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SPEAK, LITTLE MUTE GIRL:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF MUTE WOMEN IN FILM

BY HONOR SCHWARTZ

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts

Major in English

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## ABSTRACT

SPEAK, LITTLE MUTE GIRL:

REPRESENTATIONS OF MUTE WOMEN IN FILM

HONOR SCHWARTZ

2017

In this thesis, I focus my examination of mute women on three mainstream motion pictures spanning from the Hollywood studio to contemporary era times to explore the ways in which film undermines mute women's attempts to use alternative languages. *Johnny Belinda*, *Children of a Lesser God*, and *The Piano* are films that display mute women and garner popular attention. I argue that the women in these films use alternative languages (such as sign language and touch) to gain representation and resist the masculine order; however, these women cannot obtain autonomy and agency because of their decisions to participate in romantic relationships with men. To identify how these women fail, I scrutinize the cinematic tropes that the films employ, including that of the male gaze, sexual violence, and voyeurism.

## Chapter One: Introduction

### RETHINKING THE MUTE WOMAN:

#### VOICELESS WOMEN AND ALTERNATIVE LANGUAGES IN FILM

In a scene from one of the best known films depicting a young mute woman, Arthur Penn's *The Miracle Worker* (1962), Kate Keller (Inga Swenson) urges her husband, Captain Keller (Victor Jory), to seek a teacher for their deaf and mute daughter, Helen (Patty Duke), saying, "She wants to talk; be like you and me." Kate suggests that Helen wants to communicate orally to her family and emulate the spoken language that her family and the culture at large employ. Meanwhile, Helen appears more akin to an animal than to a child of the genteel Southern class that her parents represent: Helen's wild hands grab at random objects lying around the Captain's office and she makes animalistic guttural sounds as she knocks down items while Kate pleads to the Captain. Kate prevails, and Helen transforms from a feral child to a civil young girl that can say "water" with the help of her teacher, Annie Sullivan (Anne Bancroft). Helen's efforts to speak signal that she indeed ascribes to the common cultural consensus that disabled (mute) women want to be like other (speaking) women.

Duke won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her portrayal of Helen, and many other actresses who have portrayed mute women have received critical acclaim from their peers and audiences for communicating emotions through alternative forms of expression, like sign language, rather than dialogue (*The Miracle Worker*). For example, the following three actresses received accolades, including Academy Awards, for successfully portraying mute women: Jane Wyman in Jean Negulesco's *Johnny*

*Belinda* (1948), Marlee Matlin in Randa Haines's *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), and Holly Hunter in Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993). These three films demonstrate to varying degrees how mute women cannot effectively resist oppression from the dominant (speaking) culture through the use of muteness and alternative forms of expression (i.e.: sign language, lip reading, writing, music, and touch). The films imply that a male-dominated speaking culture silences and shuns these mute women's alternative languages, pressuring them to adopt instead the language of the culture that attempts to control them. This impulse is reflected in the title of the 1973 Spanish film from which the title of this thesis is drawn, Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón's *Habla Mudita*, which translates as "Speak, Little Mute Girl." *Johnny Belinda* implies that mute women can develop self-reliant skills after learning sign language; however, the audience witnesses a mute woman relying on a male doctor for emotional and financial support. *Children of a Lesser God* stresses that women can use sign language and sensual touch to communicate more effectively than men who speak; however, the audience watches a mute woman accept a romantic relationship with a man who attempts to control how she communicates. Finally, *The Piano* appears to show that women can use touch and music (the mute woman does use sign language and writing to communicate to a lesser extent as well) as weapons to resist men who attempt to dominate them; however, the film showcases a mute woman who is ultimately unable to escape her role as an object exchanged between men. Some feminist theorists suggest that women can undermine patriarchy by resisting the male-oriented, or phallogentric, spoken language that supports it. In the following chapters, I argue that—while these films explore this possibility—they ultimately represent muteness and alternative languages as ineffective tools of



resistance for women. In the end, the mute women in these films choose romance over resistance.

Each film deserves examining for the way it depicts gender stereotypes, showcases sexual violence, and problematizes mute women's sexuality in patriarchal societies. Although the women live in different time periods and circumstances, they all experience social animosity and clashes with domineering men. In *Johnny Belinda*, Belinda Mac Donald (Jane Wyman) is a poor deaf-mute farm woman living with her father and aunt who, along with the local townspeople, call her "the dummy." Audiences watch Belinda learn, at lightning speed, to communicate in sign language and to read lips from Dr. Robert Richardson (Lew Ayres). Dr. Richardson also provides Belinda with financial help as she raises a child on her own; the doctor even helps Belinda evade prison time at the end of the film for murdering her rapist, Locky McCormick (Stephen McNally). *Children of a Lesser God* follows Sarah Norman (Marlee Matlin), a deaf-mute janitor at a school for the deaf as she falls in love with James Leeds (William Hurt), a teacher at the school who tries to teach her how to speak, while she tries to show James her world of silence, underrated by hearing and speaking people. *The Piano* chronicles the story of Ada McGrath (Holly Hunter), a mute Scottish "mail-order bride" who moves with her daughter, Flora (Anna Paquin), to the coast of New Zealand to live with Alisdair Stewart (Sam Neill), a man uninterested in communicating with Ada through her piano. Ada embraces a sexual relationship with her new husband's neighbor, George Baines (Harvey Keitel), a man who at the end of the film helps Ada learn to speak. Each mute woman craves domestic bliss at the end of each film with a man willing to teach her communication skills to connect her to the dominant speaking culture. These films

endure as popular examples of how cinema uses mute women to highlight the oppression, sexual violence, and silencing that women experience within patriarchy.

What is most intriguing about these films is that all portray sexual violence and exploitation in heterosexual relationships in a way that overshadows the romantic gestures used in the classic Hollywood narration style. Men often dominate mute women sexually to assert their power over them. In *Johnny Belinda*, Belinda is raped after appearing as a demure girl in a pretty dress; in *Children of a Lesser God*, Sarah admits to James that she was prostituted at a young age to random boys and that she believes that he can also use her for sex; and in *The Piano*, Ada is nearly raped by her husband and must offer her body to Baines in order to retrieve her piano. Each film also shows how society stigmatizes and ostracizes these sexually-exploited women. In short, these films portray sexual violence and exploitation in a way that subverts the true traditional film narration style.

Conversely, films featuring mute men do not showcase men encountering sexual violence or exploitation. A few major motion pictures (1950s-1990s) present mute men to audiences; for instance, Micheal Cutiz's *The Proud Rebel* (1958) is a Western in which David Chandler (David Ladd) is a pubescent mute boy whose father attempts to take him to Minnesota for an operation to cure his muteness. Gene Kelly's *Gigot* (1962) presents Gigot (Jackie Gleason) as a poor man in Victorian Paris who cares for a prostitute's daughter in addition to random stray animals. Meanwhile, Werner Herzog's *The Engima of Kaspar Hauser* (1974) depicts Kaspar (Bruno S.) as a mute man in nineteenth-century Nuremburg, Germany, to whom the townspeople teach cultural norms, including spoken language; finally, Jim Sheridan's *My Left Foot* (1989) shows Christy Brown (Daniel

Day-Lewis), a disabled Irish man, reflecting on his childhood poverty after publishing his autobiography.

Other characters make it known that these men are different from and threatening to social norms, and thus, some of these mute men encounter physical violence—but not sexual violence. Although David is never harmed by others, he witnesses cowboys beating his father. Meanwhile, townspeople beat and threaten Gigot with imprisonment for several infractions including stealing money from a bakery to help the young girl he cares for and for supposedly kidnapping this girl. Additionally, someone murders Kaspar, presumably because of Kaspar's sensitive personality and his refusal to value religion, which differs from the local populace. Christy is somewhat like David, as other men do not beat him up; however, other men seem to accept Christy more so than the other mute men because he fights in pubs, swears, and drinks.

For the most part, these mute men overcome their speechlessness to serve a purpose in society. For instance, David suddenly speaks when he sees a man aim a rifle at his father, screaming "Johnny, look out!" (without any stuttering or speech difficulties to indicate that he has not spoken for years). David's love for his father cures his muteness and saves his father from certain death. Unlike David, Gigot never speaks, but he cares for a girl's wellbeing while the mother takes advantage of Gigot's compassion toward her daughter. The young girl gives Gigot a purpose as a father figure who can entertain and cheer her up. Kaspar questions the Church's purpose in the local townspeople's lives and insists that all living objects experience pain. Although, he never convinces others of his opinions, Kaspar's resistance against societal conventions drives the film's plot.

Meanwhile, Christy has a clear purpose as a painter and writer whom others admire for his ability to overcome his physical handicaps and express himself.

Mute male film characters overcome their disabilities to achieve greatness; however, cinema continues to represent mute women as unable to do the same. These different portrayals reflect the unequal relationship women have to language and silence within a male-dominated culture. Recent feminist theorists note that our culture continues to deny women access to oral language, relegating them to a submissive position. Contemporary theorist Robin Patric Clair writes extensively on muteness and how it relates to social order; however, she avoids explicitly defining this mode of silence to instead opt for identifying it “as a form of defiance” that “takes on varied forms and fulfills a variety of functions” (187). Although, Clair focuses on how silence can act as a form of resistance to the dominant culture, she states that speaking men and women both deny mute women access to social privileges (54). Some feminist theorists make the case that women can use silence to resist male dominance. Silence, according to scholar Christine Keating, “can be used to reject, to witness against, and to temper modes of domination,” and so women can use silence to look inward, refuse men, and disagree with men (32-33). Keating asserts that women can remain mute to punish those in power; however, she argues that silence alone is not an effective means of resistance for women. Feminist scholars, I argue, must not confuse silence with voicelessness. The mute women in the films I focus on in this thesis are not without voice. Instead, these women resist speech and develop alternative forms of expression. Nonetheless, these forms of expression prove unequal to the task of disrupting the masculine order. Their attempts to

gain agency are noteworthy and deserve examination; nonetheless, the dominant order silences these mute women's voices.

Contemporary feminist theorists like Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Sheena Malhotra also suggest that for a woman to significantly resist this oppressive culture, she must speak: “[F]or an individual or group who is silent to gain power, they must activate voice [spoken language] in order to resist and transform the conditions of their oppression” (1). Women cannot resist the dominant social group without adapting the tools those in power utilize, like the oral language. Put simply, these theorists convey that women must speak orally without interference to define their place in society because silence and alternative language forms restrict women. This suggestion problematizes mute women's voices because mute women, who literally cannot speak due to their disability, “speak” using alternative expressive forms like sign language, writing, and artistic expression instead of spoken language. These alternative language forms ought to receive as much attention as spoken language in films, since these forms are how mute women speak and resist patriarchy; however, films often minimize these women's alternative languages through cinematic conventions, such as omitting subtitles for sign language.

Women can resist male-dominated cultures through using alternative forms of expression (like writing, sign, and artistic expression) even though the masculine order dismisses these forms. Clair explains that Japanese American women in American internment camps during World War II created gardens, wore fashionable American clothes, and wrote poetry to resist their oppressors (152). Clair points out that women can resist through the arts at what she terms “the micro level” and not in traditionally considered “masculine” ways (such as: violence and aggression) to refuse situations to

which oppressors subject women, and affect “the macro level” or the culture at large (69). When women use art mediums, they can formulate new ways to call attention to sexual oppression and showcase this harassment to a diverse audience. Clair’s observations on forms of female resistance show that muteness is not the only form of resistance women in film can employ against patriarchy. However, Clair does admit that these forms of resistance are “marginalized in literature for not meeting heroic ‘male’ standards of resistance,” and thus, these acts of resistance are not what the culture at large sees as formidable tools with which to protest against patriarchy (Clair 152).

Feminist psychoanalytic theorists provide a useful description of how a male-dominated culture marginalizes not just mute women, but all women through language. These feminist theorists base their ideas off of one of the founding fathers of psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan, who perceived that language represents a masculine system, dominated by the father, into which male children in particular are socialized (Lacan 67). A woman in this system is largely represented as the mother who cares for the child in the early years prior to language, and the female child’s relationship to the masculine system of language remains unclear (Lacan 67). Women find it difficult to insert themselves into the male-dominated system of spoken language. As Cora Kaplan states, “social entry into patriarchal culture is made in language, through speech” (qtd. in Santaolalla 56). Men discourage women from acquiring language that they can use to earn power within the public sphere and instead direct women toward domesticity (Santaolalla 56).

Both intrigued by and critical of the work of Lacan, feminist psychoanalytic theorist Luce Irigaray considers women’s relationship to language and silence more

deeply to argue that women need to create a female discourse separate from masculine discourse. In “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine,” Irigaray suggests that males “subordinate” women by using “phallogentrism” to define the masculine as the superior sex (795 and 797). Irigaray contends that in masculine discourse “the feminine is defined as the necessary complement to the operation of male sexuality, and, more often, as a negative image that provides male sexuality with an unfailingly phallic self-representation” (qtd. in Bolton 30). A woman is defined as the opposite of a man, which does not create a clear and positive image of women. Instead, this approach to defining women represents them as a threat to masculinity. Men deem that the female gender must submit to the phallic and deny women access to language.

Irigaray states that society at large should give equal status to women (unlike in patriarchy). She goes on to argue in “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine,” that male language should not be privileged and language itself should not “circumvene, circumscribe, the properties of any thing and everything” (797). The masculine syntax dominates in patriarchy and forces women to use a language that does not represent them. Women’s speech in that environment is more akin to fraud than to a language that actually allows them to represent their gender’s identity.

Irigaray theorizes that the female gender would benefit if a new language developed that did not privilege the male. In the current system, women represent commodities that men trade, which serves to create connections between men (“Women on the Market” 221). But a female language would allow women to become more than objects of exchange. Irigaray suggests that a woman’s language would have a “style that does not privilege sight” but rather “is tactile among other things” (797). This

communication style would place emphasis on touch, which differs from the masculine focus on the visual. Irigaray advises that women must form a different language that does not privilege or dichotomize others (795). She proposes that a female sensual syntax that emphasizes touch would not privilege the male sex (795). To summarize, Irigaray wants to individualize the female from the male in relationships and reject femininity in its entirety to suggest that we need a new, autonomous, female-made syntax where the male and female genders can develop as individuals separately and within their relationships to language (795). This developed syntax carries over into the visual art of film.

Analyzing films, while keeping in mind Irigaray's theories, provides feminist film theorists the opportunity to examine female protagonists with a fresh perspective.

Irigaray's challenge to women to create a new language encourages those in feminist film theory to consider how female characters are defined by their relationship to the male protagonists and are not defined as autonomous women. The female character should be able to participate in metadiscourse, like writing in a journal (an alternative language that differs from the oral language), and reflect internally on her circumstances (Bolton 34-35). This character should develop her own ways of communicating with others and hold autonomy over her thoughts. However, films often choose to represent stereotypes of women that do not construct the female as an equal and complex sex alongside men (Bolton 28).

Additionally, films show audiences women characters from the male viewpoint. Feminist film theorists like Laura Mulvey and Teresa de Lauretis describe the problematic construction of the female image in film (Bolton 28). Mulvey and de Lauretis argue that directors usually force the viewer to "identify with the male



protagonist” through the male gaze (Bolton 23). In other words, the audience looks at the female from the male’s perspective, and so the audience sees the woman as an object of desire—not a character comparable to the male protagonist. These theorists suggest that directors do not wish to show complex female characters that can effectively resist patriarchy. Mulvey and de Lauretis imply that if women viewers become concerned with how films demean women, then the film industry will be inclined to offer them a woman’s vantage point in cinema more often (de Lauretis 128).

The female spectator has difficulty identifying with characters in traditional films due to these films’ reliance upon scopophilia, where a viewer gains pleasure through watching a passive object (usually a woman), and narcissism, where a viewer gains pleasure through identification with the male protagonist (Mulvey 14). The viewer narcissistically identifies with the male protagonist and entertains the idea of possessing a woman while watching her act as the male protagonist’s property (Mulvey 10). In other words, the viewer sees the woman as a possession and not as an autonomous, active subject. One must note that traditional cinema caters to a male audience, and so the male viewer can seamlessly transition to identifying with the male protagonist and viewing the woman as a passive object. The audience’s voyeuristic gaze is “inherently male, even when the actual spectator is a woman” as the “three gazes that comprise cinema in the first place (the gaze of the camera, the gaze of the characters at each other, and the gaze of the spectator toward the screen)” are male (Benshoff and Griffin 44). However, identifying with the male protagonist and viewing the woman as passive is problematic for the female viewer, who sees herself as an active agent, but connects with the passive woman because of her gender. Mary Ann Doane recognizes that the female viewer has

no “symbolic representation” and must identify as the desired object—the beautiful woman onscreen that male protagonists admire and fear (qtd. in Bihlmeyer 15). Mulvey contends that viewers must analyze these elements of cinema to challenge directors’ decisions and resist viewing women characters as objects (14).

In classic Hollywood film, female characters dress and perform for men who look at and eroticize them. The female character’s style in a sense justifies that the viewer can gaze at her, isolate her from others in a camera shot, and sexualize her image (Mulvey 10). For the male to devalue the female, who represents the threat of castration, he must either turn her into a “fetish” object or punish her (Mulvey 11). In cinema, many male characters use the gaze to minimize women’s role in the plotline. When the viewer/male character gazes at the female, they demystify her sex and dominate her. Oftentimes the camera does not show the male gazer the entire woman and looks only at her body parts (Benshoff and Griffin 247). The male’s gazing usually disrupts the storyline “to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey 10). The woman does not drive the action in a film, but instead works to hinder the action that the male protagonist drives.

The voyeurism and narcissism that traditional Hollywood uses to generate the pleasure of male audiences also works to objectify and pacify mute women in film. The mute women threaten to harm able-bodied male characters because they reject spoken language, which threatens male dominance. In a male-dominated culture, a woman is a “bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey 6). Men, along with the cinema spectator, value the oral culture because oral language supports and clarifies the male role in patriarchy. The mute woman cannot recognize and distinguish the male gender as the

dominant gender through traditional speech, which in turn unnerves the male characters and creates a communication gap between the woman and the audience. The male characters and the spectators gaze at the mute woman's body from a distance in an attempt to control her image. However, her muteness blocks men from access to her body and her mind. The mute woman simply cannot validate the male gender through spoken language. Some male characters (as in *Johnny Belinda* and *Children of a Lesser God*) attempt to communicate with mute women through alternative forms of expression, but insist on doing so on their own terms. Others (as in *The Piano*) use physical violence to domesticate and pacify the mute woman to force her to conform to the masculine order.

Not only does Hollywood marginalize mute women, but according to disability scholars, Hollywood often misrepresents disabled characters in general as one-dimensional and unreflective. Disability scholar Martin F. Norden sarcastically notes that Hollywood directors traditionally represent disabled characters as objects, not characters that audiences can see as complex human beings (Norden 317). Mute women do not have direct access to the viewer through oral language, and thereby, they do not get to self-reflect to the viewer and represent themselves as self-aware characters with agency (Mulvey 10-11). Hollywood values oral language and audism in film because the oral language easily works to narrate character development and plots to viewers. Feminist contemporary theorist Rachel Levitt aptly identifies that people who hear, the majority of cinema viewers, underestimate the intelligence and social significance of the mute and deaf (71). When traditional Hollywood productions show mute women and other disabled characters onscreen, the films often victimize the disabled for entertainment purposes and

show audiences dimwitted and simple-minded fools (Bérubé 570). These films' plotlines also show that able-bodied characters heal or rescue the disabled (Bérubé 570). Mute women cannot represent themselves to their best capacity in film and typically rely on the male protagonists to convey their thoughts to viewers (and in turn these protagonists usually treat the mute women as passive objects). The viewer receives a second-hand account of the mute woman's perceptions from the male protagonist—an account which he can co-opt and misinterpret for the audience.

In spite of these obstacles, I seek to understand mute women's psyche and relationships, and in particular, the dynamics between the women and their male counterparts. This thesis proceeds with three chapters discussing the role of the mute protagonist in each film and a chapter that offers my conclusions about the future of mute women drawn from contemporary films. Chapter two examines how in *Johnny Belinda*, the male protagonist uses his knowledge of sign language to gain authority over Belinda's muteness and does not allow Belinda to represent herself as a self-reflective woman with agency. The chapter also explores other films, like David Miller's *The Story of Esther Costello* (1957) and Arthur Miller's *The Miracle Worker* (1962), that continue to suppress and marginalize mute women in the decades before Haines's *Children of a Lesser God*. Chapter three seeks to understand how *Children of a Lesser God* uses James's translations to create and justify differences between the masculine oral language and Sarah's muteness; in addition the chapter also suggests that Sarah must adapt to James's forms of expression to live an adequate life. Chapter four analyzes how *The Piano* works to subvert the traditional voyeurism in cinema and represent the alternative languages of touch and music through Ada and Baines's sensual relationship.

The final chapter reflects on how mute women are represented in contemporary films like Alejandro G. Inarritze's *Babel* (2000), Paul McGuigan's *The Reckoning* (2002), and Kristian Levring's *The Salvation* (2014). I suggest that these fairly recent films represent mute women as complex characters that hold more autonomy, albeit still limited, which compares to previous films; thus, contemporary films follow a pattern of character portrayal designed by earlier films. As theorists such as Irigaray suggest, women can develop alternative forms of expression within a culture that silences them. Films portraying mute women explore this possibility in various ways; however, the films ultimately represent these alternative means of expression as ineffective forms of resistance.

## Chapter Two

### CLASSIC HOLLYWOOD MUTE WOMEN:

#### *JOHNNY BELINDA* AND OTHER FILMS (1940s-1980s)

Films during the 1940s often relegated women characters to subservient roles, possibly due in part to a desire to showcase culturally acceptable demure women of that time period to viewers; however, some forties-era films chose to reveal that women can fall victim to sexual violence and participate in violence in a strict patriarchy. Jean Negulesco's *Johnny Belinda* (1948) was one of the first major motion pictures to portray murder and rape. *The New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther, who is said to have preferred the box office films designed to reinforce patriarchal ideologies to male audiences (Haskell 232), criticized the film's rape and murder scenes in 1948, citing them as "pretty lurid" (Crowther). Nevertheless he still praised the setting quality, performances of the actors, and Negulesco's skills—calling the film "absorbing," "moving," and "a picture which has a novel and genuine theme" fit for audiences (Crowther). *Johnny Belinda* became the fifth top grosser of 1948, earning \$4.1 million by the year's end (*Variety* 46) and was nominated in twelve categories for the 1949 Oscars ("Oscars of 1949"). The film's leading actress, Jane Wyman, won an Oscar for her portrayal of Belinda, a deaf-mute woman.

The film was also one of the first mainstream productions that presented sign language to viewers. According to film scholars Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, "The deaf community had spent decades trying to convince mainstream society that sign language was a legitimate language, and Belinda's use of it was a further indication of a

specific culture arising from a disability as well as its members' growing self-reliance" (372). *Johnny Belinda* was one of the first films that offered audiences a diverse and complex deaf-mute character that learned how to use sign language to communicate. Furthermore, Belinda's use of sign language showed audiences that the disabled can develop self-reliant skills once they've mastered this alternative language.

Although *Johnny Belinda* adheres to and maintains traditional gender roles, viewers can see that the film pursues a complex project of delegitimizing, reassessing, and reevaluating Belinda, and thereby, the disabled female character's place in cinema. Belinda submits herself to stereotypical roles: In the beginning of the film, she appears to fulfill the role of subservient daughter to her demanding father, and she eventually transitions into a doting mother by the film's end; however, Belinda also gains agency along the way, in part through learning sign language and lip reading from Dr. Robert Richardson (Lew Ayres). She also claims authority over her baby at the film's climax when Belinda makes use of her semi-independence to murder a man who raped her in an effort to prevent the man from seizing the baby (Belinda's one possession over which she has control).

This chapter offers a reading based on the idea that the film allows us to see the main character gain agency, albeit limited, after a rape. On the one hand, I offer an analysis of Belinda's progress towards autonomy, progress that is due, in part, to her decision to shoot a sexual predator. On the other, I seek to show in this chapter that the film reveals a male-created construct of sign language that Dr. Richardson commands, which marginalizes Belinda. Though class issues present themselves throughout the film, my analysis focuses on making the case that *Johnny Belinda* both suggests that disabled

women deserve to represent themselves in mainstream films through alternative languages and creates an opportunity for a critique of the masculine order. I also choose to examine other films featuring mute women to account for the decades of film that elapse between the late 1940s and the mid-1980s in this chapter. I draw the conclusion that mute women can attempt to explain their experiences to the masculine order through sign language and work towards autonomy, but this order ultimately chooses to ignore and devalue them.

The film may have been entitled *Johnny Belinda* (after Belinda's infant son) instead of *Belinda* to indicate how motherhood provides Belinda with some authority. Traditionally in Gaelic regions like Newfoundland, people refer to each other by a first name followed by the first name of their father. Since the father of Johnny was not known, the baby received his mother's first name as a second name or surname ("FAQ for *Johnny Belinda*"). One can surmise that the film producers' and director's choice to inscribe the film with the name of the son was to show the female protagonist's devotion to raising a son and her role as a protective mother in the film. The meaning behind the title reveals that Belinda holds authority over her child and has the right to claim Johnny as hers, which suggests that this film is not a total celebration of patriarchy/fatherhood.

In addition to suggesting that Belinda, and vicariously other women, have authority over children, the film caters to a female audience and does not exclusively serve male viewers. Negulesco and his production team created a compelling and distinctive film that falls into both the film noir genre and "woman's film" of this time period, genres that typically present complex women, like Belinda, striving to overcome obstacles in patriarchy. Film noir directors wanted audiences to feel that cunning men



endanger women's lives at anytime, which Negulesco certainly suggests in *Johnny Belinda* (Doane 47). The film is set in a 1900 Newfoundland fishing and farming village where, according to an omniscient narrator, "everyone is treated fair," which is an ironic message in a film idealizing twentieth-century patriarchy. Belinda does not appear until roughly fifteen minutes into the film when Dr. Richardson treats a cow, at which time the owner of the cow, Black MacDonald (Charles Bickford), Belinda's father, introduces Belinda as "the dummy" to the doctor. Black tells the doctor that Belinda has been deaf and "dumb" since the age of one. As the film progresses, Dr. Richardson teaches Belinda communication skills to improve her life, but after a local fisherman rapes Belinda, Belinda gives birth to a son that the rapist wants to raise as his own. Belinda goes from a young girl who works toward gaining agency to a victim of sexual violence, but then chooses to participate in violence to protect her son.

The film shows Belinda's progression from poor farm girl to violent woman in a possible effort to demonstrate how Belinda gains agency (or what I define as her ability to make independent decisions in the interest of herself and her child). The film takes great pains to show that Belinda is complex enough to have "pluck and intelligence" and that she can care for herself and Johnny Belinda (Benscroff and Griffin 372). At the film's climax, Locky McCormick (Stephen McNally), the rapist, bursts into Belinda's home and begins to ascend the stairs to Johnny Belinda's room. Belinda fires a rifle at Locky and he falls down. She then walks past Locky, grabs the baby, and rings a bell to "call" to her Aunt. Belinda becomes the hero by shooting Locky. According to disability scholar Michael Bérubé, sometimes disabled characters like Belinda "cannot narrate themselves but can only be narrated" by other characters; however, Belinda overcomes

this problem in this film scene with her decision to kill Locky on her own (572).

Unfortunately, this murder is the only time Belinda appears to act on her own without support from the doctor. Yet, from a feminist perspective, the film's decision to show Belinda rising above victimization works to subvert Hollywood's usual way of representing women as victims in need of men to alleviate their problems and presents Belinda as a heroic figure; Belinda appears as a hero who has the agency to defend herself from abuse (Santaolalla 54). In addition, the rape that normally would decrease Belinda's value in patriarchy does not actually do this for Belinda.

Instead, Dr. Richardson has a continued interest in Belinda after the rape, and thus, the film pushes against the stereotype that a raped woman is damaged goods; however, in spite of Belinda's potential as a feminist heroine, she conforms nonetheless to traditional expectations for women, elevating her status within the patriarchy by moving from virgin to mother. In her essay "Women on the Market," Irigaray identifies three subcategories of women: "Mother, virgin, prostitute" (222). She notes that the characteristics of mothers are often "valorized" in patriarchy. While virgins are subject to exchange between men, mothers are "private property," a status that renders them too valuable to exchange (221). The mother is more valuable than a virgin or a prostitute, which is why Belinda readily adopts motherhood. Belinda's adaption of the mother subcategory still relegates her to a diminutive position because the film shows that Dr. Richardson wants to take care of her. The film uses Belinda's decision to adapt to a mothering role to project to audiences that Belinda is a devoted mother and that Dr. Richardson needs to protect her. The film implies that after Belinda gives birth, her natural maternal instincts drive her to become a devoted mother to Johnny Belinda and a

potential mate for Dr. Richardson. Dr. Richardson holds Belinda after her father dies and vows to care for her. We see at the end of the film Belinda, Johnny Belinda, and Aunt Aggie (Agnes Moorehead) all smiles and holding hands with Dr. Richardson. We can surmise from this happy family scene that the doctor has now taken over as Belinda's provider and protector. However, the fact that Belinda does not walk alone suggests that she will remain in a submissive position and must depend on the doctor in the future.

In fact, Belinda relies on the doctor, throughout much of the film, to interpret her experiences for her, and he alone is the moral indicator in the film. Dr. Richardson indicates during the courtroom trial, following the murder, that Belinda did not commit a moral crime, and in fact argues that she acted bravely to defend Johnny Belinda. In one scene, Belinda refuses to communicate to a male interpreter during the murder trial, and so the doctor argues for her acquittal on Belinda's behalf. At one point, Dr. Richardson argues directly to the judge, "Your lordship, I insist this girl obeyed an impulse older than the laws of man: The instinct of a mother to protect her child." Shortly thereafter, the judge immediately declares that Belinda acted as an instinctual mother when she shot Locky and releases Belinda proclaiming, "Justice will always protect." This scene serves to show that the doctor is the character that can indicate to audiences the other characters' moral qualities, and he acts as Belinda's interpreter throughout much of the film to narrate her experiences to audiences.

Even though the doctor interprets and represents Belinda's words to audiences, one must note that Dr. Richardson devotes himself to teaching Belinda an alternative language that he himself must learn. The audience learns from Stella (Jan Sterling), the doctor's assistant, that the doctor must learn sign language to communicate with Belinda.

Toward the beginning of the film, Stella stares with a perplexed look at the *Guide Book for the Deaf* that the doctor leaves on a table and opens the book to see a man performing sign language. Dr. Richardson's determination to teach sign language to Belinda places him in a position of authority over her. The first time the doctor visits Belinda to teach her sign language, Belinda quickly and enthusiastically learns, which Dr. Richardson considers as an indication that Belinda is intelligent. The doctor grabs Belinda's hands to force her to learn the signs for water, land, and chicken. These first signs are labels men apply to objects they can possess and imply what the doctor values as a man in patriarchy. Belinda quickly learns these signs and readily uses them.

Sign language functions as an alternative to the spoken language of the dominant patriarchal culture; however, Dr. Richardson's decision to teach Belinda symbols that men value illustrates that he masculinizes sign language, using it as a means to integrate Belinda into a "feminine" role within the dominant culture. Sign language, for example, becomes a means for Belinda to represent her acceptance of the subordinate role of daughter in relation to her father. At one point, Belinda signs to Black "father" and Black becomes elated. Black exclaims: "It's the first time she's ever called me that!" Black and Dr. Richardson bask in Belinda's assimilation of a masculinized version of sign language and in her assimilation into a patriarchal hierarchy. The male characters regulate and control Belinda's narrative agency in language through masculine identifiers.

In spite of its representation of potentially alternative forms of female communication, *Johnny Belinda* projects a patriarchal society where men claim ownership of both established and emerging forms of communication. Dr. Richardson takes an alternative form of language that is not part of the dominant-masculine order and

masculinizes it, asserting all language is a male-created construct that he can control. Dr. Richardson makes sure that Belinda does not learn to read and write in a possible effort to ensure that she has few opportunities to communicate her thoughts to others. The doctor does not even bother to teach Belinda how to sign her name in sign language. In fact, the only time Belinda lays claim to her name is when she writes it on a chalkboard; it is shortly after this that Locky rapes her. Belinda writes her first name alone, without Dr. Richardson, after her aunt leaves and then the film cuts to Locky drinking at a party, where he schemes to rape Belinda before committing the crime. The doctor makes no attempts, after finding out that Belinda is a victim of rape, to teach Belinda how to articulate and express herself in writing—an alternative language. Dr. Richardson chooses to control Belinda's access to knowledge and all forms of language, including the alternative forms of writing and sign, to reinforce patriarchy at Belinda's expense. Belinda never has the chance to express her feelings to anyone other than the doctor.

Dr. Richardson is a figure of power that narrates Belinda's experiences for her throughout much of the film, and this is because Dr. Richardson sees Belinda's body as a vehicle of hysteria and disability that cannot equal that of his powerful gender. Doane remarks that in classic Hollywood films the male characters generally think that women have emotional outbursts and that these irrational emotions suppress the women's rational thoughts (39). The female characters who narrate their stories tend to become hysterical in such a way that the male characters completely ignore them under the guise that the female gender is irrational; therefore, men can only listen to women when a man (often a doctor) interprets for the woman (Doane 54). In *Johnny Belinda*, the doctor must control Belinda's "access to language and the agency of narration" even though her

disability already confines her communication skills (Doane 54). Dr. Richardson represents the male gender and its stereotypical beliefs that the female gender lacks the capacity to articulate experiences in a coherent manner. Belinda's mute character represents the female gender in general—a gender men think needs regulating.

As noted in the previous chapter, men like the doctor think mute women need regulating because they deem these disabled women as threats to masculinity (Silverman 168). Dr. Richardson works to control Belinda's access to alternative languages and acts as a father figure who can solve all of her problems. The doctor remains devoted to molding Belinda into a submissive and civilized woman throughout the film. We can surmise that Dr. Richardson wants to objectify Belinda by cultivating and recreating her image as a virginal girl. Belinda's inability to participate in oral discourse disbars her from validating the doctor's higher status in the patriarchy. Her inability to use Dr. Richardson's oral language threatens to blemish his position, and so he needs to place her in her rightful position beneath him in the social order.

The doctor introduces Belinda to the trappings of femininity to show her her place in patriarchy. When the doctor first sees her, Belinda is “is dirty and unkempt, her hair uncombed” (Doane 41). As the doctor teaches Belinda how to sign and read lips, Belinda begins to wear light and frilly dresses. Although we don't see Dr. Richardson urging Belinda to dress in a feminine fashion, Belinda's wardrobe changes point to the doctor domesticating her to fit the stereotype of an inexperienced girl in need of a father figure to lead her in a patriarchal society. One can perceive that the doctor chooses to fulfill the husband role as well. Dr. Richardson's interest in Belinda influences her to wear more feminine dresses, which her “embittered aunt openly ascribes to the doctor's influence”

(Santaolalla 57). The aunt screams at Black at one point: “All the grand ideas the doctor’s been putting into her head, filling her up with fancy notions! Do you know what she was doing instead of feeding the dogs? Brushing her hair!” Belinda starts to wear dresses that evoke femininity and ceases performing hard labor on the farm. One also sees this as a sign of Belinda’s desire for the doctor to admire her on some level; however, even if Belinda’s change in dress is her own doing, this decision to wear frilly dresses causes Locky to admire Belinda and subsequently rape her. In essence, Belinda pays the price, as a rape victim, for accepting her position as a pretty young woman in an oppressive patriarchy.

After Belinda’s rape, Dr. Richardson has a difficult time imploring her to explain why she is depressed and so he takes her to a specialist. Dr. Richardson indirectly violates Belinda’s body during this visit. Film scholar Kaja Silverman theorizes that since Dr. Richardson cannot get Belinda to sign directly to him, the doctor must find an alternative route, and so he has the specialist examine Belinda’s vulva lips (169). Silverman infers that Dr. Richardson vicariously invades Belinda’s body in much the same way as Locky does during the rape (168). Through the vulva, the specialist discovers Belinda’s innermost secret—that she is pregnant—and provides this information to Dr. Richardson. Thus, Belinda’s inability to speak about her rape causes another man to violate her again and does not protect her from victimization.

Men’s control over Belinda’s body is reflected in the camera shots used to represent her image. The film’s use of subjective shots works to suppress Belinda’s representation because these shots frequently represent her from the male perspective (mostly from the doctor’s perspective). In contrast, objective shots do not show “a

character's point of view, but rather a shot that most clearly conveys the action of the scene. In Hollywood films almost all of the shots are objective and omniscient—they show the spectator, . . . , what her or she needs to see in order to follow the story” (Benshoff and Griffin 242). Objective shots do not show the male character's point of view, but often subjective shots of what the male character looks at follows the objective shots (Benshoff and Griffin 243). This is the case in *Johnny Belinda*, where subjective shots are usually of Belinda and represent a male perspective.

Not only does the camera focus on the male character's point of view through subjective shots, but the male characters drive the narration of *Johnny Belinda*. The first character we meet is the rapist, Locky, whom the audience follow through the opening scenes at the dock where Locky witnesses a fellow fisherman's injury on deck and he says: “Let's get going before this load starts stinking the place up.” We then meet Dr. Richardson, who rushes out to help the injured fisherman and then agrees in the next scene to “fix up” a cow for Belinda's aunt. The audience sees Belinda for the first time from Dr. Richardson's point of view, and throughout most of the rest of the film we look upon Belinda from a distance. The focus on the male characters and their perspectives suggests that Belinda must become both a social creature who communicates with men and an object of desire for men.

The film represents Belinda as both communicator and object in addition to presenting Belinda as a woman capable of performing murder (which pushes against the classic Hollywood representation of incompetent disabled women) and as a submissive woman that Dr. Richardson can control. *Johnny Belinda* shows that Belinda has control over what happens to her, yet it also demonstrates that men sexually violate Belinda



because she does not express herself orally. Hence, Belinda's muteness allows men to violate her. The film represents Belinda in a way that assures other filmmakers that mute women can be part of compelling storylines; nonetheless, Belinda's position in *Johnny Belinda* is alternately compelling and disappointing to examine.

A number of films featuring mute women were produced after *Johnny Belinda* and before *Children of a Lesser God*. For example, David Miller's *The Story of Esther Costello* (1957), Terence Fisher's *The Curse of the Werewolf* (1961), Arthur Penn's *The Miracle Worker* (1962), Sidney Hayers's *The Trap* (1966), Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), and Abel Ferrara's *Ms .45* (1981) all feature mute women. Most of these films employ a number of similar cinematic tropes and character elements. For instance, in all of these films, directors shoot subjectively, characters immediately announce to other characters that the mute women do not lack intelligence, and the mute women usually communicate with hand signals and writing. These serve as threads that tie together directors' depictions of the mute women in films from the fifties to the eighties; however, what is more important to discuss is how these films attempt to complicate mute women and how many of these films represent the suppression of women through sexual violence.

Most of these films are part of the melodrama genre with the exception of *The Curse of the Werewolf* and *Ms .45*. The film noir genre fell out of favor with directors around the beginning of the 1950s due in part to the advance of television, which presented realistic versions of life and catered to a female audience (Benshoff and Griffin 39). But the major reason directors avoided film noir was that Hollywood executives did not fund films critical of American foreign or domestic policy (Benshoff and Griffin 39).

Melodrama replaced the film noir genre and catered to women viewers while employing the classic Hollywood cinematic tropes that reinscribe gender stereotypes (Benshoff and Griffin 41). Directors of melodrama attempt to present more complex mute women characters; however, many present gender stereotypes of the macho man and the vulnerable woman (Haskell 234). Female characters in melodrama, including those with disability, routinely have difficulty resolving problems and represent victims of patriarchy (Doane 73). These victims show that women cannot amend their dire situations in the social hierarchy (Doane 73).

However, Helen in *The Miracle Worker* is an outlier who does not fall victim to the masculine order. Instead, *The Miracle Worker* demonstrates how film can represent women with disabilities without showing them as victims. This film received the most attention from critics and scholars out of all of the films representing mute women from the fifties through the eighties. *The Miracle Worker* tells the story of how Helen Keller (Patty Duke) learned sign language from Annie Sullivan (Anne Bancroft). Although, in *The New York Times*, Stanley Kauffmann criticized the film, calling it “clumsy and cluttered,” he admitted that “[t]he raison d’etre of the work is in the encounters between Annie and her pupil” (Kauffmann). Indeed, the film shows audiences a strong-willed female teacher creating a loving relationship with a young girl, which is unusual in mainstream Hollywood productions.

Much like *Johnny Belinda*, the film offers audiences a glimpse into a teacher’s efforts to save a woman from speechlessness (Molina 278). Both films suggest that mute women need to learn spoken language and both demonstrate that teachers like Annie and doctors like Dr. Richardson can civilize the mute heroine through sign language. Annie

takes great pains to show Helen how to draw letters on her palm, and Dr. Richardson works to teach Belinda how to sign words to identify objects. Helen and Belinda must adopt the sign languages that their instructors teach them to gain approval from other characters and their instructors' love.

Yet, Annie has great difficulty teaching Helen communication skills and table manners, which differs from Dr. Richardson's relatively easy task of instructing Belinda in *Johnny Belinda*; nonetheless, Annie does recognize that Helen can learn to communicate and eat like a civilized young woman. At one point Helen's mother Kate Keller (Inga Swenson) asks Annie: "Will she learn?" Annie replies: "Maybe after a million words." Annie does not seem upset that Helen will take a long time to learn words, but Helen's refusal to eat like a lady irritates Annie and the film focuses on this problem in a series of scenes. Helen grabs food off people's plates, which appalls Annie. In a long drawn out scene in the Kellers' dining room, Annie and Helen commit physical violence against each other while Annie attempts to teach Helen to eat with silverware like a civilized lady. Eventually, Annie emerges from the dining room to tell Kate: "The rooms a wreck but she folded her napkin!" This news impresses Kate and she softly repeats: "My Helen folded her napkin." This folded napkin suggests to both Kate and Annie that Helen can become civilized and a productive member of society. Scholar Ellen Handler Spitz points out that Annie considers Helen her student, which she distinguishes from a child (107). Annie sees that she must teach Helen obedience while also teaching her communication skills to show the Kellers that Helen can function in society.

*The Miracle Worker* is like *Johnny Belinda* in that it emphasizes teaching Helen spoken language and “civilizing” her (making her “a lady”). However, it does so within the context of a loving relationship between two women, not a relationship in which a man dominates a woman, as in *Johnny Belinda*. *The Miracle Worker* shows the development of a female bond between a student and a teacher that differs from the male-female bonds created between the mute women and men in *Johnny Belinda* and the films examined in later chapters. Benschhoff and Griffin note that in one scene “[Annie and Helen] engage in a battle of wills and wits that shows both women as strong, determined individuals” (373). In *The Miracle Worker*, Helen does not have to bond with a male character to learn the spoken language, and in fact slowly develops a loving relationship with Annie. The teacher-student relationship that Annie works to create does help Helen prosper and learn to sign.

Throughout the film, Annie identifies with Helen through a series of childhood flashbacks and Penn uses Annie’s flashbacks to convey that Annie will use her childhood experiences as a blind/deaf/mute child to teach Helen communication skills (Spitz 109). Towards the end of the film, Helen reverts back to her old feral child antics at the dinner table and Annie takes Helen outside to the water pump where Helen spells “water.” When Annie sees this she says: “She knows.” This prompts us to think that Annie successfully teaches Helen an important word and Helen can now communicate. Annie is relieved and elated that her patience finally results in Helen learning to spell a word on her hands. In the finale, Helen climbs into Annie’s arms and spells “teacher” and Annie spells back “I-L-O-V-E-H-E-L-E-N.” Helen finally learns how to communicate to a

certain extent at the end of the film because of her love for her teacher, which Spitz associates with the Freudian love for the mother (109).

Helen is a complex character that quite literally fights Annie, but she also learns to communicate affection to her teacher—and most importantly she does not communicate love to the other male characters as a male-dominated system would require. The film attempts to represent Helen and Annie as autonomous women with agency. Each woman makes her own decisions: Helen, at the start of the film, works to thwart Annie's attempts to teach her letters, and Annie insists on teaching Helen sign language in an isolated home on the Keller plantation, much to the chagrin of the Kellers. In spite of showing this autonomy, the film also places emphasis on showing that Helen must act as a submissive woman at the dinner table. Helen represents the growing complexity in the mute woman character (a woman tackling complex problems that she cannot completely overcome) that films of later decades after *Johnny Belinda* avoided presenting to audiences.

Other films tend to return to the position established in *Johnny Belinda*. Films like Miller's *The Story of Esther Costello* (1957) show men's use of sexual violence to suppress and dominate mute women. Scholar Isabel Santaolalla mentions that "talking cure films" like *The Story of Esther Costello* end with the mute woman's embrace of language and that the makers of these films insinuate that women must learn to speak for their emotional fulfillment (and to communicate their love to men) (Santaolalla 55). The film documents how Margaret Landi (Joan Crawford) teaches the deaf-mute Esther Costello (Heather Sears) sign language and lip reading. *The Story of Esther Costello* climaxes when Margaret's ex-husband Carlo Landi (Rossano Brazzi) rapes Esther, which

causes Esther to see and speak again. The morning after the rape, Esther says to Margaret “[y]es, yes” without a slight stutter or minor speech impediment. Margaret answers back: “You can speak! Dear God you can see!” Shortly after this apparent miracle, Esther’s love interest bursts into the room and Esther cries out: “Harry, oh Harry!” She calls out her male lover’s name, but for some reason she never bothers to address her beloved female teacher. This suggests that the film wants to show that Esther assimilates into patriarchy through using the oral language and that the male gender triumphs. Esther chooses to direct spoken words to a male but does not acknowledge the woman that taught her an alternative language, sign language. Instead, Esther rejects sign language once she can speak; Esther’s decision to discard sign language implies to the audience that the oral language is the only language form acceptable for women to use when women communicate to men.

In Fisher’s *The Curse of the Werewolf* the male gender dominates the mute woman again through rape. The mute woman never learns to communicate with anyone, but her silence makes her susceptible to sexual violence. A nameless mute servant woman (Yvonne Romain) refuses a king’s sexual advances and the king imprisons her in jail with a beggar. The beggar then rapes her (we do not see the rape, but do see her cling to the bars in terror). A jailer then releases the mute woman from jail and she murders the king. This killing slightly complicates her tragic victim character, but the fact that Fisher never gives this woman a name shows that this mute woman holds no representation within a male-dominated order. She remains a nameless victim—a minute detail in the film’s plot.

In Hayers's *The Trap*, a mute woman succumbs to patriarchy due to her love for her violent common-law husband. This Canadian film, set in the 1800's Canadian wilderness, documents a trader's wife (Barbara Chilcott) exchanging Eve (Rita Tushingham), a mute servant, to the burly trader La Bete (Oliver Reed) for a thousand dollars. Unlike Helen in *The Miracle Worker* or Esther in *The Story of Esther Costello*, no one ever forces Eve to adopt a language; however, Eve fights off and endures La Bete's physical and sexual violence. Eve does defend herself from La Bete's attempts to rape her and escapes from him. However, Eve chooses to return to La Bete, and when Eve comes back to him, he tells her to "clean the house" and leaves. The film ends with Eve smiling back at La Bete. Hayers's film is designed to show that sexual violence has a positive outcome in that the victim can enjoy a life of domestic servitude with her kidnapper/attempted rapist.

Bergman's *Persona* attempts to offer the mute woman a better life than Hayers does through representing her as a progressive-thinking woman that shares personality traits with an able-bodied nurse. In the film, Sister Alma (Bibi Andersson), a nurse, and Elisabet Vogler (Liv Ullmann), a mute actress, develop a friendship in a hospital during the sixties. Over the course of the film, Elisabet imposes her will on Alma and Alma begins to define her life "morally rather than romantically" in the same way as Elisabet (Haskell 203). Rather than portraying this change in thinking as progressive, the film shows audiences that Elisabet's feminist perspective obstructs Alma's dreams of marriage and motherhood. In *Persona*, Elisabet's silence blocks Alma's desires to lead a stereotypical life as a wife, and thus, the film implies that mute women are evil women that bar patriarchal values.

Ferrara's classic low-budget rape film *Ms. 45* attempts to offer audiences a more complex mute woman character than previous films. The 1980s saw a "resurgence of film noir" that showed "suspicion and distrust among men and women leading to murder and mayhem" (Benshoff and Griffin 289). According to Molly Haskell, the murdering women characters that appeared in these films were "symbols of defiance, of a refusal—or inability—to live by the old rules" (373). Films of this decade wanted to offer different female characters than films of the past had, but they were not sure how to represent daring women onscreen. In *Ms. 45*, a mute woman, Thana (Zoë Lund), becomes the protagonist that desires to exercise control within patriarchy through murdering her rapists (Haskell 386). Ferrara's *Ms. 45* shows audiences a new mute woman that challenges the male protagonist's role even more so than Belinda and other characters in previous decades.

Though films like *Ms. 45* work against the precedent set by *Johnny Belinda*, most films featuring mute women continue to emulate it. One way in which they do so is by representing the mute women's story within the context of heterosexual romantic love. In *Johnny Belinda*, the love story, serves to disguise Dr. Richardson's manipulation of Belinda's language. Although the romantic relationship between Dr. Richardson and Belinda is never clearly apparent in the film (the two never embrace in a passionate kiss), unlike in *Children of a Lesser God* and *The Piano*, the characters keep the audience in suspense about their presumed love story. This suspense keeps the audience from realizing that the doctor co-opts Belinda's use of sign language. The audience watches Belinda transform into a beautiful woman that attracts the doctor after Dr. Richardson teaches Belinda a masculinized form of sign language. Belinda becomes the classic mute



girl—a pretty, young, and demure girl susceptible to an able-bodied man’s charms. Belinda has to relinquish her autonomy and the agency that she acquires from killing Locky at trial in order for the doctor to defend her actions. The film’s ending shot of Belinda and the doctor walking away from the courthouse, hand-in-hand, suggests that Belinda also chooses to let go of her independence as a single mother to live as Dr. Richardson’s wife. Belinda’s apparent decision to submit to her male lover sets a precedent for other mute women in film including Sarah in *Children of a Lesser God*.

## Chapter Three

## “SPEAK TO ME!”:

CONFLICT, CONTROL, AND ROMANCE IN *CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD*

Randa Haines's *Children of a Lesser God* (1986) is above all else a love story between two contrasting characters, Sarah Norman (Marlee Matlin) and James Leeds (William Hurt), each of whom value different languages. James is a new speech teacher at a school for the deaf where he falls in love with Sarah, a deaf-mute janitor. The couple argue, break up, and eventually reconcile during a school dance. Haines delivers a plotline focused on the lover's conflicting viewpoints: James imposes oral language on others in the belief that speech is an essential communication tool, whereas Sarah prefers to use sign language to convey her thoughts. Haines explained in an interview that she feels the movie needed to fixate on the differences between the couple: “[I]t seemed to me to be the story of two people from two very different cultures trying to ... find a middle ground where they both can meet” (DeVine). Haines and the production staff crafted the film to portray relationship language conflicts that separate and connect the main characters. The film challenges misperceptions of the deaf culture and explores language conflicts (Benscoff and Griffin 378).

In what follows, I argue that this film calls attention to Sarah's progressive achievements (as a mute woman), relationship conflicts, and language barriers. The film appears to reinvent the demure mute girl character that Belinda in *Johnny Belinda* partially represented, transforming her into an assertive woman with power to subvert the male protagonist's agenda. Sarah represents a sensitive, spontaneous, and sexual woman.

Her presence humanizes the deaf community onscreen and acknowledges the struggle of the deaf in the auditory culture. Sarah also attempts to gain agency and fight against James's beliefs that the deaf should learn to speak through using silence, sign language, and sensual touch. Sarah is more assertive and aggressive than mute women in previous films, and yet she also submits to many of James's desires. A tension between James and Sarah exists, in part, because of their different classes: Sarah is part of the working class that lacks degrees in higher education, whereas James, who teaches, represents the educated, white-collar class. During Sarah and James's fights, Sarah chooses to run away from James and sign crude comments to him, in much the same way as a disobedient girl would. Sarah chooses not to act like a mature adult and her actions during these fights appear to justify James's controlling behaviors in their relationship. Furthermore, James translates Sarah's words aloud in a way that emphasizes the masculinized oral language's dominance over Sarah's sign language. Sarah and James break up, but Sarah's loneliness ultimately leads her to get back together with James. The film shows that Sarah's life without James is unfulfilling, ultimately suggesting that women need men in order to live purposeful lives. I conclude that the film focuses on creating a love story at the expense of Sarah's development; as a result, Sarah remains in a position similar to that occupied by previous mute women in film—she becomes incapable of living a fulfilling life without a man.

Sarah's and James's characters expose the friction between those who use spoken language and those who use sign language. Haines explains that the film is "about people struggling to communicate ... [James] doesn't hear [Sarah] saying what her limits as a person are" (DeVine). Throughout the film, Sarah resents James's intense interest in

interpreting for her and his insistence that she speak. Sarah refuses to express herself orally in part because she is certain that she will sound awful if she speaks. At one point, she tells James: “I don’t do anything I can’t do well.” More importantly, however, sign language distinguishes Sarah as an individual (Benshoff and Griffin 379). But James never truly understands why Sarah does not want to become a “normal” speaking person.

Sarah asserts her rights through violence and anger while representing the deaf community. In her opening scene, Sarah throws pots and pans across the deaf school’s kitchen. James looks up from the cafeteria line, startled by the noise in an otherwise quiet lunchroom, and sees Sarah signing insults at the cook. Her aggression lures James to her character and he eventually tells Sarah: “[Y]ou’re the most mysterious, attractive, angry person I’ve ever met.” Over time, Sarah reveals why she is angry, starting with her first date with James when Sarah feels that the waitress thinks she is mentally disabled. She tells James that “hearing people” always think that deaf people are mentally inept (Benshoff and Griffin 379). Sarah’s claim appears justified during a poker party later on in the film where the guests speak to James about Sarah as if she is not there. The anger Sarah exerts also attributable to the fact that her sister sexually exploited her when she was young. Sarah’s personal experiences suggest that other members of the deaf community experience similar injustices because of their inability to communicate orally.

Even though others have taken advantage of Sarah because of her inability to communicate orally, she values sign language. For Sarah, language engages her entire body. On a walk along the ocean, Sarah expresses to James the sound of waves by moving and touching her body erotically (Fellernan 120). She transforms the letters of the word “waves” into “body kinetics and sensual touch” (Santaololla 58). This form of

expression suggests that Sarah deems sign language as a more natural form of communication than speech. But more importantly, this shows that sign language can translate words into “bodily expression” (Santaololla 58). When Sarah asks James to explain what Bach sounds like, James cannot. In fact, he completely fails and admits he doesn’t know the signs to use to express the sounds Bach exerts. James is unwilling to freely move his hands and body in the same fashion as Sarah. It appears that for him sign language is not a comfortable mode of expression and instead James implies that Sarah’s alternative language is an invalid form of communication.

Despite James’s inability to use sign effectively, Sarah maintains that sign language is most effective for her self-expression. Before moving in with James, Sarah asks if he despises her for refusing to speak and he replies that he does not. This puts Sarah at ease and she tells him that she wants children, which James does not express interest in. However, several scenes later, Sarah shows interest in learning speech very briefly when she tries to mimic a speech pattern in a mirror by herself. Yet, she does not express interest in speaking to James, which builds tension in their relationship, ending in a climatic fight. Usually, mute characters express interest in learning speech patterns to show that they are not mentally deficient. For instance, in *Johnny Belinda*, Belinda reads Dr. Richardson’s lips to obey his requests and show the doctor that she is capable of learning sign language. However, Sarah refuses to willfully submit to James’s requests. Even though James claims that he does not “hate” Sarah for not learning how to speak, James hypocritically continues to urge her to speak, and Sarah continues to defend her language. During the couple’s final altercation, James accuses Sarah of knowing how to speak and Sarah lets out animalistic and unintelligible sentences that horrify James

(Fellernan 123). The only sentence we can decipher is: “I want to be free!” Sarah’s retort silences James’s accusations and she uses this guttural response to justify her reasons for using sign language.

Sarah recognizes that the silence she experiences from not hearing speaking people offers her a mode of self-reflection. On a dinner date with James, Sarah tells him, “I like working alone. In my silence.” For her, silence is a respite from speaking people that misjudge and violate her. Sarah tells James that she likes working as a janitor, presumably because it is a quiet and solitary occupation; he laughs at this, thinking that she signs this explanation to him in jest. However, according to scholar Rachel Levitt, “[s]ilence can function as a form of solidarity that opposes the recentering of the hearing subject” for those in the deaf community (75). Sarah may feel that silence and sign language unifies her with other deaf people (Levitt 71). Levitt explains that quiet solitude offers people contemplation and a safe haven for self-expression (76). This quiet respite helps both the deaf and the speaking culture collect their thoughts and conjure new ideas. The deaf believe that silent reflection allows them to connect discourses to ideologies and protest against the oral culture (Levitt 77). We do not know what Sarah thinks during her moments of silent reflection; however, we do know that she attempts to use silence and sign language to maintain some level of autonomy from James (Levitt 79).

In a way, Sarah’s muteness threatens James’s masculinity. In several scenes, Sarah insists that she has communication skills and vehemently believes that others lack them. At one point she claims, “I have more than enough communication skills,” and that James does not have the skills to converse with her. Film scholars Benshoff and Griffin note that throughout the film, Sarah reveals to the audience that she dislikes how “hearing

people think that deaf people are mentally retarded” and that Sarah’s father left because “he felt a deaf child reflected poorly on his masculinity” (379). Sarah’s mother tells Sarah, “Your father couldn’t accept you. He felt he failed.” Her admission suggests that masculinity is an important element in the film and that men see Sarah’s disability as a threat to their masculinity and/or identity. James appears to disregard Sarah’s muteness, but in actuality, James works to coerce Sarah into using speech in order to avoid having Sarah’s muteness blemish his masculinity. James continually implores Sarah to speak throughout the film, claiming he can teach her speech if she would let him, but Sarah refuses to speak to avoid giving James validation as a male figure. For Sarah, sign language “is a mark of pride and difference from the hearing world” and she does not wish to participate in spoken language (Benshoff and Griffin 379). However, James refuses to understand Sarah’s conviction to only use sign language.

To counter James’s denial, Sarah asserts her power over James, to certain degree, through her sexuality. In the film, Sarah’s sexuality, like her silence, is sometimes associated with water. In one scene, James walks in on Sarah swimming alone and naked in a pool at the deaf school. Sarah’s association with water, which traditionally signifies the feminine, assigns her an identity that differs from James’s (Fellernan 111). When James falls into the pool with Sarah while trying to proclaim his love for her, he essentially falls into the arms of a woman. The swimming pool symbolizes the birth of love for Sarah and James (Fellernan 113). The underwater sex scene that follows implies that James yearns for Sarah and that she can manipulate him with her sexual power. Sarah understands her body and seamlessly joins with James in the pool. Her body and the presence of the water consume his body.

Water also symbolizes Sarah's ability to stymie James's power. James feels he must possess Sarah to claim his masculinity and authority over her. He desires for others to see him as the "epitome of masculine strength" (Fellernan 114). Not long after engaging in sex in the pool, James enters Sarah's room and tells her that she will move in with him. She protests that she needs her job and James asserts his masculinity over her by stating: "Screw your job. I've got mine." After Sarah and James break up, James appears underwater in a scene that suggests he is attempting to reconnect with Sarah's presence. This water scene suggests that James wants Sarah to consume him and that he desires to join together with her as equals. Water acts as a forceful female power over James despite his masculinity.

As this symbolic representation of water suggests, Sarah's overt sexual nature empowers her (Fellernan 114). For her, sex allows her to rise above able-bodied women and transgress the social hierarchy. At one point, Sarah signs to James: "Sex was always something I could do as well as hearing girls...better!" Sarah uses her body not only to assert herself as superior to hearing girls, but also as a means of speech (Santaololla 58). Sex serves as an alternative for speech, and it also allows Sarah to get closer to James. After one sexual interlude, Sarah tells James that he is the nicest person she's ever met. The sensual touch that sex provides Sarah helps her communicate in addition to sign language. Sarah initiates sex during the couple's violent and climatic fight. Afterwards, James states that the sex "didn't help much" and Sarah contradicts him. Her retort reveals the difference between their communication and expression. Sarah communicates through touch, whereas James communicates through speech. As noted in the introductory chapter, Irigaray theorizes that women should devise a female sensual



syntax that does not privilege men; Sarah uses her sexuality to do this in the film. Sex also serves to help Sarah make decisions. After the intercourse that occurs during the fight with James, Sarah decides that “no one will ever speak for [her] again.” Sarah claims to James that she did not want to quit her job, learn poker, or leave a party early. A sexual and sensual language of touch provides Sarah with the confidence to assert herself and her claims.

Though the film in many ways represents Sarah as a strong female figure who resists masculine control, it undercuts this representation by also representing her as stubborn and petulant. During their disagreements, Sarah repeatedly refuses to speak to James and runs away from him. However, this does not work, as James always runs behind her and implores Sarah to speak to him. Sarah’s decision to run away from confrontation implies that she approaches problems like a child or teenager and this in turn suggests that Sarah is not capable of resolving conflicts on her own. In one scene, James confronts Sarah at the school and Sarah dashes down the stairs into the library. The school principal witnesses James yelling after Sarah and he quips to a colleague, “Yelling at the back of a deaf person, very good James. He’s been in all the best schools.” James corners Sarah in the library and implores her to divulge her reasons for resisting him. Even though James’s affinity for chasing after and cornering Sarah reveals that he chooses to confront problems like an alpha male in the masculine order, Sarah’s decision to run and hide from James reveals to the audience that she reverts to childlike behaviors during conflicts.

Sarah’s childlike tendencies and decisions to hide from confrontation justify James’s controlling behavior. Interestingly, Belinda in *Johnny Belinda* also adopts

childlike mannerisms, presumably to appear attractive to Dr. Richardson. Belinda fulfills the role of a subservient pupil to Dr. Richardson when she willingly learns sign language at a rapid pace. Although Sarah does not become a faithful student of James's, she does act like a disobedient young girl. *Children of a Lesser God* represents Sarah as an annoying object, not a representation of a woman. We, the audience, watch Sarah throw objects, smoke, and run away during every argument with James. We gaze at Sarah from a distance; thus, we view Sarah as a problem child who needs to learn to communicate like an adult. James insists that Sarah explain to him reasons why she runs away from him. He gains power from obtaining Sarah's secrets, such as her revelation that her sister prostituted her, and James uses this knowledge to win fights with Sarah and control her behavior. A few scenes further into the film, after confronting Sarah in the library, Sarah tells James in bed that she has not let people hurt her in the past and James immediately tells her, "that's not true...I know people have hurt you." Sarah rolls over to avoid him and he in turn holds her, whispering "I'll take care of you." James, in a sense, wins the minor argument and asserts his dominance over her by literally holding Sarah and vowing to care for her. James implies that Sarah does not have the ability to care for herself and that he must protect her like a husband would from other men. Although James merely claims that he'll care for Sarah, his vow also implies that he will attempt to modify her behavior and control her actions in the future.

One must note that despite James's subsequent controlling behavior in their relationship, Sarah, unlike Belinda from *Johnny Belinda* and Ada from *The Piano*, creates a sustainable life for herself without a man before she meets James. Sarah holds more agency in a capitalistic economy than other mute characters because she can work

as a laborer without the support of a man. Before dating James, Sarah works as the school janitor on her own and does not appear to rely on a father figure as Belinda and Ada do prior to their involvement with male protagonists. Sarah holds agency as a laborer and uses her labor power to provide a self-sustaining life for herself (Marx 659). When James first meets Sarah, he approaches her in an obvious attempt to woo her, offering to teach her speech one morning as she cleans his classroom. Sarah sarcastically asserts that she can teach James to mop the floor in exchange for his lessons. James immediately disregards Sarah's offer, and although Sarah clearly does not intend to participate in the proposed exchange, she asserts to James that she holds power as a worker and that her work has value just as his does. She again asserts her power after breaking up with James, by moving in with her mother and succeeding financially without James's help. Her character shows the audience that despite her disability and her gender, Sarah can "manage" herself (which James implies she cannot do during the film's climactic fight). In one scene towards the end of the film, James peers through a store window to watch Sarah holding a dollar bill after painting a woman's nails. The dollar bill symbolizes capitalism and commerce that women traditionally do not have access to in patriarchy because men hold capitalistic symbols of power while women reproduce and raise laborers. However, Sarah supersedes James's power as a man in patriarchy and earns capital on her own.

Sarah's labor as a janitor creates tension between her and James. At the beginning of the film, James's résumé suggests that he comes from an educated background and has the ability to change occupations. He arrives at the school with what Dr. Franklin (Philip Bosco), the school principal, sarcastically calls "the most amazing résumé." James claims

that he worked for “some really good schools, the best.” The résumé suggests that James worked in a variety of fields and had the capability of transitioning from manual labor to the skilled labor class. However, Sarah appears to have worked only as a school janitor and does not have the ability to move into the skilled and educated workforce. Sarah likes her job and appears concerned when James announces that she shall move in with him. Sarah cannot obtain capital and autonomy without her labor, which she implies to her mother at one point. Yet, when James commands Sarah to move in with him, he does not seem to grasp Sarah’s concern about the loss of her job. Instead, James implies that Sarah’s job should be to care for him. James tells her, “You can do whatever you want.” James then tells Sarah “You’ve got me” and that he does not share Sarah’s desire for children. James does not ask Sarah what duties she would like to perform as a laborer in capitalism and this omission suggests that James deems that Sarah’s purpose is to perform domestic duties and focus solely on him.

In addition to forcing her to leave her janitorial position, James exerts his control over Sarah by translating Sarah’s language. James translates Sarah’s words out loud for her, and although his speech endows her words with some power, James’s interpretations distinguish oral language from sign language (Fellernan 118). James’s spoken language provides the hearing film audience access to Sarah’s sign language. One could argue that by translating Sarah’s language to the audience using his powerful male speaking voice, James empowers Sarah and her alternative language. In a scene at a busy dock, Sarah signs to James and he translates her signs out loud, saying that she thinks he cannot communicate to her while his “mind is busy,” and James then apologizes for not paying attention to her. James suggests that Sarah’s words are important to him and that he

wishes to diligently watch her hand movements. As the powerful male protagonist in the film and a symbol of the masculine order, James's presumed admission that sign language is important symbolizes that the masculine order acknowledges it. In fact, during a pivotal fight in the film, James confesses that Sarah's words go through "my brain and out my mouth" and imprint in his mind. This implies that he not only listens to her words but understands and imbibes her sentiments.

However, the fact is that James privileges the masculine oral culture over Sarah's sign language. James tells Sarah, during their first date, that "maybe I like to hear myself talk" while dancing with her. James suggests not only that he enjoys speaking, but that he can exert his power over Sarah and conquer quiet space with his words. James holds the power to translate Sarah's words and his power suggests that the oral language deserves more recognition than sign language. *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby acknowledged in his 1986 review that James "not only speaks all of his own lines, as he 'talks' with his students and Sarah in sign language," but that he translates the other deaf characters' lines out loud (Canby). When James stops translating, the audience has no idea what Sarah or other deaf characters say. The film does not supply the audience with subtitles for sign language (unlike in *The Piano*) (Fellernan 119). In fact, during a party at Sarah's friend's home, James does not translate Sarah's sign language and James even jokes that everyone at the party, including Sarah, appears to "talk in some far northern Hungarian dialect." Sarah's sign language looks like a comical foreign language and means little without James's interpretations. James's spoken words give Sarah's language meaning. The film elevates spoken language above sign language. James's position as

Sarah's interpreter not only illustrates a stark difference between the two languages, but represents Sarah's language as inferior.

In addition to distinguishing his masculine oral language from sign language, James advocates oral language to Sarah and other deaf school members because he subscribes to the belief that the disabled want to assimilate into the oral culture. According to film scholar Susan Felleran, James "is a speech teacher whose operative pedagogic assumption is that deaf people ought to (want to) speak" (117). James's philosophy prevents him from seeing that Sarah and other members of the deaf community "embrace sign language as a manifestation of culture and a primary gateway to early intellectual development" (Medoff and Zachary 8). James values speech so much that even when he is alone he talks to himself and to others who cannot hear (Felleran 117). James also thinks that he rescued Sarah from a life of silence and explains to her how important he is: "You have a full-time interpreter just like a United Nations diplomat." However, for James, Sarah's communication through sign language does not substitute for speech. James recurrently impresses upon Sarah his ability to teach her speech and she rejects his offers (Felleran 118). James continues to implore Sarah to no avail and becomes frustrated, screaming at one point: "Let me help you, damn it!" In every instance, James feels that he is Sarah's mentor, but beneath this veneer lies a "crude authoritarianism" (Santaolalla 55).

Eventually, James reveals to the audience his problem with Sarah's rejection of spoken language. During the epic fight with Sarah that forces her to gargle out bizarre sounds, James stops signing and exposes his true inner concern with controlling Sarah in a monologue:

Read my lips! What am I saying? You want to talk to me? Then learn my language! Did you understand that? Of course you did. You've probably been reading lips for years, but that's the great control game, isn't it? I'm the controller. What a ... joke! Now, come on! Speak to me! Speak! Speak to me!

This speech happens, ironically, after Sarah explains that James can never come inside her silence, or, rather, her mode of self-reflection. According to Sarah, James will never be privy to her inner thoughts and, most importantly, Sarah's muteness ensures that James will never exert complete control over her. She also claims that James does not let her be herself. Sarah tells James that he really does not want to help the deaf but instead wishes to merely change them into hearing people in order to benefit himself. James has a problem with Sarah's subjectivity and her ability to withhold information from him for her own personal reasons. James ignores Sarah's accusation, claiming that she is capable of speech but unwilling to divulge her oral abilities to James out of pure spite. James attacks Sarah's fondness for her language and her disability and suggests that Sarah's "stupid pride" prevents her from learning to speak. James tells Sarah that she must "learn to read my lips" in order to continue her relationship with James. Once James exposes his authoritarianism to Sarah, Sarah flees.

James's character represents the speaking culture's refusal to acknowledge sign language as a language equal to speech. Language can both emancipate and trap people, but James sees the oral language as solely empowering (even though he is willing to acknowledge that sign language is a language). Society privileges audism and speech at the expense of sign language (Levitt 78). Therefore, members of the dominant culture, like James, regulate the deaf to the "other" in society (Levitt 78). This results in the deaf

having the capacity to complain only to each other. The disabled cannot gain privilege in the speaking world, and thus the deaf have great difficulty getting people like James to understand they are intelligent. James never acknowledges that sign is important to him and instead demeans Sarah's language when he translates for her. James "substitutes 'you' for Sarah's signed 'I' and 'I' for her signed 'you,'" throughout much of the film (Fellernan 118). Yet, James shifts pronouns around in the scene in the library when Sarah reveals she has been sexually abused so that sometimes he says "you" for Sarah's signed "you" and "I" for her signed "I" (Fellernan 118). He does this once more when he translates Sarah's reasons for her frustrations in the relationship during the climatic fight:

Everyone's always told me who I am. And I let them. She wants. She thinks. And most of the time they were wrong. They had no idea what I'd said, wanted, thought...you think for me—think for Sarah—as if there were no I...Until you let me be an I the way you are, you can never come inside my silence and know me.

James appropriates her perspective and stops converting her "I" to a "you" and ends up assigning Sarah's "I" to himself (Fellernan 119). In other words, Sarah's statement about silence turns into James's statement. Sarah holds no autonomy over her own words because of James's interpretations. James translates Sarah's language into speech and that in itself suggests that sign language is unequal to speech. James demeans sign language to block Sarah's access to the oral language and undermine her belief that sign language is equal to speech.

Even the sounds and music the film uses privilege sound over silence. This includes the sound of water, the symbol associated with Sarah's sexuality. The sounds intrude on Sarah's silent moments and do not offer audiences a chance to experience



what Sarah values. These natural sounds combine with James's voice to interrupt and impose on Sarah. James's constant translations both justify and malign the silent sign language. He modifies her language without her consent. For Sarah, muteness and sign language are failed strategies to bar James from imposing oral language on her (Levitt 79).

Ultimately, Sarah maintains her identity as "other" and the film never represents women as equal counterparts to ultra-masculine males like James. The film reveals the problematic power dynamics between Sarah and James only to render this dynamic palatable by placing it within the context of a love story. At the end of the film, James asks Sarah: "[D]o you think we could find a place where we can meet—not in silence and not in sound?" And together they sign the word for "join." This scene implies that Sarah and James will get back together.

But Sarah and James's communication problems will not cease; the film shows that Sarah and James emotionally depend on each other. It does not try to subvert the love story plotline and have the two separate forever. This contemporary melodrama does not question the representation of Sarah as a woman with limited agency (due to her disability and her relationship with a controlling man). *Children of a Lesser God* is mainstream film that does not transform the mute woman character into a true figure of resistance. Sarah submits to her loneliness and joins with James in the end after coming to believe that life without a man, while living with her mother, is a sad existence. Sarah fails at resisting James through silence, sign language, and sensual. The film allows James's masculine spoken language to dispel Sarah's sign language in order to keep the love story functioning.

Yet, the film does demonstrate an emerging tendency to present mute women with greater autonomy in film. The film represents the deaf community in a better light with complex characters that are not the simplistic deaf-mutes of previous decades. The eighties was an era during which women and minorities began directing in an attempt to subvert classic Hollywood standards. However, women directors like Haines face the pressure to produce successful mainstream films; they “are obliged to work within the same narrative structures and formal codings as are male filmmakers” (Benshoff and Griffin 291). Despite this, Haines does offer new perspectives on both the disabled and women throughout *Children of a Lesser God*. Her desire to show a disabled and sexual woman in a love story provides opportunities for other contemporary directors, like Jane Campion, to offer more subversive plotlines and complex characters.

## Chapter Four

## “IT IS A WEIRD LULLABY”:

VOYEURISM, MUSIC, AND TOUCH IN JANE CAMPION’S *THE PIANO*

During the opening credits of Jane Campion’s *The Piano*, Ada McGrath (Holly Hunter) peers out through her fingers with one fiercely-determined eye directed toward the camera lens. A voiceover—spoken by Ada’s inner voice—introduces viewers to the heroine, who has not spoken since the age of six for reasons unknown to her: “I have not spoken since I was six years old. Nobody knows why, least of all myself.” Viewers get a strong sense that this film is different from *Johnny Belinda* and *Children of a Lesser God*, where the male protagonists introduce the mute women to audiences. In films like *Johnny Belinda*, mute women want men to teach them communication skills, but Ada embraces her disability in her voiceover. She states that she does not think of herself as silent because of her piano and wears a notepad around her neck that mimics a noose—a visual reminder to the viewer that Ada rejects spoken language (McGlothlin 21). The voiceover predisposes viewers to Ada’s perspective that her mind’s voice can communicate to others better than the oral language (Molina 268). However, viewers quickly learn from the mind’s voice that Ada is not in control of her circumstances because her father married her to a man that she has “not yet met.” This voiceover makes certain that viewers understand Ada’s precarious situation as a woman in the nineteenth century. The camera pans away from a gold-banded ring finger and viewers see a man urging a pony forward with Ada’s daughter, Flora (Anna Paquin), riding atop it. Ada is a victim of her times, and yet her mind’s voice explains that she is a stubborn and strong-willed woman

who possibly can stop herself from breathing (she claims her father believes that “the day I take into my head to stop breathing will be my last.”)

The film attempts to subvert the classic Hollywood representation of the submissive mute woman and provide audiences with a complex narrative to a much greater extent than *Children of a Lesser God* and most certainly *Johnny Belinda*. Scholars analyze Ada using post-colonial, disability, and music theories at great length; however, in this chapter, I examine the visual aesthetics in *The Piano* that offer ways to interpret Ada’s situation from a feminist perspective. This film serves as a construct of history from a woman’s perspective and subverts the tendency in traditional cinema to objectify women through voyeurism. The film represents the languages of music and touch through Ada and George Baines (Harvey Keitel), both of whom caress the piano to express their feelings. Although Ada uses sign language and written notes to communicate to Flora, her alternative languages of music and touch deserve more scrutiny because Ada uses these communication forms for speaking directly to men. Ada attempts to gain autonomy by refraining from spoken language, but Baines and Alisdair Stewart (Sam Neill) sexualize, violate, and masquerade her as property. In the end, Ada succumbs to the rules of nineteenth-century civilization when she realizes that she can remain mute only in death, and the romantic relationship Ada proceeds to have with Baines winds up forestalling her character development. Much like Belinda and Sarah, Ada becomes a traditional object of the male protagonist’s affection, which prevents her from achieving more progressive gains toward autonomy.

In spite of this unsatisfactory ending, the film uses the female gaze in a way that subverts the male gaze, presenting an unpredictable plotline to audiences. In “Jane

Campion's *The Piano*: The Female Gaze, the Speculum and the Chora within the H(y)st(e)rical Film," Jamie Bihlmeyer points out that the female gaze is both "ambivalent and progressive in terms of its potential for deconstructing the [masculine] Symbolic order" (Bihlmeyer). The female gaze objectifies the male body and works to show complex women characters. Traditionally Hollywood uses the male gaze to expose the female body to ensure that the phallus is a mysterious and powerful object that needs to be shrouded in mystery (Hardy 80-81). This gaze allows the male to observe sexual differences from a distance, represent his sexual desire, and position him as a "controlling subject" (Bruzzi 261); conversely, the female gaze objectifies a man and makes the female the "active sexual agent" (Margolis 14). *The Piano* undermines the male form of voyeurism with the female gaze to confront the male with the "subjective experience of individual women: their imaginations, dreams, fantasies, and interior journeys," and thus, provides audiences with a complex heroine who holds autonomy over her communication tools and her own thoughts (Bruzzi qtd. in Bolton 186-187).

The audience sees Ada off and on from the male point of view. When Ada and Stewart have their wedding photo taken, we see her from the male photographer's perspective—staring out at Ada in the dreary rain. We watch Ada's back as we listen to her play the piano and we see Ada's creamy white shoulders through Baines's eyes after she takes off her jacket. However, we see from Ada's perspective more frequently, which suggests that Campion and her production crew want the audience to experience conflicting perspectives in order to understand the struggle Ada experiences with both Baines and Stewart. For instance, the audience sees from Ada's perspective when Ada squeezes Baines's finger in a piano key cover to express her dissatisfaction with him. A

few scenes later, the audience then sees Ada's neck from Baines's perspective. These conflicting perspectives and shots also offer us the opportunity to see the relationship dynamics between Ada and Baines.

*The Piano* also incorporates camera shots from the male gaze closely near shots from the female gaze to reflect the conflicts between Stewart and Ada. When Stewart ventures out to meet Ada for the first time, he takes out Ada's picture and gazes into her image. He then uses it as a mirror and combs his hair back. Stewart's decision to use Ada as a mirror symbolizes his "economic control over and objectification of Ada" (McGlothlin 22). Ada is Stewart's possession that he bought from her father, and as Stewart's object, Ada should mirror his values. Stewart feels Ada reflects his image and he is aware that she "returns to him a sense of self, an illusion of identity and totality" (McGlothlin 22). During this time period, Ada cannot function as a person with autonomy and must therefore represent to Stewart an image of his "selfhood and ownership" (McGlothlin 22). However, Ada does not gaze back at Stewart's image. Right after Stewart and Ada meet, Ada gazes back longingly at her piano in its box on the beach as she and Flora trek into the forest. Ada's decision to not admire her new husband, but rather look back upon her piano, reveals Ada's lack of interest in Stewart and the impending conflicts between husband and wife.

The couple's conflicts continue to escalate when Ada sexually exploits her husband's body. After Stewart barricades Ada in his home to keep her under his authority, Ada seduces Stewart (although, she does not engage in sexual intercourse with him). Ada caresses Stewart's body at night and pulls down Stewart's undergarments to reveal his bottom. She objectifies her husband's body for a moment before Stewart

promptly yanks up his clothes and pleads to touch her, which she does not allow.

According to Campion: “Ada actually uses her husband Stewart as a sexual object—this is the outrageous morality of the film” (Campion qtd. in Bentley 49). Ada appears to yearn for her sexual partner and substitutes her husband’s body for Baines’s. Stewart is “vulnerable” because Ada refuses to allow him to touch her body, and thus, Stewart’s ability to control Ada in his own home ceases (Margolis 14). Ada makes Stewart uncomfortable in his own bed—a place where Stewart as a male should dominate. Stewart is “overwhelmed and submissive as if in shock at her sexuality and his sexual fastidiousness,” and Stewart surmises that Ada’s interest in his body means that Ada accepts her place in Stewart’s house (Bihlmeyer “Jane Campion’s *The Piano*”). Stewart then removes the boards across his windows and doors to free Ada, even though Ada “annihilates his confidence, his security, and his identity” (Bentley 49). Her gaze serves to undermine his authority.

The film incorporates the female gaze to deconstruct and make fun of Stewart’s use of male voyeurism through the use of camera angles and Flora. In one scene, after the male photographer looks through his camera, Stewart looks out through the photo camera lens at Ada in a faux-wedding dress, and instead of directing the camera lens out at Ada, Campion directs the camera back at Stewart’s eye framed within the portal lens of the photo camera. This decision redirects the male gaze, which would normally allow Stewart to examine Ada’s body, to in effect make “a pun of scopophilia” and force the audience to watch Stewart peering out, like a young boy from a peephole, at Ada (Bihlmeyer “Jane Campion’s *The Piano*”). The film again subverts the male gaze when Flora peeks through the wall cracks at Ada and Baines engaging in sexual intercourse.

Flora, a “pre-pubescent female,” takes possession of the gaze and inverts its power (Bihlmeyer “Jane Campion’s *The Piano*”). A young girl taking over the gaze’s power shows that the gaze is not potent and can be dismantled. As Ada and Baines’s relationship continues, Flora becomes an extension of Stewart, and so her decision to watch the intercourse also suggests that Flora is shut out of her mother’s relationship with Baines. Additionally, Stewart is not privy to the sexual relationship between Baines and Ada, which drives Stewart, much like Flora, to voyeurism. Stewart chooses to peep through the wall cracks and the floorboards at Baines and Ada’s sexual encounter. Instead of empowering him, Stewart’s use of the gaze emasculates and isolates him from the emotional center of the film (Ada) to a point where Stewart must secretly watch his wife have sex with his neighbor (Bruzzi 261).

Even though Stewart acts as the subject who utilizes the gaze as he looks upon Ada and Baines, Stewart also becomes the object of the gaze. The female gaze allows the film to separate the “active gaze from the male subject,” which means that Ada retains the gaze and Stewart is devoid of its authority (Margolis 14). Ada stares up at Stewart and her look stops Stewart from attempting for a second time to rape her after he chops off her finger and her look “functions as the mirror to reflect his shame” (Bruzzi 262). Ada’s gaze forces Stewart to listen to her and Stewart thinks that Ada speaks directly to him. In this moment, Ada takes possession of the gaze to undermine Stewart’s authority and distance herself from Stewart (Bruzzi 265). Ada’s bewildered stare forces her husband to lose control of his intentions and become an oppressed object of the gaze. Several scenes later, Stewart tells Baines, with shotgun in hand, that he ‘heard’ Ada



‘speak’ inside his head of the power of her will” and Ada’s “voice” appears to have told Stewart to let Baines have Ada (Bihlmeyer “Jane Campion’s *The Piano*”).

In addition to Stewart’s loss of power from the female gaze, Stewart’s refusal to privilege Ada’s sensual language of touch threatens to prevent him from receiving Ada’s love. Ada tries to get Stewart to understand her language by touching him at night, but Stewart recoils from Ada’s advances. As it is for Sarah in *Children of a Lesser God*, touch, and more importantly sexual touch, is an important form of communication for Ada. Touch is the “dominant sense” that Ada uses to communicate with Stewart, which “subverts and supplants” his voyeurism (Margolis 27). In “This Sex Which is Not One,” Irigaray observes a “woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking” (qtd. in Bruzzi 264). Ada touches Stewart to communicate her growing sexual interest, though it is not clear if it is in him.

When Stewart wants to receive Ada’s touch, he grasps a hold of her and attempts to violently possess her body. Looking divides Stewart from Ada, but touch links the two of them together—something that Stewart finds necessary when he wants to control Ada as his object (Bruzzi 264). Ironically, Stewart muses to Aunt Morag (Kerry Walker) that he hopes Ada will in time “become affectionate,” which he does not allow Ada to do on her own terms. Instead, when Stewart makes his second attempt to rape Ada, she is “most passive and silent” and lies under him, devoid of passion (Bentley 49). During the first attempt, out in the forest, Ada desperately tries to get away from Stewart’s grasp by grabbing at random branches and brush. Her attempts fail, and Flora’s call to her saves Ada from Stewart. Stewart never understands that he cannot force Ada to act as his wife when he cuts off her ability to communicate through touch. His decision to value the

visual medium as opposed to the physical medium forces him to resort to violence in an effort to force Ada to bend to his will. Stewart fears losing his power of observing and violates Ada's intimate language.

By contrast, Baines succumbs to Ada's language of touch and music. The piano serves as Ada's voice and thereby is part of her self-expressive language in addition to touching. For Ada, "the piano serves as a kind of surrogate female body" that represents her sexuality and her speech (Molina 270). When Baines takes Ada and Flora to the beach, he watches Ada lavish her attention on the piano. For Ada, this is the perfect day where she can spend her time playing with zeal pieces of music that organically come to her (she does not play from sheet music), which arouses Baines. Ada expresses through the piano her intense affection and personality, and thus, one can determine that Baines finds Ada's music erotic and seductive. Baines wants Ada to devote her passion to him, but during their first few piano lessons, Ada adores the piano and not Baines. At one point Baines insists that Ada lie without her shirt on next to him. After Ada gets up, she caresses the piano keys and Baines shuts the piano key cover. Baines sees that in order to get Ada to admire him he must control Ada's object of affection, the piano, and thereby control her language (Bihlmeyer "Jane Campion's *The Piano*").

Baines understands that "the language of commerce" is the dominant language in colonial New Zealand (Molina 270). Baines initiates a barter with Stewart and posits to give Stewart thirty acres of land in exchange for the piano and lessons from Ada. Stewart then informs Ada, after agreeing to the barter, that he gave Baines the piano and that she shall teach Baines how to play, to which Ada replies in the form of a written note: "The piano is mine. It's mine." Stewart screams back "[w]e are a family now. We all sacrifice

and so will you” before slamming the door and ending the argument. Stewart and Baines choose to use the language of trade to control Ada’s piano and actions despite her protests. The exchange of women established relations between men during the nineteenth century, and exchanging Ada becomes a motif in which both men engage throughout the film. As noted in the introductory chapter, in “Women on the Market,” Irigaray theorizes that men exchange women like commodities for procreation, status, economics, and sex (Irigaray 802). Baines essentially exchanges land with Stewart so that he can have sex with Ada. Much like Belinda in *Johnny Belinda*, motherhood does not prevent men from exchanging Ada. Ada is still a sexual object despite having had Flora. In effect, Stewart sells his new bride that he recently purchased from her father to Baines (Dalton and Fatzinger 35).

But unlike Stewart, Baines gives Ada access to the language of bargaining (although this is also a manipulative move). Men typically exchange women, but they do not engage in “exchanges *with* them” (Irigaray 800). However, Baines rebuffs this economic tradition. He tells Ada that “[t]here’s things I’d like to do while you play,” and Ada takes this opportunity to act as an agent in the barter. She tells Baines through hand signals that she will submit to each of his requests for a number of black keys until she earns back all the black keys, upon which Baines shall return the piano to her. Ada is able to negotiate and is not “entirely disempowered” thanks to Baines (Davis 73). Baines agrees to Ada’s offer and then proceeds to seduce Ada through her language of touch: Baines fingers a hole in Ada’s black stocking much to her chagrin and has Ada play the piano shirtless while he kisses her exposed neck and rubs her shoulders. Baines does not subscribe to the typical masculine practice of gazing from afar and utilizes touch to

become a suitable partner for Ada. Baines accommodates himself to the feminine language to unite with Ada (Dayal 21).

Both Baines and Ada caress the piano on a number of occasions to imply their ardor for the language of touch and music and also their admiration for each other. The piano substitutes for Ada's body when Baines chooses to dust it with his shirt while naked. His decision to clean off the piano symbolizes his desire to stroke Ada and acts as a premonition for the relationship that he embarks upon with her (Bruzzi 260). At first, after agreeing to the barter, Ada employs music as a communication tool that allows her to limit Baines's advances. Soon, however, she uses music to suggest that she warms to Baines's desires. The piano combines Ada's interior and exterior feelings to express her emotional state. For instance, Ada plays a melody without her shirt on and Baines, also shirtless, rubs his hand across Ada's back and then brushes across Ada's neck. Ada immediately pounds on the keys evoking a harsh sound that "mimics sarcasm" (Gorbman 42). The sound causes Baines to back away from her. But after Baines gives back the piano to Ada, Ada is despondent and remains alone for the first time. She eats without interest and then goes over to her piano to stroke the keys with the back of her hand in a fashion that mimics how Baines touched the back of her neck, and then Ada plays a lonely melody to suggest that she longs for Baines's touch. Ada's desire for Baines begins to "displace her symbiotic attachment to the piano," which she begins to use to communicate her intense desire for Baines (Davis 73). Both Baines and Ada repeatedly treat the piano as a sexual being and an object through which they express their emotions.

In addition to music, Ada uses her disability/muteness in an effort to gain recognition from Stewart, Baines, and ultimately patriarchy at large. Her disability

appears to act as an expression of her “disenfranchisement” from European culture, but one is never sure if this is what Ada truly seeks to do with her muteness (Dalton and Fatzinger 34). Many scholars find meaning in Ada’s decision to remain speechless. The film addresses silence as an alternative form of human expression, but it never fully explains if Ada’s decision to avoid oral language excels or fails as a communication tool (Molina 267). The film’s refusal to explicitly define why Ada prefers her alternative languages of sign, music, and touch, is in part what makes it so alluring.

The dominant theory among scholars is that Ada’s silence defies patriarchy; however, I contest this theory to suggest that Ada’s muteness, like her gender, subjects her to persecution. Scholars suggest that muteness is an effective weapon for women to use when they cannot claim their own identity or a nameable experience in patriarchy (Dalton and Fatzinger 36). For them, silence (or the decision to remain speechless) is a radical “feminist mode of discourse” that Ada uses to resist the oppressive colonialist culture (Bruzzi 257-258). Ada adopts her disability because the phallogentric culture at large does not hear nor choose to understand women (Dalton and Fatzinger 36). Her choice to refrain from speech acts as a “symbol for her transgression, control and defiance of patriarchal law” (Bruzzi 265). The culture marks Ada’s muteness as a disability, and thereby marks Ada as the *other*, someone unlike other women, which she accepts as a mark of distinction at the end of the film (Dalton and Fatzinger 36). Although the idea that Ada can dispute her position in patriarchy through her disability presents a valid argument. I argue that the disruptive potential of Ada’s silence is undermined by the film’s failure to invest her or her alternative languages with substantial or permanent power.

Interestingly, Baines, Stewart, and Aunt Morag all hold contrasting views on Ada's muteness. Baines does not think of Ada as a defective woman who cannot speak; in fact, for him, Ada's muteness is a "powerful medium of sexual seduction" (Molina 267). Conversely, Ada's disability repels Stewart, which Stewart implies in one of his first statements to Ada on the beach: "You're small. I never thought you'd be small." Ada does not reply to his comment and later on Stewart confesses to Aunt Morag that he thinks Ada is "stunted" and Aunt Morag retorts that Ada could be "brain-affected." Stewart surmises that Ada's muteness led to the physical problem of stunted growth and Aunt Morag reverberates his sentiments to imply that Ada's disability left Ada mentally defective (Molina 269). Aunt Morag even questions Ada's intelligence by remarking that Ada is akin to a pet that is "easy to like," and in doing so, Aunt Morag suggests that refraining from speech makes Ada sub-human. Both Stewart and Aunt Morag place a higher value on speech than on Ada's alternative languages and do not consider Ada's muteness as a legitimate form of expression. Ultimately, the film does the same.

Although Stewart and Aunt Morag hold Ada's disability in disdain, Flora uses Ada's alternative forms of expression to her advantage. Ada can remain mute and communicate her wishes to Flora even though Flora takes creative license with Ada's opinions (Molina 268). Ada opts to play the piano and use a "primitive form of hand-signing with her daughter" (Dapkus 181) that is a "para-linguistic" form of communication (Bihlmeyer "Jane Campion's *The Piano*"). Flora interprets her mother's sign language and revels in her mother's "unruly voice" (Jay 7) at the beginning of the film, when Flora tells a concerned sailor that Ada "would rather be boiled alive by

natives then go back to your stinking tub.” Ada expects that Flora should repeat her words but Flora can “flout convention” in the process, much to others’ dismay (Jay 8-9).

Later on in the film, Flora does assert herself as a moral compass who expresses disapproval for her mother’s disability (Dapkus 181). When Aunt Morag and her niece help Flora put on angel wings, Aunt Morag comments that she “can’t imagine a fate worse than being dumb” in obvious contempt for Ada’s disability. Aunt Morag does not understand that everyone in Ada’s life goes deaf or dumb at some point, which makes Ada not the only one with a disability. Practically everyone “fails to communicate or to comprehend something” in the film (Molina 273). Stewart fails to comprehend Ada’s languages; Baines cannot read Ada’s written messages; and even Flora has trouble understanding Ada’s mixed messages about Baines (Molina 272). Flora counters back to Aunt Morag in an effort to protect her mother: “Actually, to tell you the whole truth, Mama says most people speak rubbish and it’s not worth the listen.” But Flora then sees that she offended Aunt Morag and offers “[a]y, it’s unholy.” Flora’s dismissive remark about her mother’s opinion foreshadows her transition from Ada’s mouthpiece to her mother’s critic. Flora eventually encourages her mother to submit to patriarchal conventions, largely as a means to ensure that Ada pays attention to her rather than Baines.

For Stewart, and indeed patriarchy, “[t]he counterstroke to muteness is mutilation” (Molina 271). Flora tries to subvert Ada’s deviation from marriage conventions by attempting to prevent Ada from returning to Baines’s home. Ada tells Flora to go back home and Flora screams: “Let her fall face down in boiling, bloody mud! Let a mad dog bite her till she bleeds!” Several scenes later, Ada urges Flora to take

a piano key to Baines on which Ada etched a love proclamation; however, Flora gives the key to Stewart. After reading the key, Stewart violently drags Ada down to the wood chopping block. He asks Ada if she loves Baines, hears no answer, and chops off her finger—permanently mutilating her. For Stewart, this mutilation is the right punishment for Ada who “transgressed society’s laws” and most importantly, ignored his command to speak (Hardy 78). Chopping off Ada’s finger is a way for Stewart to attempt to get his wife to speak and force her to abide by phallogocentric society’s conventions (Azeri 5). Later on, while Ada recovers from her wound, Stewart justifies his actions by telling Ada: “I clipped your wing, that’s all.” Presumably, Stewart wants Ada to no longer have the ability to play her piano or touch Baines. Ada asserts a kind of power that threatens Stewart and, in his mind, his decision to cut her finger off will allow him to own Ada permanently. By “castrating” her, Stewart forces Ada to obey him and remain his property. Her muteness threatens Stewart’s authority and ultimately makes her a target of his violence.

It is, for this reason that Ada chooses to distance herself from her muteness at the end of the film. She realizes that her disability severely hinders her presence in society and renders her opinions insignificant. Ada can “refuse the terms by which [muteness] can be cast as a resistance” (Gillett 196). In other words, Ada can choose to remove herself from the disability she valued as a child. Ada’s muteness appears as “a form of self-imprisonment” in the opening scene where the fingers she places across her face suggest “the bars of a cell” (Bentley 148). Ada realizes, after losing her finger, that speech is a way for women to “reassert their power and control their own destinies” in patriarchy (Hoeveler 114). She learns from her battle with Stewart that her decision to



remain mute acts as an “instrument of power,” but ultimately an “obstacle to power” that she must escape to claim her existence in the world (Bentley 47).

However, the male-dominated culture represents a world Ada is not eager to embrace. Ada attempts suicide in a desperate attempt to both escape patriarchy and avoid having to learn spoken language. Her suicide attempt is “an understandable reaction by a woman forced to confront the possibility that she has no reliable existence” (Hardy 83). After Stewart allows Ada to leave New Zealand with Baines, Maori (a group of natives of New Zealand) take Ada, Baines, and Flora out in a boat with the piano. Ada insists that they toss the piano into the sea and then places her foot in a loop of rope around the piano so that she is pulled overboard into the sea. The suicide attempt is the “ultimate denial of speech,” and thus the final way that Ada can resist the masculine order (Santaolalla 59). She realizes that she must become a part of this culture if she is to settle into a peaceful domestic life with Baines.

As in *Children of a Lesser God*, water in this suicide scene is associated with the feminine, especially the maternal. The rope around Ada’s foot acts as an umbilical cord connecting her to the piano (Davis 65). The water represents amniotic fluid and serves not just as a grave, but as a womb (Davis 65). However, Ada’s will rejects this ending; in a moment of rebirth, Ada kicks off her shoe and swims to the surface. When Ada surfaces, she embraces her body as a woman and her sexuality. Because Ada accepts her sexuality, she, or rather her will, accepts that she needs Baines and speech (Hoeveler 114). According to Bihlmeyer, Ada chooses to live to connect to her sexuality, which empowers her “erotic desire” and her “psychic shift from death-bearing silence towards

speaking” (“The (Un)speakable Femininity” 74). At the same time; however, she accepts a position in the male-dominated order she previously struggled to resist.

The film suggests that death is not a victory for Ada, and so Ada must live and break free of the piano that helps her maintain muteness. Ada uses the piano as a communication tool; however, during her attempted suicide, the piano represents the disability from which Ada must break away from. In fact, Ada even states that she thinks of her piano “in its ocean grave, and sometimes of myself floating above it. Down there everything is so still and silent that it lulls me to sleep.” The piano, associated with silence, must rest at the bottom of the sea as a “transitional object” that Ada can remove herself from in order to speak and gain autonomy (Bihlmeyer 74-75). For Ada, the piano also represents “her ‘dead’ self, the self that was exploited, silenced, and annihilated” by Stewart (Bentley 57). Ada understands that her refrain from spoken language “would only lead to a watery grave,” much like where her piano rests “silent in its ocean grave” (Davis 63-64). Therefore, the will that chose muteness for Ada at age six now chooses “life and voice” (Dalton and Fatzinger 38). Ada’s inner voice explains in a voiceover during the closing scenes that she teaches piano with a metal fingertip that Baines made. She states that she is now the “town freak, which satisfies,” and that she is learning the oral language even though her “sound is still so bad” that she chooses to “practice only when I am alone and it is dark.” In the closing scene, a scene reminiscent of that in which Belinda signs the word “father,” Ada walks around a porch with a black veil over her face and attempts to say “Papa.” Baines lifts the black veil and kisses her. By learning to say “Papa,” Ada gives men power by acknowledging their patriarchal authority. Ada’s decision to have a relationship with Baines, a man who traded land to have his way with

her, forestalls her character development. The only progressive claim Ada makes at the end of the film is that she thinks of her piano on the seafloor, stating that “[i]t is a weird lullaby and so it is; it is mine.” Bihlmeyer asserts that “[t]he last shot” is where Ada “claims ownership of the weird lullaby” (Bihlmeyer “Jane Campion’s *The Piano*”). Ada refers to a poem from the English poet Thomas Hood that is both male-altered and speaks of the uneasy nature that she has with her affinity for muteness and alternative languages: “There is a silence where hath been no sound. There is a silence where no sound hath been, in the cold grave under the deep, deep sea.” She continues to claim the piano as her own, but her decision to live for love puts an end to her narrative.

Not surprisingly, *The Piano*’s ending, which contains elements of both a wedding and a funeral, is a source of disagreement among critics. Some scholars make the case that the happily-ever-after scene with Baines is a promising ending for feminists because it shows that Baines “has allowed their relationship to evolve on Ada’s provisos,” and that “Ada chooses to speak when she finds someone who will listen on the terms she establishes” (Dalton and Fatzinger 38). However, according to Ann Hardy, “[t]he closest the film comes to setting up an alternative, female source of authority” even though Ada does not die in the end like a “tragic heroine” (Hardy 266). I argue that, though the film represents muteness and alternative languages as possible means of resistance for women, the ending ultimately closes down this possibility. Ada realizes in the end that the male-dominated order will never value her. Ada sees that she must reinsert herself into spoken language and the male-dominated order because her only other option is death.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

### MUTE WOMEN IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FILM:

#### THE MUTE WOMAN AS EVERY WOMAN

In this thesis, I offer interpretations of mute women in three complex mainstream films (*Johnny Belinda*, *Children of a Lesser God*, and *The Piano*) to add to the conversation regarding representations of mute women, women's sexual exploitation, and women's alternative languages. I assert that films generally represent mute women as complex characters, but that the Hollywood film industry's representation of these women leaves much to be desired. Most films representing mute women are characterized by a two-fold problem. First, these films suggest that there are no effective tools of resistance against masculine authority available to mute women; instead, they represent mute women as abandoning the struggle for agency and autonomy, usually in favor of romance. Second, they reduce mute women to a symbolic representation of women in general, representing their disability as a sign of feminine weakness and vulnerability.

Recent films continue to suppress mute women and focus on the women's sexuality at the expense of showing their progressive gains toward autonomy and agency in patriarchy. Much like the films I discuss in previous chapters, more recent films suggest that mute women cannot obtain independence on their own. Twenty-first century film producers and directors continue to integrate mute women into motion pictures, but most regulate them to secondary characters—albeit characters experiencing problems in addition to disability (Benshoff and Griffin 381). Paul McGuigan's *The Reckoning*

(2002), Alejandro G. Inarritze's *Babel* (2006), and Kirsten Levring's *The Salvation* (2014) all share narrative and iconographic elements to represent common themes of early twenty-first century films that showcase complex mute women. In much the same fashion as Belinda, Sarah, and Ada, some mute women in these films choose to use alternative languages such as touch to communicate with men. Moreover, several of the women experience sexual assault and victimization. These recent films consider mute women's sexuality pivotal to the plotline. Hence, I suggest that the mute women in these films remain objectified and victimized by men, much like the mute women from earlier films.

In keeping with the twentieth-century representations described in the introduction, mute men are represented more positively. The twenty-first-century film industry, which represents mute men more often than mute women, often creates motion pictures that feature "defective" men for entertainment, and this shows from the number of films with mute men characters, such as Clint Eastwood's *Mystic River* (2003), Jonathon Dayton and Valerie Faris's *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), Julian Schnabel's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007), and James Marsh's *The Theory of Everything* (2014) (Medoff and Zachary xi). These films do not portray the men experiencing violence much less sexual violence, and in fact, these films reveal that men do not experience social rejection from other characters. Instead, these mute men seem to exist in the plotline to showcase their struggle with their disability or their acceptance of this disability. For instance, in *Little Miss Sunshine*, Dwayne (Paul Dano) embraces his muteness when he takes a vow of silence as a follower of Nietzsche prior to a family trip. The film documents Dwayne and his family's road trip to California and, for the most

part, the family views Dwayne's choice to use alternative languages for communication purposes as helpful. In fact, Dwayne writes many of the most poignant lines in the film. He often writes down his thoughts on paper, and his thoughts submerge the other characters into silence. Dwayne writes to his uncle Frank Ginsberg (Steve Carell): "Don't kill yourself tonight;" "Welcome to Hell;" and "I hate everyone." Although Dwayne's writing annoys and upsets the other family members, his thoughts lead them into moments of silent self-reflection. One can determine that the family views Dwayne's alternative written language as a positive contribution to the family dynamics.

As Dwayne's experience with his family suggests, mute men often use their disability to serve a greater social purpose. Recent films show that mute men do not need to participate in spoken language to become productive members of society. Instead, the films tend to show these men as using alternative languages to affect social change. In *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, a film I consider the most progressive contemporary film on muteness, Jean-Dominique Bauby (Mathieu Amalric) cannot speak and uses voiceovers as well as what other characters interpret from his eye blinks to communicate (a therapist reads out the letters of the alphabet that Jean-Dominique blinks). Jean-Dominique explains in a voiceover that he memorizes what he wants his therapist to write down, and then blinks out the letters he wants the therapist to transcribe into poetry. He writes his memoir using his alternative language of eye blinks. Jean-Dominique claims in his voiceover: "I decided to stop pitying myself. Other than my eye, two things aren't paralyzed, my imagination and my memory." From the closing caption, viewers read that Jean-Dominique does fulfill his purpose, and a publisher publishes his book ten days after he dies.

However, mute women from recent films, including Martha (Elvira Minguez) in *The Reckoning*, do not effect change or distinguish themselves through the use of alternative languages in the way that mute men do. These women do not have the ability to transform themselves or their situations because of their gender, whereas mute men continue to have opportunities for progress. For instance, McGuigan's *The Reckoning* steadfastly denies a mute woman autonomy and agency. A deaf-mute Martha, who sports a low-cut dress, is condemned to death by hanging in fourteenth-century England for supposedly murdering a local boy. Although Martha never goes to trial, her character is in a similar position as Belinda in *Johnny Belinda*, and she, like Belinda, must rely on a male protagonist to save her from this charge. The protagonist, Nicholas (Paul Bettany), a rogue monk that joined a group of actors, decides to create a new play about the boy's murder and go to Martha's dungeon to find out more about the murder. Martha pleads to the actors through a series of primitive hand signals and facial expressions, and at one point mouths "Help me" after throwing rocks at them. She expects the male actors to save her, and eventually Nicholas and the other actors prevent Martha's hanging by performing the "true" murder of the young boy on the hangman's platform. Clearly, imprisonment and the medieval time period constrain and restrict Martha's access to autonomy and agency. However, Martha's reliance on Nicholas calls attention to mute women's inability to rescue themselves from patriarchal constraints.

When mute women do attempt to rescue themselves, it is often by subjecting themselves to exploitation. In Inarritze's *Babel*, the mute and deaf Chieko Wataya (Rinko Kiyaki) experiences sexual rejection, depression, and an inability to connect emotionally with others. Chieko is an overtly sexual teenage Japanese girl; however, Chieko's

disability is not the focus of her character and instead “her deafness is as much a metaphor for the film’s theme of global miscommunication as it is a defining trait of her character” (Benshoff and Griffin 381). At one point, Chieko, in a fit of rage, flips off the referee of a volleyball game, and her girlfriends explain to her, through sign language, that she needs to have sex to feel fulfilled and eliminate her “bad mood.” The friends’ suggestion sets Chieko off on an unsuccessful quest to engage in sex.

Although *Babel* focuses on how characters encounter problems because of miscommunication, Chieko’s quest for sex, partially through the language of touch, also attests to an ongoing problem in film (discussed in earlier chapters) where women’s communication with men through alternative languages hurts them. Chieko’s purpose as a character is largely to pursue a sexual encounter to overcome her depression. Because we do not know what will happen with Chieko at the end of the film, we do not know what progress Chieko achieves as a character. Chieko sexualizes and exploits herself without prompting from men, and her character speaks to the film industry’s ongoing assessment that women feel their lives are unfulfilling without male companionship. Chieko unsuccessfully uses touch to coerce men into sexual encounters multiple times, and each time the men reject her and her language. These consistent communication failures illustrate that men choose to acknowledge only spoken language and that mute women cannot gain men’s attention without this masculine language even in twenty-first century films.

Levring’s *The Salvation* continues this tradition of showcasing mute women that do not gain positive acknowledgement from men. This Western offers a rape-revenge theme where the antagonist, Colonel Henry Delarue (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), seeks



vengeance for his brother's death on behalf of his battered and mute sister-in-law, Madelaine (Eva Green). Madelaine is a prostitute with a scar across her lips to permanently indicate her disability. At one point, Madelaine steals the Colonel's money in an effort to flee from him. The Colonel captures Madelaine and slaps her. Madelaine subsequently spits in his face, and then he tells her, "Your husband saved you from the savages...but never straightened you out." The Colonel orders his men to rape and kill Madelaine, but luckily during a shoot-out finale, Madelaine and Jon shoot the Colonel and ride off together. Madelaine, like Belinda, exerts agency when she shoots her oppressor, but unlike Belinda, Madelaine does not have the ability to exercise authority over a child. Instead, Madelaine operates in a more restrictive role as a woman than Belinda, Sarah, and Ada do.

Madelaine does not interrupt the male dialogue and does not interfere with the values and ideals of the dominant men. She goes from one man, her husband, to another, her brother-in-law (the Colonel), who acts as her pimp and guardian and controls her like a slave. The men exchange Madelaine as an object and do not provide her with agency in this exchange, unlike Baines does for Ada in *The Piano*. Although the Colonel accepts Madelaine's disability "as a gift" to him, he, much like Dr. Richardson in *Johnny Belinda* and James in *Children of a Lesser God*, makes it clear that he feels his job is to protect and possess the pretty Madelaine as his object. Meanwhile, Madelaine never experiences a respite from sexual violence, nor does she use an alternative language to dispute the Colonel. Instead, Madelaine attempts to gain agency by shooting him twice in the gut, but does not kill him. She relies on Jon to fatally kill her oppressor and then blissfully rides off into the sunset with him. The film suggests that Madelaine cannot communicate for

herself and cannot solve her own problems; hence, the film implies that she needs men to tell her what to do to survive, and therefore, does not deserve the same status as men.

Most of these recent films, including *The Salvation*, suggest that most male characters continue to either avoid or misuse mute women's alternative languages and sexually exploit them. *The Reckoning* is an outlier, as Nicholas does listen to Martha's forms of expression and does fulfill her request to exonerate her from the murder. However, in *Babel*, the men simply refuse to engage in sex with Chieko and ignore her alternative languages. Moreover, *The Salvation* showcases that nothing that Madelaine does undercuts the Colonel's actions. When the Colonel tells Madelaine that he will care for her, he does so without considering that Madelaine craves economic freedom because he does not consider her his equal. His actions suggest that mute women need men that will care for them like objects after other men victimize them. *The Salvation*, along with *Babel* and *The Reckoning*, speaks to film's continued interest in portraying mute women's vulnerabilities and sexual victimization more so than portraying women with agency or autonomy. In addition, films like *The Salvation* and *Babel*, much like *Johnny Belinda*, *Children of a Lesser God*, and *The Piano*, imply that a woman's "happy ever after" lies in a romantic relationship with a man.

Historically, men often opt to devalue women's alternative languages and victimize and exploit women in patriarchy. For centuries, the dominant masculine order, characterized by spoken language, considered mute women defective, labeling these women "voiceless" to nullify their ability to speak through alternative languages. The dominant masculine order not only perceives silent women as incapable of communication; it also perceives all women as silent. Cheryl Glenn claims that "silence

has long been considered a lamentable essence of femininity, a trope for oppression, passivity, emptiness, stupidity, or obedience” (22). In other words, men consider women voiceless and do not value their opinions. Muteness affords women like Sarah in *Children of a Lesser God* distance from men and opportunity to explore their interior character/inner lives. However as, Bernard Dauenhauer suggests, silence also establishes and maintains conflict in discourse (79). A constant tension lies between those who employ oral language, men, and the so-called voiceless ones, women. Through the negation of mute women and their alternative languages, even recent Hollywood films suggest how the dominant masculine culture considers silence a defect that all women share.

In other words, films like these I explore use the image of the mute woman to represent the experiences of all women, not just disabled women. Generally speaking, the image of the mute woman represents women’s subordinate position in patriarchy. Belinda, Sarah, and Ada represent the female gender in its entirety, and while these representations call attention to the struggles that many women share, they fail to acknowledge the challenges specific to disabled women by suggesting that all women are, in essence, disabled. Reducing disability to a symbolic representation of womanhood not only dehumanizes disabled women; it also denies the differences in the experiences of disabled and able-bodied women.

According to Irigaray, women can bring about real change if they leave the masculine order and its oral language. However, Irigaray also realizes that the best way for women to resist is if they work within the masculine order. I have drawn upon Irigaray’s theories on female alternative languages, such as touch, as recurrent “motifs

and devices” that films recreate and subvert in order to show how mute women can express themselves without spoken language (Bolton 174). Irigaray and others recognize that art, encompassing film, is an avenue women can take to express, communicate, and cultivate fresh perspectives on the world. People can use film to cultivate awareness and offer new perspectives on disability and the female gender for audiences. In this thesis, I explore possibilities and limitations inherent in representations of mute women in film. I conclude that the mute women in *Johnny Belinda*, *Children of a Lesser God*, and *The Piano* fail to skillfully showcase the importance and effectiveness of alternative languages for women. For an example of how representations of mute women might function more positively, I return to *The Miracle Worker*. This outlier film shows that Helen, a young mute woman, can successfully build a bond with another member of her gender and communicate effectively with others in society using an alternative language. She does so not merely as a representation for all women, but as a disabled woman facing challenges unique to her situation. In the future, the film industry should use this representation as an example of how mute women can make progressive gains toward autonomy and agency.

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