



## Deafening

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"Deafening" uses the film *Sound of Metal* (Darius Marder, 2019) to probe what it means to hear and to not hear, and how and what one hears in cinema. The use of captions extends the analysis beyond the figuration of hearing to the relationship between sound, image, and text in cinema and in videographic criticism.

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### Creator's Statement

When the protagonist of *Sound of Metal* (Darius Marder, 2019), Ruben (Riz Ahmed), arrives at a residential Deaf facility, the director of the program, Joe (Paul Raci), tells him: “[I]t’s very important, if you want to be here, to understand that we are looking for a solution to this [signs ‘mind’/points to middle of his forehead], not this [signs ‘ears’/points to both his ears and shakes his head].” Whereas Ruben is seeking a “fix” for his sudden hearing impairment, what Joe offers is help in finding a sense of calm and acceptance. Ruben’s stay in the Deaf community is about a psychological reorientation vis-à-vis his body and its relationship to the world. Extending Joe’s point, we might say that the “deafening” of Ruben’s hearing enables a conceptual reorientation as well. While Ruben’s aural shift sets off an identity crisis, it also introduces him to a more expansive and complex notion of sound and hearing. Ruben’s task—and that of hearing audiences—is to shed ableist notions of normalcy and learn what he knows well as a drummer: “sound is always already multimodal” (Mills, “Deafness” 52).

Deaf and disability studies scholars, activists, and artists have long called for a material, multi-sensorial, and relational understanding of sound. They have argued for not just more nuanced accounts of sonic experience, but ones that unsettle naturalized and quietly normalizing ideas about embodiment that undergird sound studies. “Deafening” draws on Rebecca Sanchez’s encapsulation of this body of scholarship to dislodge assumptions about what it means to hear and to not hear, and how and what one hears in cinema. Sanchez proposes a grammatical shift from noun to verb (“deafness” to “deafen”) to grasp the many relationships one might have to sound—audile, visual, textual, tactile, social, and so on. “Deafening as a verb” turns deafness into a critical “methodology,” prompting a rethinking of the notions of sound and hearing (Sanchez 274). My analysis is also guided by Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne’s concept of “dismediation,” which recognizes disability and media as co-constitutive categories (Mills and Sterne 366). Deafening hearing thus demands an engagement

with the media forms and technologies that imbue sound with a self-evidence that is both deceptive and limiting.

In “Deafening,” I look and listen not so much for bodily difference on screen, but for the different ways in which bodies apprehend sound, both on and off screen. Performing but also reaching beyond a critique of ableism in media, my video essay evidences a multiplicity of bodily encounters, capacities, and experiences, and thus the multiplicity inherent in the embodied practice we call “hearing.” What are the devices and registers that *Sound of Metal*—and, by extension, my video essay—uses to muddy the boundaries between noise, music, language, and silence; between sight, sound, movement, and touch; and between hearing and not-hearing? How, in other words, does it cast not just deafness but all audition as an embodied, mediated process? On a more meta-level, how might conceiving of deafness as methodology enable a form of dismediated “material thinking” in my videographic practice (Bolt, quoted in Grant 49)?

Early in the process of crafting this video essay, I noticed how *Sound of Metal* deploys point-of-audition sound. Sharp cuts into, and out of, Ruben’s subjective experience of sound abound, particularly in the first third of the film, when Ruben realizes he “can’t hear anything.” Listening alongside our protagonist allows the audience to (partially) inhabit Ruben’s body at key moments, fostering empathy and dramatic tension. The more radical effect of the film’s comparatist editing strategies (within and across scenes) is to cast deafness not as lack (or silence), but as difference. Whereas Ruben frames his new relationship to sound as loss, the film allows for an alternative interpretation. Deafness, here, is rendered as a departure from the sonic norm—one that draws attention to the norm, and the cinematic conventions that reify that norm.

Crucially, other aspects of the film’s soundwork disallow sharp distinctions between “normal” and “impaired” hearing. For instance, Ruben and Lou’s performances trouble the boundaries between music, noise, and other sorts of sounds. Their loud concerts and cross-country drive in an Airstream trailer recall Jonathan Sterne’s argument about “audile scarification,” the myriad daily and socially acceptable ways in which hearing impairment is induced and encouraged (Sterne 119). As Ruben settles into the Deaf community, *Sound of Metal* makes far less use of subjective sound, as if to coax him out of himself and his isolation. This choice also blunts any sense of distance hearing audiences may feel vis-à-vis those in the Deaf house. The filmmakers’ sensitivity toward the similarities and differences between people’s varied encounters with sound is evident in their production choices. Sound designer Nicolas Becker attempted to capture Ruben’s experience of deafness by

placing stethoscopes, earplugs, hydrophones, geophones, and contact mics on, and inside, the (hearing) actor Riz Ahmed's body (Tangcay, Flight, Calobro). This process of "listening through the body, by contact, through the skin, through bone cavities" evokes many layers of perception, some that are specific to the moment and/or the individual, and some that gesture to other sonic experiences and memories (Becker, quoted in "Case Study"; Calobro). Much of the film's minimalist score, composed by Abraham Marder and Nicolas Becker, uses a glass-and-metal instrument called a cristal baschet to craft what sounds at once like music and sonic distortion (Boyd and Leftie, Flight). Even in quieter scenes, it can be hard to discern whether the soft buzzing is a mark of Ruben's tinnitus, his mood, or the ambience of the location.

That said, it is critical that *Sound of Metal* does not fully close the gap between hearing, hard-of-hearing, and d/Deaf experiences. Characters engage sound in many different ways, including by reading, writing, watching, touching, listening, lip-reading, gesturing, musicking, dancing, and signing. Sound and hearing are always in flux, always a matter of negotiating one's position vis-à-vis the world. A key question for me, then, was: what videographic choices might keep in play such a mobile, textured, and relational notion of sound?

One of the ways in which I enact attentiveness to the multi-sensoriality and textuality of sound, and keep alive a sense of sonic reflexivity, is through captions. Here, I am inspired by the artist Christine Sun Kim's magnificent experiments with captioning. Kim is among a host of scholars, filmmakers, and artists reaching for a more creative understanding of captions, one that goes beyond questions of access as a legal or political imperative (see, for instance, Kim and Tome). They urge us to not treat captions as "an afterthought that can be turned on and off," but instead to consider the work that captions do—and can do—aesthetically, rhetorically, conceptually, socially (Watlington). Director Darius Marder was himself attuned to the importance of captions, having used open (hardcoded/burned-in) captions in the film version that made the rounds of the festival circuit (Boyd and Leftie). He also fought to include some open captions in the theatrical release (Hadidi). (The Criterion DVD used to craft this video essay only offered closed captions.) I sought in this video essay to think with this access feature, keeping some of the captions of the DVD version and adding several of my own. If "[c]aptions do not merely transcribe audio content but transform it," I wondered if they could be put to use in "deafening" our sense of sound (Zdenek, Sanchez). Could they unsettle received understandings of the relationship between text and sound, sound and image, image and text—in cinema, but also in videographic criticism?

Finally, a word about the collaborative process out of which this piece was born. What began as an idea for a conference panel quickly turned into a months-long process of exchanging feedback on drafts and commentary on the theory and practice of videographic criticism. For their advice, encouragement, and general good humor, I am grateful to my friends Desirée de Jesús, Javier Ramirez, and Steven Sehman. It has been thrilling to witness the overlaps and connections, both stylistic and conceptual, that developed between our various projects. If, as we argued in our SCMS 2024 abstract, cinematic bodies are the “means for materializing alternate social and political imaginaries,” our collective efforts also challenged individualistic modes of scholarly production that continue to characterize the academy.

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## Biography

Pavitra Sundar is Associate Professor of Literature at Hamilton College, where she teaches courses on film, literature, and sound, with a focus on South Asia. Her work on the gendered politics of voice and media have appeared in *BioScope; Communication, Culture, and Critique; Jump Cut*; and the *Sounding Out!* blog, among other venues. She has coedited special issues on masculinities (with Praseeda Gopinath, *South Asian Popular Culture*, 2020) and decolonial feminisms (with Debashree Mukherjee, *Feminist Media Histories*, 2022). Her most recent, open-access publications include *Listening with a Feminist Ear* (University of Michigan Press, 2023), which was long-listed for the Kraszna-Krausz award, and *Thinking with an Accent* (University of California Press, 2023, coedited with Pooja Rangan, Akshya Saxena, and Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan), which won the American Comparative Literature Association’s René Wellek Prize for best edited essay collection.

## Review by Tracie Schneider, Southern New Hampshire University

*Sound of Metal* (2019) remains a successful example of the d/Deaf community’s continued efforts for positive media representation. In the film, Ruben—a hearing drummer in recovery—begins experiencing a sudden sensorineural hearing loss, and his partner is concerned that this upheaval threatens his sobriety; as Ruben eventually enters a Deaf recovery community to cope, his experiences there and eventual choices teach him and the viewer not just about ASL and Deaf culture, but also about what it means to reinterpret/accept perceived flaws and find an internal sense of peace. Director Darius Marder’s collaboration with d/Deaf actors, representing hearing loss through sound design, and captioning the film to include all viewers, allowed *Sound of Metal* to brilliantly tell a story about self-acceptance.

Pavitra Sundar’s “Deafening” revisits this journey using subtitle mechanics in a style similar to Deaf artist Christine Sun Kim’s “[Closer Captions]” while also drawing on Rebecca Sanchez’s critical Deaf approach. The open captions in “Deafening” seek to

provide richer, deeper environmental information to viewers while also representing emotion—something which is frequently absent from traditional subtitles—to immerse the viewer in Ruben’s shift from externally hearing to internally listening, whether to his own body sounds in the absence of noise, or to his own healing in the absence of distraction. Additionally, Sundar’s use of captions notably functions as the medium by which themes shaping Ruben’s time at the Deaf recovery community are emphasized, especially Deaf identity (“crip wisdom writ large”) and Deaf gain (the Deaf power symbol <math>\leq 0/>). This, in particular, moves the essay toward displaying the potential power of captions as a way to create more nuanced understandings of a piece beyond their previous utility as an access tool.

When using ASL, communication flows from the entire body, not just from the hands. As a result, this 3D, layered message cannot be separated from its signer. In similar fashion, Sundar’s brilliant use of captioning layers this video essay with deeper points to consider and becomes integral to its message, requiring viewers to actively listen—multimodally—in order to understand.

### **Review by Emilija Talijan, University of Brighton**

Sundar’s video essay explores how *Sound of Metal* (Darius Marder, 2019) “deafens” our sense of sound by showing deafness as a departure from the sonic norm, revealing that norm, and tuning us to other multisensory and active ways of listening. It argues that Ruben’s (Riz Ahmed) sensorium is expanded through unlearning sound, alongside a “viewer’s” own, which is expanded through cinematic forms that move away from underscoring difference (revealed through point of audition—what Ruben hears compared to what we hear) to instead explore the many forms listening can take. Sundar’s piece searches for the way the film presents “different ways bodies apprehend sound, both on and off screen.”

While claiming this takes place in the film and for *Sound of Metal*’s “viewer,” what is striking about this video essay is how much further the material thinking of Sundar’s videographic practice takes this idea. While Sundar suggests that Marder’s film reveals the sonic norm and the “cinematic conditions that reify it,” it is in the videographic choices made in Sundar’s piece that the idea is more radically realised. I found my own sense of sound “deafened” and my sensorium expanded by the multidirectional forms of attention Sundar’s video essay demanded of me. In working with the heterogeneity of the audio-visual medium, doing away with the unity that polices sound-image relations (Doane 1980), working with creative captions and polyptychs, Sundar’s piece generatively multiplies the relational forms made possible through media. Being called upon to listen, to read, to look at multiple

elements, scenes, signs—dispersed across the frame—and hear other resonances in those signs, I found myself in the flux of constant negotiation, modelling Sundar’s idea that sound and hearing are always “a matter of negotiating one’s position vis-à-vis the world.” The way Sundar works with the possibilities of access tools, and her creative choices around captioning in particular, stretches the possible meanings and relations between sound and image, sound and text, image and text, to communicate further possibilities and connotations. Gabrielle Berry has recently argued, revisiting Chion’s notion of rendering, that captions might render some of the multisensory aspects of sound and “the not specifically auditory sensations associated with the source [of a sound] or with the circumstances” (Chion 2019 quoted in Berry 2024: 55). The main accomplishment of the video essay is the expanded sense of sonicity it performs through videographic practice, searching for various locations and forms in which we might discover sound and its multisensory effects.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

