RINGING, HUMMING, SILENCE: POINT OF AUDITION REPRESENTATIONS OF DEAFNESS, TINNITUS AND SONIC TECHNOLOGY

by

Gabrielle Berry

B.A. (Hons), Queen’s University (Kingston), 2017

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Film Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

August 2019

© Gabrielle Berry, 2019
The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, a thesis/dissertation entitled:

Ringing, Humming, Silence: Point of Audition Representations of Deafness, Tinnitus and Sonic Technology

submitted by Gabrielle Berry in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Film Studies

Examiner Committee:

Dr. Lisa Coulthard
Supervisor

Dr. Brian McIlroy
Supervisory Committee Member

Supervisory Committee Member

Additional Examiner

Additional Supervisory Committee Members:

Supervisory Committee Member

Supervisory Committee Member
Abstract

A young girl moves through an abandoned grocery store. As the camera cuts closer, drawing attention to her cochlear implant, the quiet sounds of the store drop away. The audio-viewer is wrapped in her deaf perspective, and the shades of silence of her cochlear implant. Occurring early in John Krasinski’s *A Quiet Place* (2018), this sequence embodies the vital role of sound and technology in cinematic representations of deafness.

The sonic equivalent of the point of view shot, point of audition (POA) sound is frequently used in cinematic representations of deafness and tinnitus. Using the frame of point of audition sound, this thesis brings together the disciplines of sound, disability, technology and Deaf studies to interrogate the role of auditory perspectives in cinematic representations of deafness and tinnitus. It examines the use of point of audition sound in *A Quiet Place*, and Edgar Wright’s *Baby Driver* (2017). Through point of audition sound, both films blur the boundaries between the audience, the characters, and sound technology (the iPod, cochlear implant and Dolby Atmos). Point of audition in these films brings together representation and the tools of representation, providing a platform to consider the ways in which sound technology and sonic experiences are portrayed through sound.

This thesis argues that point of audition, along with adding a significant dimension to representations of deafness and tinnitus, provides a sounding space in which to confront the cultural beliefs, myths and ideologies bound up in sound technology. In the process, it demonstrates the constructive critical possibilities of bringing Deaf, disability and sound studies into conversation with each other. Together they provide a formidable framework for critically engaging with the complications and possibilities of acoustically representing deafness or tinnitus for hearing audiences.
Lay Summary

Point of audition sound (the sonic equivalent of the point of view shot) is frequently used in cinematic representations of deafness and tinnitus. Bringing together Deaf and Sound studies, this thesis examines the use of point of audition sound in Baby Driver (Wright, 2017) and A Quiet Place (Krasinski, 2018). Through point of audition sound, both films blur the boundaries between the audience, the characters and the sound technology (the iPod, cochlear implant and Dolby Atmos). This thesis demonstrates the essential role of point of audition sound in representing deafness and tinnitus. Beyond representation, it also shows the way in which point of audition sound can be used to critically confront the cultural beliefs, myths and ideologies bound up in sound technology. This thesis ultimately examines the possibilities and complications of representing deafness or tinnitus acoustically for hearing audiences.
Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Gabrielle Berry. A preliminary draft of Chapter 2 was presented at the Film Studies Association of Canada annual conference in June 2019. A preliminary draft of Chapter 3 was presented at the Cinema Studies Institute Graduate Conference at the University of Toronto in January 2019.
Table of Contents

Abstract...........................................................................................................................................iii
Lay Summary.......................................................................................................................................iv
Preface................................................................................................................................................v
Table of Contents..............................................................................................................................vi
Acknowledgements ..........................................................................................................................viii
Dedication ..........................................................................................................................................ix
Chapter 1: Introduction - Point of Audition: Sound and Deafness .............................................1

Chapter 2: Hearing the Hearing of Others .....................................................................................8
  2.1 Disability on Screen .....................................................................................................................9
  2.2 Deafness and Film ......................................................................................................................11
  2.3 Subjective Point of Audition ......................................................................................................14
  2.4 Spatial Point of Audition ..........................................................................................................20
  2.5 Sound and Silence ....................................................................................................................22
  2.6 Technology, Deafness and Point of Audition .........................................................................24

Chapter 3: "Hum in the Drum": Tinnitus, iPods, and Point of Audition Sound in Baby

Driver (2017)....................................................................................................................................29
  3.1 iPod Culture ..............................................................................................................................31
  3.2 Listening to Dolby Atmos........................................................................................................38
  3.3 Atmos and EarPods ................................................................................................................40
  3.4 Point of Audition and the Hum in the Drum .........................................................................42
  3.5 The iPod and Control..............................................................................................................44
### Chapter 4: Technology, Bodies and Sound: Sonic Representations of the Cochlear Implant in *A Quiet Place* (2018)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Point of Audition and Deafness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>The Politics of the Cochlear Implant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>The Deaf Cyborg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Narrative Framing of the Cochlear Implant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>The Cochlear Implant and Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Electronic Sound and Silence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>The Cochlear Implant and Cinematic Sound Technology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter 5: Conclusion - Sounding Out the Future

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Conclusion - Sounding Out the Future</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Works Cited

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Works Cited</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

51, 55, 57, 60, 65, 68, 71, 72, 76, 79, 86
Acknowledgements

This thesis is the result of support and encouragement from so many people. I’d first like to thank my supervisor Lisa Coulthard, for enthusiastically supporting me at every turn when my first graduate paper turned into a full blown obsession over sound and Deaf studies. Thanks as well to Brian McIlroy, for his perceptive questions and comments; and to Christine Evans for her incredible feedback on my SSHRC application and support throughout my degree.

I’d also like to thank my awesome cohort—Jared Aronoff, Jemma Dash, Morgan Harper, Zoë Laks and Zoë S. Sherman. I’d like to extend extra thanks to Zoë S. Sherman for being my deadline buddy and weathering this summer of frantic writing and research together. Thanks as well to Morgan Harper for his patient advice and enthusiastic support; and graciously allowing me to not only join his sound studies directed reading course, but to divert a week to Deaf studies.

Thanks is also owed to Lorraine Lau, for years of invaluable writing advice and encouragement, and for her perceptive comments on an early draft of Chapter three. Thanks to Mynt Marsellus, for helping me get my ideas in order when they felt all over the place. To Pip, my long suffering cat, who may have been even more stressed about this thesis than I was. I’d also like to thank SSHRC for financially supporting this thesis.

Finally “to the moon and back” thanks are owed to my family. To Rhonda MacDonald and Jeff Berry, thanks for the late night phone calls, teary FaceTime chats, last minute flights, and always being a constant source of support and motivation. To Bronwyn, Josie, and Charlotte, thanks for putting up with me obsessing/panicking over my thesis. Love you guys.
Dedication

To my family
Chapter 1: Introduction

Point of Audition: Sound and Deafness

The camera moves in on a character, and suddenly the sounds of the scene drop away, the audience enveloped in a new sonic experience. The audio-viewer is wrapped in the muffled quiet, or left wincing as a sharp ringing explodes across the speakers. For a brief moment the sonic experience of the audio-viewer is melded and merged with the character’s shades of silence or humming tinnitus. The moment passes, and the full, ‘normal’ sounds fill back in, altered and heard anew after temporarily brushing shoulders with the silence or noise.

These auditory experiences are a common occurrence in film, often used for psychological or physical moments of trauma. A list posted on Letterboxd by user Steve G ❤️, entitled “movies where a character is involved in an incident which briefly impairs their hearing and leads to us hearing EEEEEEEEEEEE for a few seconds to symbolise this” includes 255 films, with other users continually suggesting new films to add. The films on this list are wide ranging, from The Thin Red Line (Terrance Malick, 1998) to Jane Eyre (Cary Joji Fukunaga, 2011) to Frozen (Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, 2013). The prominence of this ringing sound across genres is indicative of what Mack Hagood names, “the tinnitus trope” with the sound of tinnitus a common representation of acoustic trauma, “arguably to the point of cliché” (Hagood, “Tinnitus” 2). For most films, this ringing sound is temporary. In the animated children’s film Frozen, Elsa throws herself out of the path of a falling chandelier. As her head hits the ground, the screen suddenly cuts to black, and painful ringing fills the soundtrack. The sound of ‘tinnitus’

1 Letterboxd is an online social media networking site, where users can rate and log movies. They can also create lists of films to be shared with other users.
slowly fades as Elsa regains consciousness. The sound appears only briefly, and does not occur again. The popularity of these brief “EEEEEEE” sounds such as Elsa’s are evocative of the affective power of sound, providing a succinct and familiar symbol of acoustic and psychological trauma. While prevalent, these instances can be distinguished from auditory representations of characters for whom the ringing of tinnitus is not a temporary experience but a permanent acoustic reality. Going beyond fleeting sounds, one can interrogate not simply the “tinnitus trope” but also the cultural, political and acoustic experience that the sound represents. For example, one can look to the soundscape of films such as *A Star is Born* (Bradley Cooper, 2018), where the ring of tinnitus is a daily, painful reality for musician Jackson Maine (Bradley Cooper). Throughout the film, the audience is slipped into the sounds of Maine’s experience of tinnitus.

This auditory perspective, when the audience is brought into the aural experience of the buzzing, ringing sounds of tinnitus, is known as point of audition (POA) sound. The auditory equivalent of the point of view shot, point of audition asks the audio-viewer “not to hear, but to identify with someone who will hear for us…this technique locates us in a very specific place—the body of a character who hears for us” (Altman 60-61). While point of audition representations of tinnitus is a reoccurring trope in films, point of audition is also used to immerse audiences into environmental and ‘neurological’ silences (Wierzbicki). A character slipping underwater might be accompanied by a similarly ‘underwater’ and muffled soundscape. Point of audition is similarly used to immerse audiences into the relative silence of a D/deaf² or

---

² This thesis utilizes the terminology and punctuation recognized by the Canadian Association of the Deaf: ‘deaf’ is used here to refer to those who are medically deaf but do not necessarily identify with the Deaf community and culture. “Deaf” (with a capital D) is used when referring to individuals who identify with Deaf culture. Sign language is always capitalized, in recognition of its status as a legitimate language.
hard of hearing aural experience. For instance, in *La Famille Bélier* (Éric Lartigau, 2014), point of audition sound is used to envelop the audience into the deaf aural perspective of the family, as they watch their hearing daughter sing at a school recital. In the process of representing ‘silence’, the film suspends the expected sounds of the soundtrack, the subtle quiet demonstrating the limits and immersive possibilities of digital surround sound.

Point of audition adds an essential dimension to representations of deafness and tinnitus. Although exposure to loud music at a concert can result in temporary and familiar ringing, point of audition adds a crucial element to representations of characters continually hearing the sharp ringing in their ears. As a highly subjective sound, tinnitus can differ widely. For some, tinnitus is a ringing sound, for others a humming, clicking or painful roaring. Because of the interiority of tinnitus, it is difficult for non-tinnitus sufferers to understand the affects and sounds of tinnitus, and the very existence of the condition can be in doubt (Hagood, *Hush* 42). Deafness is arguably even more challenging for hearing audiences to conceive. Unlike the eyes which can be shut, it is difficult to truly stop up all sound from entering the ears. Point of audition sound provides a facsimile of a deaf aural perspective, offering a brief experience of a spectrum of sonic engagement. Far more than the temporary shift into silence or ringing, point of audition can provide an essential component to cinematic representations of deafness and tinnitus, moving beyond the visual to immerse the audio-viewer into different sonic ways of being.

In addition to augmenting representations of deafness and tinnitus, point of audition sound also holds a close relationship with cinematic sound technology. Point of audition emerged as a concept during the early codifying years of synchronized sound, as sound technicians debated the relationship between sound space and image (Altman 49). Point of audition continues to have a strong correlation with modern sound developments. The specific
auditory perspective of point of audition sound amplifies the immersive capabilities of digital surround sound technologies, such as Dolby Atmos. A recently launched sound platform, Atmos allows practitioners to place sounds precisely within the sound mix, including above the audience (Atmos). Point of audition brings together both representation and the tools of representation, providing a platform in which to consider the ways in which sound technology and sonic experiences are represented through modern sound technology.

In recent years, there has been a call by scholars for an expansion of sound studies to include a variety of sonic perspectives. Despite the prominence of deafness in sound history, Jonathan Sterne points to the persistence of a “creeping normalism” in sound studies, “an epistemological and political bias towards an idealized, normal, nondisabled hearing subject” (Sterne, “Hearing” 73). In his essay “Hearing,” Sterne poses a vital question: “What would sound studies become if we began without the automatic assumptions that we have direct, full access to our own hearing, or through our hearing, direct access to the sonic world, or through the sonic world, intersubjectivity with each other?” He continues, stating such a project would begin “with hearing the hearing of others” (74). Michele Friedner and Stefan Helmreich have similarly called for an expansion of sound studies, pointing to the possibilities of working at the intersections of Deaf and Sound studies. Friedner and Helmreich argue that “Sound studies and Deaf studies have points of articulation – points of common concern about sensory socialities in their shared desire to carve out analytical and experiential spaces for contemplating what is unheard and unseen” (81). As a sonic mode that brings together representations of deafness, tinnitus and sound technology, point of audition is a vivid “point of articulation” between sound and Deaf studies. Immersing the audio-viewer into the sonic experience of deafness or tinnitus, point of audition embodies Sterne’s call for “hearing the hearing of others” (74). Although
largely undertheorized, a recent academic focus on point of audition representations of tinnitus in film (Hagood, “Tinnitus” 2; Grajeda 171; Wierzbicki 144; Walker 136) signals the wealth of possibilities in analyzing the cinematic moment of silence and tinnitus. Point of audition is hence an ideal sounding space in which to consider the constructive collisions and intersections between sound, Deaf, technology and film studies.

In articulating the significance of point of audition sound and its relationship to audiences, technology and representation, this thesis brings together major scholars from sound, Deaf, disability and technology studies. In so doing, it foregrounds the constructive possibilities of bringing these fields into conversation with each other. Reading point of audition through a variety of perspectives draws out major ideas around hearing, sound and technology. Read in tandem, Deaf studies provides an alternative to sound studies “creeping normalism”, while sound studies provides Deaf studies with research on silence, sound and technology. The visual emphasis of disability scholarship is augmented by the sound based work of Deaf and sound studies, while providing seminal research on culture and representations of difference. Together, cinematic sound studies (with its emphasis on technology and sound practitioners) along with disability and Deaf studies, provides a powerful theoretical framework in which to interrogate the complications and possibilities of representing deafness or tinnitus acoustically.

This thesis grounds its analysis in case studies around Baby Driver (Edgar Wright, 2017) and A Quiet Place (John Krasinski, 2018). Although several recent films have focused on deafness and tinnitus, both Baby Driver and A Quiet Place notably shape their soundscape around the aural perspective of the character with deafness or tinnitus, frequently utilizing point of audition sound. Baby Driver and A Quiet Place also significantly draw attention to the role of sound technology. With iPods and headphones in the former, and the cochlear implant (CI) in the
latter, the acoustic perspectives of the central characters in both films are inextricably bound up in the sound technology they use to mediate their acoustic experience of the world. Both films also feature sound mixes created with Dolby Atmos, shaping their representations of point of audition sound through developments in surround sound technology. The soundscapes of *Baby Driver* and *A Quiet Place* hence offer the audio-viewer an acoustic experience that embodies a particular cultural moment in time, while reflecting current conceptions of how deafness and tinnitus should be figured in film.

Chapter two examines the complex history between deafness, technology and cinema. Drawing on the works of sound studies scholars Rick Altman and Michel Chion, it defines the concept of point of audition sound, situating it in the development of synchronized sound technology. It also details Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne’s proposal for a ‘dismedia’ approach to media and disability studies, arguing that point of audition, as a sound mode at the intersection of disability representation, technology and the audio-viewer, provides a powerful sounding space in which to apply many aspects of ‘dismediation.’

Chapter three focuses on iPods, headphones and Dolby Atmos and the concept of sonic control in *Baby Driver*. The film follows the story of Baby, a young getaway driver who obsessively uses iPods as a means of masking the constant ringing in his ears. This chapter reads Baby’s use of sonic technology through Michael Bull’s analysis of iPod culture, demonstrating the way in which iPod culture crucially informs *Baby Driver’s* point of audition representation of tinnitus. Drawing on Mack Hagood’s work on tinnitus and sonic self-control, and Gianluca Sergi’s research on Dolby Atmos, this chapter also interrogates the myth of control and immersion that permeates sonic technology.
Finally, chapter four considers the silences and painful glitches of *A Quiet Place*’s aural representation of the malfunctioning cochlear implant. This chapter traces the cultural and political debates surrounding the cochlear implant. It examines the problems and possibilities of the film’s point of audition representation of sound mediated through the cochlear implant, eschewing viral videos of cochlear implant activations to immerse the audio-viewer into the moment of the cochlear implant ‘switch off.’ Drawing on Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Alison Kafer’s conceptualizations of the cyborg, this chapter details the complicated relationship between sound, technology, the deaf character and the audio-viewer in the film’s auditory representation of the CI. Offering a soundscape that is both subtly quiet and full of painful noise, *A Quiet Place* also subverts auditory expectations, providing a space in which to confront the cultural and political ideas shaping conventions of listening and cinematic sound.

Point of audition sound is far more than a temporary “EEEEEE” or momentary silence. This thesis unpacks the technological and cultural significance of point of audition sound; examining the way in which sound provides a formative dimension to hearing audience’s experiences of cinematic representations of deafness or tinnitus. In both *Baby Driver* and *A Quiet Place*, sound brings together the audience, characters and the technology. Point of audition sound allows for a study of both representation and the relationship between technology, deafness and disability. In the process, it offers a sounding space in which to confront cultural beliefs, ideologies and myths that shape societal perceptions of technology, sound and the act of listening. Point of audition provides the opportunity to hear, albeit briefly, the hearing of others. And it is through this hearing that one can consider the possibilities and complications of experiencing a spectrum of sonic perspectives.
Chapter 1: Hearing the Hearing of Others

A young deaf girl settles into her seat in a movie theatre and the lights fall. The flickering beam of the projector cuts through the dark, illuminating her face staring up at the screen. She watches as a woman struggles to find shelter from the coming storm, the images of the projected film punctuated by shots of the organist, playing away just beneath the edge of the screen. The faces of other patrons, crying and gasping, are shown, each wrapped in the communal viewing experience. As the girl exits the movie theatre, she is overwhelmed by the frantic activity, as workers remove signs for the silent film, and hang giant banners that declare, “THIS CINEMA WILL BE CLOSED DURING THE INSTALLATION OF HOBOKEN’S FIRST SOUND SYSTEM”, and “SEE AND HEAR YOUR FAVOURITE STARS.” Giant boxes, labelled “Vitaphone” litter the sidewalk in front of the theatre, awaiting installation. Throughout the applause of the audience and the activity outside the theatre, the soundscape of this sequence consists entirely of non-diegetic score. From the silent film screening to the oncoming wave of sound, this scene vividly presents a young girl swept up in an era of immense change.

The scene in the movie theatre occurs early in Todd Haynes’ 2017 film Wonderstruck, which weaves together the stories of two children—Rose, a deaf girl in 1927, and the recently deafened Ben in 1970, as each ventures out alone into New York City. In telling the stories of two deaf children, Wonderstruck shapes much of its soundscape around the aural perspective of its young protagonists. While Ben’s sections are in color, with an aural perspective that shifts between full sound and faint noises; Rose’s portions of the film are in black and white, with a soundtrack wholly consisting of expressive, non-diegetic sounds evocative of ‘silent’ cinema musical accompaniment. In so doing, the film stresses the connection between the young Deaf girl and the silent era of film. Juxtaposing Rose’s immersed experience in the cinema watching a
film with the other patrons, to Rose taking in the banners loudly proclaiming the coming of sound, *Wonderstruck* vibrantly captures a crucial moment in the complex history of the interrelation between deafness, film and sound technology. Rose’s non-diegetic soundscape throughout the film is also evocative of the role and significance of sound in cinematic representations of deafness and hearing loss. While *Wonderstruck* visually tells the story of Rose and Ben, it is sound that adds an immersive element to its representation of its two young deaf protagonists.

As this example from *Wonderstruck* suggests, sound and sound technology play a pivotal role in cinematic representations of deafness. This chapter brings together the critical and technological history of deafness, disability and film sound, tracing tangled and essential relationships. While point of audition sound, such as Rose’s non-diegetic soundscape, crucially shapes the audio-viewer’s experience of the film, sound technology also has a long history of ostracizing the Deaf community and shaping perceptions of hearing. Sounding at the intersection of technology, representation and production, point of audition provides a space in which to interrogate the act of hearing the sounds of deafness.

2.1 Disability on Screen

Disability studies scholars have traced the staggering amount of films featuring the disabled body from the very beginnings of the moving picture (Davis 152). Film quickly usurped the role of carnival side-shows of the past, providing audiences with the opportunity to stare in equal fascination and horror at the body of the Other (Norden 6). Representations of the

---

3 The Deaf community has a complicated relationship with the concept and label of disability. While acknowledging the differences between the two, this thesis brings Disability and Deaf studies into conversation with each other to further discussions of cinematic representations of D/deafness. For more on the relationship between deafness and disability see Harlan Lane (2008) and Douglas C. Baynton (2008).
disabled body in film can be traced back to Thomas Edison’s 1898 film, *Fake Beggar*, which located disability as a source of humor and deceit (Norden 14-15). From the beginnings of film, filmmakers have used disability as characterizing shorthand, physical ‘defects’ signifying emotional or personal flaws (Norden 5). In their text *Narrative Prosthesis*, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder examine this use of disability as a characterizing trait or metaphor in the history of literature and the arts, writing that “disabled people’s marginalization has occurred in the midst of a perpetual circulation of their images” (6). In addition to reducing disabled characters to metaphors or tropes, representations of disability in film as Martin F. Norden has argued, also tend to isolate disabled characters both from each other and their able-bodied peers, exacerbating the character’s ‘Otherness’ (1).

As powerful cultural products, cinematic representations of disability have had a profound impact on societal understandings of disability and the concept of the ‘normal.’ In his seminal text, *The Cinema of Isolation* (1994) Norden stresses the role of film in constructing society’s perception of disability, often presenting representations that vary wildly from the lived experience of the disabled community. Disability in film is presented as a personal challenge to overcome or accept in an inspiring manner. This problematic duality disregards the role of society, and specific physical and social environments in producing disability (Norden 3-4; Ellcessor et al. 5). These conceptions of disability offered by cinema are so prevalent and pervasive that they have “become mainstream society’s perception of disabled people and have obscured if not outright supplanted disabled people’s perception of themselves” (Norden 3). A significant aspect of this is grounded in the manner in which films approach their representation of disability, often framing disabled characters through the lens of an able-bodied point of view (Norden 1). The disabled character, frequently isolated and reduced to a tragedy or source of
inspiration, is also used to enforce and dictate the boundaries of the mythical ‘normal’ body (Davis 152). As Lennard J. Davis argues, “we cannot have the fantasy of the erotic femme fatale’s body without having the sickened, disabled, deformed persons’ story testifying to the universal power of the human spirit to overcome adversity” (154). In *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson similarly theorizes the role of the disabled body in constructing the abled body, with the disabled body figured as a source of fear: “At once familiarly human but definitely other, the disabled figure in cultural discourse assures the rest of the citizenry of who they are not while arousing their suspicions about who they could become” (Garland Thomson 41). It is through cultural discourses of this disabled other that the ‘normate’ is constructed, an elusive, impossible figure, “outlined by the array of deviant others who marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries” (8). The disabled body on screen, as a prominent figure in cultural discourse, holds an essential role in constructing the ‘normate’, by offering alternatives to the culturally idealized ‘normal’.

### 2.2 Deafness and Film

In the introduction to his text on the history of deafness and the film entertainment industry, *Hollywood Speaks*, John S. Schuchman writes of the role of film in shaping societal perceptions of deafness. Film and popular media have conditioned consumers “to see deaf persons as victims, usually dependent upon persons who hear” (3). Like Norden, Garland Thomson and Davis, Schuchman points to the role of cinema in spreading and perpetuating harmful stereotypes, creating a culture which facilitates active discrimination.

In addition to narrative representations and the role of media in shaping public perceptions of deafness, the Deaf community also has a particularly fraught and complex relationship with film and cinematic sound technology. For many years film was equally
accessible to both the hearing and the deaf, and several deaf actors appeared in films. However, with the emergence of technologies such as the Vitaphone system (as seen in the scene from *Wonderstruck*), which was used to create the “earliest successfully mass-produced sound films” (Lastra 194), the Deaf community found themselves exiled from a medium they had embraced so fully (Schuchman 21, 43). By the fall of 1930, Hollywood was primarily producing talkies (Gomery 5). However, film, as the only medium capable of capturing all the moving complexities of Sign language, continued to hold a significant role in the Deaf community as a tool for both teaching and preserving Sign language. The moving picture was as significant a development for Sign language as the printing press was for the written word (Padden 252; Krentz 51-52). The Deaf community hence has its own, specific relationship to the cinematic medium.

In examining the history of representations of deafness in film, two separate cinematic traditions can be traced, from films produced by the Deaf community to Hollywood productions. Films, such as the series of shorts produced by the National Association of the Deaf in 1913, are used to preserve Sign language. Film is also a major source of entertainment, with films produced by deaf filmmakers for deaf audiences. These include the all-signing *Deafula* (Peter Wechsberg, 1970) and films from ASL Productions, such as *Legend of the Mountain Man* (Mark Wood, 2008). Like disabled characters, D/deaf characters appear frequently in mainstream films. The first talkie film to offer a truly deaf character was *Beau Bandit* (Lambert Hillyer, 1930), with the “deaf-mute” sidekick Colosso (hearing actor Mitchell Lewis), who does not utter a sound throughout the film. Colosso would serve as the model for deaf characters for the next half century, with movie audiences accustomed to the figure of the silent deaf person. The alternative to this “mute” stereotype were deaf characters who had perfect speech and the ability to lipread,
such as hearing actress Loretta Young’s portrayal of Mabel Bell in *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* (Irving Cummings, 1939) (Schuchman 44-45). *Johnny Belinda* (Jean Negulesco, 1948) was the first film to provide hearing audiences with the experience of watching a character transform from the stereotype of the deaf “dummy” to someone who just happens to be deaf. The film follows Belinda (hearing actress Jane Wyman, who received an Oscar for the role) as she acquires Sign language. The popularity and critical success of *Johnny Belinda* would lead to numerous other films featuring deaf characters; however, each of these characters would be portrayed by hearing actors, an issue that still occurs in Hollywood today. \(^4\)

Sound and language are essential elements of representations of deafness in film. Although the analysis of Norden’s text largely focuses on visual and narrative representations, in his reading of the seminal film, *Children of a Lesser God* (Randa Haines, 1986) Norden does draw attention to the role of sound and language. *Children of a Lesser God* follows the troubled love story of a hearing speech teacher, James (William Hurt) and a Deaf woman, Sarah (Marlee Matlin) who refuses to speak orally. *Children of a Lesser God* was the first Hollywood film since 1926 to cast a Deaf actor as a major character, and for her role in the film, Matlin would be the first and only Deaf actor to win an Oscar (Schuchman 82). Adapted from Mark Medoff’s Tony award winning play of the same name, the film version of *Children* shifts the focus of the plot from political fight for Deaf rights, to centre on Sarah and James’ love story. In the process, the film limits the scope of the conflict to that between Sarah and James, “virtually eliminat[ing] any

\(^4\) The controversy around the recent film, *The Silence* (John R. Leonetti, 2019), which follows a similar premise of *A Quiet Place*, is evocative of many of the current casting issues in Hollywood portrayals of deafness and disability. In an interview, Leonetti declared that the hearing actress, Kiernan Shipka, “learned to sign for the film, and now she’s flawless, like she’s been signing her entire life. She seems to have an almost innate sense of what it’s like being a deaf person.” A review of the film from *Deaf in the Media*, noted that Shipka’s signing ability was distinctly beginner level, with several signs incorrectly used throughout the film.
possibility that a movie audience will understand the larger cultural discrimination with which deaf persons contend” (Schuchman 84). Oral speech plays a significant role in critical readings of the film. As Norden writes, “To make the film more accessible to audiences unfamiliar with ASL, Haines and her collaborators employed a strategy that harkened back to *Johnny Belinda* almost forty years before: having a hearing person offer a running translation of the deaf person’s dialogue” (Norden 288). In addition to focusing on the voice of the hearing partner, the lighting and framing of Sarah’s signs often rendered them unintelligible to Deaf audience members (Schuchman 85). The problematic nature of this running interpretation is particularly pronounced during a scene where Sarah declares her selfhood in a signed speech that is simultaneously interpreted through the oral voice of James. As a cultural group that has been forced throughout history to speak orally or have others paternalistically speak for them, language is significant to representations of deafness (Bauman “Introduction” 5-6). While speech is important—the complications of the representations of deafness and hearing loss are not simply limited to the question of who speaks and whose voice is privileged. We must also ask whose aural perspectives do we hear? What does it mean for hearing audiences to listen from the constructed sonic perspective—the point of audition—of a deaf character?  

2.3 Subjective Point of Audition

The concept of point of audition\(^5\) (POA), the so called auditory equivalent of the point of view shot, can be traced back to the beginnings of cinematic sound. In 1930, RCA sound technician John L. Cass published the essay “The Illusion of Sound and Picture” in the *Journal \(^5\) Although “point of audition” is used by scholars, specific auditory perspectives are referred to by sound practitioners with a variety of terms including “sonic envelopes” and “point of view” (James; Sergi, *Dolby* 178).
of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers. In a passionate defamation of Hollywood’s practice at the time of recording with multiple microphones with the mixer eventually choosing the best to use, Cass declared “the resultant blend of sound…may not be said to represent any given point of audition, but is the sound which would be heard by a man with five or six very long ears, said ears extending in various directions” (325). Cass uses the concept of point of audition sound to refer to a specific auditory perspective, one he declares is disrupted by the blending of sound. Cass’ argument is evocative of the perceived significance of the body of the auditor in debates raging between Hollywood sound technicians shortly after Hollywood’s adoption of sound technology. The idea of mixing a blend of sound perspectives is so offensive to Cass, as it creates an impossible auditor.

Cass is one of several sound technicians Rick Altman refers to in the essay “Sound Space” in his book Sound Theory, Sound Practice as he situates point of audition sound through a historical lens. Altman examines the concept within the dramatic shifts in the relationship between image and sound scale in 1930s Hollywood. During the early days of synchronized sound, technicians sought to replicate the ‘natural’ close correlation between image and sound space, with the framing of visual distance also expressed acoustically through the placement of the microphone and the reverberation (50). If a character was framed in a long or extreme long shot, the sound would similarly be shaped by this distance from the camera. With the development of lighter microphones and the popularization of the boom, the desire to match sound scale to image scale was replaced by a need to create a continuous, level and intelligible sound recording, with the unbroken quality of close up sound throughout the scene (54, 57). While arguing that point of audition sound does not represent a return to sonic scale-matching, Altman notes that it does exist between the two sonic modes of acoustic fidelity (the matching of
Point of audition relates the audio-viewer to “the narrative not as external auditors, identified with the camera and its position” (60), a position that is traditionally created by matching acoustic and visual perspectives. Identified by its volume, reverb level and other characteristics that place the origins of the sound from a specific point of audition, POA “carries signs of its own fictional audition” and hence “always has the effect of luring the listener into the diegesis not at the point of enunciation of the sound, but at the point of its audition” (Altman 60). By locating the sound at the “point of its audition”, POA also denies the audio-viewer the feeling of participation in a dialogue and direct address from the characters, which is fostered in the sonic intelligibility model (60). Eschewing a strict codification with either the fidelity or intelligibility models, point of audition relates the audio-viewer to the narrative as an “internal auditor” (60). With point of audition sound, the audio-viewer is specifically placed into the role of an internal auditor, and the sound is shaped by this perspective. Altman highlights the close connection established between the audience and the character when point of audition sound is used: “We are asked not to hear, but to identify with someone who will hear for us…this technique locates us in a very specific place—the body of a character who hears for us. Point of audition thus constitutes the perfect interpellation” (60-61).

While the actual practice of point of audition sound as described by Altman was relatively rare in classical Hollywood, it was a popular source of theorization. In Sound Technology and the American Cinema, James Lastra notes that by “insisting on a physically real observer as the principle of representational coherence” (140), point of audition was connected to theories of the ‘invisible witness’ model of narration. This model was utilized by theorists such as Hugo Münsterberg, Vsevolod Pudovkin and André Bazin, who argued that an “invisible observer” served as a guiding force of editing and other elements of film form (Lastra 140). Like
point of view, point of audition “‘humanized’ machine perception…adjusting framing to the human body” working to “minimize the more disturbing tendencies of the new medium” by shaping them around the familiar human experience (Lastra 140-141). Point of audition sound also offered one of the few instances within the classical system, “where the spatial characteristics of sound might manifest themselves” (Lastra 142). Point of audition is hence inscribed into the history of sound technology, offering a source of theorization from the beginnings of synchronized sound.

Point of audition has historically emerged as a highly subjective auditory experience. Sound studies scholar Michel Chion offers two definitions of point of audition sound in his book Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen—spatial and subjective. Chion’s subjective point of audition is similar to that described by Altman and Lastra, and asks the question “which character, at a given moment of the story, is (apparently) hearing what I hear?” (Audio 90). Chion notes that due to the omnidirectional nature of sounds and listening, it can be difficult to infer subjective point of audition on sound alone. Visual cues, such as a close up of the character are often necessary, the visuals “in simultaneous association with hearing sound, identifies this sound as being heard by the character shown” (Chion, Audio 91). Chion identifies sounds that “don’t carry” such as phone conversations as an exception for the need of visual confirmation (Audio 91). To Chion’s exception one could also add subjective point of audition sounds that are constructed around the aural perspective of a character with tinnitus or deafness. A character with an acknowledged hearing loss serves a similar role as the telephone—providing a short hand for audiences to quickly grasp the origin of the quasi-silent point of audition sound.

However, point of audition representations of deafness and tinnitus are often used sparingly, and reserved for moments of traumatic hearing loss. In his article, “Narrative cinema’s
‘sounds of silence’: variations on the POA”, James Wierzbicki argues that filmmakers tend to rarely use point of audition representations of hearing loss when the deafness is an already established fact for the character. Wierzbicki gestures to examples such as *Children of a Lesser God*, where despite the focus on speech and sound in the film, point of audition sound is never used to provide audiences with Sarah’s aural perspective. Subjective point of audition is more often used to immerse audiences in the traumatic moment of hearing loss in films such as *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006) where the hearing of the protagonist Theo is damaged in the opening by a terrorist’s bomb, and left with a sharp ringing of tinnitus throughout the rest of the film (Wierzbicki 144-145). Theo’s ex-wife Julian (Julianne Moore) directly addresses Theo’s tinnitus in a scene shortly after the explosion, “You know that ringing in your ears? That eeee? That's the sound of the ear cells dying, like their swan song. Once it's gone you'll never hear that frequency again. Enjoy it while it lasts.” This frequent use of point of audition to convey trauma through tinnitus and hearing loss is so pronounced in film that it has been named by media scholar Mack Hagood as a “cliché” and “trope” (Hagood, “Tinnitus” 2).

One of the most celebrated examples of point of audition representations of hearing loss is the D-day opening sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) (Hagood, “Tinnitus” 3; Grajeda 171-172). As the soldiers plunge off the landing craft into the water under heavy fire, the camera follows, submerging beneath the waves. Underwater the sounds become muffled, a sharp contrast with the loud sounds of the battle as the camera dips in and out of the waves; the film visually and acoustically presenting the perspective of a soldier making their way to the beach. Later, in the sequence the aural perspective is directly tied to the subjectivity of a single character, Captain Miller (Tom Hanks), as he experiences momentary hearing loss after a loud explosion. The camera moves into a medium close up of Captain Miller, and the barraging
noise of the battle dies away. In an interview with sound studies scholar Gianluca Sergi, Gary Rydstrom, the re-recording mixer, sound designer and supervising sound editor of *Saving Private Ryan*, spoke of the role of auditory perspectives in the scene,

We would go into a point of view, into the Tom Hanks character, and the natural sounds of the battle would drop away. We were left with what I tried to make into a sort of listening to a sea-shell kind of roar, all the realistic sounds of the battle drifted away, dropped away, and it gave us another point of view on battle. So now we are seeing images without having the realistic sounds go with them and that becomes a different take on it. We can see a man carrying his arm but we are not hearing the reality of it, and we take that in very differently than we would earlier on (178-179).

While hearing the “sea-shell kind of roar” of Captain Miller’s aural perspective, the audience is simultaneously offered his visual perspective, as he takes in the death and terror of countless young men, impossibly overwhelmed and outgunned, trapped without cover on the beach. One young man wanders back and forth in shocked confusion, searching, before picking up his severed arm and staggering forward with it. Locked into Miller’s point of audition, the images of the man carrying his hand seem for a brief moment an impossible, horrific dream. In his analysis of the sequence, in an article on the rupture of hearing through POA, Tony Grajeda writes that “both sight and sound…immerse us in the action, which is nothing if not an unbearable stream of gruesome images and sonic terror” (172). Captain Miller’s temporary loss of hearing, “not only sutures the spectator-auditor to a specific figure on screen but also imposes on us the sonic effect of dreadfully losing one’s own hearing” (Grajeda 172). As this example from *Saving Private
Ryan vividly demonstrates, subjective point of audition can powerfully and painfully immerse the audience both sonically and psychologically into a film.

While Wierzbicki states that the majority of neurological point of audition representations focus on the rupture of hearing, he does acknowledge that there are outliers. Following Norden, Wierzbicki argues that when point of audition sound is used to represent the acoustic perspective of a D/deaf character it is often used to stress their isolation and otherness (145). A potent example of this can be found in the Oscar winning short film *The Silent Child* (Chris Overton 2017). After her mother’s repeated assurances to the new social worker that four year old Libby (deaf actress Maisie Sly) “follows what we’re saying really well” the audience is slipped into Libby’s deaf point of audition at the dinner table. While the rest of the family laughs and engages with each other, she is left alone and brutally isolated. The audience, like Libby, can only stare as the family makes sounds we cannot hear. Libby’s sonic isolation in her POA is similarly accentuated narratively, with her parents eventually deciding to focus on lip-reading over sign language, further isolating her at school. *The Silent Child* utilizes point of audition to convey Libby’s isolation to the audience, a tool in the film’s campaign for an increase in Sign language access and support in mainstream schools. Point of audition in the film, although used in an attempt to raise awareness and tug at the heartstrings of the audience, can also be considered as an example of the isolating nature of subjective deaf point of audition.

2.4 Spatial Point of Audition

Chion’s second model of point of audition sound is spatial point of audition sound. Chion maps his two conceptions of point of audition on the two models of point of view—the point of view of a specific character (subjective point of audition) and the POV/position of the camera, the place from which the spectator sees (spatial). Spatial point of audition asks, “from where do I
hear, from what point in the space represented on the screen or on the soundtrack?” (Chion, *Audio* 90). Unlike visuals, sound is omnidirectional and subject to sound reflection. Sound reflection means that most listeners at a live performance “even those standing at diametrically opposite points of the room, will hear roughly the same sound, with slight differences in reverberation” (91). These differences in reverberation are not enough to identify a specific point of audition. Because of these fundamental differences between sound and image, Chion argues that “it is not often possible to speak of a point of audition in the sense of a precise position in space, but rather of a place of audition, or even a zone of audition” (91).

Although Chion offers two separate models of point of audition sound, examples of POA in film can fluctuate between subjective and spatial forms of sound, or exist in both simultaneously. In his essay “Listening to Violence: Point-of-Audition Sound, Aural Interpellation, and the Rupture of Hearing”, Tony Grajeda examines a scene in *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999) which brings together both subjective and spatial point of audition. At the end of the film, a sniper suddenly shoots down US soldier Troy Barlow (Mark Wahlberg). As he falls to the ground, and the camera moves in on his pained expression, the sound slowly fades. The audience can clearly hear his strained panting breath, while the voices of his comrades are muted and distant. Grajeda writes, “the film’s audience is momentarily placed in the position of this particular character through sound…Yet we are sutured not merely as an ‘internal auditor’ in the text but moreover as an ‘interiorized’ one—listening from within a damaged body that sounds as if it’s taking its last breath” (173). This double point of audition of the ‘internal auditor’ and the ‘interiorized’ perspective, asks the audience to “simultaneously identify as and with a character” (Grajeda 174). The audience is placed both within and outside of the character’s body through sound.
A similar example can be found in *Baby Driver*, which likewise demonstrates the complicated nature of point of audition sound. During a debriefing sequence after the opening bank heist, Baby sits alone at the back of the room, listening to “Egyptian Reggae” by Jonathan Richman and The Modern Lovers on his iPod. Throughout the scene the audience is presented with the subjective, internal sounds of the music playing out of Baby’s headphones. Yet at the same time, the conversation between Griff, Doc and the rest of the gang can be clearly heard. The audience is simultaneously listening to Baby’s subjective point of audition, and the general spatial, ‘zone of audition’ of the microphone. This scene also demonstrates the difficult relationship between point of view and point of audition. When Griff removes Baby’s left earphone, the music drops out of the left side of the sound mix. Throughout the rest of the scene the sound of the music in Baby’s earbud continues to only emanate from the right side of the mix, even as the camera is reoriented to a variety of perspectives throughout the scene. When the camera’s POV cuts to a variety of shots of Baby from the front, there is a disconnect between the POV and POA, as the music continues to play from the right side of the mix, although the earbud now appears screen left.

2.5 Sound and Silence

In his chapter “The Audiovisual Scene,” in addition to outlining his models of point of audition, Chion also expounds upon the differences between sound and image. Unlike image, sound is not limited to the frame: “There is no auditory container for film sounds, nothing analogous to the visual container of the images that is the frame” (68). Unlike visual disability representations point of audition is not framed or contained by the screen. Point of audition sound engulfs and immerses the audio-viewer. It is, as Altman explicates, a moment that locates the audio-viewer into the body of another, “constitute[ing] the perfect interpellation” (60-61).
Point of audition arguably exists more like a mimetic experience than a simple representation of disability. While the experience of briefly listening through Libby’s ears in *The Silent Child* obviously does not give a hearing viewer a sudden and full understanding of what it is like to be a young deaf girl, the use of point of audition creates a more embodied relationship between the deaf character and the viewer then possible with visuals alone. Point of audition, as noted by Altman and Lastra, foregrounds the relationship between the body of the human perceiver (real or imagined) and the sound technology (Altman 49; Lastra 140). Unlike many other instances of disability in film, which are often framed through the perspective of an able bodied viewer (Norden 1), point of audition sound places the viewer directly (although often very briefly) into the bodily perspective of the deaf character.

In addition to melding auditory experiences, these moments of ‘silence’ also make the audio-viewer aware of their own faculties of hearing. In *Film, A Sound Art*, Chion states, “every instance of silence is disarming since it seems to expose our faculty of hearing; it’s as if a giant ear were turned toward us ready to pick up the tiniest sounds we make. We are no longer just listening to the film; we are being listened to by it” (148). The ‘silence’ of deaf POA makes us aware of our own hearing, while creating a close relationship between the viewer and the film. Yet, in the mainstream popular film texts examined in this thesis, these are aural representations crafted by hearing directors for hearing audiences. As detailed by Devin Burke in his thesis on cinematic representations of Beethoven, "all sounds in cinema that represent deafness are fantasies of deafness" (94). And these fantasies of deafness are specifically crafted for hearing audiences. While most readings of disability have largely focused on visual and narrative representations, point of audition offers a complex and immersive sounding of difference.
2.6 Technology, Deafness and Point of Audition

Point of audition vividly brings together deafness and sound technology. As examined earlier in this chapter, point of audition was significant to early debates around sound space, and the relationship between sound recording/emission. While arguments have been made and disproven about the levels of technological development necessary for point of audition sound to be used to represent tinnitus (Walker 139; Hagood, “Tinnitus” 3), there is still an important connection that can be drawn between POA and sound technology. In Beyond Dolby (Stereo): Cinema in the Digital Sound Age, Mark Kerins writes on the relationship between surround sound and point of audition sound. The POV and POA shot offer the opportunity for “interesting” and inventive uses of sound, while also pushing “the digital surround style to its extreme, placing the audience not just in on the onscreen world but at a single and singular location in it” (Kerins 181). Scenes with point of audition sound thus stand as moments of intense immersion and unique aural soundscapes that allow for inventive mixing and editing of sound. The significant technological element of point of audition sound is crucial to its representations of deafness.

Throughout their work, Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne have repeatedly highlighted the connection between the Deaf community and sound technology. In The Audible Past, Sterne examines the social and cultural conditions that led to the development of sound reproduction. One of the first sound technologies he examines is the telephone, a key piece of sound and communications technology. The telephone was invented by Alexander Graham Bell, utilizing technology developed for his phonautograph, a device designed to teach the deaf to speak by visualizing sounds (Sterne, Audible 38-39). Married to his former student, Mabel who was
herself deaf, Bell was a vocal advocate for the oralist movement, and staunch supporter of eugenically controlling the deaf population (Sterne, *Audible* 39; Sacks 27). Mills has similarly traced the connections between the deaf population and the development of sound technology, examining the relationship between the telephone and ideas of visual speech. Mills has also undergone extensive research on the development and politics of the cochlear implant, an electroacoustic device that offers a new medium for investigations of sound, and the relationship between the body and technology, that is also a source of intense controversy in the Deaf community (Mills, “Cochlear” 1-2; Mills, “Signals” 321). Mills’ research on the cochlear implant will be examined in greater detail in my analysis in Chapter four of *A Quiet Place*, which frequently offers point of audition representations of a malfunctioning cochlear implant.

Technology has crucially shaped societal understandings of ability throughout history. Sound technology codified ideas of hearing, and instrumentally established the conceptualization of the ‘normal’ modern hearing subject. Throughout his chapter on ‘hearing’ in *keywords on sound*, Sterne elucidates the connection between technology and ideas of hearing, noting that “everything that is known about hearing in its natural state is a result of the interactions between ears and sound technologies” (“Hearing” 69). Although James Lastra does not follow Sterne in drawing out the connections between technology and deafness, his reading of the development of sound technology similarly notes the role of sonic technology in shaping understandings of sensory ability: “The very devices that initially had been modelled on human perceptual faculties had themselves come to embody a new paradigm of ideal and decidedly inhuman sensory acuity”

---

6 Oralism promoted lipreading and speech over sign, as a supposed means of integrating the deaf into hearing society.
(Lastra 48). From both a disability media studies and sound studies lens, it is clear that sound technology has shaped ideas of human perception. Point of audition sound, as a “fantasy of deafness” (Burke 94) continues this legacy of sonic technology, by critically shaping societal understandings of what ‘deafness’ and ‘hearing’ sounds like.

As a sonic mode deeply embedded in the history of cinematic sound, frequently utilized to represent the aural perspective of deafness, hearing loss or tinnitus, point of audition sound can be used to bring together sound and Deaf studies, serving as a crucial meeting point for these areas of study. This is significant as despite the prominence of deafness in sound history, and the fascination with the concept of silence in sound studies (Gautier), there still persists a “creeping normalism” to sound studies, “an epistemological and political bias towards an idealized, normal, nondisabled hearing subject” (Sterne, “Hearing” 73). This bias manifests itself in a variety of ways, from assuming levels of auditory access, to the common usage of phrases such as “turned a deaf ear to” in sound studies texts, which perpetuate negative connotations around deafness (Sterne, “Hearing” 74; Friedner and Helmreich 74). Such a line can be found in Altman’s “Sound Space” essay which outlines his concept of point of audition sound, where he asks, “Why did early technicians’ calls for scale-matching fall, as it were, on deaf ears?” (58). In Disability Film and Literature, Nicole Markotić examines the relationship between the disabled body and language use, writing “widespread metaphorical uses, in the media and the literature, of bodily depravity and unfitness perpetuate not only images of disability…as fitting examples for moral correction, but also erase the actual physical body from representational visibility” (8-9). The use of metaphorical language in sound studies hence serves to ostracize the Deaf community from discussions of sound, despite the community’s long, complex and essential role in the development of sound technology. In his essay “Hearing” Jonathan Sterne poses a vital
question: “What would sound studies become if we began without the automatic assumptions that we have direct, full access to our own hearing, or through our hearing, direct access to the sonic world, or through the sonic world, intersubjectivity with each other?” He continues, stating such a project would begin “with hearing the hearing of others” (74). Point of audition is the opportunity to interrogate how the audio-viewer in cinema ‘hears’ the constructed hearing of other, and all the complexities inherent in this act of hearing.

As a sonic mode that can be read at the intersection of technology, representation and production, point of audition is an immersive and embodied depiction of deafness that can be interpreted through Sterne and Mills’ concept of “dismediation”. Included as an afterword in Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick’s 2017 edited collection Disability Media Studies, dismediation continues the text’s trajectory, as it brings together disability and media studies. As detailed in the introduction to the collection, Ellcessor, Kirkpatrick and Mack Hagood hope that creating a dialogue between disability and media studies will help disability scholars “move beyond textual analysis of media representations to consider more fully the role of media within economic and ideological circuits of production and reception” (4), while helping media scholars recognize “dis/ability as central to the study of media” (4). In the process, both fields can invigorate each other, and build up a disability media studies. Mills and Sterne’s dismediation “understands disability and media as mutually constitutive, while urging the ongoing interrogation and revision of media systems” (365). Dismediation centers disability in media, “refus[ing] universal modes of media and communication…tak[ing] some measure of impairment to be a given, rather than an incontrovertible obstacle or revolution” (366). Dismediation calls for rethinking media theories, detailing the centrality of disability to media, bringing together disability and media studies texts, and documenting the centrality of media to
disability—including the ways in which media (and media technology) produces disabilities (368-372).

As a complex intersection between disability representation, sonic technology, and the audio-viewer, point of audition is a rich sounding space to apply the tenets of dismediation. This thesis aims to follow the growing trend to move beyond simply addressing positive and negative media representations of deafness, to also acknowledge the broader production, consumption, interpretation and cultural impact of cinema (Ellcessor et al, 7). Point of audition crucially invokes and involves the audio-viewer into the sonic experience of ‘deafness’, in the process demonstrating the way in which hearing directors shape societal perceptions of deafness. With the origins of the term in the development of synchronized sound, point of audition also powerfully evokes cinematic sound technology. A vivid collision of technology, sound and deaf representation, point of audition prompts the crucial question—what does it mean to hear the hearing of others?
Chapter 3: “Hum in the Drum”: Tinnitus, iPods and Point of Audition in

*Baby Driver* (2017)

*Baby Driver* is a film that revels in its musicality. The origin of the film is grounded in music, with Edgar Wright ascribing his inspiration for a “car-chase film powered by music” to “Bellbottoms” by the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion (Hogan). Over the years Wright would ‘cannibalize’ the idea of *Baby Driver* for a Mint Royale music video, which follows a getaway driver dancing in and around his car as he awaits the return of his fellow criminals (Hogan).

Music would also be central to the pitch of the film, with Wright providing studios with “*Baby Driver* mixes” of songs that blended music and sound effects; which Wright would later use when storyboarding sequences (Dolby Institute, “Edgar”; Minsker). The opening scene of *Baby Driver* draws together these early influences and renditions, while setting the musical tone of the film. The pulsing rhythm of “Bellbottoms” sets the pace for the visuals—the editing and movements of the characters carefully synced to the song. Waiting for the return of his crew, the titular character, Baby (Ansel Elgort), dances in his seat to the song, enthusiastically lip-syncing along with perfect precision. The ensuing car chase across the streets of Atlanta is similarly synced to “Bellbottoms”, each sudden turn vibrantly punctuated by the song; the visuals and the music coming together in perfect harmony. The emphasis on music established in the opening sequence is continued throughout the rest of the film, and permeates every element of *Baby Driver*; from the casting of musicians as minor characters, to the oft told origin story, to the

---

7 *Baby Driver* features numerous musicians in minor roles, including Michael “Flea” Peter Balzary (the bassist from Red Hot Chili Peppers) as Eddie No Nose, and Sky Ferreira as Baby’s Mom. Composer and actor Paul Williams plays “The Butcher” a gun dealer. Atlanta based rappers Big Boi and Killer Mike appear in the background of the restaurant scene (Killer Track).
marketing campaigns and taglines, to an enthusiastic featured review in the trailer, declaring that the film “uses music the way the rest of us use air” (Minsker; “TeKillTah” trailer).

While pre-existing music is central to the origins and construction of Baby Driver, it is instructive to examine the tools and sonic perspectives Baby Driver utilizes to justify its ever-present soundtrack. Before the image of the film fills the screen, or “Bellbottoms” blasts across the soundtrack, there is noise. As the production logos make their way across the screen, sounds slowly and vividly situate the audio-viewer into the space of downtown Atlanta, with the noise of cars, helicopters and most strikingly, the sharp ringing of tinnitus. After the image of a shiny red car rolling to a stop, the next shot is a close up of a classic iPod. The clicks of the iPod scroll wheel can be heard, as the cued up song “Bellbottoms” is selected. With the opening bars of the song, the audio-viewer is finally introduced to Baby, his Apple branded earbuds—EarPods—displayed prominently in both ears. While music is essential to the construction of the film, Baby Driver is not just about music. iPods and tinnitus are equally central to the film, driving and justifying Baby’s musical obsession.

During a scene early in the film, the constant presence of Baby’s headphones and iPod is explained by the criminal ringleader Doc (Kevin Spacey), “He’s got tinnitus…He had an accident as a kid. He still got a hum in the drum. Plays music to drown it out.” In this scene, tinnitus is framed in distinctly musical terms, with the almost poetic turn of phrase, “hum in the drum.” While providing the justification for Baby’s constant playing of music, tinnitus is also presented as another musical element of the film. The musical framing of tinnitus in the narrative is mirrored by the sound editing, with the various acoustic renderings of tinnitus throughout the film carefully mixed to correspond to the pitch of the surrounding music (Di Placido). Throughout the entire conversation on tinnitus Baby’s headphones are prominent, and the sound
of “Kashmere” by the Kashmere Stage Band, played on Baby’s iPod, underpins the sequence. This scene stresses the connection between tinnitus, iPods and the use of music in the film, bringing the essential relationship between the three to the foreground. Together iPods and tinnitus provide the necessary grounding for Wright to craft his musical car chase, justifying the film’s wall to wall soundtrack of eclectic tunes. The scene also demonstrates the relationality between iPods/headphones, tinnitus and point of audition sound. As internal sounds, both tinnitus and iPods are conveyed to the audio-viewer through point of audition sound. Baby Driver, in moving between the music from Baby’s iPods and the musical “hum” of Baby’s tinnitus, vividly and mimetically shapes the experience of the film’s music. While the tagline for Baby Driver declares “all you need is one killer track”, the manner in which this “killer track” is accessed—the sound technology and personal acoustic perspective of that experience—are equally significant. As a film that extensively showcases Apple’s iPod, both visually and acoustically, Baby Driver can be read through Michael Bull’s analysis of iPod culture—which details the manner in which modern society is defined by a device that promises acoustic control and immersion. Mixed in Dolby Atmos, Baby Driver also provides the opportunity to examine the concepts of control and immersion, equally central to the development of digital surround sound technology, which continually strives to create more intense, engrossing experiences through sound. Baby Driver presents the opportunity to engage with the ideologies and obsessions of control and immersion so intrinsic to sound technology, and the relationship between technology, tinnitus and the listening subject in the age of the iPod and Dolby Atmos.

3.1 iPod Culture

With its visual and acoustic emphasis on Apple products, Baby Driver highlights the connection between the modern listening subject and the iPod. Scholars and media researchers
have long noted the crucial role of the iPod in shaping modern culture. The iPod symbolizes the “buzzing overlap between technology and culture” (Geffen), the device standing as “the first icon of the twenty-first century, representing a sublime marriage between mobility, aesthetics and functionality” (Bull 1). It is not merely a musical player—it is a commercial product that defined a generation (Levy 4). As a product of this “iPod generation,” the player holds a significant role in Baby’s formative childhood memories. The appearance of the bulky first generation iPod—which was released in November 2001 and discontinued July 2002—can be used to date Baby’s flashback sequences (Costello; Pappu). Baby’s iPods, and the music they contain, serve as important forms of emotional expression for Baby. As he explains to his love interest, Debora, “Oh I’ve got different iPods for different days and different moods.” From the opening scene, the iPod and headphones are a constant presence, the iconic white wires forming a direct, commercialized link between the iPod and Baby’s ears. While the iPod is a mass produced and widely used product, with over 300 million iPods sold in the first ten years of production (Crook), Baby is the only character significantly associated with the device within the film. Although other characters wear headphones—such as Debora’s (Lily James) purple headphones, and Doc’s nephew’s black earbuds—Baby is specifically characterized by the white wires of his Apple headphones, the EarPods. The iPods in Baby Driver embody the product’s paradoxical position of individuality and consumerism, with the use of the iPod standing as “both an inclusive act – the listener communes with the products of the culture industry – and an act of auditory separation” (Bull 8). The iPod is not merely a piece of technology—it is a device that defines Baby. It is embedded with deep sentimentality, Baby’s first iPod given to him by his now dead mother. The iPod and Apple headphones crucially shape and transform Baby’s
experience of the world. His ever present sound technology, in turn, pivotally structures the sound design of the film.

Baby’s constant use of the iPod and headphones—and Wright’s decision to make this the primary source of the film’s music—means that the audio-viewer finds their auditory perspective consistently aligned with Baby’s for much of the film. In his definition of point of audition sound Chion notes the subservience of the sonic to the visual. He writes that “it is the visual representation of a character in closeup, that, in simultaneous association with the hearing of the sound, identifies this sound as being heard by the character shown” (Audio 91). Headphones, as “privatized sound bubbles” (Bull 5) arguably offer one of the most succinct visual symbols of point of audition sound. The presence of headphones provides a visual shorthand that is heightened when the audience has the opportunity to also hear the selection of the song, or briefly exit the acoustic ‘bubble’ of the headphones. This fundamental relationship between point of audition sound and headphones can be seen/heard in other recent films, such as Guardians of the Galaxy (James Gunn, 2014), which similarly highlights portable sound technology (here a Sony Walkman) in scenes that utilize point of audition sound to varying degrees. Guardians also foregrounds the technology and music as an essential part of the protagonist’s identity, both Peter Quill and Baby identifying the mobile player with nostalgia and loss, having received their first device from their now deceased mothers. The relationship between point of audition sound and the iPod in media representations of the device can be traced back to the first iPod ad. Released in 2001, the ad features a man loading up his new iPod and dancing energetically around his apartment, white headphones connecting his ears to the device. Like the opening of Baby Driver, the ad shows the man selecting and playing a song, the corresponding audio filling the soundtrack. In this moment the audience ostensibly listens along with the new iPod owner,
this early media representation of the iPod utilizing point of audition sound to sell the device.

With the source of music clearly located in the iPod and headphones throughout *Baby Driver*, the use of point of audition in the film cannot be separated from the ideologies and implications of these technologies.

The essential relationship between the iPod, control and immersion is a powerful through line that runs throughout Michael Bull’s book length study of iPod culture, *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience*. Compiled through extensive fieldwork and interviews with iPod users (4), Bull’s text examines the role of the iPod, a “twentieth-first-century icon and acoustic metaphor” (3), the latest in the line of cultural icons following the Gothic cathedral and the Citroën DS automobile (2). The iPod emerges as the ultimate symbol of auditory freedom and control, a product of Western society’s continual push for greater mobility and privatisation (2). The iPod is a widely used and largely accessible piece of technology, meaning that for the “first time in history the majority of citizens in Western culture possess the technology to create their own private mobile auditory world wherever they go” (4). This private auditory world enables users to “control and manage [their] experience of the urban environment” (4), the iPod providing the opportunity to filter and select which sounds are heard or unheard, the “self claim[ing] a mobile and auditory territory for itself through a specific form of ‘sensory gating’, permitting it to screen out unwanted sounds, producing its own ‘soundscape’” (Bull 7). The personal ‘soundscape’ of the iPod and the device itself are endowed with the desires and beliefs of the culture in which it emerged. As Jonathan Sterne notes in his text on the history of sound reproduction, technology is a cultural product: “Technologies are repeatable social, cultural, and material processes crystallized into mechanisms…They embody in physical form particular dispositions and tendencies” (Sterne, *Audible* 8). Some scholars have identified the isolating
technology of the iPod with Capitalist culture’s design to isolate and break the bonds between urban citizens (Bull 7). The promise of control and personal soundscapes of iPod culture also reflects the dream of control, privacy and intimacy in an increasingly loud, packed and uncontrollable urban environment.

The cultural ideologies embodied in the iPod significantly shape the sound design and aural experience of Baby Driver. By constantly mediating point of audition sound through Baby’s iPod and headphones, the film creates highly immersive and intimate sonic soundscapes; the interiority of point of audition sound amplified through the tenets of iPod culture. As Bull notes, headphones create “pleasurable and privatized sound bubbles” (5), that transform the outer world into a space that is “intimate, known and possessed” (13). In Baby Driver, the audio-viewer not only perceives the exterior world through Baby’s ears, but is also made privy to the private, “intimate” interior soundscapes that he has created for himself. Without point of audition sound it could be difficult to connect with a character engaging in isolating sound technologies (Bull 7). The intimacy of the interiority of the iPod listening experience is reflected and intensified in the musical relationships between characters. During their first outing together, the white wires of Baby’s headphones physically connect him to Debora as they share the private listening experience (Bull 11). The shared music leads the characters to offer personal information, Baby telling Debora about his tinnitus and the death of his mother, and Debora speaking about her own dead mother. A similar moment of musical bonding occurs between Baby and the criminal Buddy (Jon Hamm), the two sharing Baby’s EarPods and rocking their heads in unison to “Brighton Rock” by Queen. With both Debora and Buddy, the shared interest in music and the physical connection of the headphones produce powerful scenes in which characters exist for a brief time on the same sonic and symbolic wavelength.
Beyond representations of acoustic intimacy, *Baby Driver* also engages with ideas of control and immersion at the heart of sound technologies. Just as the iPod has helped define Baby as an individual, it has also long symbolized sonic control for him. During the flashback sequence that sees Baby receiving his first iPod, young Baby is shown frequently using his iPod to drown out the sounds of his parents violently fighting. iPod culture is a culture of managing and filtering sounds, and this is, as Bull notes, a powerfully self-protective strategy, “Filtering is a heightening strategy of cognitive control and a defensive strategy. The iPod acts as a ‘framing’ device, enabling a distinctive mode of auditory embodiment – governing the way in which iPod users engage and orientate themselves to the world and to themselves” (Bull 22). As an adult, Baby continues to use his iPod and headphones as a means of controlling the way he engages with the world and himself. The iPod, along with his ever present sunglasses, provide a significant barrier, signifying Baby’s attempts to keep himself apart from the life of crime he has fallen into (Hagood, *Hush* 220). Forced to drive for criminal ringleader Doc, Baby’s iPods provide one of the few means available for him to maintain control of his situation, crafting his own soundscapes. The ever present iPod (and sunglasses) also crucially shapes the other characters’ perceptions of Baby. Griff (Jon Bernthal), ripping the headphones out of Baby’s ears and smacking the sunglasses off his face, declares that “[Baby] thinks he’s better than us.” Finally, and most crucially, the iPod allows Baby to seize control of his own personal soundscape, providing the sounds to block out Baby’s even persistent “hum in the drum.” The iPod hence provides the opportunity to seize control of the self. From his attempts to use the first generation iPod to block out the sounds of his parents fighting, the iPod has served as a symbol of auditory control for Baby, a means of drowning out sounds—both internal and external.
With its emphasis on iPods and headphones, *Baby Driver* frequently offers scenes that fulfill the ultimate dream of iPod culture—where a user’s music physically controls and shapes the polyrhythmic urban space (Bull 29). One such scene occurs early in the film, as Baby dances his way through the streets of downtown Atlanta on a coffee run. As Baby moves to his selected rhythm, the sound of “Harlem Shuffle” by Bob & Earl, the sounds of the city—such as the honking of horns, shouts, and the beeps of the ATM—perfectly accentuate his music. Sound effects that might otherwise be dismissed as noise become key to Baby’s sonic harmonies. As well as controlling the sounds of the city, Baby’s music physically imprints itself onto the landscape. The lyrics of the song can be seen in the diegesis, scrawled in graffiti, taped up on lampposts and carved into trees. In this scene, Baby’s sonic control manifests itself physically, empowering Baby and transforming the noise of urban intrusions (Bull 32). In the “Harlem Shuffle” sequence, the controlled sonic bubble of the iPod reshares and restructures the very sound of the urban environment.

The emphasis on control in iPod culture can also be read in the sound technology involved in the production of the film. The history of the development of cinematic sound technology has long been a hunt for greater control and immersion. In his essay, “Technology and Aesthetics of Film Sound,” John Belton notes that “the evolution of sound technology and, again, that of studio recording, editing, and mixing practices illustrate...the quest for a sound track that captures an idealized reality, a world carefully filtered to eliminate sounds that fall outside of understanding or significance” (66). The ultimate culmination of this technological development would be a constructed soundscape where every sound signifies (Belton 66). The emphasis on filtering sounds, and creating an experience of specifically chosen sounds, draws intense parallels to the iPod and its “filtering culture” (Bull 22). Although Belton’s essay was
published over thirty years ago, it encapsulates the “quest” that still motivates current sound technology developments, particularly those from Dolby. Like Apple’s iPod, the sound systems introduced by Dolby have had a crucial effect on sonic experiences and society. Film and sound scholar Gianluca Sergi has argued that “the profound changes that have taken place in mainstream cinema since the arrival of Dolby technologies in the early 1970s are so pervasive as to make it possible to suggest that they ushered in a new ‘era’ of cinema” (*Dolby 3*). Just as Bull identifies the iPod as the cultural icon of modern society, Dolby defines the sounds of modern cinema.

### 3.2 Listening to Dolby Atmos

*Baby Driver* was mixed in Dolby Atmos, Dolby’s latest innovation, which promises to deliver “a completely new listening experience” (Sergi, “Knocking” 111). Dolby Atmos was first launched with Disney/Pixar’s *Brave* in 2012, and was described by *Brave* director Mark Andrews as “more 3D than 3D visuals because it puts you in the environment and it shoves you into that screen” (“The Sound of Brave”). A considerable update to the previous Dolby digital surround sound systems, Atmos “can address individually up to 64 speakers (a 62.2 configuration to be exact), each individually driven and offering full frequency range” (Sergi, “Knocking” 111). One of the most considerable developments with Atmos was the addition of “two overhead speaker arrays” allowing filmmakers to place sounds—“audio objects”—above the audience (Sergi, “Knocking” 111). With Atmos, Dolby promises to free sounds from specific channels, with the “movie’s sounds flow[ing] all around you to completely immerse you in the

---

8 “Dolby Atmos expands the 5.1 and 7.1 sound array with a native 9.1 layout fed to up to sixty four loudspeakers” (Wright 231)
action, heightening the impact of the story and creating a powerfully moving cinema experience” (Dolby, “Atmos”). Atmos represents the culmination of the “quest for a sound track that captures an idealized reality” (Belton 66), arguably going beyond simply representing an idealized reality, to creating a fully controlled, immersive, and simulated experience (Sergi, “Knocking” 113).

In a podcast interview with the Dolby Institute, director Edgar Wright and Julian Slater, the supervising sound editor, re-recording mixer and sound designer of Baby Driver, discuss the “Harlem Shuffle” sequence and the complex layering of offscreen noises and music throughout the scene. Slater, who is a long running collaborator with Wright, declares “I feel like Dolby Atmos was invented for that ‘Harlem Shuffle’ scene…as Baby’s walking…things are happening off screen that you don’t necessarily see…stuff you obviously can’t do with six speakers, but you can do with a whole array of speakers.” As Slater’s comment suggests, Baby Driver is a film that fully utilizes the channels of its sound mix. This use of Atmos creates a vivid experience that works to place the audio-viewer directly into Baby’s position. The intensified immersion of the film is amplified through the constant on-screen emphasis of headphones, which carry similar connotations of sonic envelopment and control. As Slater notes in an interview with The Hollywood Reporter, the sound mix of Baby Driver features an unusual emphasis on Baby’s particular sonic perspective:

We played the music much more in the surrounds than is traditional, so every time Baby listens to music on his earbuds, it engulfs you more than a traditional mix would do. If he takes one of his earbuds out to speak to someone, if he pulls

---

9 After first collaborating on Shaun of the Dead (2004), Wright and Slater have worked together on four subsequent films, Hot Fuzz (2007), Scott Pilgrim vs. the World (2010), The World's End (2013) and Baby Driver (2017).
his right earbud out, we then play the music on the left hand side of the cinema, sometimes throughout the entire scene, which again is not a conventional thing. But that’s how Baby’s hearing it. (The Hollywood Reporter)

Much of the immersion of the digital surround and point of audition sound is thus directly tied to Baby’s headphones. By dropping music out of the side of the theatre that corresponds to the removed earbud, the viewer is sharply reminded that the film is being heard through Baby’s perspective. It also provides a degree of familiarity to the sound mix, as viewers are likely aware of the auditory sensation of removing a single earbud. The relationship between Baby and the viewer’s hearing is only heightened when the film is experienced through headphones.

3.3 Atmos and EarPods

If accessed through headphones, Baby Driver engages audiences in a sonic experience that closely equates and aligns the audio-viewer’s hearing with Baby’s. While the DVD release of Baby Driver only offers 5.1 digital surround, the film was initially mixed and dubbed in Dolby Atmos, with the Atmos mix included on the 4K Blu-ray release (Hollywood Reporter, Archer). Yet, without an extensive and costly home theatre set up, the complexities of the sound mix may only be accessible to some viewers through headphones. In fact Dolby has recently released a luxury pair of headphones that are designed to be worn in the home and used while

10 “Atmos features the Dolby Rendering and Mastering Unit (RMU), a fully automated component of its audio authoring system. After an Atmos mix is created, the RMU algorithm automatically generates 5.1 and 7.1 room configurations based on a theatre’s loudspeaker layout. The renderer also automates the placement of audio objects in non-Atmos environments by intuítng how each sound element should be reproduced in theatres of various sizes and layouts” (Wright 232).

11 For this thesis, the North American DVD of Baby Driver, with 5.1. Dolby digital surround sound was used. The sound of the film was accessed in three different ways: from the speakers of a 2012 MacBook Pro, Apple EarPods (like those Baby uses in the film) and Bose QuietComfort 35 headphones. The Bose headphones are notably marketed with messages of immersion that mirror the promotional material of Dolby Atmos, with the slogan “However you feel really feel” and the Bose motto, “Get closer” (Bose).
watching media on a television, the company stating, “when you play entertainment created in Dolby Atmos, you’ll automatically get the best sound for it over a Bluetooth® connection.” This release of Dolby Dimension headphones could potentially signal an increased rise in the use of headphones as home theatre entertainment devices.12 But even without a costly Dolby device, listening to Baby Driver through headphones arguably enhances the viewing experience. The sudden drop of music on the right-hand side to match diegetic action, which Julian Slater notes in the above quotation, is particularly prominent when the sound of the film is contained to the head space of the viewer. With headphones, the viewer finds their sonic experience directly correlates with Baby’s, while seeing in Baby’s EarPods a reflection of their own sound technology.

Although the iPod is emphasized throughout the film, one scene offers a particularly visceral experience of this acoustic technology. After learning that Baby has tinnitus, Bats (Jamie Foxx) sharply taps on Baby’s right headphone. With this blow, the harsh ringing of tinnitus fills the viewer/Baby’s ear. In this moment, Baby’s painful “hum in the drum,” becomes the audio-viewer’s own sonic reality, and they experience the ring of tinnitus in a highly embodied manner. The close relationship between Baby and audience’s headphones creates a powerfully immersive point of audition experience, one that later plays an important role in the film’s representation of

12 One of the selling points of the Dolby Dimension headphones is “Dolby Lifemix.” The press sheet for Dimension describes Lifemix as “A proprietary new technology central to the Dolby Dimension experience. It allows consumers to control how much they hear of their surroundings — from a perfect blend of their entertainment and life around them (Transparency) to shutting out the world (Active Noise Cancellation). Consumers can experience shows, movies, and music while hearing as much or as little from their surroundings as they want, all in perfect balance and clarity.” Dolby Dimension headphones are thus the physical embodiment of filtering culture, allowing users to precisely control the degree of outside sounds/noise they wish to hear.
tinnitus and hearing loss. This short sequence also reaffirms the connection between the iPod, tinnitus and point of audition sound.

3.4 Point of Audition and the Hum in the Drum

With Baby’s tinnitus, Baby Driver follows a cinematic tradition of utilizing point of audition sound to convey auditory trauma. Tinnitus is broadly defined as “the experience of sounds in the head or ears that have no external physical source” (Hagood, Hush 33). Tinnitus manifests in a variety of ways, but often resembles a hissing or ringing sound that can cause brutal acoustic agony (Sacks 64). The causes of tinnitus are widely varied, including loud noise, physical damage, psychological factors, and infections (Walker 134). Tinnitus is the most common auditory disorder, affecting approximately forty million people in the United States (Hagood, Hush 33). A condition difficult to understand and treat, there is currently no cure for tinnitus (Walker 134; Eggermont et al. vii). Because of its interiority, point of audition sound is a particularly effective means of conveying a character’s tinnitus to the audience. It also presents an unprecedented opportunity to expose “normal” hearing audience members to the ringing acoustic reality of those with tinnitus. This is particularly significant as the internal nature of tinnitus means that it is a condition whose “reality is always in doubt because no one else can hear it” (Hagood, Hush 42). The essential relationship between point of audition sound and tinnitus has often been utilized in films, and has been frequently studied in recent years (Hagood, “Tinnitus” 2; Grajeda 171; Wierzbicki 144; Walker 136). Media scholar Mack Hagood argues that “the sound of tinnitus as a representation of acoustic trauma has become commonplace—arguably to the point of cliché” (Tinnitus 2). While the “tinnitus trope” has been used in films to convey hearing loss due to medication or illness, Hagood asserts that the most common use is to represent “the aural and psychological effects of violence-induced acoustic trauma” (Tinnitus 3).
One of the most recognized examples of point of audition tinnitus is found in the opening D-Day sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg 1998), the violent loss of hearing suturing the viewer to Private Miller’s aural perspective (Hagood, “Tinnitus” 3; Grajeda 171-172). Beyond the battlefield, the violence of hearing loss is also prominently located in an unstable dystopian future in Cuarón’s *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón 2006). These two examples reflect the trend of utilizing point of audition sound to present the psychological and physical effects of violence, centred around the brutality of hearing loss.

As a film that offers both tinnitus and significant hearing loss through point of audition sound, *Baby Driver* can be read alongside these examples of cinematic sonic violence. Yet, *Baby Driver*, through its emphasis on sound technology and iPod culture, also significantly deviates in its representation of tinnitus. Baby’s tinnitus, like that of Theo’s in *Children of Men*, is used throughout the film to provide an aural representation of Baby’s psychological state. Julian Slater created an acoustic representation of tinnitus that changes throughout the film: “The more stressed Baby is, the louder the tinnitus is, as it can be in real life” (*Hollywood Reporter*). However, *Baby Driver* significantly connects Baby’s psychological state with the devices he is using, framing Baby’s tinnitus and eventual hearing loss not as simply a violent loss of hearing, but as a loss of acoustic control. This representational shift is located in the culture surrounding the technological tools Baby uses to access his music, further amplified through the similarly codified Dolby Atmos system. *Baby Driver* dramatizes the fear of losing acoustic control, a feeling, Bull notes, that is highly intrinsic to iPod culture, “Users commonly describe themselves as bereft without the mediated auditory presence of their iPod. Experience unadorned by the immersion of experience through the intimate sound world of the iPod is often described with apprehension” (Bull 124). *Baby Driver* takes these small moments of loss to the extreme, and in
doing so, presents the trauma of Baby’s tinnitus through the recognizable features of iPod culture, and the ideology of control so fundamental to sonic technology. This framing also exposes the false utopic promises of the iPod, which can only provide a facsimile of control, limited by the fragility of the device and its battery life. By connecting and framing Baby’s tinnitus through the iPod, *Baby Driver* demonstrates the impossibility of true sonic control.

### 3.5 The iPod and Control

Throughout *Baby Driver*, the trauma of Baby’s tinnitus is symbolized by the destruction of iPods. While the ring of Baby’s tinnitus is first heard during the opening credits, the cause of his acoustic trauma is not revealed until after the first successful robbery, when the audio-viewer is offered a glimpse into the car crash that killed Baby’s parents and left him with tinnitus. Emerging from the flashback with his tinnitus loudly ringing, Baby slowly walks over to his collection of iPods, and gently picks up a white first generation iPod. The screen of the device is cracked, as if punctured, and the scroll wheel, which allows users to select and control music, is gone. The broken iPod, which the film later confirms Baby was listening to during the accident, provides a visual representation of Baby’s acoustic and psychological trauma. Baby’s hearing, like that of the iPod, has been punctured and damaged. The brutal destruction of the iPod denies Baby a degree of sonic control, a concept embodied in his tinnitus, an interior noise he cannot shut off. The violent destruction of Baby’s iPod occurs again later in the film, when Buddy shoots Baby’s iPod as Baby attempts to flee, abruptly cutting off the music of the desperate escape sequence. The iPod is destroyed, and Baby is forced to run away without his music. With the loss of the iPod, the painful ringing of tinnitus blares across the sound mix. Baby presses his hands to his pulse in a desperate attempt to, as Wright states in the director’s commentary, find “some kind of internal rhythm.” Baby proceeds to steal a car, but fails to drive away until he can...
find the right song on the radio. In this moment, the iPod user, used to “control[ing] the rhythms of daily life” (Bull 8) struggles with the radio, and a soundscape shaped by someone else. Despite the urgency of his situation, Baby takes several seconds to find the perfect song, frantically scrolling through the stations before he drives away. The violence of Baby’s tinnitus is hence located throughout the film in the iPod, and its lost promise of acoustic control.

Through its use of point of audition sound and its emphasis on the iPod, Baby Driver provides an opportunity to interrogate the relationship between sound technology and control. In his recent text, Hush: Media and Sonic Self-Control (2019), Mack Hagood analyzes media devices, “that provide control and customization of individuals’ sonic environments” (3) which he states are “proliferating” modern markets (6). Hagood names these devices “orphic media” for the parallels they draw to the Greek mythological hero Orpheus, fighting unwanted sound with sound (3). These orphic devices, which include white noise machines, nature sound recordings, and noise-cancelling headphones (3), provide a personal sense of control that

often derives from the suppression of the biological, social and material differences that make us who we are—a suppression of difference that actually makes us more compliant as subjects of the control society we inhabit (Deleuze 1992). Ultimately, the technologies I call orphic media may be designed to hush an age-old secret that is both too obvious and too frightening to contemplate: that we have never been, and will never be, in control (Hagood, Hush 6).

Orphic media provides a powerful illusion of sonic control, one that conceals the all too frightening reality that one is not actually in control, and that the filtering of sounds is ideologically motivated. The role of control in orphic media is particularly acute when considering the relationship between tinnitus sufferers and orphic devices.
Tinnitus sufferers are some of the most dedicated users of orphic media, using “these sound devices in what they perceive as a high-stakes war” (Hagood, *Hush* 34, 52). Because of the elusive, internal nature of tinnitus, and the role of media technology in treating and managing it, Hagood notes that tinnitus “provides a unique auditory opportunity to explore ideologies and enactments of ability and disability—and the media’s role in these dynamics” (Hagood, *Hush* 35). Tinnitus challenges Western, liberal notions of selfhood and control by imposing a sound the individual does not choose (Hagood, *Hush* 51-52). This unwanted sound is often accompanied by a feeling of self-blame, as tinnitus sufferers are often held responsible for making poor media choices—listening to too loud music, standing too close to the speakers at a concert—that led to them developing their “hum in the drum” (Hagood, *Hush* 39, 55). Hagood writes that hearing tinnitus as “a loss of silence, a loss of choice, and finally a loss of self, is central to the suffering [of many with tinnitus]” (*Hush* 52). Here tinnitus emerges as a manifestation of the “ideology of ability” which makes us “fear disability” (Siebers 9). Defined by disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers, the ideology of ability is at its most basic level a “preference for able-bodiedness” (8), however, it can also profoundly shape ideas of selfhood and worth, “at its most radical, it defines the base-line by which humanness is determined, setting the measure of body and mind that gives or denies human status to individual persons” (8). For some tinnitus sufferers, Hagood writes, overcoming tinnitus is a process of learning to give up on the possibility of freedom from tinnitus, to accept and rewire the brain to sever the connection between tinnitus and fear: “In order to make the patient free once again, [the audiologist and their technological tools] must enable the patient to let go of freedom of choice as a habitus of listening” (Hagood, *Hush* 71).
Ideas of control, freedom and choice are hence as integral to tinnitus as they are to the iPod and Dolby sound systems. By acoustically and narratively bringing these elements together, through the immersive tool of point of audition sound, Baby Driver integrates the audio-viewer into this tangle of technology, ideology, and culture. The “Harlem Shuffle” sequence is in many ways codified as a moment of intense acoustic control, and was singled out by Slater as the ultimate demonstration of Dolby Atmos technology. And yet, even as the music from Baby’s iPod physically imprints itself onto the landscape, the sounds of the urban environment synced to Baby’s music—Baby’s control is already beginning to crumble. Baby’s sonic control, his personal soundscape, can only provide the illusion of true control. During the sequence, Baby repeatedly runs into other people, and is almost hit by a car and a bike. Obliviously locked into the interiority of his own tunes, Baby is referred to by the people on the street as an “asshole” and a “jerk.” As the film continues, Baby’s sonic control continues to fail, forcing him to rewind a song mid-heist, ultimately culminating in the destruction of the iPod and his deafening.

While the iPod provides an illusion of sonic self-control to its user, the device is also paradoxically identified as a significant cause of hearing loss. As Hagood writes in Hush, the iPod is one of several orphic devices, including sound machines and hearing aids, which tinnitus sufferers turn to as essential tools for managing life with tinnitus. Baby’s use of his many iPods reflects this, with Baby’s iPods serving as “technologies of the self, shoring up the self in order to restore freedom of choice and control of their own subjectivity” (Hush 52). Other sufferers of tinnitus find that the iPod only exacerbates their hearing loss, exceeding the limits of their sound sensitivity (Tinnitus Talk). Despite the role of the iPod as a device for “shoring up the self” for some tinnitus sufferers, iPod use has also been acknowledged as a significant cause of tinnitus. Noise-induced hearing loss is frequently ascribed to iPods and headphones, the maximum
volume on the iPod ten times louder than the recommended listening setting, “At maximum volume, an iPod reaches about 103 decibels, which can cause permanent hearing loss in a matter of minutes while listening through ear buds” (Levey et al. 76; Martinez). The iPod hence stands as a device that can both rupture human hearing and provide a degree of control for tinnitus sufferers, a physical representation of the thin line between music and loss, control and tinnitus.

Beyond the iPod, the complicated myth of sonic control also manifests itself in the sound design of Baby Driver. Dolby Atmos treats individual sounds as “audio objects” which “can be precisely placed and moved by the soundtrack creator anywhere in the cinema's three-dimensional space” (Dolby), Atmos offering the epitome of control and choice. Sound scholars have long noted the myth of “invisible” sound technology, such as Michael Chion, who writes, “one of the myths of digital sound is that it allows one to attain perfect sound, with no loss, and in a way, no origin—the Immaculate Conception of Sound…Normally restless and wild, sound in the digital world is conceived as wholly submitting to the will of the Master” (Film 152). Yet, Chion continues, this “immaculate conception of sound” is “an illusion at best” (Film 152).

Belton similarly argues that “though the cinematic apparatus becomes, decade by decade, a more perfect transmitter, reducing signs of its own existence…it inevitably reproduces not only the light and sound waves reflected and emitted by objective reality but also its own presence” (Belton 71). Yet, Atmos, as Gianluca Sergi notes, seems to “leap” over past concerns about the presence of the sound system: “Unlike previous systems, it is extremely difficult to detect the system boundaries—that drop off point where the artifice becomes all too apparent, betrayed by the technology’s limitation” (“Knocking” 113). Atmos seems to break through previous conventions and limitations of surround sound.
Yet, one could argue that Atmos is too controlling. Atmos’s drive for control, immersion and the precise placement of sounds could lead to a sound mix that is uncanny in its perfection. Like Baby, caught up in his acoustic control throughout the “Harlem Shuffle” sequence, Atmos holds the potential to be so engaged with its possibilities of control that it fails to consider the potential downsides to this revolutionary sonic platform. Atmos provides audiences with unprecedented amounts of immersion, and an array of previously unheard sounds, but requires an extensive and costly renovation to theatre spaces (Wright 232). Dolby’s call with Atmos for “immersive”, more “life-like” sound can also come at the cost of intelligibility, disorienting audio-viewers in an attempt to create a “heightened sense of realism” (Wright 241-242; White Paper 5). In the process of stressing realism and fidelity, Dolby Atmos could disrupt the conventions of Hollywood sound mixing, as codified in the early synchronized sound period (Wright 241). Regardless of its control and bursting sound mixes, Atmos cannot silence or control the sounds of other patrons in the movie theatre, or prevent noises from invading home theatre entertainment viewings. Atmos, like all surround sound platforms, should also contend with the plurality of sonic experiences. All audience members do not have access to the same forms of hearing and hence a single, universal mode of interacting with sound technology does not exist (Mills and Sterne 368-372). As Dolby Atmos is relatively new, with little surrounding scholarship thus far, it offers a significant opportunity to integrate conversations of different viewing/hearing practices into discussions of surround sound technology. Baby Driver, as a film that brings together deafness, tinnitus and Dolby Atmos, is an example of how these elements can be considered in relation to each other.

13 For more on the history of Hollywood sound, and the fidelity vs. intelligibility debates, see Chapter two.
Finally, as Sergi notes, the controlled sounds of Atmos, and the listening experience it creates, requires a cultural shift for both filmmakers and viewers: “The one thing we can be clear about is that Atmos acts simultaneously as one of the greatest challenges to traditional filmmaking practices and one of the most empowering narrative tools for filmmakers and audiences alike in many decades” (118). For audiences, Atmos disrupts conventional ways of listening to films, and demands new ways of interacting with cinema sound, drastically re-writing conventions. Atmos presents a learning curve for sound professionals, and requires filmmakers to reassess the relationship between sound, image and narrative (Sergi, “Knocking” 115). Although Atmos promises to provide mixers with immense acoustic control through the specific placements of the ‘sound objects’, there is, as Benjamin Wright argues, “significant evidence that Atmos actually limits a mixer’s creative role in authoring soundtracks” (228). One of the features of Atmos is the Dolby render and Mastering unit (RMU), which automatically creates 5.1 and 7.1 versions of the Atmos mix. In the process of doing this, the RMU also “automates the placement of audio objects in non-Atmos environments by intuiting how each sound element should be reproduced in theaters of various sizes and layouts.” (Wright 232). While this process is intended to make the format more accessible to distributors and exhibitors, it destabilizes the role of mixers. “If the sound mix is the ‘final rewrite’ of a film, as Robert Zmeckis describes it, then Dolby Atmos is potentially leaving the final word to be rewritten by a computer algorithm that approximates the location of individual sound elements” (Wright 236). While Atmos supposedly provides more control, the RMU process gestures to the limits and loss of control, embedded within the technology.
3.6 Hearing Vibrations

Beyond framing its point of audition representation of tinnitus through sound technology and the myth of sonic control and immersion, *Baby Driver* also challenges conventional point of audition representations of deafness. Music, and the act of listening, often play an important role in films featuring the D/deaf. For example, *Beyond Silence* (Caroline Link 1996) and *La Famille Bélier* (Éric Lartigau 2014) both focus on the story of a young hearing woman born into a Deaf family, with a talent for music. In each film, sound threatens to rip the family apart, the Deaf family members unable to understand the daughter’s obsession with music. In *Beyond Silence*, point of audition is used during a flashback sequence of a recital, which the film identifies as the catalyst for the Deaf father’s hatred of music, and his estrangement from his sister, who is now a professional musician. *La Famille Bélier* utilizes point of audition sound in a similar manner, as a means of highlighting the separation between the hearing and the Deaf. During the pivotal duet between the girl and her love interest at the school recital, the audio suddenly fades out. The audio-viewer is left with distant, faint sounds, as the camera cuts between the singing girl, her Deaf family and the enraptured hearing audience. Both films eventually show the Deaf characters accessing the daughter’s music through vibrations; the films each concludes with the Deaf family coming together to support the hearing daughter at her audition for a musical school. Yet, point of audition sound is not used again during the moments of vibrational hearing. While these point of audition sequences in *Beyond Silence* and *La Famille Bélier* are used to align the audience with a Deaf auditor, “asked not to hear, but to identify with someone who will hear for us” (Altman 60), they ultimately serve to stress sonic difference, and isolation from the hearing world. The Deaf point of audition appears only briefly, with the film immediately returning to ‘full’ sound. The point of audition in the films thus work to support and construct the ‘normally’
hearing body (Davis 151), emphasizing Deaf otherness by stressing auditory difference. While the Deaf characters eventually listen through vibrations, the films elect to only utilize point of audition sound as a means of accentuating the ‘silence’ of deafness.

Unlike *Beyond Silence* and *La Famille Bélier*, alternative access to music through vibrational listening is never questioned in *Baby Driver*. When Baby dances around the apartment, listening to a record of Carla Thomas’ “B-A-B-Y”, his Deaf godfather Joseph places his hand on the speaker and nods in time with the song. The bass tones of the song are accentuated when Joseph’s hand is on the speaker. Later in the film, Baby directly addresses vibrational hearing in a tape he records when leaving Joseph at a retirement home. Speaking for Joseph into the recorder, Baby says, “I also like to listen sometimes to old records through the vibrations” (Wright). Thus *Baby Driver* continually acknowledges the centrality of vibrations to the D/deaf musical experience (Dibernardo Jones 61). At the end of the film, Baby’s hearing is damaged by Buddy, who shoots a gun on either side of Baby’s head, in a sequence reminiscent of the ending of *Cop Land* (James Mangold, 1997). The loud gun shots and sharp ringing aftermath resonate on either side of the sound mix, interpolating the audience into Baby’s loss. In the scene immediately following, vibrational hearing is once again represented, but this time through Baby’s point of audition perspective.

When Baby awakes in the car, the point of audition sound is of his still ringing ears, and muffled sounds. Sky Ferreira’s “Easy” floods into full clarity as Baby places his hand against the car’s speaker. The film lingers on a shot of Baby’s hand on the speaker, visually establishing that Baby is accessing the music through vibrational listening. Despite Buddy’s attempt to destroy Baby’s hearing, the film immediately demonstrates that Baby is still capable of accessing the music he loves. The vibrational listening of this scene is not singled out as a moment of auditory
difference, but a continuation of the intimate auditory connection that the film has developed from the opening credits. The viewer does not question Baby’s auditory perspective, as they have been conditioned throughout the film to accept his personal soundscape.

*Baby Driver* presents tinnitus and hearing loss in a manner accessible to the modern viewer, and validates alternative modes of listening through its use of point of audition sound. However, in the vibrational listening of the post-deafening scene, Ferreira’s “Easy” is presented as acoustically whole. To a hearing viewer, the song sounds as if it is being accessed through “normal” modes of musical listening. While presenting vibrational listening in this manner validates haptic listening as a legitimate form of accessing music, it also avoids acknowledging the essential differences between modes of listening. This scene erases sonic differences, and the spectrum of musical engagement, by imposing “normal” modes of musical listening on all bodies, both hearing and D/deaf. The vibrational listening of the “Easy” scene is also undermined by the sequence that follows. As the film cuts to a sequence of Baby’s court case and subsequent sentencing, full sound floods back into the mix, dislocating the viewer from Baby’s clear point of audition. Initially edited to be silent (Wright, Commentary) the addition of sound in the final scene undercuts Baby’s presumably deaf or hard of hearing aural perspective.

In the conclusion of *Hush*, Mack Hagood notes that the centrality of iPods and headphones in the conceit of a high profile film like *Baby Driver* is reflective of how common these types of orphic technologies of mediation and control have become in society (221). While *Baby Driver* notably grounds its representation of tinnitus and hearing loss through the iPod, headphones and point of audition sound, it also demonstrates how fragile these attempts at sonic control can be. Despite his use of mediating headphones and sunglasses, Baby cannot keep himself apart from the reality of his situation—and the film concludes with Baby in prison.
Although the iPod promises Baby a degree of sonic control, it is also an easily broken device that can only deliver the illusion of transforming the urban landscape into a space that moves to the beat of Baby’s tunes. Through its narrative emphasis on control, *Baby Driver* also opens space to consider the centrality and impossibility of sonic control in modern culture, and sound systems such as Dolby Atmos. In *Baby Driver* one can consider the uncontrollability of human hearing, from tinnitus to the fragility of the easily ruptured human ear. Yet, the film also offers an immersive perspective of the spectrum of sonic engagement—in the process demonstrating the ways in which sound and the act of listening can defy expectations and categorizations. Listening is not simply limited to the ear, and sound is both auditory and haptic. *Baby Driver* revels in its music, fast car chases and stylized aesthetics. In cranking the tunes from Baby’s many iPods, the film also offers a vital examination into the culture of sonic control, in the process demonstrating the essential connections between the modern listening body and technology.
Chapter 4: Technology, Bodies and Sound: Sonic Representations of the Cochlear Implant in *A Quiet Place* (2018)

A young girl walks alone through a cornfield at night. Spotting a light amongst the stalks, she crouches down, the camera cutting to her view of a flashlight lying abandoned in the soil. With this visual cut the quiet sounds of the night suddenly fade to near silence, as the audience is enveloped in her Deaf point of audition. Wrapped in her sonic perspective, we watch as the creature—a massive blind beast that hunts through sound—creeps up behind her, Regan Abbott oblivious to its presence. Cutting to a shot behind Regan, the sounds of the night return. However, this return to ‘conventional’ sound is short lived. The thick layers of the creature’s outer hide peel back to reveal its uncanny, iridescent ear. The sound mix shifts to the creature’s point of audition, the sounds of the night intensifying into a painful ringing feedback. Cutting between Regan clutching her cochlear implant in pain, and the creature’s own ear, trembling with sound, a shared auditory perspective of electronic noise and amplification is offered as Regan’s cochlear implant reacts to the creature. This painful sound is directly associated with the malfunctioning sound technology in the film’s close captions, which describe the sound as “feedback whining.”

With its melding of auditory perspectives and technologically mediated experiences, this sequence in the cornfield is evocative of many of the central themes of John Krasinski’s *A Quiet Place*. This scene highlights the prominence of the interface between the cochlear implant, the Deaf character, the creature, and the ears/body of the audience in the affective experience of the film. Through Regan (portrayed by deaf actress and cochlear implant user Millicent Simmonds)
and a sound mix composed around her aural perspective, *A Quiet Place* offers an alternative to conventional representations of deafness in film. While representations of deafness in film tend to use point of audition sparingly, primarily utilizing it to highlight acoustic contrast and isolation, *A Quiet Place* constantly foregrounds Regan’s POA perspective.¹⁴ With its centering of sonic technology—particularly sonic technology that does not operate according to its intended function—*A Quiet Place* also provides a platform in which to consider and confront cultural ideas around sound technology, especially representations of the cochlear implant in mass media. The painful “feedback whining” and the ‘silence’ of the broken implant brings together the bodies of the deaf character and the audience in immersive, point of audition sound. The glitching cochlear implant emerges in this cornfield scene and others as a powerful weapon, and a means to destroy the sound sensitive creatures. This glitching twists notions of the value of attentive listening, and technologically mediated hearing. Through its acoustic representations of deafness, the cochlear implant and sound technology, *A Quiet Place* emphasizes the relationship between the glitch, technology, and the body to produce an immersive form of cinematic sonic engagement.

The point of audition sound and sound technology of *A Quiet Place* immerse the audience, and envelop them in the tangle of body and technology. Here, a character re-appropriates the cochlear implant to seize control and defeat the monsters. Yet, *A Quiet Place’s* use of the cochlear implant, while a significant mainstream representation of deafness and technology, is still bound up in cultural attitudes. In their treatise, “Dismediation”, Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne call for an understanding of “disability as a constituting dimension of media,

¹⁴ See Chapter three for more on representations of deafness through point of audition sound.
and media as a constituting dimension of disability” (366). *A Quiet Place*, which brings together media and disability through sound, can be read through a ‘dismedia’ lens. As Mills and Sterne note, a ‘dismedia’ practice involves “resist[ing] rehabilitation and standardization, but without recourse to the easy celebration of glitch, error, noise, jamming, or hacking that often yields "disablement" as the most convenient Other to the smooth functioning of contemporary corporatized media” (Mills and Sterne 366). While the glitching implant stands as a noteworthy alternative to conventional media representations, and a significant theoretical jumping off point, it is still caught up in the culture in which it was produced, containing elements of ableism and audism.\(^\text{15}\) In endeavoring to bring together Deaf and disability scholarship with film studies, this chapter will examine the manner in which *A Quiet Place* subverts and reaffirms the ideologies of sound technology. It will move beyond an “easy celebration of glitch” to interrogate the complex relationship between technology and deafness; examining the role sound plays in complicating and enriching this representation of a young deaf girl and her family, attempting to survive in a horrific world.

### 4.1 Point of Audition and Deafness

From the opening sequence, point of audition sound and the cochlear implant are central to the film’s representation of Regan. As the family moves quietly around an abandoned pharmacy, the first medium close up of Regan is accompanied by a seamless slippage into her auditory perspective, the already quiet sounds of the store fading to near silence. The shot that accompanies her auditory perspective is framed from the side, and prominently features her

\(^\text{15}\) A term created by deaf scholar Tom Humphries in his unpublished 1975 article, “The Making of a Word: Audism.” Humphries defines audism as “the notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears.”
cochlear implant. A beam of sunlight shining into the darkened store illuminates the cream coloured external microphone and speech processor wrapped around Regan’s ear, with the external transmitter visible amid her curls. With the next shot, the patter of tiny feet is the only signal that the audience has been moved back into ‘full’ sound. From the opening of the film, Regan’s deafness and her cochlear implant are inseparable, each essentially shaping and constituting the other. The implant visually signifies Regan’s ‘invisible’ disability, working in tandem with the sound to immediately inform the audience of the character’s deafness. Regan’s point of audition, referred to by the sound designers as “sound envelopes,” envelops the audience in near silence, designed by sound editors Ethan Van der Ryn and Erik Aadahl to “mimic the feeling of being in an anechoic chamber, a room that absorbs sound to the point where all you can hear are the heightened noises of your own body. Regan’s envelope is rendered with a kind of low, muffled feel punctuated by the gentle pulse of her heart” (Murphy). The faint, muffled sounds of the cochlear implant mediated point of audition are evocative of the sophistication of the sound mix, providing various degrees of silence.

The frequent slips in and out of Regan’s sonic envelopes is uncommon for mainstream cinematic representations of deafness. James Wierzbicki asserts that deaf point of audition is used rarely in film, traditionally reserved “for those special moments when the “fact” of a hearing impairment is not simply one of the narrative’s many constant elements but is, rather, an issue” (144). Although Regan’s POA is sometimes used in moments to amplify the scares of the film—such as in the cornfield sequence, scenes that factor her deafness as “an issue”—Regan’s point of audition is also a common, reoccurring element of the film’s overall soundscape. In this way, A Quiet Place differs from other many films that figure deafness. As Wierzbicki notes, films with characters that are already deaf seldom utilize point of audition sound, gesturing
towards *The Miracle Worker* (Arthur Penn, 1962) and *Children of a Lesser God* (Randa Haines, 1986). The former tells the story of a young Helen Keller acquiring language, and the latter the relationship between a Deaf woman and a hearing man, neither film utilizing point of audition to present the perspective of their deaf (or deaf and blind) characters. Point of audition is usually reserved in films for the moment of hearing loss (144) for example, *There Will be Blood* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2007), where sound immerses the audience into a young boy’s sudden loss of hearing after a blowout at an oil well. The easy movement in and out of Regan’s sonic perspective, enabled by the largely quiet soundscape of the film, also stands in marked contrast with similar examples in other films; such as *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006) which focuses on miscommunication and interconnectivity between characters around the world, including a young Japanese Deaf woman. In *Babel*, the shift into the POA of the young deaf woman in the club sequence is a flickering movement between pulsing sound and silence, disorienting the audience. *Babel’s* point of audition stresses the isolation of the young woman, even while surrounded by hundreds of other people.

Point of audition, while an opportunity to hear the hearing of others, is also frequently used in films to amplify the isolation of deaf characters. In *The Cinema of Isolation*, Martin F. Norden asserts that films tend to “isolate disabled characters from their able-bodied peers as well from each other” (1). As examined in the previous chapter with the films *La Famille Bélier* and *Beyond Silence*, point of audition can amplify auditory difference, utilizing sound to isolate characters. Although the film is unconventional in its constant and easy movement in and out of point of audition sound, isolation still holds a central role in *A Quiet Place*, occurring on numerous levels. While the main family is isolated, unable to communicate with the wider world, Regan’s isolation is particularly prominent. Early in the film, the youngest boy is
horrifically murdered, due in part to Regan’s indulgence for her baby brother (giving him the batteries for his toy rocket), and her deafness. The closest to him on the walk home, Regan does not hear the sounds his rocket makes, and hence does not react quickly enough. Despite racing back, her father cannot reach the boy in time. Throughout all of this, the sound slips back and forth between Regan’s sonic perspective and full, ‘normal’ sound. For the rest of the film Regan’s deafness, and her internalized guilt over her brother’s death, isolate her from the rest of her family. Despite her family’s knowledge of ASL they struggle to meaningfully communicate with her, locked in their own mourning. Regan is hence doubly isolated, as a young deaf woman apart from the Deaf community, and as a young woman wrapped in grief and guilt. Sound frequently immerses the audience into Regan’s sonic envelope, while reminding the audio-viewer of her difference. The cochlear implant, which the film uses as a visual shorthand for Regan’s deafness, similarly emphasizes Regan’s difference, with her father seemingly obsessed with finding a way to fix it.

4.2 The Politics of the Cochlear Implant

With the acoustic and visual prominence of the cochlear implant throughout *A Quiet Place*, the film must also be considered alongside the cultural representations and political debates surrounding the device. The cochlear implant is a neuroprosthetic device that delivers a form of electronic hearing, directly to the auditory nerve (Mills, “Signals” 321). While hearing aids amplify sound, “a cochlear implant bypasses damaged portions of the ear to deliver sound signals to the auditory (hearing) nerve” (Mayo). Most implants “presently consist of a fully implanted receiver and electrode array; an external microphone and speech processor, worn at the ear; and an external transmitter, which attaches magnetically to the receiver beneath the skin”
The role of each of these components, and their part in delivering the electroacoustic “sound signals” is detailed by the Canadian Academy of Audiology as:

- The microphone picks up sounds near the ear level and sends it to the speech processor. The speech processor takes the acoustic signal and codes it for speech electrically. The signal is sent to the transmitter worn on the head where it is then sent through the skin to the implanted device. Under the skin, the receiver decodes the signal and sends it to the electrode array. The electrode array distributes the signal and stimulates the nerve endings in the cochlea, producing nerve impulses. The impulses are sent along the hearing nerve to the brain where they are interpreted as sound. (CAA)

The internal aspects of the implant are surgically inserted. After several weeks of healing, the external sound processor is attached, and the implant is ‘switched on’ (Snell 343). Through this array of technology, the cochlear implant does not restore normal hearing, but rather offers an electronic perception of hearing.

Despite the film’s emphasis on the device, there are numerous significant technological inaccuracies in its representation of the cochlear implant. The painful ringing feedback from Regan’s cochlear implant is central to the plot of the film. Yet, as several deaf viewers have noted in their reviews of the film, the cochlear implant processor (unlike hearing aids) cannot emit feedback (Nichols, Frohock). Both reviewers ascribed the ringing implant to the modifications Regan’s father, Lee (John Krasinski) had made to the device, and the sci-fi setting. In her review “The Deaf Perspective on ‘A Quiet Place’” Meriah Nichols directs the viewer to several errors. In addition to the glitching implant, she remarks that due to the uncomfortable nature of the processor, it is unlikely a user would continue to wear a broken one, which Regan is
shown doing throughout the film. Nichols also notes that cochlear implants rapidly run through batteries—a presumably scarce commodity in a post-apocalyptic world. In Laura Snell’s study of young adult cochlear implant users, the limited life of batteries in cochlear implants was often raised as a significant negative aspect of the device. With the types of batteries used in different brands of processors varying, the battery lifespan of the cochlear implants of the subjects in Snell’s study lasted from under one day to just over a week (348). The availability of the specific types of batteries needed for Regan’s implant would likely be limited by the time the film opens, 89 days after the arrival of the creatures, and particularly so on day 472, which the film jumps forward to after the death of the youngest son. Others have also drawn attention to the different brands of sound processors Regan wears throughout the film, arguing that the processors from one brand cannot properly interface with devices from another brand.16 While these incongruities in the representation of the cochlear implant stand to viewers familiar with the device as humorous mistakes or glaring oversights into the very design of the implant, A Quiet Place’s representation of the implant as a ‘miracle’ weapon in the fight against the creatures can also be read through the widespread cultural assumptions and controversy that currently surround the device.

The cochlear implant is a highly contentious piece of sound technology. Approved by the FDA for adult implantation in 1984, the cochlear implant entered the market as a commercial product at the same time as the emergence and expansion of Deaf culture, during a period of immense social change (Mills, “Cochlear” 271; Mauldin 8). The era included the rise of the

16 Posted by the user luke_in_the_sky on the Reddit forum r/MovieDetails August 2018.
social model of disability, the recognition of Sign as a legitimate language, the galvanizing Deaf President Now (DPN) movement at Gallaudet University in 1988, and the institution of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 (Ellcessor et al 5-6; Bauman, “Introduction” 8, 15, 7). Tangled in this timeline of disability rights and the Deaf cultural movement, controversy has been central to the implant since its inception (Mauldin 9). The implant has been perceived as a direct threat to Sign language and Deaf culture, the device considered by some as tools of ‘cultural genocide’ (Mills, “Signals 324). The cochlear implant has been read as the latest development in a long history of oralism and audism, continuing western society’s “manic” obsession with the voice and hearing, the CI signaling a return to a dark era of Deaf history (Bauman, “Listening” 4, 8; Paludneviciene and Harris 6). Deaf adults and educators of the deaf have raised concerns about the CI’s over-emphasis on auditory/speech training “at the expense of overall cognitive development, resulting in language delays, often on top of delayed identification of hearing loss, especially if a visually based language foundation is lacking” (Paludneviciene and Harris 6).

The threat of the implant became particularly pronounced when the FDA approved the device for implantation in children, with the age of implantation eventually lowered to twelve months in 2000 (Mauldin 9). While the initial market response by Deaf adults to the device was

---

17 The social model of disability challenges the medical model, and “posits that while bodies may have impairments, those impairments become disabilities only in the context of specific physical and social environments” (Ellcessor et al 5, emphasis original).
18 DPN occurred in response to the appointment of a hearing president at Gallaudet, the only liberal arts university for Deaf and hard of hearing students in the world, located in Washington, D.C. Students, faculty and staff shut down the campus in protest, DPN seizing international media attention, bringing awareness of the Deaf world as a political and cultural group (Bauman, “Introduction” 7-8).
19 There is also increasing implantation of children under 12 months in several European countries such as the United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Finland and Belgium (Kim et al 1427)
lukewarm, the majority of deaf children are born to hearing parents and make up the fastest-growing group of cochlear implant recipients. Pediatric implantation remains at the centre of the controversy and media representation of the device (Mauldin 9-10), such as the Oscar-nominated documentary *Sound and Fury* (Josh Aronson, 2000) which follows the intense debates between Deaf parents and hearing grandparents, as a family decides whether their five year old deaf daughter should get a cochlear implant. Studies have shown that the age of implantation is the most important factor in determining the success of acquiring spoken English—with children implanted at 13 months out performing deaf children implanted later in life (Paludneviciene and Harris 4). In her article, “Unlocking the World of Sound for Deaf Children” *The New York Times* Personal Health columnist Jane Brody heralded the cochlear implant as a miracle device, capable of enabling “[deaf babies] to hear and, with auditory training, develop language skills as good as those of their normal-hearing peers.” Brody quotes Dr. Bonagura, a cochlear implant user who declares: “the ability now to put implants in babies is incredible. They grow up with sound; they grow up hearing everything. Sound is a gift—laughter, voices, nature. How can you take that away from anyone?” In response to Brody’s article, Sara Novic, a Deaf writer and professor, wrote “A Clearer Message on Cochlear Implants,” an opinion piece in which she stressed the nuanced nature of the implant. Not all deaf people are eligible for a cochlear implant—and the implant does not come pre-loaded with language information. To declare the implant a miracle is to stop at the YouTube video of tears and laughter as a deaf child ‘hears’ for the first time. It overlooks the long, arduous and expensive process of learning to use the CI, which requires immense adjustment and support such as speech therapy to utilize fully, with results differing depending on the users and other factors such as age and class (Novic).
The cochlear implant (and its media representation) is definitively shaped by the values and beliefs of the society in which it emerged. As Laura Mauldin writes in the introduction of her text, *Made to Hear: Cochlear Implants and Raising Deaf Children*, “technology is not neutral, bodies are seen as in need of transformation (especially disabled ones), and the social structures where these processes take place are cultural sites with norms and values” (15). In “Do Signals Have Politics? Inscribing Abilities in Cochlear Implants,” Mara Mills notes that CIs embody “a range of cultural and economic values, some of which are deliberately ‘scripted’ into design, others of which accrete inadvertently” (323), these include privileging speech over music, and nontonal languages over tonal ones (323). The very emergence of the implant, and its rapidly increasing popularity in recent years—with the CI now the most advanced and commonly used neuroprosthetic—reflects both the significance of the device as a technological advancement, and the importance of hearing and speech to society (Mauldin 10). The popularity of the device can also be seen as reflective as the lack of accessibility and general awareness/knowledge of Sign language in mainstream society. *A Quiet Place* takes this social emphasis on the implant further. Even in a world that is reduced to her family, all of whom are fluent in ASL, it is still necessary for Lee to fix Regan’s broken cochlear implant. She must hear (so she can monitor her own sounds), and despite Regan’s protests, Lee assures her he will keep modifying her cochlear implant until it works.

4.3 The Deaf Cyborg

In addition to capturing the imagination of the public through viral YouTube videos, the “bionic ears” of the cochlear implant have also long been of interest to cyborg and technology scholars (Mills, “Cochlear” 262-263). Disability has frequently figured in literature and scholarship as a metaphor, a means by which to illustrate abstract theories, while the personal
experiences and politics of these identities are overlooked. Elizabeth Ellcessor argues that “the clearest example of such metaphorical use of disability lies in cyborg theory” gesturing towards Donna Haraway’s seminal “Cyborg Manifesto” (1763). Haraway specifically invokes disability in her manifesto, writing “perhaps paraplegics and other severely handicapped people can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experiences of complex hybridization with other communications devices” (61). The disabled body here emerges as a symbol to represent Haraway’s argument of the pleasures and possibilities of blending the human and technology (Ellcessor, “cyborg” 1763). Disability scholars have drawn attention to the ableism of Haraway’s use of the disabled body, and her potentially deliberate outdated application of language with the repeated use of “severely handicapped” (Kafer 111). In Disability Theory, Tobin Siebers writes, Haraway is so preoccupied with power and ability that she forgets what disability is. Prostheses always increase the cyborg’s abilities; they are a source only of new powers, never of problems. The cyborg is always more than human—and never risks to be seen as subhuman. To put it simply, the cyborg is not disabled. (63). Haraway does not mention the potential pain or discomfort associated with “intense experiences of complex hybridization,” or the lived experiences of these disabled bodies, instead focusing on the theoretical possibilities. As Alison Kafer notes, “Disability may be an excellent site for witnessing the blurring of human and technology, but not, apparently, for exploring actual experiences of such blurring” (115).

Despite the cyborg’s complications, it is still a potentially useful concept for disability studies. In the chapter, “The Cyborg and the Crip” in her text Feminist, Queer, Crip, Kafer argues for a critical crip engagement with the cyborg. Such an engagement would “warn against
easy celebrations of the technological fix; it would require a more complex and ambivalent relationship with technology” (Kafer 119). A disability perspective of the cyborg requires an acknowledgment that human/machine interfaces are not always beneficial or pleasurable; an awareness that many disabled people lack access to the cybertechnologies so highly praised in cyborg writing; an accounting for the ways in which cybertechnologies rely on disabling labor practices across the globe; and a realization that not all disabled people are interested in technological cures or fixes. Each of these elements takes cyborgology away from its traditional use of disability as metaphor, and toward an understanding of disability in political and social context. (118)

While the cyborg has a contentious past—thecripped cyborg holds immense possibility for future scholarship on technology and the body, in the process foregrounding not just bodies and prosthetics/technology, but the political practices of the body engaging with these prosthetics (Kafer 120). As a device that physically melds body and technology to create an electronic form of hearing, encapsulating technological advancements and intense cultural and political debates, the cochlear implant presents rich ground in which to apply Kafer’s non-ableist cyborg theory.

The possibilities and complications of *A Quiet Place*’s representation of the cochlear implant can be read through Kafer’s theory. Deaf scholar Brenda Jo Brueggemann, in her book *Deaf Subjects: Between Identities and Places*, argues that the cyborg is an important element of the modern, mutable deaf identity and its relationship with the cochlear implant: “within the deaf kaleidoscope is the fragmented but also contained—and beautiful—image of the ever shifting deaf cyborg. The seamed and seeming boundaries between ‘cure’ and ‘control’ in constructing the deaf cyborg body is a potent commonplace” (15). In her analysis of young adult cochlear
implant users, Snell notes that the blurred relationship between the body and technology is a significant aspect of the CI experience:

the blurring of boundaries that occurs as the (deaf) body and the implant technology are merged to form a hybrid, or cyborg, body…the body and machine have to learn how to work together to produce and recognise the electronic sound. The effect of this merging is that the boundaries of existing body parts become blurred and functions are altered (349).

Both Brueggemann and Snell note the way in which the cochlear implant melds bodies and technology, interfacing between the machine and the organic. In the process of this blurring, the device also crucially gives rise to a mutable deaf identity, the “beautiful” and “ever shifting deaf cyborg.”

In *A Quiet Place*, the layering of point of audition sound and the cochlear implant immerse and involve the ears of the audience into this “blurring of boundaries.” This immersion primarily occurs in two ways—through painful noise and silence. Both of these soundscapes defy boundaries, while highlighting the blurring of technology, characters and the audience. This is not simply a representation of the cochlear implant—this is an aural experience, though mediated by the direction of a hearing filmmaker. Through its intense focus on the cochlear implant, *A Quiet Place* provides a site to examine the complexities and possibilities of representing the implant, along with the issues of control and cultural expectations that also surround the device.

4.4 Narrative Framing of the Cochlear Implant

*A Quiet Place* foregrounds the cochlear implant and ideas of listening. The film initially appears to establish attentive, active listening as essential for survival in a world populated by
creatures that hunt through hypersensitive hearing. As previously described, the opening scene brutally accentuates the importance of attentive perception, with Regan left blaming herself and her deafness for the death of her baby brother. In addition to Regan’s internalized self-loathing, the family limits what Regan is allowed to do because she cannot listen attentively or carefully monitor the sounds she makes. She is not permitted in the basement of the house, where her father keeps his sound technology, despite her demonstrated interest in tinkering with technology herself. Nor is she allowed to accompany her father as he does his rounds, informed that she must stay at the farm to “be safe.” At this point in the film, Regan’s cochlear implant plays a central role in the emphasis on specific forms of listening. Her father seems obsessed with fixing and modifying her implant with parts ripped from other pieces of sound technology, informing her that he will “keep trying until it [works].” The broken cochlear implant serves as an embodiment of Regan’s separation, her inability to perceive the snapping fingers beside her ears, a reminder that she does not possess the “correct” form of listening supposedly required to survive in this world.

Yet, the film quickly moves from its focus on listening to privileging the malfunctioning cochlear implant and through the implant, Regan’s deafness. After the fateful encounter with the creature in the cornfield, the broken implant emerges as a glimmer of hope in one of the darkest moments of the film. In the final scene, a combination of the cochlear implant, microphone and gun successfully kill one of the creatures. *A Quiet Place* ends finding confidence and triumph in sound technology that fails, directly paralleling the malfunctioning technology with the gun, as weapons of equal worth and value. Because of the essential connections between the cochlear implant and Regan’s deafness, this ending could be read as an example of “Deaf-gain.” Deaf-gain, as defined by H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray, declares the value of deafness
and Deaf culture to society, and is also “the notion that the unique sensory orientation of Deaf people leads to a sophisticated form of visual–spatial language that provides opportunities for exploration into the human character” (Bauman and Murray 243). In *A Quiet Place*, it is Regan’s cochlear implant, a visual embodiment of her deafness, that saves the day. The ending of the film suggests that it is the cochlear implant, working in tandem with the gun and the amplifier, that holds the potential to ultimately defeat the ferocious creatures.

However, by ascribing so much potential to the implant, *A Quiet Place* risks falling into the ‘miracle’ narrative that surrounds the device. In an opinion piece on the film, Pamela J. Kincheloe, an Associate Professor at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, argues that *A Quiet Place* ultimately foregrounds the device, rather than the deaf character—

> Being deaf and signing is not enough. Regan needs her implant to restore the world to normalcy…In the end, it is not the ability to speak silently through ASL that saves the Abbotts... It is that other symbolic piece, the cochlear implant, that saves the day. It is one of the very first things we see in the movie; we see it even before we clearly see Regan, or any of the other characters. It is the implant, not the signing deaf person, that is heroic.

While *A Quiet Place* potentially complicates conventional media representations of the cochlear implant by foregrounding a device that does not work—and presenting a character that ‘hacks’ the device to seize control—in the context of the many debates around the device, it is significant as Kincheloe notes, to acknowledge the manner in which the film foregrounds the device. The Abbott’s knowledge of American Sign Language (ASL), learned because of Regan, may help them temporarily survive, but to truly live, the film concludes that they need the implant.
4.5 The Cochlear Implant and Control

Conceptualizations of control are also central to *A Quiet Place*’s representation of the cochlear implant. There has long been a shifting relationship between control and the cochlear implant user. In her analysis of the cochlear implant, Mara Mills draws attention to late-deafened adults CI users, a group that is frequently overlooked in discussions of the device. The active participation of late-deafened volunteers was crucial to the research and development of the implant (“Signals” 322). The early volunteers for the implant were often technical experts or enthusiasts, for example Charles Graser, a musician with knowledge of electroacoustics from military radio work. Graser constantly experimented with his device, his tests leading to numerous improvements to the early implants. However, as the implants were commercialized, the developers “eliminated the personal control and auditory customisation that Graser so appreciated.” This decision crucially shaped the relationship between the CI user and the implant, “This black-boxing of the technology compounded disability, implying a lack of technical facility among users, as well as an obligatory dependence upon physicians and medical engineers” (Mills, “Signals” 332). *A Quiet Place* repeatedly draws attention to Lee’s attempts at hacking/modifying Regan’s implant, working to get beyond this “black-boxing of technology” to fix his daughter’s device. His attempts are almost manic—with his workbench shown as a mess of textbooks, and parts ripped from implants and other pieces of technology, creating new prototypes to force upon Regan. Lee’s attempts at modifying the device are in line with the initial role of the CI—to grant his daughter a form of hearing. The true hacking of the device, then, occurs when Regan begins using her implant as a weapon, truly freeing the device from the constraints of society and the audiological profession. Regan’s implant is not to ‘fix’ her hearing—it is to attack the creatures by damaging *their* hearing. Regan asserts control by
appropriating the device—fundamentally altering the implants intended function—though this hacking of the device also means subjecting herself to intense acoustic agony.

4.6 Electronic Sound and Silence

   The narrative and visual representation of the cochlear implant are only a part of the film’s relationship to the implant. Sound—particularly point of audition sound—is key to the relationship between the film text and the device. Through the sound design of the film, *A Quiet Place* merges the audio-viewer into the complicated tangle of body and machine, opening space to explore the experience of this blurring (albeit shaped by hearing filmmakers and sound designers). The film’s aural focus on the malfunctioning implant stands in stark contrast with popular media representations of the implant. One of the most popular YouTube videos on cochlear implants is “29 years old and hearing myself for the 1st time” which has over 27 million views. The video depicts Sarah Churman, who was born profoundly deaf, as she experiences the sound of the implant for the first time. The short video features the moment of the ‘switch on’, with tears and laughter in the audiologist’s office as the implant is activated. Another top activation video, “8 Month Old Deaf Baby’s Reaction to Cochlear Implant Being Activated” (9 million views) is similar. After the activation of his implant, the baby coos and smiles to the sound of his mother’s voice. The commenters on a compilation video of CI activations, “Deaf People Hearing Sound for the FIRST Time” (7.5 million views), frequently note that they are either brought to tears by the video “I’m not crying okay? My eyes are just taking a quick shower” or are impressed by the medical advances the CI represents, “The medical world has

---

20 Another video, with an identical upload of Jonathan’s activation by a different user, has 4.5 million views on YouTube.
21 Comment posted by YouTube user “Random Things” with 2.8 thousand likes.
come SO far. This is amazing.”22 In *A Quiet Place*, Regan’s implant serves as a counterpoint to ‘heartwarming’ viral videos of implant activations, interpolating audiences instead in the auditory moment of the ‘switch off.’ The film directs its aural attention to the malfunctioning implant. The malfunctioning device immerses audiences through noise or silence—always denying the mythic restoration of hearing, as promised by popular culture.

The painful noise of the glitching implant, heard/felt through point of audition sound, immerses the audience into Regan’s aural experience. During the scene in the cornfield, presented through Regan and the creature’s POA, the agony of the loud feedback is equally experienced by a hearing audience, in a powerful moment of intensified subjectivity. As noted by musicologist Michael C. Heller loudness can transform “sound into a tangible presence, reminding us of sound’s identity as a tactile object that operates in, around and through the body” (45). Painful, loud sounds can serve to break down the barriers between the bodies of listeners, uniting them in a shared, immersive and overpowering auditory experience (Heller 46). There is an essential physicality to sound, loud noise not only permeating the ears—but also the body (Heller 43). In *A Quiet Place*, the blending of the machine and body evident in Regan’s cochlear implant, is mirrored by the audience whose aural perspective is blended with that of the mechanically constructed point of audition sound. Loud, painful sound collapses the differences between self and other, machine and human—an inescapable, cyborgian vibration. This immersive, affective aspect of film sound is also noted in sound studies scholar Lisa Coulthard’s work, where she argues the vital role of sound in creating experiential relationships between the audio-viewer and violence, the sound of the film creating an experience where “we are invited to

22 Comment posted by YouTube user “Sammie Sapphire” with 5.4 thousand likes.
feel the impact, not just feel for a character” (58). In the immersive sound of *A Quiet Place*, the audience is invited to feel the auditory pain.

In addition to the painful whining feedback, *A Quiet Place* also utilizes point of audition sound to suture the audio-viewer in the ‘silence’ of Regan’s cochlear implant. While the film features an generally quiet soundscape, it also repeatedly slips into Regan’s point of audition. The audience is offered the faint, “anechoic chamber” sounds of Regan’s working implant, and the utter silence of the broken device, or moments when Regan removes or switches off the implant. In its subversive silences, *A Quiet Place* challenges both genre and audience expectations, offering an extreme example of Michel Chion’s reading of surround sound silence. In *Film, A Sound Art*, Chion writes that “every instance of silence is disarming since it seems to expose our faculty of hearing; it’s as if a giant ear were turned towards us ready to pick up the tiniest sounds we make. We are no longer just listening to the film; we are being listened to by it” (148). Chion’s metaphor of a “giant ear” is eerily suited for *A Quiet Place*, with its massive creatures that hunt through sound. In an interview with Dolby, supervising sound editor Erik Aadahl spoke of the audience response to the film, and the manner in which the subtle soundscapes forcefully involved audiences in the stakes of the film:

we got all this feedback when the film came out—that people were afraid to breathe. They were holding their breaths, they were hanging on to every moment, they were afraid to eat popcorn…in a funny way that makes the audience an active participant in what’s actually happening on screen.

The silences of the film interpolate audiences an active participant, the silence forcing them to confront their expectations of cinematic sound, their own faculty of hearing and the sounds of the body. The silences of *A Quiet Place* are hence crucial to the affective experience of the film.
Beyond immersing the audience as an embodied perceiver, the noise and silence of the cochlear implant in *A Quiet Place* can also arguably be considered through Kafer’s disabled cyborg lens. Both noise and silence reflect some of the embedded issues or potential problems of the lived experience of the implant. In the painful noise, one confronts the invasive surgery; the large expense associated with the device and subsequent years of medical visits and speech therapy, as well as the strange sounds produced by the implant. One CI user informed Snell that the sound through the cochlear implant “is artificial and sometimes people’s voices sound ‘robotic’ or ‘electronic,’” while another wrote that the initial sounds she heard through the implant “were just noises” (Snell 343). The activation can be a happy or a disappointing experience; and it is only the start of a long process of training the brain to decipher these new electronic sounds. With the emergence of the cochlear implant, deafness is recast not as a sensory loss but a neurological problem—laying the responsibility on the individual to retrain their brain to the specificities demanded by the machine (Mauldin 108-109). The painful noises of the malfunctioning implant also reflect the power the device has over the user’s hearing. As Michael Chorost writes in his book *Rebuilt: My Journey Back to the Hearing World*, about his experience of acquiring a cochlear implant as an adult, “because the computer would decide what I heard and how I heard it…It would be the sole mediator between the auditory world and myself. Since I would hear nothing but what its software allowed, the computer’s control over my hearing would be complete” (8). The cochlear implant user is bound both to the audiological profession and to the device implanted inside of them. The silence of Regan’s implant also embodies other issues and complexities associated with the device. The process of being implanted can result in the loss of all residual hearing, fundamentally altering the function of the inner ear (Snell 350). While the cochlear implant is cast as a miracle cure in the media, not
everyone wants or is eligible for the implant, and the device is far from a simplistic cure. The short battery life of the cochlear implant leaves the user beholden to batteries, and when the batteries run out, the user is back to their original state of deafness (Snell 349).

4.7 The Cochlear Implant and Cinematic Sound Technology

In the process of challenging conventional representations of the cochlear implant through sound, *A Quiet Place* also confronts the traditional role of cinematic sound technology. In scenes where Regan removes or shuts off the cochlear implant, the sound of the film completely drops away. In a short video included in the film’s special features, producer Andrew Form noted the unusual nature of the sound mix, and the apprehensions surrounding the sound decisions:

To go into Regan’s head, we turned the sound off in the movie. We don’t even have backgrounds on. There’s always backgrounds on in a movie. There’s always some sort of ambiance, from a room tone to outside, to crickets, to wind, and there’s two or three times in the movie where we turn it off completely. And we were so nervous, at least I was, are people going to think the speakers are broken? (Sound of Darkness)

In this quote, Andrew Form gestures to the expectations of sound in film. When sound is denied, when everything, including the “backgrounds” are switched off, there is a question of failure and technological breakdown. In her essay, “Ideology and the Practice of Sound Editing and Mixing” Mary Ann Doane argues that silence reveals the techniques and technology of sound mixing, fundamentally exposing the ideology of cinematic sound, “Since the absence of sound would signal a break in an otherwise continuous flow, it has become a major taboo of sound-track construction. When there is no sound effects, music, or dialogue, there must be, at the very least,
room tone or environmental sound.” It is sound, Doane states, that establishes ‘normality’ and flow to a film, while “the absence of sound, in the language of the sound technicians, is its ‘death’” (57). Switching off the backgrounds is thus not a simple decision, but a choice that fundamentally counters the ideology of sound mixing and editing. Rather than ‘death’ the silence of A Quiet Place’s loudspeakers serve to create embodied, actively involved audio-viewers, crafting a soundscape directly inspired by the lived experiences of the deaf actress, Millicent Simmonds.

Beyond silence, the use of sound in the film is also unconventional. The painful noise of the feedback is a sound usually avoided by sound editors. The process of including the noise was a balancing act, with Krasinski stating that earlier versions of the noise were even worse than the sound eventually chosen for the film: “We had like 100 different versions of feedback…The first few feedback sounds…created would have made you vomit. So it was this long process of fine-tuning it” (Murphy). This statement is evocative of the careful relationship between the body and technology, and the balance between immersion and comfort that the film navigates. The fine line between immersive pain, and pain that physically afflicts the body. Even in moments between painful noise or unexpected silence, the sound mix of A Quiet Place is uncommon. While Dolby Atmos offers filmmakers the possibility of filling the aural space with bombastic sound, such as the Harlem Shuffle scene in Baby Driver, A Quiet Place aptly demonstrates how Atmos can be used to alternatively immerse through delicate, subtle sounds. Although not originally mixed in Atmos, the Atmos mix was on the minds of the sound editors as they shaped the 7.1 surround version of the mix. Speaking on the Atmos pass, both supervising sound editors Ethan Van der Ryn and Erik Aadahl agreed one of their favourite parts of the Atmos version is the subtlest sounds of the baby mobile placed in the overhead speakers by re-recording mixer
Brandon Proctor. These delicate, quietly detailed sounds immerse the audience into the action, placing them in that space with Evelyn Abbott (Emily Blunt).

While its representation of the cochlear implant is riddled with inaccuracies and potential issues, *A Quiet Place* is still a significant film in which to consider the cochlear implant, sound technology, and the melding of body and technology. The sound mix of the film parallels the glitching implant with a similarly glitching sound mix, cutting out the backgrounds and exposing the audiences to unexpected levels of painful sound. In so doing, *A Quiet Place* immerses the audience through sound, adding an important dimension to representations of deafness, and the cochlear implant. In twisting expectations—of how films should sound, of how the cochlear implant should be figured in the media—*A Quiet Place* opens space for the viewer to consider the cultural and political ideas driving/shaping these expectations. Regan’s cochlear implant does not work in the manner intended by the manufacturers, her father or society. But in her glitching cochlear implant, and the alternating silence and noise of her point of audition perspective, *A Quiet Place* offers a nuanced representation of the complex tangle between the body and sound technology.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Sounding Out the Future

From Baby’s iPods and ringing tinnitus to Regan’s broken cochlear implant and her shades of silence, this thesis has examined the immersive and representational possibilities of point of audition sound. It has brought together studies of sound, Deafness, technology and disability to interrogate the complications of listening through a constructed aural perspective. It proves that sound offers an essential dimension to cinematic representations of deafness and hearing loss; point of audition creating soundscapes that immerse, envelop and affect the audio-viewer. Additionally, through an emphasis on sound technology, both films provide an opportunity to engage with the tangled relationship between sound technology, ideology, deafness and the modern listening body. Despite their differences in genre and tone, Baby Driver and A Quiet Place share a similar focus on technologically mediated point of audition sound—Baby and Regan’s aural experiences of the world are inextricably bound up within the technology they use. These case studies hence offered an acoustic platform to examine how cinematic sound technology represents the technology of sound. In the process, they exposed the essential connections between these sound technologies, tinnitus and deafness.

Chapters one and two traced the complex history between deafness, technology and cinema, outlining major works in the fields of sound, disability, technology and Deaf studies. Chapter three examined the relationship between tinnitus, iPods and the Dolby Atmos sound system in Baby Driver. It demonstrated the manner in which iPod culture, as detailed by Michael Bull, shapes the point of audition representation of tinnitus in the film. In the process, it exposed the impossible promise of sonic control and immersion imbedded in sound technology from the iPod to the Dolby Atmos sound system. The manner in which sound technology
shapes/constructs aural experiences is further examined in Chapter four, which focused on deafness and cochlear implants in *A Quiet Place*. This chapter situated Regan’s cochlear implant alongside the cultural and political debates surrounding the device. Through point of audition sound representations of Regan’s silence and the glitching noise of her broken implant, *A Quiet Place* immerses the audio-viewer into the blurred boundaries between the body and technology. In both *A Quiet Place* and *Baby Driver*, sound adds an essential dimension to the cinematic representations of deafness and hearing loss, providing a sounding space for audiences to re-consider the cultural and political ideas surrounding deafness, technology and film sound.

While representing the tangle of bodies, hearing and sound technology, *Baby Driver* and *A Quiet Place* both also tap into the temporal and cultural aspects of these sound technologies. Both the iPod and the cochlear implant are products of their time period, producing a listening experience that is reflective of a specific moment in time. In turn, Dolby Atmos, the cinematic sound system used to represent the aural experience of the iPod and cochlear implant, similarly reproduces the sound of a specific cultural moment. *A Quiet Place* and *Baby Driver* do not simply bring together the audio-viewer and the sound technology, these films also embody/reflect the sonic experiences and technological relationships of a specific moment in time.

Time is central to representations of the iPod throughout *Baby Driver*. One of the earliest memories Baby recalls in the film is the faded image of a long gone birthday, where he received his first iPod. The appearance of the first generation iPod can be used to temporally define Baby’s memories, the iPod setting the parameters for the timeline of Baby’s life in the film. Throughout the rest of *Baby Driver*, Baby is repeatedly shown using various models of the iPod Classic, blocky, brick-like players that resemble the original model of the device. It is a black
iPod classic that opens the film, blasting “Bellbottoms” by The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, and a white iPod classic that is destroyed as Baby attempts to flee Buddy’s murderous rampage. Yet, the device that Baby constantly uses to set the beat of his life is one that has conclusive temporal boundaries. First produced in 2001, the Apple iPod classic was discontinued by Apple in 2014 (Welch). Today, the only iPod that remains in production is the Touch, which largely functions as an iPhone without the ability to make phone calls (Welch). In 2019, Apple announced the end of iTunes, which will be replaced by new Music, TV and Podcast apps (Gurman). In the years since the appearance of the iPod and iTunes, the musical listening soundscape has shifted to musical streaming apps such as Spotify and Apple Music—apps the iPod classic (without internet capabilities) cannot access (Friedlander and Bass). By framing much of its point of audition sound through the iPod classic, Baby Driver captures a fleeting and nostalgic musical experience, which is further reflected in the older songs Baby plays.

Articles and reviews of Baby Driver frequently note the way in which the film triggers iPod nostalgia. Although the iPod today may be a “fossil, a remnant of a period where hard data storage was valuable and you could show off your pocket music library to your friends, listening together with a headphone splitter” (Geffen), many still hold a soft spot for the discontinued player. In his article, “‘Baby Driver’ Stirs Nostalgia for iPods”, Sridhar Pappu argues that the film prompts fond memories of the device for viewers, writing that today the iPod has arguably taken on the nostalgic glory of vinyl for younger generations (Pappu; Zoladz). Beyond the nostalgia for the device, Baby Driver also invokes the role of the iPod in shaping modern experiences of memory and nostalgia. In his study of iPod culture, Michael Bull dedicates a chapter to “the nostalgia of iPod culture”, writing that the device provides a “personalised auditory recall” that allows users to “control their nostalgic mnemonic as they manage their
journey through urban space” (135, 144). The titular character of Baby Driver uses his iPod to play the song “Easy” by Commodores, accessing the song as a means of managing the effects of a troubling flashback. With its emphasis on the discontinued classic iPod, and Baby’s use of the iPod to acoustically control his memories, Baby Driver engages with both technological and acoustic nostalgia.

With the increasing popularity of the Apple AirPods and other wireless earbuds, the technological nostalgia of Baby Driver also arguably extends to the familiar white wires of Baby’s EarPods. Despite the discontinuation of the iPod Classic and the changing manner in which users are accessing music, the principles of iPod culture as detailed by Bull still endure. The marketing of AirPods stresses the immersion and control the product offers it users, with Apple declaring “Put them in your ears and they connect immediately, immersing you in rich, high-quality sound. Just like magic.” Here, the AirPods are presented as a “magical” device, that immediately connects and immerses the user. A recent YouTube ad, “AirPods—Bounce” (2019) presents a man using his AirPods to transform the urban landscape into a bouncy playground, dancing and jumping off concrete walls and bus stops to the beat of the song in his (and the audio-viewer’s) ears. While the vision of the iPod as captured by Baby Driver may one day only be a memory, the continuing development of technology and iPod culture presents the possibility of new sonic relationships between the iPod and the audio-viewer in future films.

While the cochlear implant is not a mainstream cultural icon like the iPod, it is a device that has had an immense impact on the Deaf community. The implant is a relatively recent technological development, particularly in regards to pediatric and bilateral\(^\text{23}\) implantation

\(^{23}\) The implantation of the CI in both ears.
The cochlear implant is also an evolving technology, with Cochlear, the largest cochlear implant producer, working towards the development of a fully implantable CI (Cochlear). Such a development could substantially alter the visual appearance of the device, removing the externally worn sound processor. Like Baby’s discontinued iPods, Regan’s implant may one day pin-point a specific moment in the temporal development of the cochlear implant.

The emphasis on the cochlear implant in *A Quiet Place* can also be used to consider the evolving relationship between the implant and the modern D/deaf identity. In her book *Deaf Subjects: Between Identities and Places*, Brenda Jo Brueggemann writes of the fusions of time, identity and space embodied in the cochlear implant:

> In Deaf studies we might begin to rethink the potent fusions in the between spaces created by cochlear implants—between then (the past) and now (the present), as well as between now (the present) and then (the future). Tough, opportunistic, interesting and sometimes even beautiful things grow in the cracks of structures seemingly well established and impenetrable; the cochlear implant cyborg might just be such a crack-dweller. It will take more than an implant to make deaf identity (whatever it might be) go away (16).

The cochlear implant does not signal an end to Deaf culture. Rather, it is indicative of a shifting, and yet enduring identity—with more and more Gallaudet University students arriving with cochlear implants every year (Brueggemann 16). The relationship between the implant and language is similarly evolving, with the emergence of educational programs that facilitate and promote learning both auditory and signed languages. This movement has gained traction, as not all children are able to acquire and master age appropriate receptive and expressive spoken
language through the CI (Leigh and Paludneviciene viii). Although *A Quiet Place* is set in a dystopian world and created by hearing filmmakers, the complex relationship it establishes between Regan, her CI and the hearing world can arguably be used to consider the nuanced, shifting connection between the cochlear implant and D/deaf individuals.

Finally, the sound system used to immerse the audio-viewer in the ring of tinnitus and the painful glitch, Dolby Atmos, is a reflection of a specific moment in the timeline of film sound development. First launched in 2012, Atmos is a relatively recent platform. As Gianluca Sergi writes, with Atmos, Dolby promised to provide not simply a new digital surround sound system, but also to dramatically create “a completely new listening experience” (“Knocking” 110). Atmos is part of a movement of new technologies intended to immerse and entice viewers into theatres, from 3D, to large-screen projections, to the moving seats and environmental effects of 4Dx (Sergi, “Knocking” 110; Wright 228). However, Atmos, as Sergi argues, is more than a technological attraction. Atmos is “central to Dolby’s attempt not merely to introduce yet another technology but to recapture the prime position that it held in the cinema market” (109). In powerfully utilizing the immersive capabilities of Atmos, *Baby Driver* and *A Quiet Place* both gesture towards the future possibilities of film sound, when Atmos may one day be a ubiquitous sound platform. Similar to the diegetic iPod and cochlear implant, the use of Atmos in both films locates the audio-viewer in a specific cultural moment.

This thesis has argued that point of audition, is far more than an auditory quirk. With the roots of the concept in the early years of synchronized sound technology, during a period of sound space codification, point of audition is linked to the technologies and practices of cinematic sound. While point of view is largely limited to the constraints of the frame, point of audition sound provides an immerse experience; with the audio-viewer merged into the sonic
perspective of the character. *Baby Driver* and *A Quiet Place*, with their emphasis on iPods and cochlear implants, also demonstrate the way in which point of audition can be used to highlight how sound technology shapes modern listening practices and auditory expectations.

Drawing on Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne’s proposal of a ‘dismedia’ practice, this thesis endeavored to move beyond simply analysing the representation of deafness and hearing loss. Through the frame of point of audition sound, the culture, politics and production practices of sound technology can also be interrogated. However, this is just the beginning. Limited in scope to point of audition sound, and largely approached through the figure of the hearing audio-viewer, this thesis gestures towards the many possibilities of bringing together sound, disability and Deaf studies.

Point of audition asks the audio-viewer “not to hear, but to identify with someone who will hear for us” (Altman 60). For a moment we all listen together. And in this shared auditory experience we blur bodies, boundaries and technologies. We share the experience of humming, ringing, silence.
Works Cited


“AirPods—Bounce—Apple.” YouTube, uploaded by Apple, 27 June 2019,

   www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyNtm0LZiKc.

Altman, Rick. “Sound Space.” Sound Theory, Sound Practice, edited by Rick Altman,

   Routledge, 1992, pp. 46-64.


“BABY DRIVER – Official “TeKillYah” Trailer (HD).” YouTube, uploaded by Sony Pictures Entertainment, 1 June 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YirEgK7yJCg.

“‘Baby Driver’ Sound Designer Julian Slater Discusses Film’s Hit Soundtrack: In Studio With THR.” YouTube, uploaded by The Hollywood Reporter, 23 Feb. 2018.

   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvUHXgCNYwQ.


“Deaf People Hearing Sound for the FIRST Time.” YouTube, uploaded by Compilation Queen, 18 January 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZ6vSn7PaPI.


“Director Edgar Wright and Sound Supervisor Julian Slater.” *Dolby Institute Podcast Series* from Dolby and Soundworks Collection. 2 July 2018.


“Dolby Atmos Cinema Sound.” *Dolby Laboratories.*


“8 Month Old Deaf Baby’s Reaction to Cochlear Implant Being Activated.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Zoot C, 5 June 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HTzTt1VnHRM.


Krentz, Christopher B. “The Camera as Printing Press: How Film Influenced ASL Culture,” *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature*, edited by H-


luke_in_the_sky. “In the first scene of "A Quiet Place", when they are in the city…” Reddit, 2018. www.reddit.com/r/MovieDetails/comments/95mme8/in_the_first_scene_of_a_quiet_place_when_they_are/. Accessed 5 August 2019.


in=soundworkscollection/sets/conversations-with-sound-1#t=0:00.

“The Sound of Darkness—Editing Sound for A Quiet Place.” A Quiet Place, directed by John Krasinski, Extras, iTunes.

“SoundWorks Collection - The Sound of Brave.” YouTube, uploaded by Soundworks Collection, 12 June 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5k95UCVizOY.


“29 years old and hearing myself for the 1st time!” YouTube, uploaded by Sloan Churman, 26 September 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsOo3jzkhYA.


