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### ARTICLE

## Deafness and Sound in *Small, Slow but Steady* (2022)

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### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the Japanese contemporary film *Small, Slow but Steady* and explores how deaf people experience sound physically, through the body. Among contemporary Japanese films that challenge ableist views of deafness, *Small, Slow but Steady* bridges the gap between hearing and deafness by portraying its deaf protagonist, Keiko, in relation to sound and bodily sensation. The film emphasizes her personal journey, illustrating how she engages with sound in a unique, embodied way. It often magnifies ordinary background noises, transforming them into heightened sensory moments that evoke emotional responses. Sound becomes a fluid boundary that highlights both the differences and interactions between hearing and deaf people. I adopt a phenomenological approach that emphasizes the perceptual qualities of sound. To be specific, I delve deep into film theories concerning sound, with particular attention to its material aspects—such as the concept of “haptic sound” as discussed by Laura Marks. Sound is portrayed as deeply intertwined with the senses of touch, sight, and taste. By manipulating sound to engage multiple senses—like touch, sight, and even taste—the film creates a deeply immersive experience. This integration of sound and tactile perception effectively conveys emotion and enhances the spectators’ affective engagement.

**Keywords:** Deafness; Sound; Film

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# 1. Introduction

In *A Silent Voice* (*Koe no Katachi*, dir. Yamada Naoko, 2016), Shōko, a girl who was born deaf, is bullied at school because she cannot communicate with other hearing students. However, Shōya, who bullied Shōko in middle school, learns sign language to make amends with her. They finally reconcile with each other when Shōya returns her notebook that he has kept. On the one hand, deaf people are usually defined as those who cannot understand audio information<sup>[1]</sup>. Regarding the definition of deaf people in a medical context, it indicates the problem of not being able to hear or having a hearing loss, resulting in a communication failure with hearing people. Indeed, films on deafness usually depict the difficulties faced by deaf people in their daily lives. In a society where the majority are able-bodied, deaf people encounter barriers, especially communication problems. Thus, it is necessary to further discuss an ableist perspective on deafness constructed by society that emphasizes the inability of deaf people to hear and favors hearing people.

On the other hand, some films not only focus on the difficulties faced by deaf people due to their hearing issues, but also remind us of a different perspective that we have often overlooked the emotional and affective aspects while emphasizing intelligence factors. In *A Scene at the Sea* (dir. Kitano Takeshi, 1991), the affection shared between the deaf couple Shigeru and Takako is conveyed through their nonverbal interactions. Takako follows Shigeru to the beach and watches him surfing alone. Even when Shigeru dies at the sea, Takako stays calm and watches the sea as she always does. Spectators may imagine her to grieve the loss of her lover by watching the sea. As the theme song “Silent Love” audibly suggests, her sorrow, regret, and fear are all dissolved into the sea.

# 2. Materials and Methods

Among the contemporary films that resist an ableist perspective on deafness, I focus on Miyake Sho’s film *Small, Slow but Steady* (2022) because it proves to be a productive site for shedding light on the permeable boundary between hearing and deaf people and emphasizes the importance of emotions, affect, and the body. It achieves

this by giving significant importance to filmic techniques, particularly the materiality of sound. Instead of analyzing the source and information of the sound, I pay attention to the perceptual qualities of a sound by referring to a phenomenological approach to sound analysis<sup>[2]</sup>. The sound in *Small, Slow but Steady* suggests the interconnectedness with touch, sight, and taste. This kind of textual synesthesia promotes a sense of sensory immersion for spectators<sup>[3]</sup>, which blurs the boundaries between hearing and deaf people. In this chapter, I will analyze how the affective sound blurs the boundary between the hearing/deaf characters and spectators’ bodies<sup>[4–6]</sup>.

Before analyzing the film *Small, Slow but Steady*, I will first map out films with deafness, focusing on how these films portray deaf characters, how films provide sound and visual information via different techniques, and how spectators perceive these sounds and visual information. I will use *LISTEN*, a film directed by a deaf filmmaker Makihara Eri and a deaf dancer DAKAI as an example to elaborate on how a film uses different techniques to depict deaf people perceiving music via the body. Then I will further examine film theories related to sound with a special focus on the materiality of sound, such as “haptic sound” noted by Laura Marks<sup>[5]</sup>. Based on the above research on deafness, I will analyze Miyake Sho’s *Small, Slow but Steady* as a case study to explore deafness in relation to the body, sound, emotions, and affect.

# 3. Deafness and Film

This section aims to clarify how films depict deaf people by focusing on sound and visual signifiers. In addition, how spectators interpret these sound and visual signifiers will also be explored as follows. First of all, Chion<sup>[7–9]</sup> notes that visual signifiers of sound are important in silent films and deaf cinema. Although the sound can be visualized, deaf characters in deaf cinema are powerless among hearing and speaking characters. Chion explores the role of deaf characters whose silence remains unheard and mute characters who “not only serve the plot but also frequently assume a subordinate position”<sup>[9]</sup>. Deaf people have often been positioned as the other to those hearing people in filmic representation as well as the film industry. Although independent deaf

filmmakers such as Ernest Marshall made films for deaf people in the 1930s, as film technology changed, deaf people could not get equal access to films <sup>[10]</sup>.

Furthermore, many films depict deaf characters as vulnerable people due to their deafness. For instance, the deaf-mute young woman Belinda MacDonald in *Johnny Belinda* (dir. Jean Negulesco, 1948) becomes the subject of local gossip after being raped by a drunk man. Moreover, *My Sons* (Musuko, dir. Yamada Yōji, 1991) portrays deaf characters as marginalized due to their inability to hear. *Happiness of Us Alone* (dir. Matsuyama Zenzo, 1961) portrays a deaf couple who are faced with more hardships and struggles than hearing people due to their deafness through the post-war period.

Some films focus on an insurmountable barrier between deaf characters who use sign language and hearing characters who do not understand it, such as *Children of a Lesser God* (dir. Randa Haines, 1986), *Sweet and Low-down* (dir. Woody Allen, 1999), and *My Sons* (dir. Yamada Yoji, 1991). In these films, there seems to be a barrier which suggests not only during the communication but also in the issue of mutual understanding and social inclusion. For example, hearing characters may unconsciously have a gap with deaf characters because they cannot understand sign language. Spectators may also be guided to feel distant from deaf characters, unintentionally reinforcing an ableist perspective that centers on people without disabilities. Films that are mainly aimed at people without disabilities, in which the design of sound and visual information often favors an ableist perspective, further alienate deaf spectators.

However, some films challenge the portrayal of deaf characters as marginalized people by depicting their unique personal experience via filmic techniques, especially sound. Compared to people without disabilities, deaf people may not be able to hear sounds, but they can use their visual advantages to capture details that may not be noticed by those without disabilities. Whereas people without disabilities hear sounds, deaf people capture them through visual cues. Film, through its unique aesthetics such as cinematography, sound, and editing, highlights the process of how deaf people capture and experience sounds <sup>[11]</sup>. Taking *A Scene at the Sea* (Ano natsu, ichiban shizukana umi, dir. Kitano Takeshi, 1991) as an example, the deaf female pro-

tagonist, with the accompaniment of Hisaishi Joe's music, looks at the boundless sea and quietly recalls the moments with her deaf boyfriend. The contrast between the calm sea and the turbulent inner emotions is highlighted by the music and the peaceful sea. Not only the music, but also film narrative and style, contribute to a sense of rhythm that allows the deaf characters to perceive the world and express their emotions through visual information.

In addition to some well-known classic films such as *A Scene at the Sea*, some contemporary Japanese films related to deafness also focus on the body, emotions, and affective aspects, which are realized through filmic and aesthetic techniques. For instance, *LISTEN* (dir. Makihara Eri and DAKAI, 2016), a film screened in Ebisu Film Festival 2023 and Tokyo International Deaf Film Festival 2021, examines how deaf people "listen to" music via the body. The 360-degree spinning camera captures a deaf girl who expresses her love towards nature by singing a song about the winds in the rustling of trees <sup>[12]</sup>. In addition, *Social Dance* (dir. Momose Aya, 2019), a documentary video work about a deaf couple quarrelling with each other by using sign language, emphasizes intimacy, trust, and misunderstandings among a couple by focusing on the hands shot with a fixed camera <sup>[13]</sup>. In *Drive My Car* (2021), directed by Hamaguchi Ryusuke, uses sign language and body movements as an alternative to oral communication. In a scene depicting actors and actresses from different countries, the language barrier is overcome through body language and eye contact, suggesting the importance of the body in overcoming the barrier of language communication. These contemporary Japanese films about deafness pay attention to the body, emotion, and affect by various filmic techniques.

Based on the films mentioned above, many of them are designed from a perspective of hearing people, which unintentionally excludes deaf spectators. *LISTEN* is a good example that provides an alternative by exploring how deaf people appreciate music. At the screening in Yebisu International Festival for Art & Alternative Visions 2023, hearing people could freely take earplugs to experience the charm of the soundless world without auditory interference. Thus, spectators with and without disabilities have agency. Even if they took the earplugs, they could choose to use them or take them off to enjoy the film in their own

way.

Moreover, people with and without disabilities may have different experiences with the sound and visual information in films. Deaf characters and hearing characters in films may also perceive and experience sound differently. Deaf people may capture sound through visual information, whereas hearing people may hear the sound directly, including on/off-screen sound and non/diegetic sound <sup>[14]</sup>. Deaf spectators and hearing spectators may also process the visual and auditory information in films differently. For example, in *LISTEN*, deaf spectators may be better at capturing sound through visual information than hearing audiences who are not accustomed to watching silent films. However, hearing spectators can also experience a different way of acquiring information by watching films, including silent films. Films take advantage of filmic techniques, such as unique narrative style, editing, and sound, to provide a rich and diverse world that appeals to a wide range of spectators <sup>[15]</sup>. In the following sections, I will examine *Small, Slow but Steady* and explore how films about deafness provide a new perspective on the visualization of sound, the body, affect and emotions, as well as the rhythm of a particular place.

## 4. Deafness, Sound, and the Body

This section further elaborates on how sound plays an important role in films about deafness by paying attention to the relationship between sound and the body. Marks draws attention to the haptic nature of film, emphasizing “haptic visuality” as a key concept to connect film and the body. “Haptic visuality” describes a mode of seeing where the eyes function similarly to organs of touch <sup>[5]</sup>. Touch is a sense that primarily operates on the surface of the body. Considering film as haptic implies recognizing how it engages the body, including characters’ bodies and spectators’ bodies, extending beyond a singular focus on visual perception. When seeing a haptic image, spectators are compelled to contemplate the image itself rather than being solely absorbed by the narrative. The haptic image invites a more immersive and sensory experience, encouraging spectators to engage with the physicality and materiality of the image.

Not only the image, but also sound goes beyond rep-

resentational aspects by exploring “haptic sound” and its association with the body and emotion. “Haptic sound” suggests that the manipulation of sound in films creates a sensory experience that not only stimulates the auditory sense but also elicits physical and emotional responses. The sound design in these films goes beyond the mere representation of sound, reaching a level where it can be felt and experienced on a visceral level.

In films that explore the theme of deafness, sound is a significant element that connects different bodies of people with and without disabilities. Some films, such as *LISTEN*, emphasize the embodied nature of sound perception and its potential to bridge the gap between hearing people and deaf people. Although deaf people cannot hear the sound, they can perceive sound with their bodies in an alternative way. Sound becomes a medium through which different bodies and experiences can connect, highlighting the shared humanity that transcends differences in auditory perception.

Sound in films that tackle the theme of deafness serves as a permeable boundary, highlighting the distinction and interaction between different people, including both hearing and deaf people. “Haptic sound” in the films and suggests the indistinct boundary between different bodies. The tactile nature of film and its connection to the sensations of people with and without disabilities. For instance, by incorporating a highly effective sound design, which encompasses environmental sounds and street rhythms, *Hear Me* (dir. Zheng Fenfen, 2009) articulates the relationship between protagonists without relying heavily on dialogue. This approach allows for a sense of intimacy and closeness to be established, appealing to the spectators’ bodies.

Above all, sound plays a crucial role in creating a powerful and immersive experience for spectators. The natural ambient sounds are amplified to the point where they no longer sound natural, but instead, they become heightened and intensified, evoking strong emotions and affect. This manipulation of sound blurs the boundaries between different senses, such as touch, sight, and taste, resulting in a sensory immersion for spectators. The close association between sound and touch allows the sound to convey emotions and affective feelings. The aural experience becomes intertwined with the body, where sounds seem to inhabit the spectators’ bodies, creating a profound

impact. Sound becomes a physical entity that touches and vibrates through the body, reaching the inner workings of the ears. In *Small, Slow but Steady*, the everyday noises associated with living, such as writing, eating, walking, running, boxing, and breathing, are prominently amplified and foregrounded, creating a heightened sense of the body and emphasizing the ambiguous boundary between hearing people and deaf people<sup>[16-17]</sup>.

The following sections will analyze the film language of sound and visuals in *Small, Slow but Steady* (dir. Miyake Sho, 2022) to show how a film can visualize sound through filmic aesthetics and how deaf characters capture sound through the bodies. The following sections will not only explore how deaf people capture and express sound, but also provide an opportunity to examine film aesthetics. Specifically, it highlights how film, as one of visual arts, can use cinematography and other techniques to suggest how deaf characters capture and experience sounds.

## 5. Deafness and Sound in *Small, Slow but Steady*

*Small, Slow but Steady*, a film made for the 60th anniversary of Nagoya TV, mainly depicts the daily life of a deaf female professional boxer, Keiko, as she trains and competes in boxing games in slow-paced Arakawa during the pandemic by focusing on the visualized sound and the body. It suggests Keiko's personal growth and connections with people around her by visualizing the slow-paced Arakawa with rich sounds. In the film, Keiko, a female boxer, does the mitt training, while being captivated by the intense impact of rapid strikes. There is a sense of rhythmic and affective stillness in boxing that provides an immersive experience for spectators.

Focusing on Miyake Sho's film *Small, Slow but Steady*, which challenges an ableist perspective on deafness, provides valuable insights into the blurred boundary between hearing people and deaf people, emphasizing the significance of emotions, affect, and the body. The body is emphasized as a way for people, regardless of their ability to hear, to experience and feel things. *Small, Slow but Steady* highlights the body as a means for people, regardless of their hearing abilities, to experience and perceive the world. Through the body, including both hearing and

deaf characters, as well as hearing and deaf spectators, the boundary between disability and non-disability becomes ambiguous. The film strategically utilizes various filmic techniques, with particular emphasis on the materiality of sound, to suggest the blurred boundary between deaf people and hearing people. By incorporating sound as a crucial element, the film deepens the sensory experience and reinforces the significance of the body in shaping our understanding and connection to the narrative.

*Small, Slow but Steady* highlights materiality of sound by amplifying subtle sounds. Sound is carefully designed to depict Keiko's unique life experience, together with slow-paced shots. At the beginning of the film, sounds of writing and chewing ice cubes are amplified while picturing Keiko sitting and writing something in her room in front of a mirror. Keiko writes quietly in her room, occasionally with the sound of police sirens passing by outside the window. She then picks up a glass on the table, puts ice cubes in her mouth, and continues writing while chewing on the ice. The sound of her chewing ice can be heard, with the ice crackling in her mouth, and the sound of teeth colliding with the ice. As Lovatt argues that the sound design signifies a connection to touch, sight, and taste, generating a textual synesthesia that immerses spectators in a multisensory experience, by utilizing "haptic sound", the chewing sound of the ice here becomes a sensory auditory experience, allowing spectators to feel the cold ice melting in the mouth<sup>[3]</sup>. Through the amplified sound, people may perceive the change in temperature, enabling spectators to immerse themselves and experience the deaf character Keiko's current state.

In addition to the sound of chewing ice, the sounds of punches in the boxing gym and the stretching equipment have also been amplified, bringing a sense of rhythm throughout the film<sup>[11]</sup>. After the scene of chewing ice, the film title appears on screen, and an alarm clock rings, followed by the flickering streetlights, a rhythmic sound of ropes touching the ground, and fitness equipment in a boxing room being pushed and pulled. Through the amplified sound of boxing and punching, spectators can understand that this is a boxing gym where Keiko practices boxing. The rhythmic sounds of pushing and pulling, jumping rope, and boxing exercises, combined with close-up shots of people practicing boxing, suggest that this is a vin-



tage boxing gym in Arakawa, which may face difficulties during Covid pandemic.

The visualized sound is also underscored when the coach's wife reads the diary written by Keiko, together with the background music of the guitar played by Keiko's brother. The diary suggests Keiko's inner world and her connections with the people around her. After the coach is hospitalized, Keiko goes to the hospital to visit him. In the hospital, Keiko draws in her notebook with a pen, and the coach's wife asks what she is drawing. The camera then zooms in on the notebook that Keiko hands over, showing a sketch of boxing gloves drawn by a ballpoint pen. While praising Keiko's drawing skills, the coach's wife carefully reads the notebook. Keiko also draws the Arakawa Bridge and notes down daily training contents and her own thoughts. Then, the coach's wife starts reading Keiko's notebook to the coach: "December 25th, long-distance running training for 10 kilometers. The river is very stinky today, and I want to go back home, but I get used to it halfway through..." The coach's wife reads it with a smile. Then the hospital scene fades away, and Keiko's training memories appear. Meanwhile, the soft guitar melody hummed by her brother appears as background music, with the lyrics whispering, "All you need to do is to persist in your life." It indicates Keiko's feelings during boxing training sessions and her daily experiences. In addition to the main boxing training, her notebook also records her memories of living with her younger brother and the people around her, including memories of her brother starting to learn boxing.

Based on the amplified sounds analyzed as above, *Small, Slow but Steady* mainly focuses on background noises or subtle sounds that are not typically paid attention to, such as the sound of writing. In terms of sound effects amplification, according to Chion's "vococentrism" that highlights the presence of a human voice, traditional Hollywood films generally amplify human voices while minimizing the surrounding ambient sounds to emphasize the dialogue<sup>[7]</sup>. However, this film takes the opposite approach. As Keiko is deaf, her perception of the sounds around her is not like that of a hearing person. Instead, her inner world and emotional changes are portrayed through the juxtaposition of ambient sounds and subtle noises.

Indeed, as suggested by the Japanese film title of

*Small, Slow but Steady*, "Keiko, Me wo Sumasete" ("Keiko, concentrate on seeing"), Keiko relies mainly on visual cues to get information, including auditory messages. In that case, the two different senses of hearing and vision will produce certain perceptual biases or gaps for the same object located in the same event and place. The difference in auditory experience causes deaf people and hearing people to have different perceptions of the same location. For Keiko, the area under the bridge is a place for her to practice boxing and reflect on her own during the day and night. However, for people who can hear, it is a place filled with the noise of trams and other vehicles passing by. But for Keiko, the place is not as noisy as people experience. Looking at the bridge piers reflecting shimmering waves below, Keiko and her coach sit together to take a break. With the rumbling sound of the passing tram colliding with the rails, Keiko begins her rhythmic boxing warm-up exercises. After taking a sip of water handed to her by her coach, the camera shifts focus to the footwork movements when Keiko practices boxing. The coach looks at Keiko with a satisfied smile in the end.

For deaf people and hearing people, different perception of sound results in divergent emotions arising in relation to the same location<sup>[18]</sup>. Keiko finds herself standing alone beneath a bridge following her triumphant victory in her inaugural boxing match. Keiko perceives the sound physically. Although she cannot hear the noise of cars speeding by like hearing people do, she feels the vibration of the sound and the energy transmitted through the bridge by the cars with her body. Conversely, for those capable of hearing the clamor, the nighttime setting becomes fraught with danger and commotion. Two policemen approach Keiko, their curiosity piqued by her solitary presence beneath the bridge, prompting them to request identification. Once her identity is verified, they inquire about her injuries. Keiko responds by demonstrating a few boxing maneuvers, yet the policemen misinterpret her actions. After their departure, Keiko departs as well, captured in a long shot against a backdrop of illuminated cars and passing trains.

As mentioned by the director Miyake Sho in the talk event of Bakuon Film Festival, *Small, Slow but Steady*, employs filmic techniques, such as on/off screen sound and on/off frame sound to illustrate the perceptual dis-

crepancies between deaf and hearing people regarding their perception of the world <sup>[14]</sup>. For example, in the scene where Keiko enters the boxing gym to change clothes, Keiko is visually shown changing clothes in a small dressing room through *mise-en-scène*. However, instead of the sound of changing clothes in the dressing room, spectators who watch the film can only hear the boxing sound in the gym. Another example is when Keiko wakes up in the early morning to run. Visually, a long shot depicts Keiko, who is very tiny surrounded by buildings, coming out running. But in terms of sound, spectators can hear the faint sound of Keiko's pants rubbing against each other while she runs.

Some spectators may become aware of this gap caused by the difference between auditory and visual information. However, this gap does not do harm to the overall viewing experience of the film. Instead, it provides a sense of rhythm through the gap as well as the mutual transformation of visual and auditory information <sup>[19]</sup>. For example, the intense sound of boxing can also be portrayed through blurry photos taken by Keiko's mother and her brother. What hearing people typically hear in the boxing gym is the intense and rhythmic sound of boxing. However, for deaf people like Keiko, the overall tone of the movie is quiet. This gap generated by the difference between auditory and visual senses in the film creates a space for interpretation, the archetype of Keiko, in the magazine *Eureka, Poetry and Criticism*, allowing both spectators and characters to imagine <sup>[18]</sup>. Unlike seamlessly crafted films that are human-centered, and often hearing-people-centered, *Small, Slow but Steady* has a sense of rhythm. The director Miyake Sho mentioned that there is "No sound between cuts" in a talk event, and even the amplified boxing sound and other environmental sounds are emphasized to accentuate this rhythm <sup>[14]</sup>.

*Small, Slow but Steady* also suggests that deaf people often encounter challenges and difficulties in both conveying and receiving information within an ableist society. In such a hearing-centered society, the communication process for deaf individuals can be hindered, resulting in the possibility of information being overlooked or misinterpreted <sup>[20]</sup>. Additionally, the transmission of information may require additional time and effort compared to communication between hearing people <sup>[21]</sup>. For instance, Keiko, upon entering the dressing room in the boxing gym,

initially attempts to catch the attention of a man by raising her hand. However, her visual sign goes unnoticed. As a result, she resorts to knocking on the door, utilizing sound to draw the man's attention. This sequence exemplifies Keiko's adaptability in employing both visual and auditory cues to ensure effective communication with hearing people.

Moreover, inadequate communication of crucial information to the judge results in a setback for Keiko. After being stepped on the foot by her opponent, Keiko finds herself unable to immediately vocalize the incident to the judge. Overwhelmed by frustration, Keiko disregards her coach's reminders and continues to throw punches in a state of heightened agitation. Unfortunately, her lack of awareness and temper ultimately led to her defeat at the hands of her opponent.

In addition, another example shows that Keiko faces gaps while communicating with police at night. The camera turns to the Arakawa River at night, and under the 16mm film lens, Arakawa River is illuminated by dim lights with the sound of trams passing over the tracks on the bridge. Keiko feels stressed from work and boxing competitions under the bridge. A long shot frames a road intersection illuminated only by a streetlamp in the dark, with cars passing in the distance. Accompanied by the roaring sound of the passing tram and the flashing lights as it speeds by, Keiko disappears from the camera's view.

Despite the challenges faced by deaf people in receiving information by hearing, they ultimately find alternative ways to get information. For example, when a staff at the convenience store asks Keiko if she has a point card, Keiko does not notice the question. The staff then repeats it, but in response, Keiko shows her bag, misunderstanding the question about the point card. Recognizing the miscommunication, the staff gives her a pamphlet to explain the details of the point card. Keiko then realizes and suggests that she does not need it.

Deaf people are at a disadvantage when it comes to sharing and receiving information due to their inability to hear. However, this lack of hearing can also be advantageous, as they are not affected by unwanted auditory stimuli like noise and offensive words. The sharing of information between deaf and hearing individuals is not solely a matter of intelligence, but also encompasses emotions and

affect<sup>[22]</sup>. This raises a discussion about emotions, affect, and the body. For instance, not all information is beneficial or necessary to receive. Deafness can serve as an advantage by allowing the filtering of undesirable information. *Small, Slow but Steady* depicts a scene in which a man sees Keiko and utters offensive words, but she remains unaffected by them due to her deafness to avoid being disturbed by those derogatory remarks.

The dynamic states captured through auditory and visual senses can undergo mutual transformation<sup>[23-25]</sup>. Although there may be discrepancies between deaf people and hearing people due to differences in information acquisition, ultimately, they can reach a point of agreement, often on an emotional level. It is important to notice that both hearing people and deaf people may forget or ignore some information when they are in a state of low mood. Keiko remains unaware that the water continues to run in the kitchen. Her focus lies on the messages conveyed by her mother, inquiring if she requires anything. However, upon encountering a message indicating her mother's anticipation of her upcoming match, Keiko experiences a sense of distress. Like hearing people may overlook subtle sounds like running water when feeling anxious, Keiko only becomes conscious of the situation when she visually observes the running water. Consequently, she retrieves a towel, positions herself on the floor, and begins the process of cleaning up. Hearing people may face similar situations in which they may fail to notice a slight sound when they are anxious.

Body language plays a significant role in transferring information through the body and connecting it with affect and emotions<sup>[26]</sup>. In the boxing gym, Keiko communicates with the coach through a writing board. In a close-up shot, the board can be seen with the words "Let's practice!" The camera then turns to Keiko and the coach holding the board. The coach gives boxing gloves to Keiko and roughly demonstrates the boxing movements. Keiko nods and then the rhythmic boxing practice begins. With the camera is fixed on a corner of the boxing room, spectators can see the boxing movements of Keiko and the coach in a medium shot. Then, the camera zooms in and frames Keiko in a close-up shot. Keiko feels happy and satisfied with the practice although she is sweating. After the boxing practice is over, Keiko does exercises alone, and the stretching

equipment makes a creaking sound. Then Keiko writes in her notebook, "On December 24th, two rounds of jump rope training and three rounds of unarmed training, practiced new punches". Keiko finishes writing late at night, and only she is left in the boxing gym, which is empty with the sound.

As I analyzed in this section, the unique rhythm of the Arakawa area depicted in *Small, Slow but Steady* is accentuated by visualized sound and the body, portraying Keiko's inner world and affect. Through the sound of the tram passing by, the sound of the punching practice in the boxing gym, and the everyday subtle sounds, combined with other visualized sounds and fixed camera shots of Keiko practicing boxing, the film portrays Keiko's personal experience of living a slow-paced life under the Arakawa River during the pandemic.

## 6. Conclusions

In conclusion, different from depicting deaf people as marginalized and vulnerable characters, some contemporary films such as *LISTEN* and *Small, Slow but Steady* suggest how deaf people perceive sound through the body. Sound addressing the topic of deafness acts as a fluid boundary, underscoring the differentiation and interplay among people, encompassing both the hearing and the deaf. The concept of "haptic sound" within these films signifies the blurred boundary between people with and without disabilities. Moreover, the tactile quality of film and its correlation to the sensory experiences of deaf people become apparent.

Sound assumes a pivotal role in crafting a profound and captivating experience for the spectators. Spectators are not passive recipients of information; they possess the ability to actively engage with the sound and perceive deaf characters in varied manners. The term "spectator" encompasses not only hearing people but also deaf people, who may perceive auditory, visual, and other information in films in different ways.

Taking *Small, Slow but Steady* as an example, it blurs the boundary between the deaf and the hearing by depicting deaf protagonists in relation to the sound and the body in specific places. It focuses on the self-expression and life experiences of the deaf character Keiko, exploring how she



interacts with the world and perceives sound in her unique way. For instance, the film highlights the amplification of sounds. The once-natural ambient sounds transcend their ordinary state, become heightened and intensified, thus stirring potent emotions and affective responses. This manipulation of sound blurs the distinctions between various senses, encompassing touch, sight, and taste, thereby engendering a sensory immersion for spectators. The intimate connection between sound and touch enables the sound design to effectively communicate emotions and evoke affective sensations.

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## Institutional Review Board Statement

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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