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To Listen: Semiotics, Deaf Representation, and A Silent Voice

Kristen Stedman
kstedman@arcadia.edu

Arcadia University

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Professor Lisa Holderman & Alan Powell

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Introduction to Semiotics

Each of the words you're reading right now has its own distinct, individual meaning, despite whether you're actively thinking about it. This meaning, however, isn't concrete, it can be influenced by an individual word being placed in the context of a sentence, paragraph, or book. It can even be changed by the way the word is portrayed - if this were written with the font Comic Sans instead of Times New Roman, the lasting impression of this piece would be altered. While we know this to be true, the study of semiotics is not only about identifying this, but finding out *why* and *how* it is.

Semiotics is the study of signs, with a sign being, really, anything at all. With that being the case, it's more accurate to say that semiotics studies how we assign and derive meaning. It is entirely concerned with the relationship between *things* in the world, tangible or otherwise, and the ways we conceptualize and communicate those things. That sounds incredibly broad, because it is. Semiology can be applied to any number of fields, with linguistics, art, literature, and film studies being just a few examples.

To get a little more concrete, anyone who has studied a language has wondered how some terms can be so eerily similar to their English counterpart, while others couldn't possibly be more different. Another surprise comes in how some languages use just one word to convey what is an entire description in another. For example, 木漏れ日, or "komorebi," is a Japanese word meaning "sunlight streaming through the trees." This word, however, doesn't have any direct connection to or even resemblance of sunlight filtering through the leaves. Rather, somewhere, at some point in time, someone decided to give the phenomenon a name, and everyone said, "Sure, why not," proceeding to use the new name.

In semiotics, the curtains are never just blue. Everything has a meaning that can be conceptualized, despite whether or not an individual is actually compelled to do so, or is even aware that they can.

The Beginning

John Locke first defined the concept of a sign in 1690, where he classifies "semiotike" or "the doctrine of signs" as a third branch of science (Locke 289). Locke understood signs as being rooted in the study of words, and the founder of semiotics as an academic field, Ferdinand de Saussure, evidently agreed. Saussure was a Swiss linguist in the 20th century, whose lectures from 1906 to 1911 were compiled and published as *Course in General Linguistics* in 1916, three years after his death. Although Locke announced to the world that there is an existing thing that should be called a "sign," Saussure developed the concept into a comprehensive theory by explaining *why* signs should be studied as their own field, and illustrating *how* we might go about studying them. To start with the basics, his definition of a sign is the product of a concept and a "sound-image" (speech), which he calls the signified and the signifier, respectively. It's easy to misunderstand here that Saussure's model, then, simply relates a physical thing to an accompanying word. Combatting this, he stresses that the sound-image "is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses" (Saussure 66). The example Saussure uses in *Course in General Linguistics* is how the word "arbor" in German acts as a signifier for the concept of a tree, the signified (Saussure 67). This relationship is true of any word, in any language.

Having defined the two categories which make up a sign, the next aspect of Saussure's semiotic theory details how the signifier and signified relate to one another: they don't. To use

his terms, "The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary" (Saussure 67). By arbitrary, he means that, for example, there is nothing directly connecting the word "tree" or any of its four letters to the real, physical embodiment of a tree. The same goes for 木漏れ日 despite its inclusion of Japanese kanji, which is more pictorial than the Roman alphabet. Neither of these terms encompass the physical sound, smell, and likeness of what they represent. Therefore, a signifer's relation to its signified is socially mandated over time. This isn't to say, however, that this relationship can be consciously changed by any individual or group through sheer determination. Saussure argues exactly the opposite in that "The signifier, though to a appearance freely chosen with respect to the idea that it represents, is fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses it" (Saussure 71). If you were to decide one day that you would, for the rest of your life, refer to "tree" using the word "dog," you will never be able to get all of society to follow suit. Once a signifier has been determined, it is concrete. This is true even of words which take on new definitions over time, in which case, the signified just develops a second signifier.

One of the backing reasons for why this is lies in Saussure's explanation of how signifiers are understood only in relation to other signifiers: "When [signifiers] are said to correspond to concepts, it is understood that the concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system" (Saussure 117). An object is what we name it to be partially because it is different, in some way, from other things: we know that a "dog" refers to a dog because "wolf," "cat," and "amygdala" are all decidedly not that thing. Though it gets a little messier, this is still true even for words that have different meanings depending on their context. To use a highly contextual language as an example, the Japanese word あの, "ano," can mean either, "that specific object over there," or

"uhm." Its meaning is determined entirely depending on its relation to other words. If あの is immediately followed by a noun, you're most likely dealing with the first definition.

When discussing Saussure's theory, it's important to note the room he left for future development. Saussure makes it no secret that his work with semiotics is exclusively rooted in linguistics, that is, encompassing strictly verbal and written signs - he essentially tells the audience that the work of applying semiotics to other fields, and other types of signs, is not his job: "Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology … to determine the exact place of semiology is the task of the psychologist! The task of the linguist is to find out what makes language a special system within the mass of semiological data" (Saussure 16).

Though he doesn't go into depth with them, he recognizes the drawback of speech "In contrast to visual signifiers … which can offer simultaneous groupings in several dimensions, auditory signifiers have at their command only the dimension of time" (Saussure 70). Saussure described that written and verbal signifiers are linear, that in order to be understood, they have to follow one another in a sequence. Such as, for example, the way that we're reading these paragraphs left-to-right, from top-to-bottom. Reading these words backwards essentially negates their meaning as a sentence. Although the new "sentence" still contains the same words, we no longer understand because they have been reordered in a way we conceive as "improper."

Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotics

While Saussure's singular defining work is a compilation of student notes taken from his lectures, American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce frequently published work which developed, and at times even contradicted, his own semiotic theory. The one thing which remained constant in his work from 1867 to 1914 was his definition of a sign: "A sign, or

Representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic" 99). This is a clear differentiation from Saussure's model. Rather than a sign being *made up of* different categories like "signified," and "signifier," Peirce envisioned that signs are instead *related to* an "Interpretant" and an "Object" in a triadic relationship.

Peirce describes how this relationship functions in that: "A sign, or Representamen, is a first which stands in such a genuine triadic relation to a second, called its Object, as to be capable of determining a third, called its Interpretant, to assume the same triadic relation to its Object in which it stands itself to the same Object" (Peirce 99-100). An Interpretant, it's important to note, is not an individual person processing a sign, but rather the thought which that person has as a result of exposure to the sign. The Object, then, is the real manifestation of what the Representamen refers to. Returning to our earlier example of 木漏れ日 once more, in Peirce's model, the word itself act as the Representamen, the physical phenomenon of light filtering through the trees is the Object, and the mental response an individual has when reading or hearing "木漏れ日," is the Interpretant.

Unlike Saussure, Peirce attempted to categorize and define *all* types of signs with his theory, rather than just signs within language. It went so far in that he even designated an individual's thoughts as their own type of sign: "[A sign] addressed somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign" (Peirce 99). In recognizing that an Interpretant can be its own type of sign, Peirce makes the three parts of his semiotic theory more similar to a venn diagram than three distinct categories. With this, Peirce established semiotics not as a singular, predetermined assessment, but as an infinite process of encountering signs and subsequently interpreting them.

The Evolution of Peirce

While Peirce's definition of a sign and the qualities of its triadic relationship were constant, his attempts to establish comprehensive categories for different types of signs underwent significant revision. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy breaks down three different phases of Peirce's theory from 1867 to 1914, those being "Peirce's Early Account" from 1867 to 1868 with his paper "On a New List of Categories," his "Interim Account" with the 1903 work "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," and an incomplete "Final Account" from 1906 to 1910 through a series of papers and letters (Atkin). In the first arc of Perice's work, he defines what a sign is, and how the perception of a sign never truly ends due to the Interpretant's ability to be interpreted as yet another type of sign (Peirce, "On a New List of Categories" 5). The second account, then, is what is largely considered to be his comprehensive theory of signs, partly in that the majority of modern applications of his theory stem from this era. In "Logic as Semiotic," Peirce more clearly defines his previous description of a sign's triadic relationship, and then attempts to classify different aspects of this relationship into three trichotomies and ten classes. The trichotomies explain different *qualities* of signs, while the classes categorize different *types* of signs.

Regarding the trichotomies, the first applies to the sign itself, the second applies to the Object, and the third applies to the Interpretant. The first trichotomy includes: a Qualisign, Sinsign, and Legisign. The second: an Icon, Index, and Symbol, which Peirce states as being the most important class of signs, and which is frequently used in modern semiotic applications. And lastly, the third: a Rheme, Dicent, and Argument. These terms can then be used to identify which type of qualities are at work in the overall makeup of a sign. Just one example Peirce uses in

"Logic as Semiotic" is "a feeling of red" (Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic" 115). In this example, the Interpretant is classified as a "Rheme," the Object is an "Icon," and the Representamen is a "Qualisign." While the definitions of each term within the three respective trichotomies differs slightly, they can all be generally understood in relation to each other. Within each trichotomy, the three classes are each noted with a quality of "firstness," "secondness," or "thirdness," with those existing to generally describe each classes' closeness to the true form of the sign. Given this understanding, "firstness" then involves qualities closest to the sign itself, with "first" classes including the Qualisign, Icon, and Rheme. "A feeling of red," then, is a pure sign. Next, "secondness" relates in some way to the actual, physical existence of the Object, with the "second" classes being a Sinsign, Index, and Dicisign. Lastly, "thirdness" involves the concept of a sign, its pure thought, and cannot represent anything on its own unless in relation to a second. Peirce refers to this class involving signs of law, with its classes including Legisigns, Symbols, and Arguments (Peirce 102). Regarding our earlier examples, then, 木漏れ日 is classified as having a "Rheme" Interpretant, "Symbol" Object, and "Legisign" Representamen. This is due to the fact that 木漏れ日, having no established physical connection to light filtering through the trees, is therefore a societally agreed-upon symbol, two "thirds" which are understood in relation to a "first" the Rheme, which in this case is the concept of light filtering through the trees.

In Peirce's "Final Account," between 1906 to 1910, he attempted to expand the number of trichotomies to ten, and 66 total classifications of signs. However, this stretch of his work is typically not used in modern applications of semiotic theory, as it is largely deemed incomplete. This is due to the fact that this portion of his theory was never formally published or researched

through any particular institution, but rather, was developed through a series of letters with

fellow philosopher Lady Victoria Welby (Atkin).

Roland Barthes and the Study of Connotation

Although Saussure was rooted in linguistics, and Peirce in defining and categorizing types of

signs, French literary theorist and critic Roland Barthes moved the field further through

researching the practical application of semiotics in culture. Another distinction between the two

previous theorists and Barthes comes with the system of connotation and denotation, which he

describes in further depth in his 1964 essay collection *Elements of Semiology*. While previous

semiotic work was largely focused on how signs are *denoted*, with that describing what signs are

connected to, Barthes was one of the first to explore cultural *connotations* associated with signs,

regarding the societal opinions surrounding certain representations.

Before diving into specific examples of how Barthes applied signs to culture, one last aspect

of his theory that's important to note here is that, while he applies semiotics to physical objects,

he still views even these items through language. To Barthes, "Linguistics is not a part of the

general science of signs, even a privileged part, it is semiology which is a part of linguistics"

(Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* 11). To Barthes, nothing studied within semiology can remove

itself from language. Every sign communicates something, despite whether or not that message

is actually received by anyone. It is ultimately through this lens that he applies semiotics to

cultural objects in *Elements of Semiology*, those being primarily clothing, food, and automobiles.

For example, with clothing he discusses how what one wears communicates a wealth of

information about them in stating that "to wear a beret or a bowler hat does not have the same

meaning" (Barthes 27). To use more modern examples, ripped jeans and dress pants carry very

different connotations. Ripped jeans suggest youth, frugality, and rebellion, while dress pants more likely represent maturity, wealth, and corporate culture.

Within his exploration of connotation, Barthes eventually developed a new term which became central to his own theory, as well as the work of later semioticians: the "myth." Although Barthes' work is heavily influenced by the Saussurean model, the "myth" is more Peircean in that it recognizes semiotics as a *process* rather than a predetermined, concrete relationship. In his 1957 book *Mythologies*, Barthes defines a "myth" as first, another type of speech, and second, as a "mode of signification, a form" (Barthes, *Mythologies* 107). What Barthes means here is that myths are not physical things, and are instead connotated from existing signs, or, as he puts it: "Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message" (Barthes 107). While myths, then, may seem similar to Saussure's Interpretant, the mental impression a sign leaves on its viewer, myths go beyond that in numerous ways. Myths are pervasive throughout society, rather than just in one individual - and they are not always readily identified. Additionally, they represent a chain of events - multiple signs work together to create a myth, while an Interpretant relates only to a single sign. Lastly, and perhaps most critically, myths are intentionally created by groups to communicate messages which, Barthes argues, typically serve to perpetuate existing power structures (Barthes 142).

Modern Semiotics in Film and Animation

Barthes' use of semiotics in reading cultural objects assisted in opening up the field to one of its major modern uses: analyzing film. Inspired by Barthes' work, French film theorist Christian Metz worked to establish cinema as a language which could be subject to semiotic analysis, but with one major difference in determining that film does not have its own

independent code: "Thus a kind of filmic articulation appears, which has no equivalent in photography: It is denotation itself that is being constructed, organized, and to a certain extent codified (*codified*, not necessarily *encoded*)" (Metz 99). The concept of a "code" dates back to Saussure, in that signs can only be understood in relation to one another with some type of societal base of understanding, with that base being the code in question. To describe it broadly, in communication, a message is encoded by a sender, and then decoded by the receiver. Without a shared knowledge of the code being used, the message is not understood, or not at least not understood in the intended manner. In stating that film has no set code, he emphasizes that there is no set way in which to criticize and view film, establishing it more so an aesthetic art rather than a language (Metz 97). While representations in film may be "codified," meaning placed there intentionally, they are not "encoded," in a way that would be received by the audience absolutely, rather, film is entirely about denoting objects (Metz 99). Having established this, film is then able to illustrate any number of possible meanings and messages. This is not to say that codes do not exist and operate *within* film, as they certainly do, and are even used in categorizing aspects of filming itself - such as technical codes involved in camerawork. These codes, like the signs within them, relate to one another to make up the total meaning derived from a film.

Expanding on this in more detail is Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman (qtd. in Berger) in his 1976 *Semiotics of Cinema*, where he states that: "Every image on the screen is a sign, that is, it has meaning, it carries information. This meaning, however, can be of two kinds" (Berger 19). Lotman explains these two types of meaning as being the depiction, or denotation, of real objects and sounds, and secondly, the augmentations that may be applied to those images to convey different meanings. For example, if we were to view a recording of light filtering through the trees on its own, it may connote something like tranquility. However, if a desaturated, cool-toned

filter were then applied to this recording, it would end up conveying a very different meaning -

perhaps more like sadness. If the study of semiotics is about how we assign and derive meaning,

film semiotics is about *how* meaning is altered in a film - asking through what tools, and for what

purpose, the meaning comes across in one way as opposed to another.

While theorists like Metz establish how semiotics can be used to identify nearly any

aspect of a film, such as its tone, message, and plot, one aspect which will be focused on in the

application portion of this piece is how semiotics analysis can be used with character

establishment and development, specifically. Tokyo University professor Nozawa Shunsuke

elaborates on this in his paper "Characterization," in which he discusses the differences between

2D characters seen in animated films and 3D ones at length: "2D characters are not a 'realist'

representation of 3D beings such as humans, though they *can* be made to function as such a

representation" (Nozawa). He then goes on to explain that the qualities given to anime

characters, such as their hair styles, relationships, and personal backgrounds, exist first to help a

real 3D viewer identify with imagined 2D beings, and then beyond that, to further the film's

narrative. Here, then, an opportunity presents itself to apply semiotic study to the ways

characters are portrayed in animated film. By identifying the signifiers present in a character's

appearance, behavior, and interactions within the film, a viewer can then analyze what these

signify about the character's role in the piece as a whole.

A Silent Voice

In January 2018, the official list of Oscar nominees for Best Animated Film was released.

Many beloved titles had been considered for a spot on this list, with just one being *A Silent

Voice*. An animated film from Japan, this work follows two protagonists: a deaf girl, and the boy

who bullied her during their childhood. Now teenagers, the two reconnect to embark on a journey of healing, redemption, and friendship. Ultimately, the nomination went to *The Boss Baby*.

While traditional Western institutions may not recognize *A Silent Voice*, the film presents abundant opportunity for semiotic analysis regarding its representation of deafness. Film analysis often overlaps with representation studies, and for a good reason. Given that semiotics studies how we assign and derive meaning, it is an excellent medium for understanding how we do that regarding media portrayal of minority groups. Often, through placing the visual signifiers on screen under a microscope, we find that these groups historically fall into inaccurate tropes, stereotypes, and cliches, which inevitably harm intercultural and subcultural relationships by fostering misunderstanding and driving groups further apart from one another. These categories can be recognized through signifiers shared in groups of different portrayals of deafness, which when repeated, form an identifiable code. Today, while there remains room for improvement, an increasing number of films are providing more accurate representations, with *A Silent Voice* being one of them. Through its careful, sensitive portrayal of Shōko Nishimiya, this film improves the representation of deaf and hard of hearing individuals and serves as one example of how deafness can be conveyed authentically in media texts.

Film Summary

As mentioned above, *A Silent Voice* follows the story of Shōko Nishimiya, a deaf high schooler, and Shōya Ishida, an ostracized teen who used to bully her. The film opens with Shōya's suicide attempt. Standing on the edge of a bridge, he steps away when he hears fireworks which remind him of his childhood. Shōko relentlessly tried to befriend Shōya only to be tormented by him and their classmates. Ultimately, after having eight of her hearing aids as

well as her notepad for written communication destroyed, Shōko transfers school. The principal

singles out Shōya for bullying her, and the class lets him take the fall - denying their equivalent

participation. From that point onward, Shōya became "the bullied," causing him to feel persistent

guilt about how he had treated Shōko. Reflecting on this during his suicide attempt, he decides

he can't die before at least apologizing to her.

Beginning his redemption, Shōya starts learning sign language. He finds Shōko while

attending classes at the local sign language center, and returns to her the battered notepad he

once threw into a pond. Shōko is overwhelmed with joy to the point of tears. Shōya had held

onto the notebook for years, returned it to her, learned sign language, apologized, and asked for

her friendship - the one thing she continually asked of him as children. As the two become

closer, they develop a larger friend group. Making up this group are Shōko's younger sister

Yuzuru, Shōko's childhood friend Sahara, another former bully named Ueno, Ueno's best friend

Kawai, and two of Shōya's classmates who know nothing of his past. As things continue to go

well, Shōko develops a crush on Shōya. However, when she tries to communicate this verbally,

he misunderstands her speech. After realizing his mistake, he takes Shōko and their mutual

friends to an amusement park. The day ends in a heated argument between all members of the

group when its revealed to the unknowing members that Shōya bullied Shōko. Once again, Ueno

and Kawai deny their involvement, which Sahara calls them out on.

Amidst the breakup of this friend group which both Shōko and Shōya always wanted,

Shōko's grandmother passes away. Trying to cheer her up, Shōya takes Shōko on a trip to the

countryside, but instead only discovers how much she blames herself for Shōya being bullied

after she transferred. Simultaneously realizing in that moment how much his actions have

damaged her, Shōya begins spending time with Shōko and her sister almost daily. One such

night, the three attend a fireworks festival. Shōko leaves early, and Shōya soon follows her after

Yuzuru requests that he go get her forgotten camera. Arriving at the house, he finds Shōko

attempting to jump from her balcony. While he's able to grab her arm, he falls over the ledge

himself from the force of hoisting her up and over him. Shōya is retrieved from the river, but is

comatose in the hospital for days following the fall. After waking up, he meets with Shōko again

to formally apologize for everything he's done that caused her to hate herself, and ultimately, for

failing to understand her so many times. Now fully understanding one another, the two attend a

school festival where they face, and make up with, their friend group for the first time since the

fight, completing their arcs of healing and redemption.

(Mis)Representations of Deafness

Part of what makes *A Silent Voice* important to discuss is the way it portrays Shōko as a

normal teenage girl, while still maintaining deafness as part of her daily life. Historically, deaf

and hard of hearing characters are not only underrepresented in media, but misrepresented

through false portrayals of the experience of hearing loss. Two works in particular have sought to

categorize these misrepresentations: John Schuchuman's *Hollywood Speaks: Deafness and the*

Film Entertainment Industry, which discusses early cinema, and Miriam Nathan Lerner's

"Narrative Function of Deafness and Deaf Characters in Film," which keeps its scope modern.

Schuchuman's labels for deaf characters include "dummies," "perfect speakers," "expert

lip-readers," and "the unhappy deaf person." While he also covers a fifth category of "the fake

deaf person," it is less relevant in the context of this paper in that the trope doesn't attempt a

genuine portrayal of deafness to begin with. To give a brief summary of the character traits

encompassed in each of these terms, "dummies," is a shortened version of "deaf and dumb." One

of the most popular early portrayals of deafness, the "dummy" perpetuates a myth that those

experiencing hearing loss are mute. Often, these characters are oblivious to their surroundings, short-sighted, and morally ambiguous. An example used by Schuchuman is in the 1930 film *Beau Bandit*, which reinforced the stereotype through portraying its deaf character as "as a petty thief who survives outside the law" (Schuchman 45).

A "perfect speaker," on the other hand, refers to deaf characters who speak regularly and with complete clarity. While through speech therapy some deaf individuals may sound similar to a hearing person, most of the time deaf speech is less intelligible, with a throaty, monotone delivery (Berke). Typically accompanying the "perfect speaker," trope is another titled "the expert lip-reader," in which a deaf character understands verbal conversations through lip-reading. In reality, only about 12.4% of a message on average can be understood through lip-reading (Altieri et al.). However, even in modern media this ability continues to be exaggerated to levels surpassing experts. One example of this is in the manga *Gangsta*, where a deaf mercenary is able to read the lips of his targets from over a mile away.

Lastly, "the unhappy deaf person," refers to deaf characters appearing as "solitary figures, unhappy, suicidal, and pitied or deceived by friends and family" (Schuchman 47). While untreated hearing loss is proven to have negative effects on mental health, this trope more often refers to deaf character's plight in directly relating to their hearing loss (Foss 889). In "the unhappy deaf person" trope, the audience is shown an individual who either recently lost their hearing or who already lacks living an isolated, burdensome existence. Then, as if their internal suffering were not enough, the character is made to experience misfortunate throughout the film spurred on by their condition.

Moving on to more modern cinema, sign language interpreter Miriam Nathan Lerner adds a number of additional categories to those previously outlined by Schuchman. Those that

she creates, though, are subcategories within her conclusion that, "Films with deaf characters often do not focus on the condition of deafness at all. Rather, the characters seem to satisfy a role in the story that either furthers the plot or the audience's understanding of other hearing characters" (Lerner). Lerner goes on to identify a deaf character's role in film being anything from an informant to the protagonist, to trauma-inspired response, to a symbolic commentary on society. While the messages behind some of these uses for deaf characters may not be ill-intentioned, they still fail at accurately representing the deaf experience in using disability as a medium for accomplishing narrative goals.

A Person, Not a Plot Device

Arguments can be made that Shōko's personality and behavior overlap with some of the above representations. There are many moments throughout *A Silent Voice* where Shōko echos Schuchman's "unhappy deaf person" in her loneliness, low self-esteem, and suicide attempt. Despite these similarities, they are attributed more to how stereotypes emerge from small corners of reality, rather than encompassing the entirety Shōko's character (Shpancer). More significantly, while Schuchman's category features deaf characters who experience turmoil and misfortune *related* to their deafness, Shōko experiences no such mental anguish about her condition. She never once says, writes, or thinks anything similar to the statements we've become accustomed to hearing from disabled characters in media like: "I wish I weren't deaf," "I hate being deaf," or even "Why me?" From the first moment we see Shōko, despite having just transferred into a public elementary school she introduces herself with a smile. Her movements are calm and deliberate as she unclasps her backpack and searches for her notebook, eventually holding up its contents to the class: "It's nice to meet you. My name is Shōko Nishimiya. I want

to get to know you all through this notebook. Please use this notebook when you want to talk to me. I can't hear" (*A Silent Voice*).

In just this initial scene, there are multiple signs communicating Shōko's demeanor to the audience. Most people become rushed and nervous when standing at the front of a room of their peers, leading Shōko's unhurried introduction to convey confidence. Regarding her notebook, the way she structures her sentences has even more to tell. Before ever mentioning her deafness, she first expresses her desire to make friends - further diverging from Schuchman's categories in that Shōko never willfully isolates herself. Similarly, in the third sentence Shōko voices her preferred method of communication to the class. Although later in the film the audience discovers that Shōko is most comfortable with sign language, there are many reasons why Shōko would have opted for written communication in childhood. Not only would this be the most likely way for her and a classroom of hearing peers to understand one another, in reality, one study found that 50% of deaf high school seniors have reading-comprehension at levels similar to hearing fourth-grade students (*Redeafined Magazine*). Given this statistic, as an elementary schooler Shōko would realistically be able to communicate with her classmates through writing.

While in these early scenes Shōko communicates through writing, it is by no means the only way she expresses herself throughout the film. In many instances where deaf characters are included in cinema, they adhere to one or two modes of communication. *A Silent Voice* counters this through showing Shōko swap out multiple strategies, which she does depending on personal preference and situational context. Throughout the film, Shōko communicates through writing, gesture, Japanese Sign Language (JSL), and speaks with a deaf accent. Rarely she'll lip read, but

only if another character is making an effort to slowly enunciate a sentence, as Shōya does when first reuniting with her.

Deafness is Not the Problem

Nonetheless, just differentiating from existing deaf stereotypes and featuring realistic methods of communication doesn't automatically render *A Silent Voice* a positive, accurate representation. Contributing more to this is the film's portrayal of Shōko's mannerisms and actions as a person, not simply a deaf character. In an interview with the film's director Naoko Yamada, the interviewer asks about Shōko's hearing impairment, stating: "It's like saying Shōko is lonely not because she is deaf, but because she is a human," which Yamada agrees with in adding, "If you think, 'Shōko is poor because she has a hearing impairment,' you impose your own selfish assumptions onto her character ... It was more important to look closely at her: how she looks at the world and how she thinks about it. Not sympathy, but respect" (Nobuaki).

Going off this, the film regularly illustrates how Shōko interacts with and processes the world without using speech. Often, she becomes aware of another person's presence through observing changes in her surroundings. Just a few examples of this were in the first scene, when she raises her eyebrows after being tapped by the teacher, alerting her to begin introducing herself. Later, when she reunites with Shoya as a teenager, the audience sees her grasping a metal bar which vibrates when Shoya runs into it, causing her to look toward him. Similarly, when she's feeding birds by herself at the park, Shoya's sneeze makes them fly away, once again alerting her to his presence. Lastly, during the fireworks festival the audience witnesses Shōko experiencing sound rather than just reacting to it. Shōko closes her eyes and smiles, with intense ripples accompanying each blast in the cup of tea she's holding. Not one word is said, thought, or narrated here - the audience understands through these visual signs that this is a special moment

for Shōko where she feels connected to her surroundings. These small moments not only give the audience insight into Shōko's daily experiences, they keep them aware of her deafness without confronting it through dialogue between the characters. Easily, these moments could have had their meaning altered by making Shōko's expression one of frustration, sadness, or embarrassment. For example, in the introduction scene if Shōko had instead been animated as embarrassed when her teacher had to tap her shoulder, this would signify to the audience that Shōko feels shame about her deafness. As discussed in relation to Schuchman's "unhappy deaf person," while deafness is an obstacle Shōko faces in life, it isn't one she faces in the context of *A Silent Voice*. Rather, the obstacles Shōko faces within the film include loneliness, guilt over Shoya being bullied, her grandmother's death, and being misunderstood by others. These issues echo ones that any other high schooler may struggle with, regardless of their hearing.

The Weight of Expression

The importance of *A Silent Voice's* efforts in representing Shōko as a prominent, fully realized character with a realistic experience of deafness can be understood through covering the impact that media representations of minority groups have on audiences. As covered in the section on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, a group of signs presented at once can form a cultural "myth," which often serves to perpetuate existing power structures. Expanding on this concept, Barthes states that myth, "abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences … it organizes a world without contradictions because it is without depth" (143). Here, Barthes explains that myth simplifies the full human complexity a group holds. While not in name, myth takes its form in film through tropes and stereotypes. Defining an entire group of people, particularly minority groups, with a handful of traits removes "their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance" (Barthes 143).

While stereotypes may have some small origin in reality at times, allowing stereotypes to inform societal understanding of a group is harmful to both those within and outside of it, in that they inform how different groups of people interact. This is explained further in an article by *HuffPost*, which states that audiences have "seen a thousand images of 'Latinos are violent,' or 'Asians are invisible,' or 'blacks are this' or 'women are that,' … it's a knee-jerk reaction. It's this, 'Oh yes, yes, of course. I know that.' (Boboltz & Yam). This kind of instantaneous reaction fosters misunderstanding and conflict between groups in reality. Just one example of this is in how deaf and hard of hearing patients have been treated in healthcare scenarios. While under the Americans With Disabilities Act healthcare organizations must offer services such as ASL Interpreters to those who require them, there were enough instances of non-compliance that The Barrier Free Health Care Initiative was formed to enforce them in 2012. In one settlement between the U.S. and Highline Medical Center, a patient was denied an interpreter and made to communicate through writing ("Settlement Agreement"). This situation features a common misconception that writing is always an appropriate method of communicating with deaf individuals. As covered earlier, many with significant hearing impairments struggle to read and write in English. Especially in health care settings, assuming a deaf person's proficiency or preference in communication can be dangerous.

While the effects of inaccurate representation on the interactions between groups can be dangerous, the internal effects are no less significant. On this, *HuffPost* discusses the term "symbolic annihilation," defined as "the idea that if you don't see people like you in the media you consume, you must somehow be unimportant" (Boboltz & Yam). Compounding this is that infrequent representation causes those that exist to stand out more to audiences, adding additional "importance" to those behaviors regardless of their accuracy. Thus, when a group in

film is simplified to only exhibit specific traits and behaviors "which don't reflect the breadth of their life's experience ... you 'may wonder if that is all that is expected of you in society'" (Boboltz & Yam). An example here with deaf characters in film is the prevalence of "perfect speakers" and "expert lip-readers." While these skills are unrealistic, hearing impaired individuals, especially youth, might be shamed by these portrayals when their own speaking and lip-reading abilities don't match what they see on screen. This can be compounded further when considering that media may be the most exposure some hearing individuals have to hearing impairments. Upon meeting someone who is deaf, it becomes more likely that they may expect a speaking, writing, and lip-reading ability that surpasses that of real people.

Have a Meaningful Voice

These myths, while currently predominant, are not impossible to change. While Saussure contends that the meaning of a sign is concrete, semiotic theory still allows for new, secondary signifiers to develop. While any given meaning of a sign is unlikely to be forgotten completely, a new signifier applied to a signified can become the dominant understanding of that sign overtime. Earlier, the example of calling a tree "dog" was used, stating that if one individual decides to make that change in their vocabulary, it will not become reality over the course of their life. While this is true, the situation changes if every Hollywood director decides to refer to trees as "dogs" in all major motion pictures. While this is an extreme example, if a group of people makes a concerted effort overtime to instill new meaning in a word or image, that meaning will eventually become real. In the case of deaf representation in film, then, stereotypes like Schuchuman's "dummy," "perfect-speaker," "expert-lip-reader," and "unhappy deaf person," can be overwritten through increasing the number of films containing characters which

don't conform to them. While erasing misunderstanding and stereotyping between groups

entirely may be impossible, these issues can improve if media, instead of adding fuel to the fire

by perpetuating harmful, inaccurate tropes – instead adds water through realistic, human

portrayals. *A Silent Voice* does this through its sensitive characterization and detailed animation

of Shōko Nishimiya as a deaf person whose problems and identity do not start and end with her

deafness. Through its efforts, this film is an example of how media can restore full, human

complexity to characters which, when featured, are too often simplified.

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