

# The Sound of Fear: Silence as Narrative and Symbol in Contemporary Horror Cinema

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## **Abstract:**

Silence, often seen as the absence of sound, emerges as a powerful presence in modern horror cinema. This article examines its role as a narrative, psychological, and symbolic device in *Hush* (2016) and *A Quiet Place* (2018). Through a phenomenological reading of *Hush* and a semiotic analysis of both films' posters, the study explores how silence is embodied, manipulated, and weaponized to evoke fear. The findings reveal that silence is active rather than passive: it unsettles, isolates, and amplifies dread. By analyzing cinematic language and visual rhetoric, the article shows how silence transforms into a central agent of horror.

**Keywords:** Horror Cinema; Silence; Sound; Psychological device; Visual rhetoric

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the realm of horror cinema, sound has traditionally been considered a primary tool for eliciting fear—through sudden screams, eerie music, and jump scares. However, in recent years, filmmakers have increasingly turned to silence not merely as a contrast to sound but as a central device to evoke psychological tension and vulnerability. This shift challenges conventional horror techniques and opens new interpretive possibilities.

Two films that exemplify this shift are Mike Flanagan's *Hush* (2016) and John Krasinski's *A Quiet Place* (2018). Both works utilize silence not as a void but as an expressive force that shapes the entire narrative, spatial configuration, and character experience. In *Hush*, the protagonist's deafness transforms the absence of sound into a source of isolation and embodied perception, while in *A Quiet Place*, silence becomes a matter of survival—if sound is made, death follows.

Moreover, the promotional posters for both films visually frame silence as deadly and suspenseful, suggesting that the horror begins even before the first scene. These images serve as gateways into understanding how silence is not only heard—or not heard—but also seen and felt.

This article will explore the following research questions:

- a. How does silence function as a narrative and psychological device in *Hush* and *A Quiet Place*?
- b. In what ways does the embodiment of silence redefine the viewer's sensory experience, particularly through a phenomenological reading of *Hush*?
- c. How do the visual elements in the posters of *Hush* and *A Quiet Place* communicate horror through silence?

By answering these questions, the study aims to illuminate how silence, often perceived as mere background or absence, can take on a powerful role as a weapon, a threat, and a storytelling engine.

## 2. The powerful role of silence in horror movies:

In movies, sound design has always been a very powerful key element, raising pallets to new heights and constructing audio soundscapes. When sound and silence are able to cooperate, the piece of work truly blossoms.

The emotion that each sound evokes is highlighted by silence. As film theorist Michel Chion explains, “Silence is never simply the absence of sound; it is a positive, active element in a film's soundscape” (Chion, 1994, p. 57). The phrase “Filmic silence” is the term for this kind of silence in movies. The absence of sound in a scene with only a subdued ambient track is known as “filmic silence”. To make a movie even more thrilling, this act is included in its most tense scenes.

The use of filmic silence stems from the foundation of film, where silence was adopted. And over time, this evolved into a technique which is able to stimulate particular parts of the brain areas that trigger different feelings as Chion (1994) claims that “The strategic use of silence can amplify tension, underscore emotion, or highlight a character’s isolation” (p. 61). This can be seen during tense suspenseful scenes, as nothing grabs the audience’s attention and fosters the feeling of psychological unease as minimizing sound to its bare essentials.

The impact of the startle response is significantly increased when silence is purposefully used before an abrupt noise. By exploiting the shift from sound to sudden silence, this technique , produces a startling and instinctive audience reaction. According to sound designer Randy Thom (1999), “In film, the absence of sound can be as loud as a scream when placed correctly—it’s a matter of psychological framing.”

The absence of sound carries yet another psychological weight ; it creates a feeling of loss of control and vulnerability. Chion (1994) explains, “Hearing is a sense that warns us of danger before we see it, alerting us to the presence of something behind or beyond our visual field” (p. 28). What make the humans interpret their environment and identify possible dangers is typically the auditory input, and when this information is missing, a sense of disorientation and powerlessness. As scholar Julian Hanich (2010) notes, “Silence in horror films strips away the familiar safety net of sound, leaving the viewer psychologically exposed and emotionally off-balance” (p. 129). The viewer, then, is left feeling unanchored and exposed.

Beyond its role in enhancing suspense, silence contributes significantly to

enhancing triggered imagination and dread as “Silence renders the listener more sensitive to the slightest sound, and in doing so, opens the door to the imagination” (Chion, 1994, p. 54). When silence reigns, the viewer’s mind tries to fill the audible gap and his mind frequently anticipates the worst when there is no definite and concrete data, the fact that leads the sense of paranoia and fear to grow. Film theorist Adam Lowenstein (2005) supports this by noting, “The horror genre thrives on suggestion—what is unseen and unheard can be far more terrifying than what is made explicit” (p. 38). Hence, the norms of horror genre prepares the viewer for imminent dangers. The power of suggestion, multiplied by silence, Serves as an effective means of psychological influence, crafting a more individualized and deeply disturbing experience for each viewer. As Julian Hanich (2010) asserts, “The silence before a terrifying event not only builds tension but also forces each viewer into a unique space of psychological vulnerability” (p. 133).

From here, the significant impact of silence use in horror movies is highlighted by the previously explained interconnected psychological mechanisms. Understanding how these dynamics operate, one can better appreciate the horror genre’s ability to unsettle and psychologically engage its audience.

### **3. Embodied Silence: A Phenomenological Reading of Mike Flanagan’s *Hush* :**

Released in 2016, directed by Mike Flanagan, and starring Kate Siegel as the protagonist, Maddie, *hush* is a psychological thriller that reshapes the home-invasion subgenre via a distinctively silent lens. Living alone in an isolated house in the woods, Maddie, a deaf-mute woman, is the heroine of the movie. What begins as a perceived weakness, her disability, evolves into a crucial advantage as her solitude is violently interrupted by a masked intruder. By focusing on a protagonist whose experience of the world is fundamentally shaped by the absence of sound, *Hush* challenges both genre conventions and audience expectations. It presents silence not merely as a condition to be overcome, but as a dynamic force within the narrative—one that can empower, disorient, and ultimately resist. John Gallagher Jr.,

playing the role of the killer, had a scary portrayal steeming from unsettling humanity rather than his invincibility. He is a simple man, with no supernatural abilities, who only enjoys the thrill of killing. The way he tries to manipulate Maggie, underestimating her and believing she is an easy target, proves to be his downfall.

In fact, the typical audible horror movies elements like speech, musical scores and the sound cues, were stripped away in *Hush*. Instead, the viewer is invited to be immersed in the silent world of Maddie, where silence becomes an active and expressive force within the storytelling. Flanagan, the movie director, stated in an interview: "We wanted the audience to experience the world the way Maddie does—to hear what she hears, which is nothing, and to feel the vulnerability and intensity that comes with that silence" (Miska, 2016).

The film's sound design alternates between Maddie's silent experience and the viewer's heightened awareness of her vulnerability, often marked by sudden silence or faint internal bodily sounds like her heartbeat or breath, creating an intimate and claustrophobic atmosphere. Flanagan emphasized this approach, stating, "We knew from the beginning that sound design would have to be a full-blown character in this film. There is so little dialogue; it forces the sound design to carry huge stretches of the movie without support" (Flanagan, 2016). By simulating bodily perception, this method adheres to phenomenological film theory's principle that viewers can be drawn into a character's lived, sensory experience. In this vein, Vivian Sobchack (1992) articulates, "The film experience is an embodied experience; it is a mode of being-in-the-world that is both sensory and meaningful" (p. 60). In *Hush*, silence becomes a phenomenological tool that brings the viewer closer to Maddie's embodied fear and isolation.

Another important technique of silence used in *Hush* is called "acousmatic sound" defined by Michel Chion as sound that is heard without its source being seen, a technique often employed in cinema to create suspense and fear due to the uncertainty it introduces (Chion, 1994). In *Hush*, director Mike Flanagan cleverly inverts this concept: the audience frequently sees

the threat—the masked killer—but does not hear it. This inversion disrupts the traditional auditory cues that viewers rely on to anticipate danger, thereby producing a paradoxical unease and disorienting the audience.

The attack on Sarah, Maddie's neighbor, outside her window early in the movie serves as an instructive illustration of this technique. While Sarah's shouts are audible to the audience, the sound completely stops when the camera moves to Maddie, illustrating her incapacity to hear the chaos. The raw reality of Maddie's vulnerability and loneliness is presented to viewers, heightening the horror.

### **3.1. Silence Can Be Killer: Reading Horror in the Poster of *Hush***

The poster for *Hush* (2016), immediately evokes a psychological tension rooted in silence. The central visual feature is the face of the protagonist, Maddie, partially overlaid with the shadowy presence of the masked intruder. This composition starkly visualizes the central premise of the film: a woman isolated not just physically, but sonically, in a world that is dangerous precisely because she cannot hear it. The poster's visual silence (marked by the subdued color palette, the absence of motion, and the arrested expressions) mirrors the auditory silence that defines the film's narrative environment.

**Fig.1.** *Hush* (2016) Poster



Source : IMP Awards (2016)

Maddie's stillness in the image contrasts violently with the blurred or looming presence of the killer. This visual juxtaposition hints at how silence transforms typical horror dynamics: instead of being warned by creaking floors or distant screams, the protagonist must rely on her remaining senses to detect danger. As one analysis notes, “Hush strips away sound and builds its terror in silence,” placing viewers directly into the protagonist’s sensory limitations (Ajith, 2025). The poster encapsulates this struggle by

presenting Maddie in sharp focus, her wide, anxious eyes acting as her primary communicative tool. A semiotic reading of the poster highlights how “the fear in her eyes is clearer to see,” emphasizing her visual expressiveness in the absence of speech or sound (Crystall, 2016). In doing so, the poster communicates the psychological horror that silence itself can generate, turning quiet into an active threat rather than a passive absence. As further emphasized by Tri-Lite (2017), “everything goes quiet as if the audience is being brought into her head and into her world of silence,” reinforcing how visual cues become the only remaining indicators of danger. The tagline on the poster—“Silence can be killer”—reinforces silence as a thematic weapon, shifting the notion of silence from passive absence to active threat. This phrase encapsulates the film's unique approach to horror, where the absence of sound heightens tension and vulnerability (Whittington, 2016).

#### **4. Silence as a Weapon in *A Quiet Place* (2018)**

In *A Quiet Place* (2018), directed by John Krasinski, is not considered a typical decision but a basic grammar of survival. The movie is set in a terrifying atmosphere where blind sound-sensitive creatures have wiped out the human population. Hence, the viewer is immersed in an environment where even the slightest sound can be fatal. The Abbott family, the main characters of the movie, had to live in nearly a complete silence. Through this idea, a distinguished cinematic experience is created serving as suspenseful device as well as a narrative restraint.

The necessity of silence alters the dynamics of every scene. Daily rituals are modified to avoid making noise: meals are eaten with hands, footsteps are taken barefoot on sand paths, and communication occurs exclusively through American Sign Language (ASL). These practical adaptations build a world where the threat is ever-present, and where silence is not an aesthetic gap but an active form of resistance. As film scholar Kevin Donnelly suggests, “sound and its absence become tools for shaping diegetic tension and audience expectation” (Donnelly, 2005, p. 88).

Ironically, in *A Quiet Place* is the careful manipulation of sound rather than its absence. directed by Erik Aadahl and Ethan Van der Ryn, the film's

sound design enhances diegetic sounds, such as rustling leaves, creaking floorboards, and dripping water, to create a rich audio landscape. Like when Evelyn (Emily Blunt) walks barefoot across sand trails or when Marcus (Noah Jupe) accidentally knocks over a lantern—these seemingly minor sounds are rendered deafeningly loud. In situations that would ordinarily be silent in traditional horror films, these micro-sounds become thundering in the film's extremely sensitive acoustic environment, adding tension. As sound designer Van der Ryn explains, “The absence of sound is an opportunity to hear things you normally don’t hear, like the emotional tension in a room” (quoted in Tangcay, 2018)

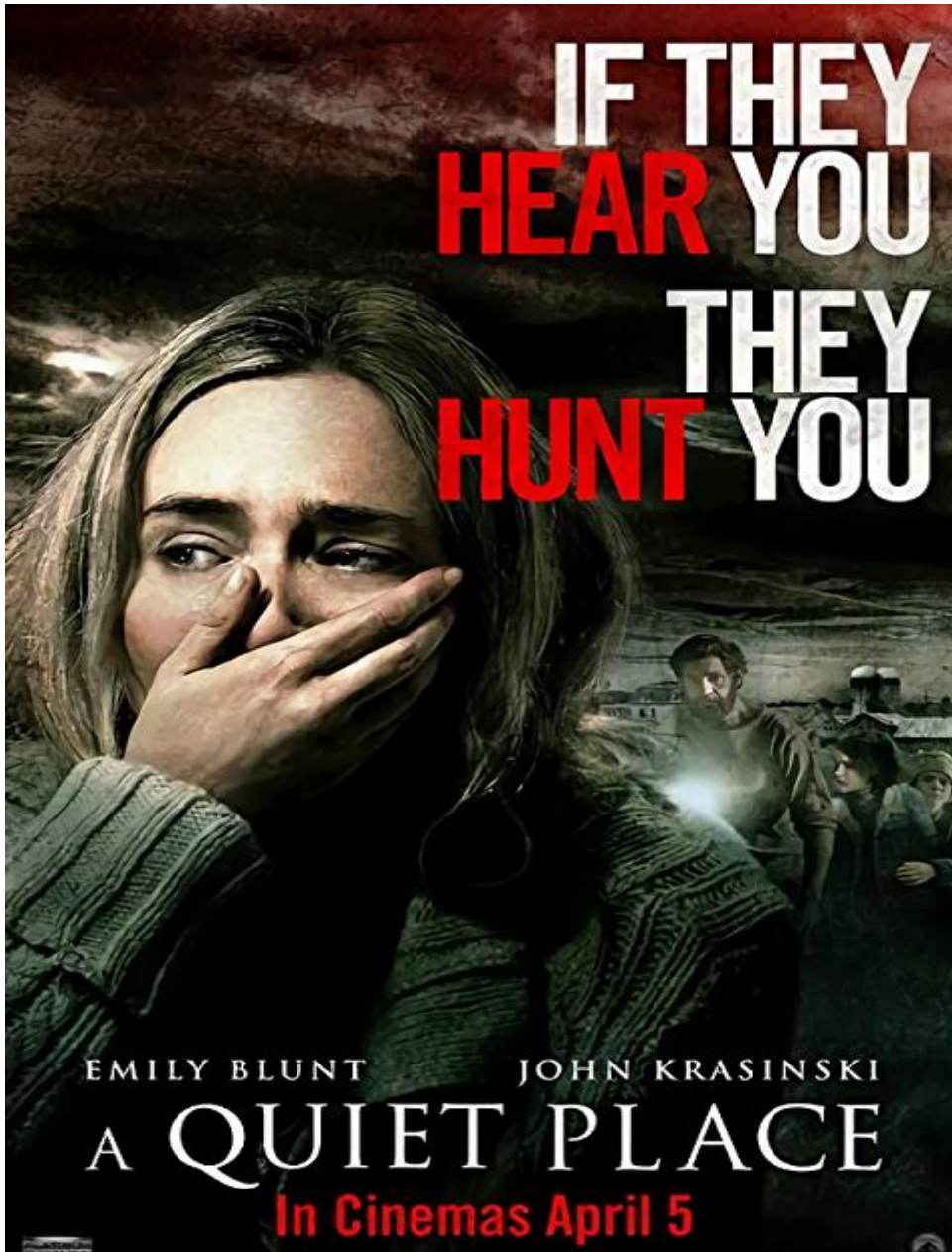
The use of quiet to establish perspective is just as powerful. The sound completely stops when the movie switches to the perspective of Regan, the deaf daughter portrayed by Millicent Simmonds, who is actually deaf. Hence, the suspense is heightened by putting the audience in an uncomfortable and vulnerable environment while also providing an accurate portrayal of deafness. For instance, in the early forest scene, Regan is walking beside her brother, Marcus, and her father, Lee. While we hear ambient nature sounds when the film follows the other characters, as soon as the point-of-view switches to Regan, the film becomes acoustically void. Silence becomes a technique of subjectivity and empathy, as demonstrated by the difference between these moments and the surrounding soundtrack. Simmonds remarked in an interview that these moments of total silence helped the film “really show what it's like for me, not just to be deaf, but to navigate a world that isn't built for you” (Lang, 2018)

#### **4.1. If they hear you they hunt you : Reading Horror in the Poster of *A Quiet Place* :**

The poster for *A Quiet Place* (2018), visually foregrounds the central thematic tension of the film: the existential threat posed by sound. One of the most iconic versions of the poster features Emily Blunt's character, Evelyn Abbott, with her hand clasped tightly over her mouth, eyes wide with terror. This single image encapsulates the film’s entire premise, that making even the slightest noise can result in instant death. The image of a

woman silencing herself is not just an act of fear but one of survival, transforming silence from a background condition into the central mechanism of suspense.

**Fig.2.** *A Quiet Place* (2018) Poster



Source : IMP Awards (2018)

This motif is reinforced by the tagline, "If they hear you, they hunt

you” . The wording here does not just suggest danger; it constructs an environment where sound is actively policed by lethal consequences. As noted in an analysis by Allan Major, the poster is "an evocative piece that chillingly encapsulates the movie's unique tension," portraying "a lone woman... her posture and expression one of anguished anticipation or silent scream, conveying the film's central premise — the life-and-death necessity of absolute silence" . It creates an atmosphere where silence is not merely a stylistic or narrative absence but a living condition, visually expressed in the taut, claustrophobic composition of the poster.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Silence in horror films like *Hush* and *A Quiet Place* transcends its conventional definition as an absence of sound. Instead, it emerges as a multifaceted tool that shapes narrative tension, reconfigures sensory perception, and visually communicates terror. In *Hush*, silence is embodied through the protagonist's deafness, transforming the cinematic experience into a phenomenological encounter with vulnerability. *A Quiet Place*, on the other hand, weaponizes silence, forcing characters—and by extension, the audience—into a hyper-aware, fear-laden state where even the faintest noise threatens annihilation.

The visual analysis of the posters reveals how silence is framed as both threat and mystery, functioning as a prelude to the dread that unfolds within the films. Whether in visual or auditory terms, silence becomes a language of horror—one that speaks volumes precisely because it says nothing.

Ultimately, this article argues that silence is no longer the space between screams but the scream itself. It is a vital, deliberate cinematic strategy that not only intensifies fear but also reshapes how audiences engage with horror on sensory, emotional, and intellectual levels.

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