

*A Quiet Place*, dir. by John Krasinski (Paramount Pictures, 2018)

What would it be like to live in a world where the slightest sound might mean your doom? John Krasinski's film rests on a *Twilight Zone*-esque premise, but gives us a tense, economical suspense thriller that delivers a much more cinematic experience than might be implied by so brief a description.

The film features next to no spoken dialogue, with characters communicating primarily in American Sign Language. *A Quiet Place* depicts a day-after-tomorrow future where humanity has been decimated by monsters able to snatch away any person who makes even the tiniest untoward noise. The film opens on the Abbott family – survivors travelling barefoot through the ruins, communicating through daughter Regan's native sign language. The camera, alternating between wide-angle shots of the landscape and close, personal views of the protagonists, goes a long way to convince the viewer that these are the only people left in the world. Deaf actor Millicent Simmons is the story's focal point, as the narrative gestures towards such themes as growing pains, survivor guilt, and the barriers between the deaf and the hearing. The film is at its best when it trusts in its visual details – the cast convey volumes with look and body language; little touches like the noiseless game pieces are eminently more evocative than the clumsily expository newspaper clippings pinned to the walls of the father's workshop-cum-retreat. Through these details, we come to understand the family's relationships better than the characters explain those relationships to us.

*A Quiet Place* is, nonetheless, a far-from-silent film. Marco Beltrami's orchestral score comes in waves, sometimes lapping at the edge of the scene, sometimes surging until it pins the viewer to their seat. Like the film's dialogue, however, the music sometimes overcommits and becomes a distraction – telling us what to feel when we are already feeling it (the score almost drowns out some of the later action scenes). The film does have one standout moment of spoken dialogue, roughly two-thirds the way through. The conversation itself is unimportant – it tells us little that we have not already intuited – but it offers both the characters and the audience a moment of release that speaks strongly to the relationship that the hearing have with speech and sound. Regan's exclusion from the scene is a telling (and again, mostly unstated) symbol of the emotional distance between her and her father, but it also serves as a comment on the exclusion of the deaf from the hearing world – even though the family is dependent on sign language for survival, Regan remains an outsider even amongst people who love her. Immediately preceding the film's long finale, the scene

provides a thoughtful moment that illustrates Krasinski's usually excellent pacing, providing a moment's respite before the ever-increasing pressure of the last half-hour.

In comparison, the finale is overcooked, contriving to throw the characters into greater and greater peril with every plot development, but the film's tight 90 minutes keeps the viewer in suspense despite this. The slightly laboured climax demonstrates how heavy-handed the story is overall, rehashing predictable conservative tropes about fathers making sacrifices for their children and previously gentle mothers taking up arms in defence of the family. The father, Lee (Krasinski), is an ingenious and practical man who resembles the all-American father figure of the atomic age of science-fiction horror. Lee is technical, dedicated, privately caring but publicly stern, a flawed-but-noble leader to the family unit – a character that the film's conclusion discourages us from reading too critically (we might have seen Raymond Burr in the role 60 years ago, and wondered how Jimmy Stewart might have improved it). Lee's sacrifice is presented as necessary and uncomplicated, the proper duty of a patriarch, while the family continues (literally) in the efforts of the mother (Emily Blunt).

Perhaps these signifiers are intentional, framing the piece as a slice of timeless Americana, with all the melodrama that might entail. Krasinski's role as writer, director, and star of the project, working alongside real-life spouse Blunt, invites us to read the film's structure less sympathetically, however. The director has described himself as a horror neophyte, and thus it seems more likely that the makers thought the film's use of sign language was innovative enough, and sought to maintain its mainstream viability by making the rest as conventional and 'relatable' as possible. Yet *A Quiet Place* is a film that leaves its best ideas unstated (via its visual cues, its usual absence of explanation), and so it is difficult to distinguish between moments of subtle and accidental brilliance throughout. Perhaps its atomic horror stylings are a hidden reward for the cine-literate viewer. Perhaps Krasinski is a science-fiction horror savant. Regardless of the film's cleverness (or lack thereof), the piece remains a highly effective thriller – one best appreciated in the dark and the quiet.

*Richard Gough Thomas*