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Spectacular Silence and the Ends of Moviegoing

The Cinema as *A Quiet Place* (c. 2021)

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Abstract

The theatrical release of A Quiet Place Part II *(*AQPII*) in May 2021, following months of cinema closures due to COVID-19, was dubbed a 'referendum on the future of moviegoing' (Paramount). The film imagines a post-apocalyptic future where humans must remain silent to survive, and the film-makers were adamant that the much-delayed sequel, just like the first instalment, would have to be experienced in cinemas. Whereas the 'permanent campaign for moviegoing' (Acland) historically has tapped into the loudness of cinematic sound, the marketing campaign for* AQPII *showcased 'spectacular silence' instead of 'spectacular sound' (Grainge) as its unique selling point. This article argues that the franchise's reversed sonic economy is part of a broader shift in the meanings and values of the cinema as a place for listening. By zooming in to a specific musical gesture pivotal to the film and its promotion, and examining film trailers, pre-show announcements, and audience surveys, I suggest that the* Quiet Place *franchise is indicative both of the increasing importance of silence in indexing the specificity of the cinematic experience and of a growing tension between traditional cinemagoing and ideals of sonic control and privatisation that are endemic to the technological interfaces of late capitalism.*

Keywords: silence, listening, cinemagoing, promotional materials, relocation

An Empty Place

When the post-apocalyptic horror movie *A Quiet Place Part II* (*AQPII*) had its global theatrical release on 28 May 2021, cinemas had been empty for a long time.[1] Multiplexes in the US and the UK – where the first instalment had opened strongly in 2018 – had been shut or operating under severe COVID-19 restrictions for over a year. As Hollywood studios decided to postpone their main theatrical releases indefinitely or go straight to digital platforms, several major exhibitors, including the UK's main

[1] This article draws on versions presented at Royal Holloway, University of London (2021), the University of Cambridge (2022), King's College London (2023), and the Music and the Moving Image Conference XX (NYU, 2024), and I am grateful to the colleagues and attendees whose thoughtful questions helped refine it. Particular thanks go to Nicole Ruta for her support in collecting and analysing audience responses to *A Quiet Place Part II*, which inform this research.

three cinema chains – Odeon, Cineworld, and Vue – famously took the decision to keep most of their outlets closed throughout the pandemic, even when legally allowed to reopen (Hancock, 2020). Others, like AMC Theatres – the largest theatre chain in the world – declared that they might file for bankruptcy by the end of the year.

The extraordinary economic impact of these closures fed into long-established anxieties about the future of moviegoing (Lang & Rubin, 2020). The pandemic seemed to accelerate the transition to a model that would no longer privilege and protect theatrical releases, finally displacing the centrality of moviegoing in our understanding of what cinema is. In popular discourse, worries about the longevity of the 'projector-film-theatre-complex' (Casetti, 2015, p.7) have crystallised around the figure of the individual 'separated spectator' – consumers watching films on their smartphones and tablets. Public health regulations emerging around COVID-19 encouraged precisely the kind of small-screen, atomised consumer behaviour that many in the industry had seen as 'the beginning of the end of conventional moviegoing' (Ward, 2019, p.119).

The release of *AQPII* – indefinitely postponed in March 2020 and eventually appearing with a relaxation of distancing measures in Europe, the UK, and the US – was thus inevitably caught up in a debate about the cinematic experience and the possibility (or not) of its 'relocation' (Casetti, 2015). Talk of where and when to release this post-apocalyptic sequel became, in other words, talk about cinema's post-digital and post-vaccine future. Crucially for my purposes here, the film amplified the role of sound in such debates. The *Quiet Place* franchise imagines a future in which humans are hunted by aliens that have monstrously sensitive ears, ready to kill anything that makes the slightest sound; because of this, the film-makers and producers were adamant that the 2021 sequel, like its 2018 predecessor (*A Quiet Place*, hereafter *AQP*), would have to be experienced in cinemas.[2]

In particular, the franchise follows the destiny of one American family whose oldest child – a teenage girl called Regan – discovers that her cochlear implant can be used as a weapon against the monsters, who are vulnerable to its feedback loop (a scenario that is in itself fantastical: as some reviewers emphasised, cochlear implants do not produce feedback sound (Dockrill, 2021)). Owing to the unusual centrality of a deaf character in a mainstream production and the casting of a deaf actor in a deaf role, much urgent and valuable critical attention has been directed towards the representation of deafness in the first instalment (Berry, 2021). Here I develop a distinct (though, as we shall see, intersecting) line of enquiry that I hope will shed further light on the franchise's politics of listening. I want to suggest that the sounds and silences of *A Quiet Place* (including those

[2] For clarity, and to minimise repetitiveness, this article will use *AQP* and *AQPII* to refer to the individual films, while retaining the full name *A Quiet Place* when discussing the entire franchise.

with the overt aim of representing a deaf perspective) are underpinned by a desire for undisturbed aural privacy that is central to hearing cultures, and more specifically, to a valorisation of quietness and sonic control that is endemic to the technological interfaces of late capitalism.

This argument is developed by exploring materials, such as film trailers and venue-specific promotional messages, that tend to be overlooked by audiovisual analysis, and by integrating diverse theoretical and empirical approaches, connecting formal analysis, first-person phenomenological accounts, and audience surveys that are rarely in dialogue with each other. Through a 'vertical' case study of the role of sound in the marketing, framing, reception, and relocation of *AQPII*, I explore how, in the middle of a sustained renegotiation of the boundaries between theatrical exhibition and private streaming, the franchise foregrounded the power of silence in order to make a case for the experiential pay-offs of cinemagoing. Zooming in to a musical gesture that played a central role in the film and its promotion, and studying the affordances of soundtrack aesthetics vis-à-vis recent work on aural privacy and collective spectatorship, I will argue that the sonic strategies and audile metaphors of *A Quiet Place* are part of broader changes in the cultural meaning and values of the cinema as a place for listening.

A Loud Place

Through a history of several crises, changes in cinematic sound have regularly been used to promote the continuing relevance of cinemagoing. Often, this has hinged on sheer volume. Loudness, with its associated notions of scale, impact, spectacle, eventfulness, and presence, has been repeatedly mobilised. As James Buhler puts it, 'the appellation "big and loud" belongs to the concept of the "cinematic" and defines a particular aesthetic of spectacle even when it is denigrated' (2021, p.119). Buhler traces the link between loudness and cinematic sound all the way back to the early days of the talkies, when film exhibitors turned up the volume of canned sound to compensate for the disappearance of a live orchestra – and did so with mixed results. A more specific context for exploring the sound and significance of *A Quiet Place*, however, is the way loudness has become a marker for the visceral impact of mainstream cinema since the late 1970s.

Focusing on promotional trailers for Dolby Surround Sound, Paul Grainge (2008) has shown that 'spectacular sound' – sound that calls attention to its own exceptional qualities in terms of frequency, dynamics, and directionality – has become routine in the industry's 'permanent marketing campaign' (Acland, 2003, p.77). 'Selling spectacular sound',

as Grainge puts it, has been regularly used by the industry not just to sell specific films, but to sell the '"big screen" experience' in itself (2008, p.252). The crucial role that Dolby technologies played in the resurgence of Hollywood is well documented, and while it would be reductive to equate Dolby and spectacular sound merely with loudness, the experiential salience of high volume should not be underestimated. As Jay Beck shows, the 'boom aesthetic' of 1970s Dolby Stereo was originally an attempt to emulate 'the wideband loudness of home stereo systems and rock concerts' (2008, p.70), and while the soundtracks of the blockbuster era were certainly also characterised by subtle sound design, the audience's experience seemed to be marked primarily by visceral responses to the extreme volume and 'decibellicosity' (Le Guin, 1978) of the cinematic events.

In the 1990s, with the transition to digital surround sound and the expansion of the home video market, we see a further escalation in sound levels and a further step towards making 'loudness' a metonym for the 'cinematic'. Paratextual marketing materials provide plenty of evidence. James Deaville shows that trailers became a battlefield for the so-called 'loudness war': 'Studios began to compete with each other for the audience's attention under the guise that "louder is better"', both in the films themselves and in their promotion, so much so that in 1999, the National Association of Theatre Owners decided to create an association (the Trailer Audio Standards Association, or TASA) specifically dedicated to setting limitations for the volume of trailers (Deaville, 2021, p.452).

To an extent, the link between loudness and the promotion of cinemagoing seems to have been further secured by the sensory turn of contemporary cinema. 'Increased volume', as Jeff Smith (2013) and Buhler (2020) show, is one specific way in which soundtracks may contribute to the 'impact aesthetics' of intensified continuity, but is also part and parcel of many of the other features they identify, from 'expanded frequency range' to the 'prominence of percussion', the spectacle of 'epic choirs', and the organisation of the soundtrack around 'explosion points' (Buhler, 2020, pp.288–289).

Yet loudness comes with limitations. First, as an attention-grabbing device, its usefulness decreases with habituation and, as the very existence of TASA demonstrates, exposure to high volumes can bring physiological, as well as cognitive, fatigue (Deaville, 2021). Second, because of its successful association with an idea of the 'cinematic', loudness is something that can be used both to invoke and transcend medium specificity. Dolby, a transmedia brand that exploits the convergence of platforms, is emblematic of this: the promotion of Home Theatre has relied heavily on the possibility of relocating spectacular sound (Kerins,

2017, pp.390–391). In other words, in the very moment that it becomes a successful index of the cinematic, loudness also becomes a (successful) vehicle for relocating the theatrical experience. Ultimately, Dolby's success undermines the ability of loudness and spectacular sound to remain cinema's USP, a feature that once set it apart.

Selling Spectacular Silence

In May 2021, while big-budget productions such as *Dune* (Denis Villeneuve, 2021) and *Black Widow* (Cate Shortland, 2021) were seeing immediate video-on-demand releases, Paramount decided to give *AQPII* a forty-five-day exclusive theatrical release. Within a few days of its premiere, the film was hailed for 'smashing Pandemic Era Records' (Lang, 2021) and becoming 'the biggest pandemic-era US box office hit' (BBC News, 2021). *AQPII* also performed well in international markets. In the UK, it led box office with a £2.2 million opening weekend that was up 13 per cent on the returns made by *AQP* in 2018. The sequel's success was celebrated by Paramount's distribution chief as 'a referendum on the future of moviegoing' (Lang, 2021).

In keeping with a well-established tradition, this 'referendum' used sound to persuade viewers to vote with their feet. The strategy was encapsulated by the final trailer released by Paramount on 6 May 2021, a couple of weeks ahead of the film's much-deferred theatrical premiere. Relying on the popularity of the first instalment, the trailer of *AQPII* does not explicitly reference the film's narrative premise. It starts with an establishing shot of an eerily deserted street (are we already in a post-apocalyptic future?). As we cut to the quiet normality of a small-town grocery shop, it is clear that what we are watching precedes the alien invasion and the events seen in the previous film. A sense of foreboding is maintained through the defamiliarisation of everyday sounds – a shop doorbell and the crackling of single-use plastic bags boosted against an otherwise very quiet and sparse soundscape. The shop owner, watching breaking news on a TV behind the counter, casually mentions 'some kind of bomb'. After a brief moment of silence, the trailer suddenly hits us with the havoc produced by a mysterious attack; screaming crowds and devastating blasts come from all sides. Another sudden cut and – fast-forward to the future – we now see the long-term impact of the alien landing. The world has gone quiet. A family of survivors is escaping to the countryside using sand and underground hideouts to suppress noise. At this stage, the pace of editing starts to synchronise with music, and the trailer turns into an extended and increasingly faster montage of horror tropes: characters recoiling in terror, hiding in the dark, running

for their lives, loading guns, their bodies dragged by off-screen forces. Then, during this otherwise frenetic build-up, before the final adrenaline rush, the soundtrack drops silent again. Or nearly so. We hear the hyperdetailed (and heavily compressed) sound of breathing set against an unnaturally silent backdrop, digitally cleansed of all ambient noise. The sharp alternation between absolute silence and the sound of breathing is synchronised with the alternation between images and captions telling us that 'THIS IS THE EXPERIENCE THEATRES WERE MADE FOR'. After this, the sequence of shoot-outs and chases resumes, ending with one of the main characters jumping inside the furnace of a disused steel foundry. As she attempts to close the vault door behind her, a split second before we cut to black and to silence again, we catch sight of a monstrous tentacle. The sales pitch is rounded off by a familiar message that acquires specific significance in the context of a post-vaccine return to public events: 'ONLY IN THEATRES'.

The trailer of *AQPII* displays all the markers of 'spectacular sound'. It capitalises on the possibilities of digital surround sound and showcases the impact aesthetics of contemporary film soundtracks. The spectacle of sound, however, is here arranged so as to draw particular attention to gaps and absences. The trailer employs three main tactics that, combined, make a spectacle of the withdrawal of sound. It starts by drawing attention to extreme quietness – the establishing shot of the deserted street also establishing an 'almost silent' baseline (Théberge, 2008, p.51). It dramatises quietness as the prerequisite for hyperdetailed hearing: the heightened individual sounds inside the grocery shop. And at every significant structural turn in the trailer, it employs sharp drops in volume to punctuate the action on screen, with the soundtrack typically falling to absolute or near-absolute silence right after a build-up or just before prominent 'explosion points'. These drops take several shapes: the characteristic 'suction', 'whooshing' sounds of reverse effects synchronised with rapid cuts to black; short and sharp 'wedges' of absolute silence interposed between loud sounds (between a gun-cocking sound and the gunshot, between seeing and hearing a distant blast); and foreboding plateaus of absolute silence and extreme quietness marking first the end of the frenetic chase and then the very end of the trailer.

The link between the trailer's strategy of spectacular silence and a pandemic-time campaign for a return to moviegoing is forged right at the end, when the rhythmic alternation between absolute, clinical silence and the amplified sound of breathing is combined with the sales pitch. These conspicuous silences, the trailer seems to claim, are what cinemas 'were made for'. In this moment, the trailer anticipates the film's broader game of sensory deprivation; it seems to suggest that cinema theatres,

particularly because they are traditionally loud, sonically immersive spaces, are ideal for a play with absence, where the disappearance of sound is designed to stimulate and sharpen our sensory responses, making us more sensitive and vulnerable to its return. The trailer displays a reversed sonic economy, where unexpected, striking, 'spectacular silence', framed by more conventional loud sounds and whooshing effects, is presented as the USP for the film and for cinemagoing. It signals an emergent strategy of selling cinemagoing by foregrounding the powerful and peculiar experience of (attending to) spectacular absences within a highly structured, technological, and controlled space.

Silence Drops

The drop routines in the *AQPII* trailer have populated the promotional material of action movies since the mid-2000s. They are a well-established convention of film trailers, but one that – I am arguing – is acquiring additional significance in the context of a broader renegotiation of the meanings of cinemagoing. Their origins are in electronic dance music (EDM). Similarly to film trailers, EDM tracks are routinely built on predictable patterns of intensification. The texture typically gets increasingly layered, louder, and higher in frequencies until it reaches a peak, and the build-up leads to the temporary withdrawal of the beat and to a very brief moment of absolute silence. In EDM, these formal patterns are meant to shape the energy of the dance floor. The absence of music is temporarily filled with the sound of the dancers' breath and the shuffling of bodies. As the beat makes a dramatic return, its affect is typically described as both frenzied and cathartic (Minett, 2013). The silence creates anticipation as dancers in clubs wait for the climatic return of the beat, their energy briefly suspended before being finally released. An implicit, collective choreography is thus built into the routine: you are aligned with others through a shared anticipation for the bass to be 'dropped' (Yadati et al., 2014; Torvanger Solberg & Refsum Jensenius, 2019).

In recent years, these silent choreographies have taken novel musical incarnations, gaining in scale and extending from EDM clubs to popular music and mass concerts. In one such incarnation, the so-called 'mute challenge', musicians pause their live performance of a song at crucial structural points, and crowds are expected to stay completely quiet until the music is resumed. First launched by Beyoncé's song 'Energy' (a club song that uses silence in ways that refer self-consciously to the enthrallment of Beyoncé's live performances), and subsequently picked up by artists including Zendaya, Adele, Taylor Swift, and Olivia Rodrigo, the challenge

turned into a 2022 social media trend (Gibson, 2023). The 'mute challenge', as a stretched-out version of the silence punctuating EDM tracks, makes a spectacle of the audience's disciplined presence, its ability to act as one body shaped by the same 'intentional object', as phenomenologists would call it. It is a spectacular way of turning the audience's attention towards itself and its participation in the performance. The drop routines in *A Quiet Place* have a comparable shape and function: they provide further evidence not only of the growing influence of EDM on film trailers and contemporary soundtracks, but of the broader role that spectacular silence is gaining in negotiating the meanings of media experiences.

The 'silence drops' that we hear in the trailer of *AQPII* are telltale signs of the film's broader sonic approach and of wider cinematic trends. The sonic tactics showcased in the trailer are used extensively and in extended and narratively motivated fashion in the main body of the film. Ethan Van der Ryn and Erik Aadahl, the film's sound designers, speak of the creation of 'sonic envelopes' for the franchise's characters. For Regan, they developed two kinds of envelopes: a 'cochlear implant envelope', which is intended to 'mimic the feeling of being in an anechoic chamber' (Murphy, 2018; also quoted in Berry, 2021), and an 'envelope in which you turn the implant off and we go to complete absolute silence' (Trenholm, 2019). Regan's on-screen presence, combined with the plot-driven imperative to keep quiet and the mayhem created by violent attacks, thus means that the *Quiet Place* films are structured around large-scale drop routines. The switches in aural perspective from normative hearing to Regan's 'deaf point of audition' (Berry, 109) are typically marked by sudden 'drops' at the end of loud build-ups.

In *AQPII*, this audiovisual rhythm is set up right at the outset. As the aliens plunge on a sleepy town in the Hudson Valley, the film cuts between different sites and between Regan's and the rest of her family's realisation of the impending horror. Within a two-minute sequence, we are exposed twice to a pattern whereby the baseline ambient sound is interrupted by a sudden blast and an increase in dynamics generated by the monsters striking and by the ensuing panic, and this increase in sonic activity is in turn interrupted by a sudden drop to extended moments of absolute silence (of about ten seconds each) that are motivated by Regan's POA.

A readily available option within the aesthetics of avant-garde and art cinema (Remes, 2020), the foregrounding of sonic absence is a relatively novel tool for mainstream cinema, and one that requires adequate narrative motivation and paratextual framing. When the film-makers of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (Rian Johnson, 2017) decided to drop all sound during the final climactic explosion, film theatres deemed it necessary to prepare

viewers that this was deliberate and not a malfunction of the audiovisual apparatus or a health emergency (Fernandez, 2017). The *Quiet Place* franchise in particular combines three types of film and cinematic situation that in recent years have made prominent use of sonic absence. First, *AQP* and *AQPII* are instances of what I suggest we call 'sensory deprivation movies', a subgenre of horror movies that makes silence central for the characters' survival. Examples include *Don't Breathe* (Fede Álvarez, 2016) and its sequel *Don't Breathe 2* (Rodo Sayagues, 2021), *Hush* (Mike Flanagan, 2016), and *The Silence* (John Leonetti, 2019), which is based on an almost identical premise to *A Quiet Place* – a nuclear family with a deaf member escaping from monstrous creatures that have supernaturally sensitive hearing. Second, *AQP* marked the beginning of a recent trend of mainstream releases giving a central role to a deaf character and exploring the sonic rendering of deafness. Prominent examples include *The Sound of Metal* (Darius Marder, 2019), a film whose journey ends in silence, with the protagonist's decision to embrace a new way of being in the world and stop measuring his hearing against a pre-hearing-damage parameter of normality, and the Oscar-winning *CODA* (Sian Heder, 2021), which features the striking silencing of a climactic musical concert, using sudden aural shifts to render the experiential perspective of the deaf family of the singing protagonist. Third, the silence drops of the *Quiet Place* franchise are emblematic of films built around prominent sonic explosions that are dramatised by a significant delay or by silencing the noise of the explosion entirely. Alongside the abovementioned *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, a prominent example is Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023), whose wall-to-wall music temporarily drops to absolute silence during the 'Trinity Test', when the atomic bomb is detonated. *Oppenheimer* was crucial to the financial windfall of a struggling sector still far from recovering from COVID closures; in another paradoxical example of a marketing campaign for cinemagoing building expectation around a spectacular absence, ahead of its release the film-makers deliberately drew attention to the moment of the bomb's detonation while refusing to reveal its audiovisual details.[3]

[3] See, for example, Nolan in Bowman (2023).

To an extent, of course, these films' strategies of spectacular silence are in keeping with a continuing investment in the loudness of the cinematic. Noiseless silence heightens the impact of loud volumes: after all, the spectacle of Dolby Stereo was always reliant on Dolby's noise-reduction system (Chion, 2009, p.149). Horror soundtracks are but one genre in which film-makers have used the dynamic tension between the absence and presence of sound, using quietness as the foil for a startling sound or for the beginning of a build-up. In the instances I have highlighted, however, there is a shift in perspective between figure and ground. While

the use of extreme contrast is conventional, the hierarchy between sound and silence is overturned. Silence is not merely a framing, punctuating, and preparatory device for build-ups and stingers; it is singled out as a central, salient experiential and structural feature in its own right. Big silence, rather than big sound, is dropped at the core of a large-scale cinematic experience.

Listening to Silence (Alone, Together)

Audiences responded strongly to *AQPII*'s use of spectacular silence. In the summer of 2021, as cinemas in the US and UK tentatively reopened their doors, we conducted an audience survey to capture these experiences without relying solely on media reception.[4] Working within limitations of travelling and social distancing, we distributed a paperless questionnaire to cinemagoers attending screenings of *AQPII* at Vue and Cineworld cinemas, my local cinema chains in Cardiff, UK. This was scanned from QR codes and completed by twenty-nine cinemagoers.

The in-person survey was supplemented by responses from forty-one Reddit users who had recently watched the film in a cinema. Across in-person and online groups, the average age of respondents was just under 30 (28.7), with the majority in their early 20s, and a good balance between participants identifying as men and women (56% and 44% respectively). Statistical analysis revealed no significant differences between the in-person survey and the Reddit responses, enhancing confidence in the consistency of the data across the two samples.

Gathering audience impressions, both at film screenings and online, is inherently challenging because it relies on self-selecting participants. As a result, 'convenience' samples are often used, instead of randomised ones, despite their limitations in terms of generalisability. Indeed, my aim in reporting on this survey is not to generalise about film reception but rather to leverage all available tools to bring the spectacular silence of *AQPII* and its affective qualities into focus.[5] This approach does not seek to smooth over the tensions inherent in mixed methods and perspectives but instead to explore them. In this case, the audience survey offers a vantage point for highlighting frictions between the film's spectacularisation of silence, the supposedly progressive representation of deafness, and the self-regulation of audience behaviour.

In order to explore the salience and nature of the experience of sound in a cinematic setting, the survey deliberately did not ask participants about the soundtrack but provided indirect opportunities to address it in the process of answering broader questions about their experience of the film. Several elements emerge from the responses collected from

[4] I designed, ran, and analysed the survey in collaboration with Dr Nicole Ruta, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, KU Leuven.

[5] For a fuller discussion of the types of scholarly labour required to bring the elusive traces of cinematic listening into focus, see Cenciarelli (2021).

cinemagoers. About three out of four participants selected sound as one of the aspects of *AQPII* they enjoyed most (more than plot, visuals, special effects, and characters), and the use of silence was repeatedly mentioned in open-ended questions. Several spectators registered the film's tactics of spectacular silence, reporting being struck by 'sudden' shifts in volume and texture and by the use of 'total silence'. They also appreciated the way these moments generated tension and positioned them in the perspective of the deaf character. When asked what they 'enjoyed most about the film', participants referred explicitly to drops in sound levels and to the use of total silence as ways of promoting identification with Regan, as illustrated by the following quotes:

> The way the entire sonority goes to the sudden silence in action and dramatic scenes to emphasize Regan's point of view.
>
> How they used muffled sound and no sound to put the watcher in the position of the deaf character.
>
> The use of silence is central to the film and works very well to heighten the tension. I also appreciated scenes where the audience experiences the perspective of the hearing-impaired character.
>
> I love how the movie plays with total silence, when we're in the mind/head of the deaf girl character.

The important role played by silence for participants is also indirectly indicated by the fact that those who chose sound as one of the aspects they enjoyed most about *AQPII* were also significantly more likely to report that they felt higher levels of 'connection' with Regan.[6] In this sense, responses to the survey support arguments advanced by critics and scholars about the film's intervention in the cultural representation of deafness. In her study of the sound design of the first instalment of the franchise, Gabrielle Berry provides a sensitive and sophisticated reading of the film's '"fantasy" of deafness' (2021, p.115) and argues that the film folds characters and spectators into powerful 'temporary identifications' (p.118). Berry argues that the sound design engenders a 'truly immersive' encounter with a 'deaf point of audition, wrapping the audio-viewer in the experience of "deafness"' (p.117). While corroborating Berry's argument that *A Quiet Place* can engender powerful identifications with a deaf point of audition, however, our survey also suggests that these moments of radical silence were, emphatically and unnervingly, moments of listening to silence, unsettling moments that entailed attending to the sonic qualities of the cinema and to the audible (and potentially distracting) presence of others in the auditorium. Indeed, a final element that emerges clearly from the responses concerns the way the soundtrack

[6] The data analysis we conducted (a linear regression model) suggests a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) causal relationship between the enjoyment of the film's use of sound and the stronger connection with Regan: those who selected sound as one of their favourite features of *AQPII* also experienced a significantly higher 'connection' with the girl (mean value = 7.89) compared to those who did not report sound as one of their favourite elements of the movie (mean value = 6.65).

activated the cinematic space and forced spectators to be as quiet as the characters on screen, as in these answers detailing what participants found most striking about the cinematic experience:

> Sound effects, how audible the subtle sounds were in the theater. The crunches of the steps, the movement of the dirt as they walk silently. More so when the sound cuts out from the perspective of the young deaf girl, lots of anxiety not knowing what is happening when we're shown her POV.
>
> Love how it plays with sound to up the horror, it was truly so quiet in my theater you could hear a pin drop…
>
> Sound: with the lack of it, it forces audiences to also be extremely quiet.

Crucially, these comments point to how *A Quiet Place* plays with the phenomenology of listening to silence. In a much-quoted passage (one that Berry also cites), Michel Chion notes how Dolby noise reduction, by giving film-makers the opportunity of silencing the soundtrack, 'makes us feel exposed as if it were laying bare our own listening' (2003, p.151). When our participants spoke of how the soundtrack required *them* 'to also be extremely quiet', they articulated this sense of being listened *to*. Yet what Chion calls the 'silence of the loudspeakers' does not just lay bare our *individual* listening; it also lays bare the collective nature of cinematic spectatorship. Writing about theatre, George Home-Cook argues that silence makes us aware 'of our own uncomfortable existence as silently present subjects within a larger collectivity of silent selves' (2015, p.129). For Home-Cook, the theatricality of listening is most vividly experienced during plays because of the co-presence of silent actors and silent spectators. However, Julian Hanich's film phenomenology has theorised several important ways in which 'quietly watching a film' (2014, p.359) can expose the (residual, much downplayed) theatricality of cinematic spectatorship and the neglected sense in which film audiences *perform* their joint attention to the film. Hanich's focus is primarily on the structures of experience, but the *Quiet Place* franchise shows the extent to which specific soundtrack aesthetics can contribute to 'thematising' the presence of others. In this sense, a soundtrack that is structured around gaps and absences, by generating a sharper awareness of the performative dimension of cinematic spectatorship, offers further opportunities to recode traditional cinemagoing as a 'live' event, conveniently so from a marketing perspective, and pointedly so against a backdrop of separate media consumption promoted and temporarily enforced by the pandemic. Not only are we being listened to 'by' the film, we (actively) listen to a space that is made a-live again, vulnerable to the here and now and to the agency of co-present individuals.

Spectators' comments, however, also point to the fact that the idea of collective spectatorship afforded by this film's sonic absences, just like the promotion of 'temporary identifications with deafness', is not neutral or all-inclusive. The franchise's rendering of deafness rests on *spectacularising* non-normative hearing and exacerbates the self-regulation of audience behaviour in the name of an ableist ideal of unimpaired cinematic listening that is assumed to be required for the optimal film experience.[7] Sharing silence in *A Quiet Place* places particular pressures on individual behaviour and, as the franchise's reception further shows, gains specific value in relation to competing economies of sound and consumption.

[7] For a critique of the ideology of ableism underpinning spectator etiquette, see Sedgman (2018). For a discussion of untenable and philosophically fraught notions of unimpaired listening, see Sterne (2021).

Popcorn Noise and Media Consumption

When *AQPII* was released, social distancing measures further thematised the notion of a 'quiet collectivity'. From the moment of booking to the moment of finding their seat, spectators would receive several reminders of the stringent cinema etiquette in place. For my participants at Vue and Cineworld cinemas, 'physically distanced seating' would impose separation, so that 'you and those in your booking are automatically seated apart from others', with the compulsory use of face masks acting as a symbolic and practical obstacle to verbal communication. In keeping with this uncanny alignment between pandemic-time health measures and a longer history of regulating audience behaviour,[8] a meaningful exception remained: customers would be able to remove face coverings 'to consume food and drinks'.[9]

[8] For a sonic perspective on this history, see Ward (2019).

[9] I am here citing information included in automated confirmation emails after the online booking of film tickets at Vue and Cineworld in June 2021.

The way film-snacking was allowed to test the limits of public health regulations highlights complex and potentially contradictory demands often made on cinema and cinemagoing. The problem of eating and drinking while watching *A Quiet Place* had dominated the film's media reception in 2018. When the first instalment came out, several headlines drew attention to its implications for cinema etiquette. For CNET, the 'sound guys [were taking] on noisy eaters'. 'They will become the hunted by fellow moviegoers if they're opening up their little candy wrapper', joked sound editor Erik Aadahl (Trenholm, 2019). Unsurprisingly, this irony was played out (in memetic fashion) by audiences on Twitter, with several tweets (and several thousand retweets) noting how the film's sonic logic seemed to extend into the space of the cinema theatre. 'Everyone is terrified to eat popcorn during *A Quiet Place*', summed up *Mashable* (Colbert, 2018), rehearsing an idea found in several other internet reviews and blogs (Burwick, 2018). British coverage ran with this theme. The *Guardian* argued that *AQP* was one of the 'few films' that could be said to truly 'affect the way we behave inside the cinema' and noted that it was becoming 'a cause célèbre for

anti-popcorn crusaders' on both sides of the Atlantic (Queenan, 2018). On BBC Radio 1, presenter Nick Grimshaw, juxtaposing absolute radio silence with extremely loud close-ups, used radio equipment to re-enact his experience as a spectator trying to open a pack of crisps in the middle of the film's tense silences (BBC News, 2018).

COVID-19 raised the stakes. Rehearsing the joke that 'in the logic of the film […] the crunch of popcorn' produced by fellow spectators could 'kill', *Wired* added that 'in the logic of our reality, until a few months ago, even their breaths could do the same' (Tan, 2021). The spectacular silence of *A Quiet Place*, reframed by the pandemic, seemed to lay bare an ever more fragile balance between the solitary and collective dimensions of cinemagoing. Throughout the franchise's reception – on social media, online reviews, and newspaper headlines – the ubiquitous idea of 'popcorn noise' was a sonic metaphor of the conflict between potentially competing forms of consumption and provided an opportunity to have a broader debate on the particular nature of the cinema as a public place where we also expect to be able to enjoy an entirely safe, free, and unhindered private experience.

In a literal sense, the noise of popcorn betrays a specific tension between the cinema and food industries, interests that have tended to enjoy a fruitful but delicate synergy since at least the 1930s. Historically, cinemas have relied on the sale of popcorn and snacks in order to create larger profit margins. As food historians have shown, movie cultures have played a crucial role in promoting popcorn snacking as an American (and then global) pastime, just as profits from popcorn and other snacks helped cinema owners magnify their margins on individual ticket sales when audience numbers dwindled (Smith, 2001, pp.99–103). This strategy was crucial to the survival of many cinemas (large and small) during the 1950s dip in audience numbers caused by the growing popularity of television. It is no coincidence, however, that in those years we also see the emergence of regular complaints about popcorn noise (Smith, 2001, pp.119–123). The popularity of television and new habits of home viewing seemed to raise cinemagoers' expectations that they would be free to consume food while watching films while also being undisturbed by the noise of strangers. In this sense, the same commercial synergies that helped cinema survive the competition with rival media also made its balancing of public and private behaviour increasingly difficult to sustain.

Unsurprisingly, then, the symbolic meanings of popcorn noise have shifted with changes in the nature of these 'rival' media. The reception of *A Quiet Place* shows that the overdetermined noise of popcorn is currently underpinned by a debate about protecting the cinema, as a fixed space, against the encroachment of mobile devices. Reviews from 2018 show a

frequent slippage from the idea of eating to the idea of using one's phone. The 'furore over noisy patrons' during *AQP* led to arguments about the difference (or not) of the space of the cinema from other spaces of media consumption. 'Kids text constantly during movies, often to friends three seats away, and there is nothing that can be done. You can't persuade or prevent moviegoers from using their phones', wrote Joe Queenan in a self-consciously cantankerous piece for the *Guardian* (2018). 'In an age where ceaseless conversation and rustling wrappers compete with trilling phones for the title of most irritating interruption in a motion picture, the quiet film demands quiet, in turn, from the viewer', followed Ryan Gilbey soon after for the same newspaper (2018). In the changing meanings of popcorn noise, we thus see emerging anxieties about the digital ends of cinemagoing: not only the spectre of the individual 'separated spectator' watching films on her smartphones and tablets, but also by extension the mobile digital consumer taking his media practices into the exclusive space of the cinema.

While pandemic-time reviews of *AQPII* did not concern themselves with the potential danger posed by smartphones, the film itself included a nod to their disruptiveness. Sensory deprivation movies provide plenty of opportunities to cast the smartphone in the role of a dangerous object, as vulnerable characters in hiding are regularly betrayed by the unstoppable noise of connectivity. In an extensive flashback sequence at the start of *AQPII*, we see our protagonists sheltering inside a pub when someone's phone rings, with dramatic consequences for all involved; the very first alien attack is triggered by the notorious sound of an iPhone marimba ringtone. In *The Silence*, a pseudo-religious group that sees the hypersensitive monsters as divine judgement deploys a makeshift suicide belt that, instead of being loaded with explosives, is packed with smartphones. In this sense, sensory deprivation movies continue a long history of textualising cinema's relationship with a range of competitors. More specifically, they are the latest incarnation of a well-established tendency of Hollywood stories to set new interactive media in opposition to a mode of cinematic reception where individuals are expected to prioritise exclusive visual and aural focus on the film over interaction with fellow spectators (Young, 2006). In *AQPII* and *The Silence*, this intermedia rivalry is played out by establishing an ironic link between film and spectator behaviour. If the reception of *A Quiet Place* rehearses the fantastical notion that the noise of popcorn might creep into the world on screen, the on-screen sound of ringtones travels in the opposite direction, resonating with the ways in which the sound of portable media in a cinema can cause disruption. On-screen terror is unleashed by a sound banned within the space of the cinema. The ringtone breaks a silence that is policed both on screen and in the cinema, playing with the boundary between diegetic and audience

space. By dramatising at plot level the near-impossibility of stopping the ubiquitous noise of 24/7 connectivity, these sequences point to the sense in which spectacular silence is underpinned by a broader conception of the cinema as one of the last places where we are expected to disconnect.

The Sound of Switching Off

In January 2020, Vue International, one of the top three multinational cinema holding companies in the UK, launched a new campaign promoting the health benefits of cinemagoing. Vue partnered with the Neuroscience Department at University College London, commissioning new research to 'see what happens to your mind and body when you spend time at the cinema – one of the only places you can truly switch off and leave your phone and the world behind' (Vue, 2019). The research findings were published by Vue in a digital pamphlet titled 'The Benefits of Getting Lost'. To an extent, the pamphlet rehearses a familiar notion of moviegoing as 'escapism', a word that recurs both in Vue's narrative and in the ensuing press releases (Lees, 2020). Yet rather than presenting the cinema as an escape from the hardship and material limitations of everyday life, 'The Benefits of Getting Lost' defines it as escape *from* 'life's distractions' and, more specifically, from the 'overwhelming distractions' provided by other media (Little Black Box, 2020). It casts the cinema as 'a sanctuary' (Get Lost – Behind the Scenes', 2020), and reframes moviegoing as a practice of mindfulness that requires disconnecting from ubiquitous online demands. Watching a film is compared both to a 'light workout' and to a 'flow state' that can be obtained by avoiding 'the constant presence and interruptions of phones'. Several press releases reiterated the message, emphasising the importance of stepping away 'from the mounting pressures of being constantly online' and celebrating the cinema specifically as 'one of the only places left where you can step away from devices and truly switch off from the outside world' (Fitzmaurice, 2020; Lees, 2020; Sparks, 2020).

By conceiving of cinemagoing as a well-being practice, 'restful and rejuvenating for our brains', 'The Benefits of Getting Lost' is representative of what scholars such as Mack Hagood have argued to be the essence of media use in neoliberal societies, which is to say, 'not the transformation of information but rather the […] control of *affect*' (2019, p.5). Vue's campaign for the health benefits of moviegoing is a strong example of Hagood's argument that, in an era of 'information capitalism' and 24/7 media engagement, affective states that involve rest, concentration, and the ability to 'remain unaffected' are 'considered hard to come by and are therefore prized, worried over, and carefully conserved' (Hagood,

2019, p.155). While the phenomenon is not exclusive to sound, Hagood notes the particular importance that technologies of sonic control, such as sleep machines and noise-cancelling headphones, have when it comes to preserving affective states that are highly valued in (late) capitalist societies. In keeping with the extensive symbolic and material role that 'quietness' has in a neoliberal discourse on well-being, it is unsurprising that Vue would then draw heavily on sound, or rather, spectacular silence, when compressing its 'manifesto' about the health benefits of cinemagoing into a two-minute trailer for its patrons. Yet insofar as the intersection between Vue's discourse on well-being and the valorisation of quietness is underpinned by the idea that mobile devices and personal sound technologies are not just 'distractions' but can also function as tools of sonic control and emotional self-regulation, the sound of the trailer reveals additional complexities in the meanings of cinematic silence and the relationship between cinema and the idea of 'switching off'.

The Vue trailer, which played prior to screenings of *AQPII* just as it had been playing prior to every film shown on Vue's 861 screens in its 90 UK cinemas since January 2020, revolves around the smartphone user, that symbolic 'harbinger of the beginning of the end of conventional moviegoing'. At the start of the trailer, directed by Jake Scott (and featuring a cameo by Ridley Scott), we see a white plastic bag pushed by the wind along a near-empty street. The bag is a reference to the famous scene in *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999) – one of the trailer's many 'Easter eggs' – the beauty of its fluctuations visibly ignored by a young man pacing across the street with his gaze firmly focused on a mobile phone. The soundtrack, by Alex Bingham from Machine Sound (a sound production company specialising in trailers), is in the style of EDM. It starts fairly unobtrusively with a simple diatonic pattern with some metric nuances, slow-moving harmonies, and a fast pulse. After a voiceover by British actor John Boyega reminds us that 'to lose yourself in a story you have to do it properly', we see a sequence of inadequate and increasingly ludicrous domestic film consumption habits that ends with a man plugged into white earbuds and balancing his phone on a cutlery stand, watching a movie while eating pizza out of a cardboard container. The back door to his apartment opens magically onto an urban street, where we see an army of smartphone users staring into their handheld devices, their multitasking screen activities visualised as fleeting, ghostly, multiplying images that increasingly fill up the space on screen. The EDM track gets increasingly loud and layered. Boyega now enumerates what you need in order to 'lose yourself in a story': 'no pings, no alerts, no click-me, like-mes'. Pinging, dinging, and chiming electronic sounds increasingly saturate the soundtrack, absorbed into and contributing to

the music's build-up. Effects are added: an electronic glissando rises in frequencies and dynamics as more and more mobile phones pop up on screen; portable media eventually pervade our horizon, until the small screens literally become everything we see, and we cut to black and to absolute silence. The glissandi take the texture from mid-low frequencies to high frequencies that peak at around 10kHz before the sudden drop to silence.

A fragile, shared, spectacular silence anchors the experience of film to a specific place and frames the cinematic experience as a way of cancelling external media noise. 'Feels good, doesn't it?', the voiceover rhetorically asks after a few seconds of absolute silence. Boyega's voice is joined by the return of music, this time with a flexible tempo and minus the bass. This is the kind of electronic music you would hear in so-called 'chill-out rooms', dedicated spaces where clubbers slow down and take a break (McLeod, 2001, p.65). Providing additional framing to minimise all semantic ambiguity, voice and music ground the meanings of that sudden moment of absolute silence into a practice of well-being.

The commercial doesn't just *tell us* about the benefits of switching off: it draws on our sensitivity to sound and on the relief that silence can provide after a build-up of electronic noise as a way of making us feel the pleasure of going offline. Sound is used to translate the Vue manifesto into a sensory experience, with EDM at once sonifying the ubiquitous noise of online media activity and also mediating notions of collective, cathartic absence. The frenzy of the EDM build-up renders the experience of contemporary mediascapes and the 'overwhelming distractions' of (other, rival) media consumption. And the 'peak event' is provided by the moment of playing *nothing*. That 'nothing' is made up of the unusual, unique quality of silence that can be experienced inside cinemas. Like most contemporary cinemas, Vue cinemas are designed to absorb all sound refraction, to minimise echoes so as not to interfere with the echoes and spatial cues built into the sound design. This means that when the soundtrack is totally silent – when the sound signal is actually interrupted – the contemporary cinema sounds like what, after Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece (2018), we might call a *sonic* (as well as an optical) 'vacuum': absolutely dry and dead quiet.

The ground/foreground reversal is unequivocal. Not the paroxysm of the extremely loud and sonically active climax but the drop to sudden, absolute silence is used to index the increasingly 'marked' status of a cinematic experience whose significance is being renegotiated vis-à-vis emergent and mobile forms of separate spectatorship. The trailer encourages spectators to rehearse their joint activity ahead of the film. Not only does it set the ideal of a 'quiet collectivity' against the displaced and asynchronous

experiences of connectivity represented on screen, but it uses the drop routine, imbued with dancefloor ideals of extreme sensory stimulation, cathartic release, and ecstatic communion, to orchestrate a choreography of attention and give us a preview of the possible rewards of shared silence.

For viewers watching *AQPII* in a Vue cinema, the 'Benefits of Getting Lost' commercial would have provided a direct, concrete link between the film's tactics of spectacular silence and a broader debate on the changing values of cinemagoing. The franchise's thematisation of silence and quietness would have explicitly (and literally) resonated with Vue's promotion of the cinema as a special, shared place sheltered from the literal and metaphorical noise of everyday media. More specifically, the nesting of *AQPII*'s narratively tense silences in Vue's message of rest and rejuvenation reveals an ironic tension that is central to the franchise's contribution to a broader recoding of the cinema as a quiet place: doubly framed by a paratextual discourse of mindfulness and a narrative mechanism of suspense, the EDM-inspired routines capture cinema's complex role as a safe container for the sharing of intense affect.

The way the Vue commercial opens a hermeneutic window into the *Quiet Place* franchise shows the importance of thinking about how specific cinemas (and film exhibitors) frame and mediate a cinematic experience. It shows that with their semiotics and branding, as well as with their architecture and absorbent materials, such cinemas can activate a horizon of expectations and contribute to the negotiation of a soundtrack's meaning, as well as the broader significance of a film's audiovisual aesthetics, in ways that have thus far been neglected. Vue's commercial doesn't just remind us to 'switch off our phones' and be 'respectful' of others; it also activates ideas and sounds that might then resound directly (and even serendipitously) with a film's own themes and sonic strategies.

However, the connection between Vue's and *AQPII*'s sonic strategies does not depend on watching the film in Vue cinemas. The relationship between the *Quiet Place* franchise and a discourse of cinema and ubiquitous media noise transcends this specific reception context. The similarities between 'selling spectacular silence' in *AQPII* and Vue's marketing campaigns are mediated by a broader economy of noise, attention, and productivity; the structural homology between the silences in *AQPII* and in 'The Benefits of Getting Lost' is underpinned by a complex link between cinematic sound and the commercialisation of quietness, which is to say that the paratextual juxtaposition of 'The Benefits of Getting Lost' and *AQPII* highlights how film soundtracks, in addition to modulating our affective response to what happens on screen (film-music theory's familiar starting point), are also valued for their ability to affect our relationship with others within the space of the cinema and to modulate our ability to be

temporarily 'unaffected' (as Hagood would put it) by what happens beyond it. The use of drop routines reveals the sense in which the meanings of spectacular silence, and the value of the cinema as a place for listening, are negotiated in reference to a broader relationship with day-to-day social environments where media are simultaneously presented as curse and cure.

What the Vue commercial does not explicitly acknowledge, however, is that the ideal of quiet collective spectatorship that it promotes is not just threatened by the increasing noise of individualised and mobile media consumption; it is also fuelled by those very practices. While the smartphone in 'The Benefits of Getting Lost', in the film's reception, and in *AQPII* itself is explicitly flagged as a symbol of 24/7 connectivity, it is also emblematic of an evolving model of solitary listening that is shaping expectations around cinematic listening.

Relocating Silence

In July 2021, as Paramount's forty-five-day exclusive theatrical release came to an end, *AQPII* could travel beyond its initial confines. Alongside digital and physical releases, the film was selected for outdoor screenings around the world. In the UK, it was picked up by Rooftop Film Club cinema, a global company that shows selections of recent and classic crowd-pleasers at two London outdoor locations during the warmer months of the year. Part of a franchise with an established following, and an acclaimed post-lockdown box office hit, *AQPII* was an obvious candidate to re-start outdoor business that had skipped the 2020 season.

Celebrating its tenth year of activity, Rooftop Film Club returned to business with a renewed promise to provide the 'Ultimate Film Experience'. 'We stand for social cinema because we believe film is best experienced together' read the company's online manifesto, deliberately placing itself as an alternative to increasingly common forms of solitary viewing while also trading the 'quiet collectivity' of traditional moviegoing with a more explicitly event-driven sociability where both location and hospitality are self-consciously visible and thematised. Rooftop screenings promote this overt sociability while also promising a cinematic experience undisturbed by the noise of others, and the claim rests on the provision of personalised sound. Each patron is given a wireless set granting them close proximity to the soundtrack and the opportunity to control volume levels. The invitation to 'embrace' 'the world around us' ('we'll bring you city skylines, sunsets, starlit evenings, awesome drinks, delicious food') is thus carefully balanced with the promise that, thanks to 'state-of-the-art wireless headphones […] you can live in those memorable cinematic moments, and not get disturbed by the outside world', nor by other spectators ('ever

missed that key plot-line because the guy behind you is eating popcorn too loudly?').[10] The 'Ultimate Film Experience' promised by Rooftop Film Club is thus one that is at once more emphatically collective and more intensely individualised than traditional moviegoing. Thanks to headphones, you can have your silence and eat it too. Or so the story goes.

[10] Information included on merchandising material and on Rooftop's website: https://rooftop-filmclub.com/about-us (Accessed: 10 December 2023).

Once again, attending to *AQPII* lays bare the underexplored relationship between soundtrack aesthetics and cultures of cinemagoing. As I took my seat atop the Bussey Building, in the London district of Peckham, prepared to take notes on the relocation of *AQPII* and compare indoor and outdoor screenings, it soon became evident that the film's strategies of spectacular silence would highlight a gap between the discourse and the technologies framing the rooftop experience. On rooftops, headphones materialise in order to compensate for the disappearance of cinema walls and for a relaxation in the disciplining of audience behaviour. The wireless headsets, with their bulky presence, are a material reminder of the fact that traditional cinematic listenership already relies on techniques and architectures of noise control, and are tasked with replacing both cinema's physical protection from the noise of the city and its discursive protection from popcorn noise and media consumption. For spectators cosying up on beach chairs and beanbags on the not-so-quiet city rooftops of south-east London, however, the absolute silence and sonic drops of *AQPII* would inexorably be filled by noise pollution – most prominently by street sirens and the low-frequency vibrations emanating from one of the many nearby clubs that animate Peckham's nightlife. The headphones' ability to provide a buffer from the noise of 'the outside world' was de-activated every time *AQPII* foregrounded sonic absences.

In the absence of film sound, the wireless set would cease to function as an interface between spectators and environment, demonstrating why spectacular silence may increasingly serve as a USP for conventional cinemagoing. Silence breaks the sonic spell that keeps the virtual perimeters of non-theatrical film consumption in place. It makes the cinematic experience reliant on the physical presence of the cinema: on the architecture, padded walls, and absorbent materials. It makes the film permeable to external agents – the hum of a fridge or the noise pollution of a nearby DJ set vibrating through the floor – which in turn blurs the ontological distinction between cinematic and non-cinematic sounds. The sound of EDM would now enter *AQPII* as an interference, with the spectacular silence of drop routines rendered vulnerable to the actual sound of dance clubs as competing forms of entertainment.

In this sense, from the trailer's rallying cry to cinemagoing to the film's flawed headphone relocation, *AQPII* provides a rich and concrete example of the growing importance of spectacular silence in indexing the specificity

of the cinematic experience. The involvement of headphones, however, is also emblematic of the competing listening models that underpin current cinematic practices. Notwithstanding the inadequacy of Rooftop's audio technology, the hyperbolic claim that personal audio can provide the 'Ultimate Film Experience' remains significant. It makes explicit the extent to which discourses of aural privacy and sonic control are central to current understandings of what lies at the core of a cinematic experience. It reminds us that, although the relationship between film and separated spectatorship is routinely cast in antagonistic terms, listening to film also aspires to ideals of aural privacy set by rival portable technologies.

In the sonic drops of *AQPII* we hear what is at stake in cinemagoing at a time when solitary viewing is increasingly normalised by portable and distancing technologies: both a precious, shared silence resting on the real-time negotiation of individual and collective needs, and a normative and unreachable ideal of undisturbed collective experience whose approximation would require the technological safeguarding of interpersonal boundaries. Insofar as it calls for the optimal experience of spectacular silence, *AQPII* feeds into a broader recoding of the cinema as a quiet place while unwittingly highlighting a tension between traditional cinemagoing and ideals of unimpaired, noise-free listening that might pressure cinemas to undergo further technological mutations.

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