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Listen: a four-worded wave speech: seesoo, hrss, rsseeeis, oos. Vehement breath of waters amid seasnakes, rearing horses, rocks. In cups of rocks it slops: flop, slop, slap: bounded in barrels. And, spent, its speech ceases.
(Joyce 45)

If listening ceases with speech, and speech with sound, then does language cease too? And, if this is true, does this not make silence the primordial necessity of language, something whose flimsy cover needs to be perforated with sound for speech to permeate through? In this short piece, I delve into these and other questions by exploring the fallacy of situating language on a continuum of sound and silence. By considering kinetic language — the most articulate expression of which is sign language — *outside* the sound-silence continuum, we may gain new insight into the forms of stigma that cultural artifacts, such as film, continue to impose on gestural forms of communication.

Sign language is a systematic and highly evolved form of language in which gesture takes precedence over the hegemonic phonology of speech: hands supplant the mouth to express a syntactical and semantic arrangement of words. Though free of sound, sign language is rich in meaning and expression, challenging the notion of the indispensability of sound to dialogue. The

tensions between sign language and the world of sound are evocatively portrayed in Joanne Greenberg's *In This Sign* (1970), a text in which the author portrays the travails of a Deaf couple, Abel and Janice, and their hearing child, Margaret. All these characters jostle through the brutal world of the "Hearing" whose duplicitous, insidious words make them an object of shame, disgust, derision, and ruthless exploitation. One incident in the novel vividly captures the wounding of the hands of a Deaf individual, which produces a calamitous new form of muteness:

In [Janice's] mind was the picture of hands. It is one of [the deaf] getting hurt in the hands... one of us. To be without hands ... it means to be dumb; it means never to talk again, like to be dead; one of us without hands...
(32)

The passage disintegrates the cultural assumption that language is predominantly a form of oral/aural communication. Rather, it centralizes the hands as the chief bearers of linguistic expression, a loss of which is tantamount to morbid speechlessness. Even more eloquently, the episode reveals a new understanding of muteness as a dearth of *language*, not of speech, that could apply across a continuum of oral/aural and gestural communication.

Greenberg's confluence of the body with language is not a new one; indeed, Lennard Davis, in his landmark study *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, asserts how a metonymic relationship between bodily materiality and language is deployed to establish the preeminence of the mouth, hand, and ears as the foremost sites for communication:

The mouth is hypostatized as the font of poetic language, oratory, conversation, while the hand is made special as the locus of writing, scholarship, the essay, ... the ear is the receiver of music, speech, of language—while the eye is the receiver of the artistic, of written knowledge. These assumptions remind us of the extent to which an economy of the body is involved in our own metaphors about language and knowledge. (103)

Sign language controverts this tradition, as the novelty of the convergence of hands with language marks the obliteration of the written and spoken word with the kinetic word. Crucially, and *contra* Davis, I argue that sign language is neither a mute nor silent language, since these categories are easily shattered by the abrupt emergence of sound. Sign language, on the contrary, is impervious to both sound and silence. In contrast, then, to Davis' proposition that "sign language occupies the interstice where space and silence come together" (117), I suggest that sign language configures a *separate* domain of language that exists beyond the dichotomies of sound and silence, where one's animate body, spatial orientation, and kinetic repertoire come together in a semantic flow.

Thinking about sign language on a continuum of silence and sound, as Davis does, not only obfuscates its autonomy as a purely embodied form of communication, but also insidiously affects social perceptions of Deafness in society. Perceiving sign language and its users as inhabiting a world of silence works subtly to reinforce the preeminence of the vocal; meanwhile, it privileges a phonological dimension of language over a purely embodied and kinetic one that is independent of the presence or absence of sound.

Film is one medium where this erroneous collapsing of sign language into a sound-silence dichotomy is particularly conspicuous. Films such as *Hush* (2016) and *A Quiet Place* (2018) portray Deafness as a state that is inextricably embroiled in silence. The onomatopoeic title of *Hush* is an overt suggestion that the Deaf person and her fatally silenced surroundings will be at the forefront of the screenplay. The struggle that ensues between the protagonist and the killer in the surrounding space is enacted in terrifying silence. Such portrayals position the Deaf in a perpetually vulnerable state, which could only be conquered by the timely employment of an alternative heightened sense that amends for the inability to hear (in this case, it was the protagonist's hyper-sensitivity to the waft of the killer's breath on the nape of her neck). *A Quiet Place*, too, is set in a post-apocalyptic world where sound is deadly. The main characters are a family who use American Sign Language as their only mode of communication. In this apocalyptic world, sign language is the only surviving mode of communication. Tragically, it comes alive only when the spoken word — and the speaking world — are decimated. In this story, sign language is ultimately a compromise, a truce with petrifying silence.

In both films, and in many other contemporary cultural artifacts, sign language remains a denizen of an “unsound,” cataclysmic world — in stark contrast to the “insightful” world of the blind, and the animate, rational universe of the hearing. In such contexts, sign begins only if listening and speech cease to be — perpetuating a pernicious, and wholly undeserved, stigma upon gestural communication.

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