] Disability is depoliticized, presented more as nature than culture.<sup>108</sup>

The risk of representing deafness by shaping an aural dimension that substitutes sounds with silence, allowing a hearing ear to listen to this silence as a contrast with sounds, as an absence of sounds, is that deafness is once again constructed from an ableist perspective, for an ableist perspective, as a lack of hearing. What is still absent from such a representation is a focus on the "failures and omissions of the built environment."<sup>109</sup> In the context of audiovisual representation, then, what is still missing is a focus on how the constructed codes of audiovision reinforces the assumption that hearing is the norm while being deaf or hearing-impaired is an exception to be overcome.

## **For whose ears? Music on the bridge**

Weighing upon the problematic position of *A Quiet Place's* aural dimension is also the usage of extradiegetic music. As an example, let us turn our attention toward the dramatic scene that follows the film's opening (see *Figure 10*). Starting at 00:08:43, the scene portrays the Abbotts going back home after having

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<sup>107</sup> Ceraso, "(Re)Educating the Senses: Multimodal Listening, Bodily Learning, and the Composition of Sonic Experiences," 102.

<sup>108</sup> Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 4-5.

<sup>109</sup> Kafer, 9.



been in an abandoned shop. The family members walk in a line, one after the other, with the youngest child—Beau—left last. A few shots frame each of them individually: when the camera turns on Regan, her point of audition suddenly shapes the film’s aural dimension, exactly as described above, then abruptly substituted by a “hearing” aural dimension when the camera cuts on someone else.

The scene takes a tragic turn when a sound tears the peaceful soundscape that had surrounded the characters until then: a siren, part of a toy that Beau managed to sneak out of the shop, shrieks. Before any action takes place, the camera cuts once more to Regan, proposing her point of audition. As expected, no aural stimulus is heard. However, an uncanny aural phenomenon suddenly takes place: while Regan’s point of audition is still shaping the scene’s aural dimension, the incipit of some extra-diegetic music, contributing to the dramatic climax of the scene, starts to be audible, thus superimposing its sounds on top of the silence that should represent Regan’s aural practice.<sup>110</sup>

What is happening? From whose ears do we, all of a sudden, hear the music? For whose ears is this music meant? What kind of ears are implied by the audible presence of the music superimposed on Regan’s silence? The issue of the role of extra-diegetic music (and music in general) in shaping sound cinema’s aural practices, already mentioned during the previous section on Lee’s point of audition, appears as a complex node in the problem of sound cinema’s aural overrepresentations. While a serious exploration of the issue exceeds the scope of my work, I would like to conclude this chapter with three observations prompted by the this last scene. First, music, in the context of the audiovisual conventions that shape a sound film’s aural dimension, has a rather eccentric role when it comes to determine what kind of point of audition is being proposed to the audience. Music seems able to move swiftly in and outside the diegesis, in and outside the characters’ ears, in and outside the spectators’ ears, beyond the ears and the physical (diegetic) world of the aural stimuli, toward the inner world of the characters’ and the spectators’ conscious and subconscious emotions. Second, notwithstanding my first observation, the analysed scene points to a dominant ear implied by the film, that is a “hearing” ear, able to contrast sounds with silence, and able to hear the music on top of the silence in order to be drawn into the narrative. Which brings us to the third point: deafness still risks being used as a narrative prosthesis, as a means to heighten the tension by “deafening,” for a moment, a hearing spectator.

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<sup>110</sup> The music audible throughout this scene is part of the original music composed for the film by Marco Beltrami.

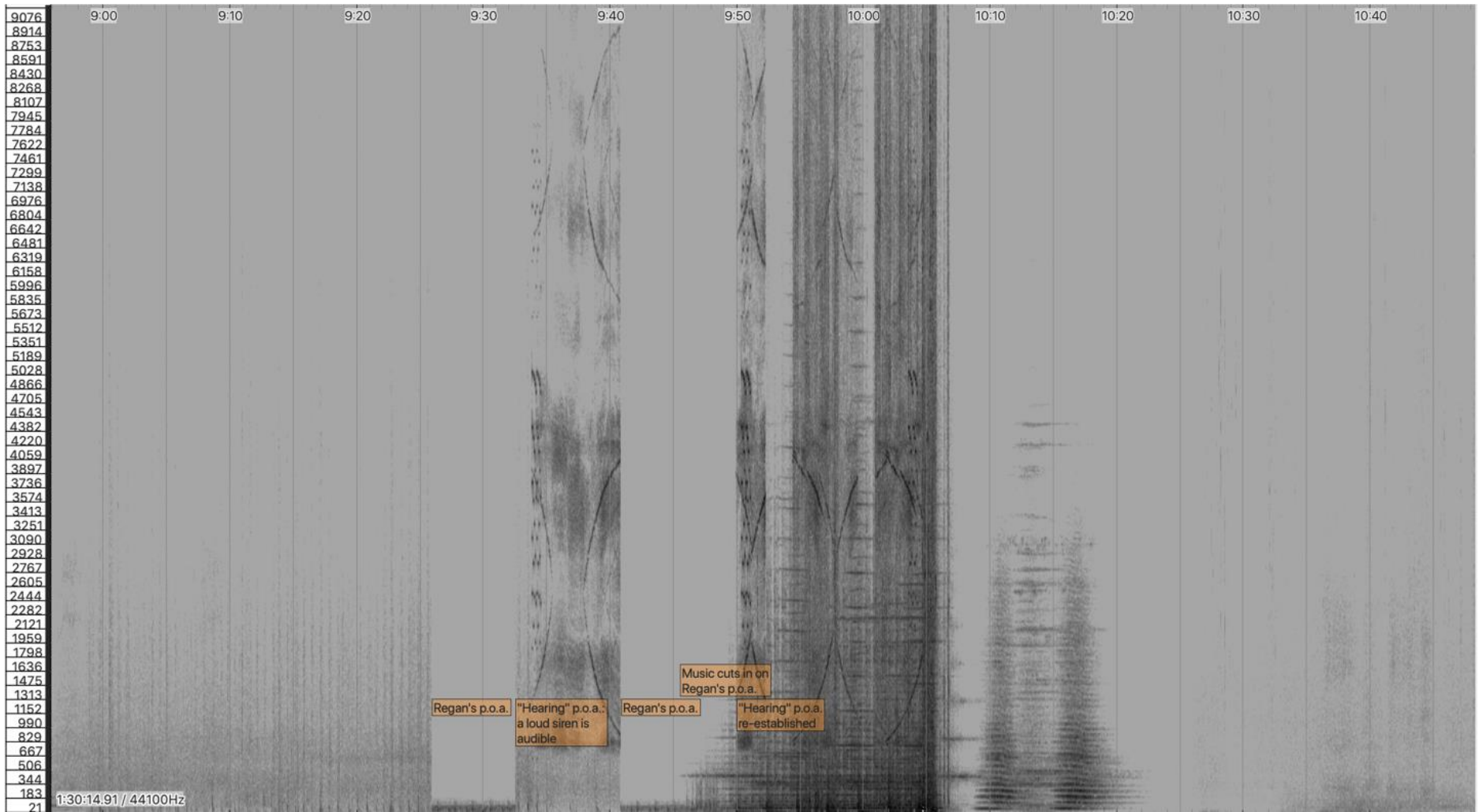


Figure 10. Extra-diegetic music cuts in on Regan's point of audition.

## Chapter 4

### Audiovisual practice as a reflection on audiovision's normativity

In the previous chapter, I explored how dominant audiovisual codes might be challenged when deafness and hearing impairments expose the constructed nature of sound cinema's listening practices, denounce their overrepresentation, and propose alternative modalities. The relationships between deafness, hearing impairments, and audiovisual mediation live in and around the theoretical work of many scholars, as well as within the practice of sound cinema. As a (temporary) final step for my work, I want to reflect on the possibilities for crippling codes of audiovision by means of artistic research. After having engaged with, discussed, and elaborated the works of other, after having begun to reflect on the possibilities of new theories, I now want to experiment with what it means to practically account for the considerations developed thus far when *doing* audiovision.

Together with fellow student Amy Welten, I developed a short film in the context of the pilot course "Visualising Change," held at Utrecht University, at the intersection between Gender Studies, Media Studies, and Criminology. The project consists of an interview with Amy's twin brothers, Mylan and Reece, who were born deaf and live their everyday life utilising hearing aids. At the same time, this short film strives to reflect on the very possibility, for any audiovisual medium, of freeing itself from ableist representations of deafness and hearing impairments. In other words, my and Amy's intention is that of utilising an audiovisual object to critique dominant models of audiovisual production and, more precisely, to destabilise the arbitrary listening practices constructed by such models of audiovisual production. As does this whole thesis project, our film rejects the ableist fantasy of imagining how audiovisual representation is experienced by deaf and hearing impaired people. Our video's aim is instead that of reflecting on our ableist perspective by attempting to understand what the limits of this perspective are, as exposed by deafness and hearing impairment. To do so, we mainly focused on three aspects of audiovisual mediation: the problematic relationship between what should be heard, and subtitles' and captions' modal "translation" of that into written traces; the constructed nature of audiovisual associations, subjected to the mediation processes of recording and editing; the "ability" of conveying meaning audiovisually, focusing on audiovision's "built environment." What follows is a critical engagement with the choices behind the making of this project, and, at the same time, a discussion of these choices in relation to the three aspects listed above.

The collaborative nature of this project disseminates this chapter with a sometimes confusing alternation between "I" and "we." I try to consistently use the first-person singular when addressing my personal points of view, while the first-person plural stands behind positions developed jointly by me and Amy.

## Silence, music, and captions

In the introduction of a book significantly titled *Subtitles. On the Foreignness of Film*, film director Atom Egoyan and scholar Ian Balfour describe subtitles as “only the most visible and charged markers of the way in which films engage, in direct and oblique fashion, pressing matters of difference, otherness, and translation.”<sup>111</sup> Interestingly, none of the twenty-seven interventions collected within the volume (introduction and afterword included) addresses the relationship between deafness, hearing impairments, and subtitles as a translational act mediating two different modalities of experiencing a film: listening and reading. In other words, Egoyan and Balfour, together with the other authors of the volume, do not take into considerations the practice of *captioning*.

While subtitles and captions both consist of written words displayed with a film’s images, the two entail different operations. Subtitles usually translate the aural verbal content of the film from a source language (SL)—the language or languages in which the film was conceived and which is or are spoken by the film’s characters—to a target language (TL)—which is the language understood by an audience supposed not familiar with the SL. Captions, on the other hand, *transcribe* the aural content of the film, attempting to capture both the verbal and the non-verbal aural content, such as music, ambient sounds, and so on. Moreover, there is a distinction between “open” captions (OC), which are displayed on the screen with the images, and “closed” captions (CC), which instead are not displayed on the screen and require additional equipment in order to be experienced by the film’s spectator.<sup>112</sup>

As argued with Johnson, at the end of *Chapter 1*, since cinema became *sound* cinema, since it formally became an *audiovisual* object, the cinematic experience of deaf and hearing impaired people became strongly tied to the practice of captioning. As claimed by Deaf sound artist Christine Sun Kim in the paratext for her work *Close Readings* (4-channel video, 25:53 mm:ss, 2015), “for non-hearing audiences, [...] the experience of watching a film is largely dependent on the way in which it is captioned. The multidimensionality of sound, or many layered sounds, are often reduced to brief captions. The captioner chooses which sounds to reference and which to leave out.”<sup>113</sup> Her intervention on this issue is a powerful video project—*Close Readings*—which reimagines five movie scenes by partially blurring their images (to “encourage the viewers to read instead of watching”) and shown with sound captions provided by four deaf friends of Kim.<sup>114</sup> *Close Readings*’ sound captions “range from literal to conceptual, imagined or even poetic,” including formulations such as “overly pretentious piano music that evokes absolutely nothing,”

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<sup>111</sup> Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour, eds., *Subtitles. On the Foreignness of Film* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2004), 21.

<sup>112</sup> For in-depth explorations of captioning and subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing see Gregory J. Downey, *Closed Captioning. Subtitling, Stenography, and the Digital Convergence of Text with Television* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Anna Matamala and Pilar Orero, eds., *Listening to Subtitles. Subtitles for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).

<sup>113</sup> Christine Sun Kim, “Close Readings,” accessed June 21, 2019, <http://christinesunkim.com/work/close-readings/>.

<sup>114</sup> Jeppe Ugelvig and Christine Sun Kim, “Sonic Identity Politics with Christine Sun Kim,” *Dis Magazine*, 2016, <http://dismagazine.com/blog/80643/sonic-identity-politics-with-christine-sun-kim/>.

“the sound of a problem that is not a problem,” “the sound of a light that never flickers.”<sup>115</sup> One of the consequences of Kim’s intervention is an emphasis on the limits of dominant captioning practices and on the subjectivity of captioning choices.

Inspired by Kim’s work, then, I would like to expand upon Egoyan’s and Balfour’s notion that “every film is a foreign film, foreign to some audience somewhere—and not simply in terms of language.”<sup>116</sup> Every film is constructing practices of listening (and, of course, of looking), assuming embodied ears (and eyes), representing bodily configurations, that are foreign to some audience somewhere. Subtitles *and captions*, then, are “only the most visible and charged markers” of the peculiarity of a film’s constructed listening practice. For this reason, our short film, from its very beginning, strives to problematise the relationship between what is shown, what is sounded, and what is written.

In the opening of our short film, we take issue with the curious practice of describing, within the captions, the music sounded by the aural component of an audiovisual object. Depending on the captioner’s level of zeal, descriptions of this kind range from very generic (upbeat music) to weirdly specific (slow melancholic metal music). But for whom are these captions intended? Should they translate the aural experience of what is heard for those who never had a similar aural experience? Should they remind those who somewhen heard a similar music about how that music is? Should they come to the aid of those who could turn the volume up? In each of these cases, how are individual listening practices to be mediated by a descriptor such as “upbeat”?

*Table 1* shows a schematic representation of what is shown and sounded by the video’s first thirty seconds. It accounts for three levels of representation: that of the images (visual), the of the sounds (aural), and that of the captions (visual).

Images	Sounds	Captions
<i>[Medium shot, frontal]:</i> computer screen at the centre, shows vinyl record spinning, unfocused.	A soft reverb.	[Upbeat shady post-funk unnerving party music playing]
<i>[Camera “dollies” backwards, gradually distancing itself from the computer screen and revealing]:</i> Mylan’s and Reece’s heads and shoulders, focused, facing the computer screen.		
Mylan and Reece switch their hearing aids on.	Music, not corresponding to what described by captions.	

*Table 1.* A schematic representation of the video’s first thirty seconds.

<sup>115</sup> Sun Kim, “Close Readings.”

<sup>116</sup> Egoyan and Balfour, 21.

Let me start from the soft reverb, within which the shot begins. The soft reverb sounds, here, a silence. In Christine Sun Kim's terms, "you'll never reach complete silence. That's my current definition of silence: a very obscure sound."<sup>117</sup> Choosing for a moment of silence, in this context, stands as a problematic option, that I shall therefore discuss. At first glance, silencing the aural component of the film's initial moments might be interpreted as an effort of constructing a listening practice that takes into account the deafened point of audition of Mylan and Reece. Such an option, however, bears with itself an important issue. Recall Alison Kafer's observation, previously quoted:

Not only [disability simulation exercises] focus on the alleged failures and hardships of disabled bodies [...], they also present disability as a knowable fact of the body. [...] Wearing a blindfold to 'experience blindness' is going to do little to teach someone about ableism, for example, and suggests that the only thing there is to learn about blindness is what it feels like to move around in the dark. [...] Disability is depoliticized, presented more as nature than culture.<sup>118</sup>

As hearing people, I and Amy do not want to imagine how it must be to be deaf in terms of what our ableist fantasies suggest we would lack: we do not want to experience silence as a way of aligning our listening practice with that of Mylan and Reece. Moreover, this silence would not even constitute an adequate representation of what Mylan and Reece describe as their aural experience without hearing aids. Why, then, silence?

First of all, silence should function here as a first indicator of the constructedness of the video's listening practice. It is our own, completely arbitrary choice as the filmmakers to impose silence on the video's aural dimension. That silence here does not stem from the diegetic space, nor is it a reproduction of anyone's subjective listening practice, should be indicated by the silence's "shape" in the form of a soft reverb. Given that, as evidenced by Kim, complete silence cannot be reached, opting for a soft reverb is a means of imposing "our" silence, and thus "our" listening practice. If we would have left the soundtrack empty, the silence would have been that shaped by the noise of the viewers/listeners' audio reproduction devices, or that of the viewers/listeners' experiential environment. Soft reverb makes "our" silence audible. Even silence, in the context of audiovisual mediation, comes down to what the film's authors opt to make audible or inaudible.

Secondly, silence should work here toward a destabilisation of an ableist confidence in the power of audiovisual "language": what does an image mean, even that of spinning vinyl? Everything. A vinyl record, as an object capable of storing acoustic stimuli, detached from its own aural component can be subject to infinite interpretations, infinite listenings. Audiovision relies on a set of visual and aural interacting entities; given that these entities can be associated at will, through audiovisual editing and mixing, audiovision relies on an arbitrary construction of aural and visual associations. And yet, as a

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<sup>117</sup> Christine Sun Kim and TED, "The Enchanting Music of Sign Language | Christine Sun Kim," YouTube, 2015, <https://youtu.be/2Euof4PnjDk>, 00:47-00:55. Kim conveys her talk in American Sign Language. What I quote, here, is the transcription of the translator's voiced translation from ASL to American English.

<sup>118</sup> Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 4-5.

hearing person watching and listening to the audiovisual representation of a vinyl spinning and sounding, say, a piece of music, would I doubt of the “naturalness” of the represented listening practice?

The silence accompanying the video’s first thirty seconds would like to hint at the delicate mechanism that constructs what might be perceived as “natural” audiovision. In absence of a normative accompanying aural component, how is meaning to be produced? Our initial silence brings us to the next problem: (in)dependence. Disability activist Eddie Ndopu powerfully observes:

Able-bodied people fail to recognize that their bodies as so-called able-bodied people disappear into the background of the built environment, making it look like they are independent. [...] Your body is carried, held tightly to make it look as if you are the one doing all the work when in fact, you are just a beneficiary of able-bodied supremacy.<sup>119</sup>

On the same line, it would be tempting to assume that a hearing person is simply *able* to experience audiovisual representations, when in fact it is the very construction of specific listening practices shaped on a “hearing” ear that allows such experiences. Audiovisual objects hear for their spectators. The unusual silence that accompanies an image implying an aural correspondence hopes to cast a first shadow on audiovision’s “built environment.” The attention of the hearing viewer/listener might be prompted by the silence to shift toward the captions. Captions, here, should function as an element of audiovision’s built environment that, as anticipated above, has very different meaning for different listening practices. Hearing viewers/listeners will probably be familiar with subtitles as a translational tool from an unfamiliar source language to a familiar target language. However, hearing viewers/listeners also happen to rely on captions: should some words uttered by a voice sound muffled, or distant, or not clearly articulated, captions can sometimes support an understanding of such words by transcribing them, even though they might be inaudible even to a normatively defined “hearing” listener. Here, captions become the element on which the hearing viewer/listener finds herself dependant when the usual means of audiovisual signification are not provided. Their bizarre formulation, though, attempts to paint a second shadow on the built environment of ableist audiovision. When an aural component other than silence is, all of a sudden, manifested, the lack of coherence, or the lack of a clearly articulated coherence, between what is shown, what is written, and what is heard strives to complete a process of destabilisation of an audiovisual apparatus that would otherwise sell its constructions as natural.

The music’s aural manifestation happens in synchronisation with Mylan’s and Reece’s gesture of switching their hearing aids on. Again, this option could suggest an effort of aligning the spectator’s point of audition with those of Mylan and Reece, thus falling again in the ableist traps of imagined deafness. In fact, we did think about this moment as a narrative expedient to hint at Mylan’s and Reece’s complex set of aural experiences, including both deafness and “aided”-hearing. At the same time, we imagined the

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<sup>119</sup> Eddie Ndopu and Nadine Kutu, “#OxfordEddicated - A Letter (as an Invitation) To The World,” Facebook, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/oxfordeddicated/videos/1040508662705384/>, 1:13-1:49.

scene with something more in mind: what does it mean for hearing to be aided? Should we consider hearing ears as capable of “unaided” (or, in other words, unmediated) hearing? The input for such questions comes from Mara Mills’ work on the politics of mediation ingrained in cochlear implants’ technology, explored in *Chapter 1*.<sup>120</sup>

Mills, after having explored how cochlear implants do not provide their users with *the* ability to listen, but rather with one, very specific listening practice, shaped by the desires of cochlear implants’ developers and early adopters, interestingly brings into the debate, in her conclusive remarks, the perspective of media theorist and hearing aid user Vilém Flusser, who writes:

If you are listening to the world, you will notice that sounds are ‘instrumentized.’ [...] It must be supposed that between you and the world there is a sound-sieve turned on, a hearing aid. The unpleasant, even unacceptable thing about this apparatus is that one cannot see it. Therefore one cannot know who programmed it. [...] My own hearing aid is visible. One knows who programmed it, a Japanese company. And this finally is an advantage I have in comparison to you. I can, better than you are able to, see through my hearing aid. And therefore hear better than you.<sup>121</sup>

Aligning the spectators’ point of audition with those of Mylan and Reece, then, should function as a reminder that a hearing ear is not free from processes of mediation and their respective epistemological assumptions, in general and especially when undergoing audiovision. In other words, the listening “enabled” by Mylan’s and Reece’s gesture attempts to make visible the otherwise invisible hearing aids constructed by sound cinema’s dominant listening practice. As stated throughout this thesis, audiovisual objects listen for us: more than aligning the viewer/listener’s point of audition with that of Mylan and Reece, then, this moment would like to emphasise the aided/mediated nature of listening practices in audiovisual objects.

## Deconstructing aural diegetic spaces

A second aspect we attempt to destabilise, within our short film, is audiovisual mediation’s construction of continuous and autonomous aural diegetic spaces, explored in *Chapter 2* and *3*. Differently than the experiments in *A Quiet Place*, however, we do not try to construct subjective practices of listening that, at times, contrast with what still functions as an “objective” practice of listening, dominant throughout the audiovisual object. Our experiment consists in maintaining the “rules” of dominant audiovisual practice’s construction of aural diegetic spaces and rearranging them, so that they work against their own model. Let me detail further.

While Mylan and Reece narrate their experience as deaf and hearing-impaired persons who grew up and live utilising hearing aids, apparently unrelated shots are imposed on the viewers/listeners’ attention,

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<sup>120</sup> Mills, “Do Signals Have Politics? Inscribing Abilities in Cochlear Implants.”

<sup>121</sup> Vilém Flusser, “Hoerapparate” [Hearing Aids], trans. Silvia Wagnermeier. Vilém Flusser Archive, Berlin University of Arts, quoted in Mills, 339.



in between the interview's portions. I would like to name these shots "audiovisual intertitles," on the model of silent cinema's intertitles. Usually, intertitles are "captions and titles that appear as a graphic element cut into a sequence rather than superimposed over camera footage. In silent films, dialogue and other information was communicated in this form."<sup>122</sup> Intertitles, then, worked as a written verbal element in a cinema devoid of integrated sounded aural elements, with both diegetic and extra-diegetic functions.<sup>123</sup> Here audiovisual intertitles mix images, sounds, and written words, with the aim of developing two parallel tracks within the video: as the interview-track unfolds, the audiovisual object reflects on its ableist conventions within its audiovisual intertitles-track, shaping a dialogue between the representation, its formal characteristics, and its viewers/listeners.

In the first audiovisual intertitle, we imagine a vinyl, spinning on a record player. The film's second vinyl, however, is not represented through the screen-in-screen double mediation of the first one. As the vinyl is a container of acoustic stimuli, whenever the act of its reproduction is shown as a profilmic element, the aural component of such a representation is thrown in complete chaos: what is a viewer/listener *assumed* to hear, when the reproduction of potentially infinite aural stimuli is shown on screen? How does the aural component reproduced by the record player/vinyl aggregate interact with the soundscape within which it is supposed to be immersed? Here, the vinyl functions as a symbolic container of every sound attached to every space that the audiovisual intertitles will represent. In this first audiovisual intertitle, then, all the sounds, still to be "seen," detached from their "sources," are proposed together, unmixed, out of context but in context within the vinyl, becoming the aural diegetic space of the diegetic space. And yet, how is this aural component supposed to be heard? How is what is made audible constructing a practice of listening?

A set of aural stimuli, proposed with no temporal arrangement and unmixed, might be perceived as mere noise. In other words, along the lines of thought drawn by Flusser and quoted above, hearing is "instrumentized," arranged by someone else's decisions: only a carefully edited and mixed aural component can function as a homogeneous and autonomous aural diegetic space within audiovisual representations. The more homogeneous and autonomous an aural diegetic space is, it would seem, the more "natural." Again, however, what is assumed as "natural" is instead a complexly constructed listening practice. It is in this context that our captions intervene. Here, captions should work by intermittently drawing the viewers/listeners' attention to the individual sound sources and by assigning them a label. Since there is no synchronisation between the appearance of a label and the presence of its relative aural

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<sup>122</sup> Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, "Intertitle," *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* (Oxford University Press), accessed June 22, 2019, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191800986.001.0001/acref-9780191800986-e-1422>.

<sup>123</sup> If I write "sounded aural elements," it is because silent cinema's representations were indeed not completely devoid of aural elements. See, for example, Barbara McBane, "Imagining Sound in the Solax Films of Alice Guy Blaché: 'Canned Harmony' (1912) and 'Burstop Holmes' Murder Case" (1913)," *Film History* 18, no. 2 (2006): 185–95, and Melinda Szaloky, "Sounding Images in Silent Film: Visual Acoustics in Murnau's 'Sunrise,'" *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 2 (2002): 109–31.

stimulus, it is still up to the listener to aurally look for the sound “revealed” by the captions. The function of captions in this first audiovisual intertitle, then, is not only that of accounting for the presence of aural stimuli, but, most importantly, that of “solving” an ambiguity that the ear alone, even a “hearing” ear, is not able to solve. What we try to critique, then, is, the belief that “hearing” in audiovisual terms is just “hearing,” and thus that a “hearing” ear is able to understand and undergo audiovision because of a natural correspondence between what represented and hearing as a biological function. There is no natural correspondence in audiovision, there is no natural “hearing”; slightly subvert the norms that govern this latter, and captions will be needed for “able” ears as well.

The following audiovisual intertitles perform a disconnect between the moments of visualisation of a sound source and the moments of audibility of that sound source. At the same time, they clearly articulate the becoming audible of each individual aural stimulus. Moreover, the disconnect is carried forward to the characterisation of the aural diegetic spaces, whereas the visually represented interior environments carry an aural component shaped with the sounds of the wind blowing, while the visually represented external environment is accompanied by the soft reverb of a room tone. The intent is that of proposing an audiovisual representation that is no longer familiar with its own normative codes of audiovision. The result should be the construction of a listening practice that might sound uncanny, but is nevertheless not more constructed than a dominant, familiar, comforting audiovisual listening practice.

## Subtitling

Our short film also experiments with subtitles, with the display of written words translating Dutch—the film’s source language—into English—our target language. Subtitles constitute another element of audiovision’s built environment that serves as a means of smooth “understanding” for “hearing” audiences (in this case, when the audiences do not know the audiovisual object’s source language), making a construction into an “ability.” We experiment with subtitles in two ways and, in both cases, we try to problematise the relationship between audiovision’s temporality, understanding, and subtitling. The point of departure must be sought in the role played by audiovisual objects’ aural components in shaping the temporality of audiovision.

If audiovisual objects’ visual component can determine a specific pace through content and editing, the temporality thus represented often leaves plenty of space for ambiguity. The pace and the temporal direction of, say, a shot of a car riding in a desert or of a sequence composed by a series of close-ups could easily be altered without arousing suspicion. When an aural component intervenes, however, the time proposed by its aural stimuli (the time of their linear becoming and that of the temporal structure arranged by their succession) suddenly imposes itself as *the* temporality of audiovision, making it more

difficult to introduce alterations. As observed by Michel Chion: “we are indebted to synchronous sound for having made cinema an art of time.”<sup>124</sup>

The consequences of Chion’s position, when it comes to exposing audiovision to deafness and hearing impairments, are tremendous: not only audiovision constructs listening practices imbued with ableist assumptions, but these listening practices also structure audiovision’s temporality. An ableist temporality? Subtitles (and captions), then, represent a particularly problematic point of this matter, since they attempt to allow an understanding of audiovisual objects’ aural component *within* the temporality shaped by this same aural component.

In an essay fascinatingly titled “For an Abusive Subtitling,” Abé Mark Nornes observes:

[Subtitlers] accept a vision of translation that violently appropriates the source text, and in the process of converting speech into writing *within the time and space limits of the subtitle* they conform the original to the rules, regulations, idioms, and frame of reference of the target language and its culture. It is a practice of translation that smoothes over its textual violence and domesticates all otherness while it pretends to bring the audience to an experience of the foreign.<sup>125</sup>

Subtitling, in the process of familiarising films’ foreignness (remember Egoyan and Balfour quote a few paragraphs above), erase difference by “hiding” the translational act under the polished appearance of the subtitle itself, shaped according to genre-specific cultural, linguistic, and technical assumptions.

Hamid Naficy, in a chapter devoted to subtitling practices in what he defines as “accented cinema,” also draws a connection between subtitles and audiovisual temporality: “out of necessity, subtitles must condense several lines of dialogue into brief textual snippets timed to the flow of the images.”<sup>126</sup> Subtitling would probably constitute a less problematic phenomenon (or, anyway, a differently problematic one) if its concern would not be that of providing some sort of understanding *without altering* the temporality governing a film’s experience. In other words, subtitles should gift target language audiences with a “real-time” comprehension of the dialogues, *while* these dialogues are uttered, *as if* these dialogues were understood in their source language (keep in mind that, as I will soon address, Naficy, as well as Nornes and the other authors mentioned in this paragraph, do not think from the perspective of captioning for deaf and hearing impaired audiences). Understanding should happen immediately, not before, nor after the film’s experience. At the same time, subtitles should leave space for the original soundtrack to be heard and for the images to be seen. Moreover, subtitles do not have the possibility of *making time* for themselves, interrupting the film’s flow in order to be read. Obviously, these conditions are not natural *data* and have not always applied to the practice of subtitling.

Nornes notes that “there were interesting precursors to the subtitle [...]. In Japan and other parts of the world on the cusp of the sound era, a typical work-around involved silent-film-style intertitles

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<sup>124</sup> Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 16.

<sup>125</sup> Abé Mark Nornes, “For an Abusive Subtitling,” *Film Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (1999): 18. Emphasis mine.

<sup>126</sup> Hamid Naficy, “Epistolarity and Textuality in Accented Films,” in *Subtitles. On the Foreignness of Film*, ed. Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2004), 143.

explaining each section of the plot.”<sup>127</sup> The fascinating aspect of such a strategy relies exactly in the alteration of the film’s temporality: the translational act performed by intertitles shifts the moment of “understanding” to before or after the moment of “foreignness,” leaving this latter (relatively) unaltered while loudly stating its interference by interrupting the flow of images. It is clear that such a solution does not magically solve the problems discussed above: its importance, however, consists in the act of making explicit the process of mediation between source language and target language, as opposed to an effort directed toward rendering this process as smooth as possible, until its disappearance.

Another interesting alternative to dominant practices of subtitling is to be found, again, in Japan, with the figure of the *benshi*:

To help the Japanese audience understand what was going on in the movies, the *benshi* was called into being. When a silent film was being shown, a *benshi* performed by the side of the screen, supplying dialogue, narrating the story, explaining what was happening in the film, and even making elaborate comments. The roles of a *benshi* were multiple. He or she was a translator, an interpreter, a commentator, and the persona of the characters. Be it translation or interpretation or comment or character role-playing, all of these functions point to the play of the spoken word as the central activity of the *benshi*’s performance.<sup>128</sup>

The reason why I am interested, here, in the Japanese *benshi* is because it provides us with a complex modality of dealing with the foreignness of film that is alternative to subtitling. First of all, the words of the *benshi* are uttered rather than written, heard rather than read, thus creating a new layer of aural information that interacts with the original soundtrack. Surely, it is an intrusive interaction. In its intrusiveness, however, the *benshi*’s voice lifts the translational act from the shadow of the subtitles, complexifying understanding rather than shaping the illusion of immediate comprehension. Secondly, the *benshi* performs outside of the screen. In this way, the very space of the cinematic experience is complicated by the materialisation of the films’ foreignness in the form of a physical mediator. Finally, it strikes me as fascinating that the role of the *benshi* did not simply consisted in translating the dialogues: s/he was also allowed to *comment* on the dialogues. The possibility of commenting through subtitles, or rather the impossibility of doing so, recurs as a lament in the words of subtitles’ commentators. For example, Sheila Turek observes that “unlike literary translators, subtitlers cannot use explanatory footnotes to convey relevant cultural information.”<sup>129</sup> The *benshi* points toward the possibility of a translational act, in cinema, that is not afraid of taking the space to problematise itself.

The translational practice of the *benshi* interestingly resonates with the usage of subtitles proposed by Trinh T. Minh-ha in her *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*.<sup>130</sup> Lan Duong observes:

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<sup>127</sup> Nornes, “For an Abusive Subtitling,” 22.

<sup>128</sup> Kuei-fen Chiu, “The Question of Translation in Taiwanese Colonial Cinematic Space,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 70, no. 1 (2011): 79.

<sup>129</sup> Sheila Turek, “Foreigners in the Margins: English Subtitles in ‘Inch’Allah Dimanche,” *The French Review* 83, no. 3 (2010): 560.

<sup>130</sup> T. Minh-ha Trinh, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 1989.

Trinh betrays the notion of feminine authenticity by rendering inaudible the women's heavily accented speeches and by providing subtitles that elucidate little about the women's speeches. Although subtitles are a translational operation that typically try to effect a "cultural affinity" between West and East, Self and Other, Trinh problematizes the idea that [sic] translations and subtitles as "visualized speech" and refuses the idea that translation guarantees access to the female Other.<sup>131</sup>

The ways in which Trinh problematizes subtitling (partial/incomplete or lack of subtitles, mismatch of what is heard and what is read, subtitles as comments rather than translations) powerfully indicates a path toward the usage of subtitles in order to encounter the Other by preserving the moment of foreignness. In other words, subtitles function in *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* as a means to critique the translational act as a politically loaded act, while at the same time rendering the effort to understand complex and richer in its layered meaning. Trinh's subtitles can therefore function as a model for a practice of abusive subtitling: "the abusive subtitler uses textual and graphic abuse [...] to bring the fact of translation from its position of obscurity, to critique the imperial politics that ground corrupt practices while ultimately leading the viewer to the foreign original being reproduced in the darkness of the theater."<sup>132</sup> The foreignness of film should be encountered rather than erased.

The authors with whom I engaged above, however, are mainly concerned with practices of subtitling undertaken by subtitlers that impose the perspective of the target audience over that of the source language. When it comes to films' captions for deaf and hearing impaired audiences, the situation is usually the opposite. As stated by Christine Sun Kim's in relation to her *Close Readings*, captioners generally do not pay attention to the "rules, regulations, idioms, and frame of reference" (in Nornes' terms) of the target audience, when the target audience is a deaf or hearing impaired audience. Captions for the deaf and hard of hearing, then, would be an exceptional case of a subtitling practice where the source language dictates its demands over the target language.

We believe that subtitles can thus function as a productive site where to force ableist audiovisual listening practices by going in a direction that is opposite to a smooth translational process. In other words, subtitles must demand the spectator's attention by means of their content and of their appearances. More importantly, they must take control over audiovision's temporality and alter it in order to make time for themselves. Our experiment, in this regard, is rather limited, and is telling of our own ableist perspective, insofar as it does not contemplate an inclusion of any Sign Language in the translational process from sounded words to visualised ones.

In our short film, subtitles have the double function of translating from language to language (from Mylan's and Reece's Dutch to English) and from modality of experience to modality of experience (from listening to reading). We would not be content, however, if this double process would go unnoticed. We thus experimented in two directions.

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<sup>131</sup> Lan Duong, "Traitors and Translators: Reframing Trinh T. Minh-Ha's 'Surname Viet Given Name Nam,'" *Discourse* 31, no. 3 (2009): 195–196.

<sup>132</sup> Nornes, "For an Abusive Subtitling," 18.

First of all, we want to put emphasis on the temporal relation existing between the video's aural component and the subtitles. To do so, we try to subtitle every single word, without condensing the meaning of a sentence in a shorter formulation. Moreover, we often break sentences in half, in order to not anticipate within the subtitle words that might be uttered later than when they are read. To further stress the problematic shift from uttered words to written ones, we also use subsequent subtitles for quick exchanges between Mylan and Reece. These procedures result in long and fast subtitles that might render problematic the understanding of the dialogue for non Dutch-speaking viewers/listeners. In practice, however, this first experiment has a deeply problematic consequence, that speaks, once again, of our own ableist perspective: while fast and long subtitles do problematise the relationship between audiovisual temporality and understanding for hearing audience, they also contribute to an inaccessibility of the audiovisual object for deaf and hearing-impaired audiences. Even though this video is indeed intended as a reflection on audiovision's ableist norms addressed at audiences who, within these norms, usually live unproblematically, the reiteration of ableist behaviours enacted by such a reflection does mark our short film with ableist assumptions and therefore imposes a different direction. How about, for example, inspired by the Japanese *benshi*, imagining a signing interpreter, to be displayed with the images, contemporaneously, before, or after the moments of sounded dialogues? There are no excuses to our ableist assumptions, but only possibilities we did not think about.

Secondly, our subtitles demand attention by means of their content. During the only dialogue that Mylan and Reece sign (in Dutch Sign Language), rather than utter, subtitles suddenly address the spectator not with a translation of what expressed by Mylan and Reece but with a caption ("My camera is too slow for Mylan's hand"), as a manifestation of the subtitler's and the filmmaker's agency, thus complicating the spectator's understanding, rather than limiting themselves to smoothing it out, and pointing to possible moments of difference, rather than trying to erase them. Moreover, subtitles assert here their importance in the context of an ableist audiovision's built environment by abandoning the spectator when Mylan and Reece communicate through Dutch Sign Language. In the first case, the caption points toward the ableist bias of the captioner/subtitler and of the filmmaker: I filmed, I edited the images, I wrote the captions/subtitles; I am, in normative terms, a hearing person; my audiovisual practice, as much as I can try, will be informed by my ableist assumptions, which matter more than my intentions; what is left for me to do is to attempt to be aware of my ableist assumptions and to make them explicit within the audiovisual object. In the second case, the subtitles' absence, by reversing the dominant codes of audiovision, strikes another blow to audiovision's built environment, insofar as the usual ableist listening practice dominating sound cinema is eradicated by Mylan's and Reece's signing, and insofar as Mylan's and Reece's signing is not supported by any of those elements that usually make a normatively "hearing" spectator into a spectator "able" to "hear," "listen," and "understand."

Our short film does not pretend to have found any solution to the issue of representing deafness and hearing impairments within audiovisual media. What we propose is an experiment in forcing the oral/aural regime shaped by dominant audiovisual listening practices in light of the different modalities of listening proposed by deafness and hearing impairments. More specifically, in light of the embodied listening practices about which Mylan and Reece dialogue during the interview. Our attempt does not want to consist in imagining an audiovision for deaf and hearing-impaired people, since we believe that this task cannot be informed by the ableist perspective of hearing people. We do want to try, however, to shake off our ableist assumptions and critically reassess the listening practices proposed by audiovisual objects as their limits emerge when confronted with non-normative embodiments. With our short film, we hope to have shaped an audiovisual representation that moves a little step forward in this process of reassessment, while at the same time functioning as an object to be further criticised.

## Conclusions

Sound cinema participates in a system of aural overrepresentations. Within mainstream audiovisual representations, the modalities in which hearing and listening are constructed, by means of sound recording, editing, and mixing, and in interaction with the films' visual components, are indicative of a normative, ableist understanding of what it means to hear and to listen, and, thus, of what it means to be human. When deafness and hearing impairments encounter sound cinema, and when sound cinema tries to take deafness and hearing impairments seriously, such a normative, ableist understanding is shaken, and, with it, the dominant codes of audiovision that support it. Representing deafness and hearing impairments within a medium that so frequently and so strongly implies a normatively "hearing" ear, however, remains dangerous, as the risks of shaping these representations from an ableist perspective would seem imbued in the very essence of audiovisual media.

Within *Chapter 1*, I began being suspicious of sound cinema's dominant aural practices. By reading the works of Jennifer Lynn Stoever and Mara Mills through Sylvia Wynter, I noticed that the construction of aural components operated by sound cinema is often dangerously surrounded by a silence concerning the specific epistemologies that motivate such a construction in the first place. With Stoever, I argued that sound cinema often represents the aural practices that it constructs as *silent*, without acknowledging for their construction. Such a silence results in an overrepresentation: recurring to Wynter, it is possible to argue that sound cinema's genre-specific aural practices, by not acknowledging themselves as genre-specific, represent themselves as the universal aural practice, in comparison to which every other aural practice is more and less "deficient." Mainstream sound cinema, then, sets a norm of what it means to hear and to listen. On the model of Stoever's sonic color line, I termed this norm "sonic auditory line." Driving my line, I identified a listening ear very similar to the one driving Stoever's sonic color line: a socio-cultural construction that produces and regulates ideas about aural realities. While Stoever's listening ear, however, has particular "objects" to hear and listen to, mine regulates and produces the very process of hearing/listening.

Given the particular nature of sound cinema's listening ear, I argued, with Mills, through Wynter, that sound cinema's overrepresentation of genre-specific aural practices results in an understanding of hearing/listening as purely biological human functions, rather than as processes hybridly both biological and discursively constructed. From this perspective, the aural mediation operated by sound cinema appears very similar, although essentially different, to that undertaken by cochlear implants. Both construct genre-specific hearing/listening practices, shaped by the desires and epistemological assumptions of its makers, while pretending to construct and represent *the* process of listening.

The essential difference between cochlear implants' and sound cinema's aural mediation, however, prompted me to further define how sound cinema constructs aural practices. To do so, I turned to



Szendy's work on the processes of listening to Western art music, which provided me with the conceptual tools to argue that sound cinema constructs the very process of hearing/listening by deciding what, of the (diegetic) reality it represents, should be audible and how. With Szendy, I also noticed that sound cinema can construct practices of hearing/listening at three levels: representationally, by showing and sounding a specific hearing/listening behaviour; formally, by shaping the hearing/listening behaviour within the formal characteristics that construct the audiovisual representation; hybridly, by constructing aural practices within its formal characteristics and then involving the constructed practices at the representational level of the film's narrative. This way, sound cinema allows the apparently impossible operation of listening to someone's listening. Finally, questioning Szendy's claim that Kagel's cinematic representation of a revenant deaf Beethoven "makes" the spectators deaf, I turned to Critical Disability Studies and Film Studies, looking for an answer to my question on sound cinema's possibility of representing deafness and hearing impairments in a non-ableist way.

At the intersection of Critical Disability Studies and Film Studies, I observed that the issue of how disability and audiovisual media have interacted and interact has been addressed mainly as a problem of how disability is narrated. I then argued for the necessity of adding to the narrative-representational focus a formal focus, aimed at a critical assessment of how deafness and hearing impairments are constructed audiovisually by sound cinema's formal elements. Such a necessity arises from a doubt concerning the possible essential ableism of sound cinema, which the "deaf" history of the transition from movies to talkies written by Russell L. Johnson urgently calls into question. Sound cinema's essential ableism was then further problematised with the works of Jenny Chamarette and Ruth Kitchen on the formal construction of a character's deafness in Jacques Audiard's *Sur mes lèvres*.

I would have then started to investigate, through the theoretical framework sketched thus far, the formal construction of deafness and hearing/listening in *A Quiet Place*, would have I not realised that the very theory of audiovision leading my analysis would have been based on a normative understanding of hearing/listening processes. Within *Chapter 2*, then, I argued for the necessity of a new theory of audiovision, truly striving to take into account the contributions of Critical Disability Studies. I gestured toward the beginning of the development of this new theory by examining, discussing, and reshaping two concepts that would have then been fundamental during the analysis: "point of audition" and "aural diegetic space." In the first case, I reframed Rick Altman's formulation of the concept of point of audition in order to identify, within cinematic representation, the alignment of the spectators' virtual ears with the aural practice of a film's character without incurring in a normative distinction between a "subjective" and an "objective" hearing/listening practice. In the second case, I critiqued Michel Chion's denial of the existence of the diegetic space within the soundtrack and of the autonomy of points of audition. Chion's denial, by misrecognising the governing audiovisual norm that usually requires for a single space, during a single scene, to be listened to by a single "ear," implies a normative understanding of audiovision,

whereas the aural consistency of cinematic space, contrasting the multiplicity of embodied listening, is left unquestioned. The existence of aural diegetic spaces, the aural autonomy of points of audition, and the “one-space-one-scene-one-ear” norm reciprocally hold each other, so that recognising one of these elements means recognising them all. The unsettlement of these very three elements operated by *A Quiet Place*, in turn, is what led me to the analysis of this high-concept horror film.

Within *Chapter 3*, I analysed how *A Quiet Place*, by multiplying the aural practices that it represents, destabilises (not unproblematically) the governing codes of audiovision explored in the previous chapters. As the film narrates a world where sounding results in a potentially deadly danger, the deafness of one of the film’s characters is complexly represented as simultaneously a loss, a difference, and a gain. This complex representation, in turn, pervades and is made possible by the film’s formal characteristics. The analysis proceeded by accounting for the points of audition constructed by the film: that of the deaf Regan, that of the hyper-sensitively hearing creatures, and that of the normatively hearing Lee. By examining how and why these points of audition could be interpreted as the subjective points of audition of their respective characters, the element that proved to be fundamental was the discrepancy between the visual consistency and the aural fragmentation of the diegetic spaces. Such a discrepancy, in turn, reinforced my thesis that, usually, diegetic spaces do have an aural autonomy and uniformity, which are instead breached by the multiplication of aural practices proposed by *A Quiet Place*. In other words, the aural consistency with which diegetic spaces are usually represented within audiovisual media can be constructed only when such spaces are “listened” to by a single “ear.” If audiovisual representation attempts an explosion of the listening ear into a multiplicity of aural practices, aural diegetic spaces are fractured and points of audition stop being autonomous. The infinite possibilities of embodied listening break the sonic auditory line, deconstruct the listening ear, and unsettle the dominant codes of audiovision.

*A Quiet Place*’s construction and representation of deafness, however, is not unproblematic. To begin with, Regan’s aural practice is constructed as complete silence and tied to the character’s ears, thus replicating a deeply ableist understanding of hearing/listening as something mediated uniquely by the ears. The construction of her point of audition, moreover, together with that of the creatures’ one, overshadows the still present risk of listening to only the “subjective point of audition” moments of the soundtrack as “subjective” and constructed, while not acknowledging the construction of the rest of the film’s aural component, or, worse, taking it as the “natural,” “objective” modality of hearing/listening. Such an ableist distinction between varyingly “normal” modalities of listening is reinforced by the construction of Lee’s point of audition, that seamlessly integrates with the “objective” points of audition dominating the rest of the film’s soundtrack. Finally, the proposal of a “deaf” aural practice in the form of a silence that normatively hearing ears can listen to in contrast with sound risks falling into the “simulation” trap described by Alison Kafer, whereas disability is imagined as a knowable fact of the

body, deafness as a lack of hearing, and the “failures and omissions of the built environment” are overlooked. The film’s usage of extra-diegetic music, superimposed on Regan’s point of audition, contributes to the ableism still lingering over *A Quiet Place*.

With the short film *Talk a little louder* and within *Chapter 4*, then, I focused on audiovision’s built environment, trying to test the ableism of audiovisual media by *doing* audiovision. I developed, together with fellow student Amy Welten, a short film that represents an interview twin brothers Mylan and Reece, born deaf and living their everyday life with hearing aid, while at the same time striving to reflect on its own possibilities, as an audiovisual medium, of representing deafness and hearing impairments in a non-ableist way. I then accounted for and critically assessed the choices that led the film’s creation and those that could have led it. Through this process, I noticed that normative codes of audiovision construct audiovisual understanding by tailoring this understanding to normatively hearing ears. Normatively hearing people, in turn, are made into viewers/listeners “able” to understand audiovision, while their “ability” is nothing but a construction supported by audiovision’s built environment. In order to destabilise such environment, the short film experiments with captions, aural diegetic spaces, and subtitles, deconstructing their usual characteristics and thus showing how each of these elements is usually shaped so that normatively hearing spectators can make sense of audiovision.

Doing audiovision and critiquing the ensuing product served, most importantly, to enlighten the ableist bias that still informs my and Amy’s attempt at questioning audiovisual ableism, as exemplified by our choice of creating confusingly detailed and fast subtitles in order to destabilise the spectators’ understanding, and by our overlooking of the disruptive potential of sign languages in the context of mainstream audiovisual production. This last point also indicates one of the most important directions toward which the project begun with my thesis could move: questioning, critiquing, and reimagining audiovision in light of the visual, gestural modalities of communication shaped by sign languages. Such an exploration would crucially enrich the development of a new, non-normative, non-ableist audiovisual theory, that my project has attempted to begin, and that would constitute an ambitious development of the ideas put forward within these pages. Finally, the role played by music in shaping hearing/listening within audiovision urgently needs to be reassessed in light of such a new, non-normative audiovisual theory, questioning music’s limits and possibilities, critiquing its potential normativity, and exploring its non-normative potential.

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