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How *A Quiet Place* is Harmful to Those in Quiet Worlds

Ashley Mendoza

The representation of marginalized communities within the film industry has always been an issue that gets swept under the rug. In particular, the disabled community has received the smallest amount of representation in films. Even then, the depiction of the disabled community is almost always problematic and hurtful. Disabled characters are used as plot devices, or as props to make the main character seem more like-able and tolerant. Very rarely are disabled characters ever played by actual disabled actors. Simply putting a disabled character into a film may seem like good representation to an able-bodied audience, but one must also take into account how the character is being portrayed and the effects the portrayal has on the disabled community.

The film *A Quiet Place* has been praised for its representation of the Deaf community, its use of American Sign Language (ASL), and being one of the first films to showcase the cochlear implant. Able-bodied audiences love the movie and feel it has done an excellent job of showcasing the struggles of the Deaf community and has brought more awareness and interest to ASL. However, some comments have been made from the Deaf community stating some of the issues they have with the film. The underlying messages of silence being torturous, and the disabled character being sainted as the person to save the day, only for it to not even be her, have all been pointed out.

The film *A Quiet Place* directed by John Krasinski follows the Abbott family as they navigate survival after the rest of the population has been killed off by extraterrestrial creatures with highly sensitive, acute hearing, that attack anything that makes noise. The family consists of parents Lee and Evelyn, their children Regan—who is deaf—Marcus, and Beau. Early in the film, Beau is killed by one of the creatures after being given a toy by Regan. She blames herself for his death and believes her father does as well. Over a year later, the family is still together and are preparing for Evelyn to give birth soon. While Lee and Marcus are away, Evelyn goes into labor and while trying to make it to the basement, steps on an exposed nail and drops a picture frame, alerting a nearby creature of her whereabouts. She successfully gives birth after the children are able to divert the creature away with fireworks. Later, the creature returns and attacks the children. Lee ultimately sacrifices himself to save his children by yelling to get the creature's attention. The children reunite with their mother, but the creature has followed them. Regan learns that her cochlear implant, when turned on in the proximity of the creature, sends out a high-frequency sound that leaves the creature in a frenzy and exposes their one weak spot. Evelyn then is able to kill the creature by shooting a shotgun into the creature's exposed area (Krasinski, 2018).

This film became a hit and was highly regarded for its display and representation of disability. Most importantly, the character of Regan was played by a deaf actress, Millicent Simmonds. Krasinski noted that it was important to him that the character was portrayed by an actual deaf actress because he “didn't want a non-deaf actress pretending to be deaf. Most importantly though, because a deaf actress would help [his] knowledge and understanding of the situations tenfold” (Fowler, 2018). This is a big step in the right direction for the representation of the disabled community. Having disabled characters played by disabled actors makes their portrayal much more authentic and real. It can even be noted that while the film is mostly silent, there are still sounds from everyday life present in the background of scenes. However, in moments where only Regan is shown, all sound is cut out entirely. This was done to allow the audience to step into her world and learn what everyday life is like for her character and her actress.

At the time that the main portion of the film takes place, the Abbotts have survived 472 days and we are left to assume that they are the only people that are still alive. One of the few reasons the Abbotts have been able to make it this far is because of their daughter being deaf. In a world where sound is the most dangerous force, being able to communicate without making noise is key. The Abbotts have the advantage of being able to do this because they already know ASL due to Regan being deaf. Through this, the Abbott family experiences the phenomenon known as Deaf-gain. The concept of Deaf-gain claims that “all individuals would be enriched by becoming a little bit more Deaf” (Bauman and Murray, 242). Because the family already knows ASL, it was very easy for them to transition over into a world where sound is not allowed; one similar to the world their daughter lives in every day. They have benefited from their daughter being deaf by being able to survive.

There is very little dialogue in the movie because of this and few scenes stand out for having small amounts of dialogue. For instance, when Lee takes Marcus out to fish, and they are near a river with a waterfall. Lee explains how it is okay for them to speak there because there are other noises that are louder that will drown out their own voices (Krasinski, 35:30-41:40). Another moment is after Evelyn has given birth and she and Lee are in the basement which has been fortified to be soundproof (Krasinski, 57:28-1:00:30). In these scenes, being able to safely get to speak is treated as a relief to the characters. They feel like they are able to breathe and relax, even if it is only for a moment. This enforces the idea that the ability to speak is the favored, as well as a better form of communication to be able to fully express your emotions.

In a review written by a Deaf woman, she critiques the film for its

portrayal of “silence, especially the inability to speak, [being] depicted as tragic” (Kincheloe, 2018). Another aspect to examine, is how the film depicts not having the ability to hear. As Regan is hiding in a cornfield looking for her brother, because of her inability to hear, she does not realize that the creature has crept up behind her and is about to attack (Krasinski, 56:40). Had she been able to hear, she would have known that she was in danger. While she ultimately isn’t injured in the scene, the disadvantage of being deaf in this world is shown very clearly, and makes it seem like people with hearing impairments are not safe without their hearing.

In this same scene, the audience is given a first look at how Regan’s cochlear implant is able to work in her advantage. The implant sends out a high-frequency sound that leaves the creature very disoriented and drives it away. This motif is repeated twice more in the film and ultimately is used to defeat one of the creatures. The idea that the implant is the only thing that will be able to get rid of the creatures and help to return life to normal displays the idea of the medical model of disability. This model frames disability as something that needs to be cured or fixed through medical intervention (Kafer, 5). The film frames the implant, not Regan, as the one to save the day. The medical model is not well liked by the disabled community because it claims that it’s solely the disability itself that limits the person and erases the factor of society having an effect as well. Having this message sent out to the audience is harmful and false.

Even through this, the idea of the disabled character being seen as the saint that saves everyone in the end, is a tired trope that has been seen time and time again with disabled characters in film (Chasoff, 00:57-1:10). Without her implant, Regan is just a normal deaf girl, but with it she transforms into this superhero that is going to save her family. Her and her family all gain a new sense of confidence once they learn that they can defeat the creatures with the implant. The superpowered supercrip narrative can be seen through this. This typology describes disabled people as having the ability to “exceed their own embodiment through their abilities, to the point where their status as disabled may be called into question” (Schalk, 82). Regan is able to use her disability to her advantage, as if it is a “superpower”, and be the hero for her family. This romanization of her disability erases the reality of the everyday struggles she goes through and will continue to go through because of her disability.

At surface level, *A Quiet Place* is a fantastic film that has been able to bring more awareness to the Deaf community and allow able-bodied viewers to understand what it is like to live in a world without sound. However, showcasing that silence is bad and should be feared has not gone unnoticed by the Deaf community themselves. Overused tropes and the idea that disabled people need fixing is displayed throughout the film. Some may argue that it was good to have the disabled character save her family in the end, but

the reality is that it was her implant that saved the day, not her. The concept that the family needs to be saved from being forced to live in a world without sound diminishes the reality of the world deaf people live in every day and displays outdated ideologies that disabled people aren't able to live life to the fullest. Overall, this film is a step in the right direction for having more representation of disabled characters in film, but the way Regan is displayed and her role within the movie's narrative skews viewers' understanding of disability and perpetuates old ideas of how disability can be "managed."

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