

How silence can create a stronger emotional response from the audience

Introduction:

Sound has always taking a particularly strong role in the horror genre whether that's through its hair-raising score, a simple sound effect that creates a buildup of tension and unease for the audience, or even as simple as letting us as the viewer know where a character's located, I believe sound can be used for so much more and no film in the genre uses the art form of sound better than 2018's *A Quiet Place*.

A Quiet Place (2018) is a tense emotional horror thriller set in a post-apocalyptic world directed by John Krasinski. Written by John Krasinski, Bryan Woods and Scott Beck. Cinematography by Charlotte Bruus Christensen. Sound design by Erik Aadahl, Ethan Van Der Ryn. Starring Emily Blunt, John Krasinski, Millicent Simmonds, and Noah Jupe. The film's synopsis reads the following "A family struggles for survival in a world invaded by blind alien creatures with ultra-sensitive hearing" - (*IMDB, 2018*). My aim with this essay is to answer the question how the silence in *A Quiet Place* creates a stronger emotional response for us the audience?

Sound being written into the script:

The sound in a quiet place is not merely just background noise, it plays a key component in the post-apocalyptic survivalist world Director John Krasinski and writers Scott Beck and Bryan Wood have created, the antagonistic alien creatures rely on auditory cues to hunt our protagonists the Abbott family, the Abbott families youngest daughter is also deaf, the absence of sound shapes the entire structure of the world of *A Quiet Place* and its narrative. The world of *A Quiet Place* is designed around its sound design, but how does one create a narrative focused on sound with minimal dialogue? who better to hear it from than the creatives behind adding sound into the script of *a quiet place* writers Scott Beck and Bryan Wood. In a blog by the duo Scott Beck and Bryan Wood wrote for Indie Wire back in 2018 the pair stated on the challenging process of writing *A Quiet Place* Stating "Writing a silent movie isn't easy. You can't use dialogue as a crutch. And you can't bore the reader with blocks of description... This process forced us to take an unorthodox approach to screenwriting, in which we threw formatting styles to the wind" (*IndieWire, 2018*) A look at the script of a quiet place shows this unorthodox approach the pair took to writing the screenplay with minimal dialogue adding in pictures and props. Further to this unorthodox approach of writing, multiple lines in the script are highlighted which draw attention to the sound and the silence of the environment and its importance to the Abbotts family

dynamic. It sometimes feels that sound is an underappreciated art form in visual storytelling having analysed and read what writing Duo Scott Beck and Bryan Wood went through while writing this is clearly not the case.

We now know the importance of sound from the early days of Pre-Production but how does that translate onto the script?

Tragedy In the Silence:

With the world of *A Quiet Place* being centered around silence in a world full of emotions with nowhere to express or let it out, how can silence convey the emotions of loss, happiness sadness? *A Quiet Place* leaves little time for us as the audience to relax, from the very opening scene Director John Krasinski shocks us the audience. The opening scene follows the Abbott family as they scavenge round a local town looking for food and supplies for their home. The Abbott family consists of Father Lee played by John Krasinski, Mother Evelyn played by Emily Blunt, Daughter Regan played by Millicent Simmonds, their eldest son Marcus played by Noah Jupe and their youngest son Beau played by Cade Woodward. As the family makes their way from town to their farmhouse their youngest son Beau sets off a sound from a toy plane his sister Regan sneakily and unknowingly to their parents gave him, this sound draws attention to the alien creatures and before Lee can get to his youngest son he is killed.

There is a non-Diegetic score in the background to build that sense of tension and suspense, but it's the lack of diegetic sounds other than the toy plane that draws your attention, it heightens the level of emotion conveyed on the family's face, in a brief shot we see mother Evelyn holding in all the pain knowing the outcome of what's about to happen unable to let it out due to the environment they live in, it's in that moment of silence she's suffering in that we see an unrelatable pain that we become more emotionally saddened by an already tragic event. Through the silence of overwhelming emotions not only does it setup the stakes of the film, but the heart of the film also, the emotions of being in a family, in an interview with Vanity Fair director John Krasinski states "To me this whole movie is about family" (*Vanity Fair, 2018*)

Dancing in the Quiet:

One of the most emotionally driven heartwarming moments in the entire narrative takes place in the Abbott family's basement, between husband and wife Lee and Evelyn. Lee is working on his youngest daughter's hearing aid as Evelyn comes down and joins his

company. In this moment we truly see the love they have for one another, there are no lines of dialogue spoken, there is no sound, just complete silence, and in this moment of complete silence we as the audience can truly resonate with the bond they have for one another. The pure silence leaves us with no distraction we are fully focused on how they are looking at one another through the emotion of their eyes. The subtle nonverbal laugh adds to what is already a heartwarming moment we are watching.

“Silence can intensify the emotional impact of a scene. Without the distraction of dialogue or music, the audience's attention is drawn more closely to the visual expression of emotion, whether it's a character's facial expression, a lingering landscape, or a significant object.” (***No Film School, 2024***)

Let's have a quiet game night:

In one of the more tense scenes, the Abbott family have just finished dinner and brother, and sister Regan and Marcus are playing a quiet game of monopoly that is until Marcus accidentally knocks over a lamp setting off a flaming noise that Lee quickly puts out. The family visibly shook keep still, there is a further moment of complete silence that is followed by a loud thud on the roof, father Lee slowly moves towards the window with nothing to see as thankfully two raccoons fall off the roof and not one of those alien creatures. As we know there are many varying human emotions, I've spoken on the emotions of Love and Loss, this scene shows the emotions of fear and anxiety again through its use of sound and silence. This scene cuts between silence and sound and both work incredibly well in eliciting the same emotions for us the audience as the Abbott family were watching on screen. In these moments of silence, we as the audience get to sit with our emotions there is no sound that can distract us from our thoughts in this moment we feel the same emotions of anxiety and fear as the Abbott family. The silence mixed in with the sound complement each other perfectly, the long wait of silence after the broken lamp not only gives us the audience a moment to sit with our thoughts, but also gives us a false sense of security that nothing has come and therefore nothing will come until moments later we hear a thud from above, it is in the moment of sound we as an audience get an initial fright, subsequently again we are brought back to complete silence giving us another moment with our thoughts. The reason this scene is so tense is the mix of silence and sound blended and timed perfectly together.

A not so quiet birth:

Throughout the runtime we as an audience have been made aware that Lee and Evelyn are expecting a further child, this constant plot threat leads us to undeniably the most tense scene in the whole film as Evelyn's water breaks. After Evelyn's water breaks she heads down to the basement to alert Lee who is currently away from home with Marcus, a poked out nail on the stairs down leaves Evelyn in visibly agonising pain and also verbally, Evelyn struggles to keep herself together but with no other choice pushes through that when we are greeted on screen by one of the antagonistic aliens. Companied in the basement with one of the auditory aliens Evelyn is saved by the noise of a timer going off this gives her enough time to make her way upstairs only to be met by another antagonistic alien, left with no other options and a baby due any minute she makes her way upstairs to the bathroom and lays in the tub where she waits expecting her fourth born child. As the creature's edge closer and Evelyn is seconds away from giving birth, she lets out a loud scream with the creature peeking through the doorway, fireworks in the distance are set off by Marcus and not much is known of Evelyn's fate till shortly after Lee appears finding Evelyn and their newborn child.

There is an on off again score in this scene, the score itself sounds very much like a heartbeat, as the intensity of the scene increases so does the beat of the score matching Evelyn's increasing heartbeat. But again what really elicits those tense emotional responses for us the audience is the moments of silence, where at a point in the film where sound itself has become a main character in the film, we know the risk if Evelyn is to make any sound. The moment in the basement as the score quiets and we hear the eerie breathing of the antagonistic alien creature as Evelyn agonizingly holds in her pain is a tense moment that was created by being written into the script via sound and the use of sound being a main character this world has created, In this moment we as the audience wait and anticipate for something to break the silence, it's this atmosphere that creates the tension. The same could be said for the infamous bathroom scene, the score and visuals are key to the intensity of the scene but through the silence we can't fully hear as the audience but know is there is what elevates this scene to a whole another level through silence and sound being written into this world as the ultimate threat.

The sound of Family & A silent Goodbye:

As aforementioned in a Vanity Fair interview with John Krasinski stated, "To me this whole movie is about family" (*Vanity Fair*, 2018) no family is perfect in real life, imagine being forced into the harsh world conditions the Abbotts are situated in. One of the most interesting family dynamics played throughout is between father Lee and his daughter Regan. Regan is played by Millicent Simmonds who much like her on screen counterpart is

deaf in real life, Regan being deaf does give the Abbotts an upper hand in communicating in a world plagued in silence. Regan and Lee have a broken relationship, Regan feels her father blames her for the death of her younger brother Beau to which she gave the toy plane to in the opening scene not realising Beau had picked up batteries.

As we reach our climatic ending both kids are trapped inside a car, Lee severely injured on the ground gets back up. Lee and Regan look at each other for what looks likely to be the last time, Lee communicates to Regan silently through the communication of sign language reassuring her “He loves her” and “Always has loved her” as he lets out a roaring scream eliciting a response from the auditory antagonistic monster sacrificing his own life saving his son and daughters. An emotionally driven score, matched with the silence of dialogue truly connotes the love Lee has for his daughter. Even in the silence you can still confess your love to someone, quiet place perfectly depicts this message.

Conclusion:

In conclusion I believe *A Quiet Place* is a perfect example of how silence can create a stronger emotional response from an audience, whether that an emotion of Love, Lose, Fear, Anxiety, Tension. To highlight the opening scene again, due to it being a matter of survival the overwhelming silence of unexpressed emotions unable to be verbally let out makes it all the more heartbreaking, there's nothing worse than not being able to vocally express or say how you feel and the Abbott family live in a world where they don't have that luxury to fully express their emotions which brings out an even greater response in the audience. Silence is also a great way build tension and suspense as seen throughout, the absence of sound creates a feeling of unease for the us the audience as we wait and anticipate with our emotions as to what will happen next. Ultimately as director John Krasinski said this film is about family, the silence in this film gives us an emotional amplification of the love this family has for one another, not through sound of dialogue but the lack thereof we truly get to see it through the emotions of their eyes with no distraction. In summary, sometimes the most effective and best use of sound in film is silence.

Bibliography

A quiet place (2018) IMDb. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6644200/>
(Accessed: 02 January 2025).

(2018) *Interview: Screenwriters Scott Beck and Bryan Woods discuss a quiet place, writing process and so much more - script magazine*. Available at: <https://scriptmag.com/features/interview-scott-beck-bryan-woods-screenwriters-quiet-place> (Accessed: 02 January 2025).

Woods, B. (2018) 'A quiet place': How two indie filmmakers accidentally wrote a studio film for Emily Blunt and John Krasinski, *IndieWire*. Available at: <https://www.indiewire.com/features/craft/a-quiet-place-screenwriters-emily-blunt-john-krasinski-bryan-woods-scott-beck-1201948205/> (Accessed: 02 January 2025).

Hellerman, J. (2024) *Why more filmmakers should use silence in their work, No Film School*. Available at: <https://nofilmschool.com/why-filmmakers-use-silence> (Accessed: 02 January 2025).

A quiet place (2018) (no date) *Script Slug*. Available at: <https://www.scriptslug.com/script/a-quiet-place-2018> (Accessed: 02 January 2025).

John Krasinski Breaks Down A Quiet Place's Lantern Scene | Notes on a Scene | Vanity Fair (2018) *YouTube*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azFsk42kb5E> (Accessed: 02 January 2025).