Sign language and *cinéma-monde* in *Marie Heurtin*

On Deaf cinema and troubling the notion of French national language

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Abstract

What can films in French Sign Language teach us about the French nation? From its inception in Bill Marshall's 2012 article of the same name, *cinéma-monde* has been concerned with borders: linguistic and geographic, internal and external. *Cinéma-monde* equips us to decenter the concept of French national cinema, to unthink historical, monolingual notions of Frenchness and to reconceive of francophone film-making in terms of plurality, diversity, and transcultural exchange. However, this reimagining has generally been conceived of in transnational terms, and not as a means of interrogating the inherent, original multilingualism of the Hexagon itself. This article examines contemporary French Deaf cinema through a *cinéma-monde* lens. It focuses on Jean-Pierre Améris's 2014 film *Marie Heurtin* [*Marie's Story*], about the sign language education of a deaf-blind girl in rural nineteenth-century France, critiquing the notion of the language barrier to evoke the border within. In so doing, it uses Marshall's description of how 'the boundaries of, say, national identification have to be understood as being reflected in the nation's internal limits, the impossibility of being fully, purely, and unproblematically French' (2012: 42), to critique Republican myths of monism and national language.

Keywords: *cinéma-monde*, sign language, deafness, multilingualism, borders, national cinema, national language, Deaf cinema, *Marie Heurtin*

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Introduction

From its inception in Bill Marshall's 2012 article of the same name, *cinéma-monde* has been concerned with borders: linguistic and geographic, internal and external. The rise of multilingual cinemas in diverse Francophone contexts has seen the French language intersect with myriad other codes on screen. Translingual contact can be the result of migration, globalization, (post) colonialism, war, travel, and countless other exchanges across borders. Yet sign languages and other domestic forms of multilingualism show it can also arise within them. With the tools *cinéma-monde* has given us in recent years, important progress has been made in film studies to decentre the concept of national French cinema (Gott and Schilt 2018). This work unthinks historical, monolingual notions of identity and reconceives of (trans)national filmmaking in Hexagonal spaces in terms of plurality, diversity and transcultural exchange. Indeed, films such as Laurent Cantet's *Entre les murs* [*The Class*] (2008) and Abdellatif Kechiche's *L'Esquive* [*Games of Love and Chance*] (2004) have even taught us to reimagine the French language itself as inherently, internally plural.

Universalist discourse in France has long dealt in metaphors of 'foreign' languages intruding upon 'French' spaces, triggering protectionist linguistic policies and fortifying ideals linking the nation of metropolitan France with the national language of French. Yet there are many domestic French languages, from the dozens of regional languages (Breton, Occitan, etc.) to the French Sign Language of the Deaf (Langue des Signes Française, LSF), which have often developed within communities and territories located inside the bounds of the so-called Hexagon.[1] Marshall signals this issue in his original article, critiquing French national cinema's 'lack of engagement with different French languages and multilingualism' (35). Such languages undermine the monolingual politic of the republican project and expose the border within. For even as a discrete, bordered nation, even if 'Fortress' France were a possibility (Thomas 2014), the Hexagon was always already multilingual.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, and especially since the mid-2010s, a growing number of films incorporating significant amounts of LSF dialogue have been appearing on French screens. These range from Jacques Audiard's bleak 2001 thriller *Sur mes lèvres* [*Read My Lips*] to Eric Lartigau's sentimental 2014 family comedy *La Famille Bélier* [*The Bélier Family*]. In his study of Audiard's film, Timothy Wilson distinguishes the lowercase, physical 'deaf' from the uppercase, cultural 'Deaf', explaining that

> the key to understanding what is at stake in [Deaf cinema] is bound up with the orthographic differentiation between deaf and Deaf, wherein deaf refers to a physiological difference and Deaf refers to a socio-cultural identity. (2013: 18)

This article does the same, using the lowercase 'deaf' to refer to the physiological deafness of characters, and the uppercase 'Deaf' for Deaf culture, community, and cinema. Wilson describes how *Sur mes lèvres*'s protagonist, Carla, is an unwilling participant in Deaf culture, almost ashamed to be seen signing in public. For Wilson, Carla is 'simply a hearing person who needs hearing aids […] She is deaf, not Deaf' (ibid.: 18–19). By contrast, films such as Jean-Pierre Améris's 2014 *Marie Heurtin* [*Marie's Story*] offer complex portrayals not only of sign language, but of Deaf culture. This film follows the semi-fictionalized story of the nineteenth-century deaf-blind Marie Heurtin, as she gradually learns LSF from a seeing and hearing nun in a school for deaf girls. This article adopts Wilson's orthography to examine Deaf cinema as a culturally engaged corpus. It turns the *cinéma-monde* lens on French Deaf cinema to explore how films such as *Marie Heurtin* can untie the knot binding French identity to the French language.

Deaf cinema in France

Set in 1897 and released in 2014, *Marie Heurtin* engages with two historical periods of significance for deafness and Deaf cinema. Though the film is set in a rural French environment far removed from the technological advances of the capital, it nonetheless takes place in the age of the invention of cinema. In the film, the teacher Sister Marguerite describes Marie's rapid acquisition of sign as 'une explosion de langage' ['an explosion of language']. This description is remarkably similar to how many in the international Deaf community described silent film. With its reliance on gesture and intertitles rather than speech, the turn of the twentieth century was a comparative golden age for Deaf access and representation in cinema, with multiple deaf actors employed and even some short films produced in sign languages.[2] John S. Schuchman describes the period as 'the only time in [cultural history] when deaf persons could participate in one of the performing arts with their hearing peers on a comparatively equal basis' (1984: 75). This age ended abruptly with the arrival of the talkies, an invention that coincided with the proliferation of oralist policies in deaf education across much of the Western world. *Marie Heurtin* is thus set in a moment of progress and relative liberation for Deaf people in culture, education, and cinema.

The Institut Larnay in which the film is set (and which has existed in Biard, near Poitiers, since 1847) is an example of the manualist (i.e. sign language-using) Deaf French schools that began appearing in the eighteenth century; the first of their kind in the world. These French schools also served as the model for American deaf schools in the following decades, with U.S. institutions employing French manualist teachers from Paris to teach their first cohorts. This led to a vibrant transnationalization of transatlantic sign languages, and French Sign Language and American Sign Language still share important similarities because of this history; far more, for example, than British and American Sign Languages (Woodward 2005: 1068–1069). While French Sign Language was formalized in these schools and encouraged among deaf people from their foundation to just after the era of *Marie Heurtin*'s setting, the twentieth century saw a crucial shift in perspective on sign languages in France, the U.S. and much of the Western world. The Milan Conference of 1880, led almost solely by hearing people and organizations, led to the adoption of strict oralist policies in deaf schools, whereby students were discouraged and often forbidden from using sign, and taught to rely on lip reading and speech. Russell Johnson claims that the introduction of oralist methods post-Milan and the proliferation of the talkies, though not causally related, ran parallel as symptoms of a growing movement against sign language (2017). Likewise, Antoinette Avon explains the era's paternalist assumption that 'the oral method of instruction would be the way to restore the deaf to society and provide them with a greater knowledge of language' (2006: 192). Indeed, the use of sign languages in various national contexts was often explicitly coded as an incursion on the unifying potential of national languages:

> Language works to unite people within specific boundaries. Those supporting oralism were not concerned with the deaf person's ability to function in the greater society; rather, Baynton (1992) explains that the educators of the time were more concerned with national unity. (ibid.)

For the greater part of its lifetime, cinema has been marked either by an absence of deaf people, or a reductive representation of their stories and experiences writ in terms of isolation, powerlessness, and loss. This was particularly true of films originating from oralist cultures and systems, including France. However, *Marie Heurtin* is not only connected to a moment of cultural change and empowerment for deaf people through the period in which it is set, but also the

period in which it was released. For since the turn of the twenty-first century filmic narratives about deafness have been increasing, and since the 2010s deaf roles have been increasingly optimistic, diverse, and interpreted by deaf actors themselves. In France, revival of French Sign Language (LSF) in educational and cultural contexts in the early 2000s coincided with films such as *Sur mes lèvres* and Michael Haneke's *Code inconnu: récit incomplet de divers voyages* ['Code Unknown'] of the same year. Each of these films represents deaf characters who use LSF as a complex and complete language that allows them to participate in Deaf culture. However, these early films conform in several ways to a pessimistic 'cinema of isolation' (Norden 1994) that divides them from hearing society – unless they can use hearing aids or, in the case of Audiard's film, master an unrealistic standard of lip reading.

Examples from the 2010s are largely more progressive. Both Robin Campillo's *120 battements par minute* ['BPM'] and Eric Lartigau's *La Famille Bélier* represent deaf characters who not only forge strong bonds with a broader French community via interpreters and their hearing allies. Most notably, *BPM*'s Bachir and *Bélier*'s Rodolphe are passionately engaged civic activists, who use LSF to express their opinions about issues in French society and to take political action. However, the latter film, which tells the story of a hearing daughter, Paula (Louane Emera), born into a deaf family, has been widely critiqued by Deaf audiences for its casting of hearing actors in deaf roles. Paula's little brother Quentin is played by deaf actor Luca Gelberg and Emera does not portray a deaf person, but a hearing person with deaf family members; or what is known in the Deaf community as a 'coda' (a lowercase acronym for 'child of deaf adults'). However, the exaggerated portrayal of Paula's deaf parents by hearing actors Karin Viard and François Damiens has been critiqued as part of a long history of hearing actors misrepresenting deaf characters in ways that have been likened to pantomime and even blackface (Wilson 2013: 21). In her scathing article for *The Guardian*, '*La Famille Bélier* is yet another cinematic insult to the deaf community', Rebecca Atkinson criticizes the film for its tired rehashing of a cinematic trope – the tragedy of deaf people's inability to hear music – that simply does not resonate with most deaf people, or at least those born deaf. However, her primary criticism lies in the film's insufficient range of deaf cast and crew:

> Deaf people's culture and experiences have long been appropriated for the fascination and entertainment of others, and in the process kneaded into a bastardisation bearing no resemblance to real-life experiences, because it is

> rare that deaf people are actually involved in the production process […] films and TV shows about deaf characters, told through a hearing lens, using hearing actors with pidgin sign language, are demeaning, depressing and cause more damage than good. (2014)

French Deaf cinema should be understood within the context of a growing number of Deaf films of diverse national origins. These films receive significant international distribution and are shown in France and beyond in cinemas, via streaming services, and on the festival circuit, and increasingly feature deaf actors and writers alongside hearing codas and other allies. These include Japan's 2016 *A Silent Voice*, Ukraine's 2014 *The Tribe*, and the U.S.'s 2018 *A Quiet Place*.[3] Yet France is a privileged site for Deaf cinema, with a long heritage of pioneering deaf education and a rapidly growing penchant for multilingual film. Nominated for five Césars including *Meilleur film français de l'année* [Best Picture] and winning one for Emera for *Meilleur jeune espoir féminin* [Most Promising Actress], *La Famille Bélier* is the country's highest-profile Deaf film of the 2010s. However, though it received far more critical attention and commercial success, *La Famille Bélier* was not even the only Deaf French film of 2014. Jean-Pierre Améris's *Marie Heurtin* received a modest critical and commercial reception, with only 258,852 domestic entries in France and a lone award: the Variety Piazza Grande Award for Améris at the 2014 Locarno Film Festival. Yet though the film is a lesser-known example of the burgeoning Deaf cinema outlined above, it provides perhaps the most dynamic, empathic, and radical portrayal of deafness to be found within this corpus.

Marie Heurtin

In the pastoral tranquility of an 1890s Catholic school for deaf girls, a child arrives whose inability to see or hear will test the school's Sisters, who teach sign language with ease to the deaf, but not the deaf–blind. The promotional material and intertitles of Jean-Pierre Améris's 2014 film *Marie Heurtin* emphasize that it is based on a true story. Marie Heurtin, often referred to in anglophone cultures as the 'French Helen Keller', was born deaf–blind in rural France in 1885. She spent most of her thirty-six years in the Institut Larnay, where she learned to sign and eventually to teach the language to other deaf–blind girls.

The film begins when Marie is fourteen years old and is brought to the school by her despairing father, as an alternative to their doctor's recommendation of '*l'asile des fous*' ['the insane asylum']. Though Marie (played by deaf

actor Ariana Rivoire) is the subject of Améris's film, the true protagonist is her teacher and carer, Sister Marguerite (Isabelle Carré), a seeing and hearing nun who feels called to bring Marie forth from her 'nuit en silence' ['silent night'] by teaching her French Sign Language using touch. Like Paula in *La Famille Bélier*, Marguerite is a coda, as her late mother had been deaf. Marguerite's mission is a test of her faith, and for the better part of a year she struggles to educate Marie, who appears to be calmed by her presence, but unable to grasp the notion that Marguerite's hand movements – guiding Marie to touch objects before shaping her hands to create the sign for them – are designed to convey semantic meaning.

Reflecting in voiceover on the moment when Marie first entered Marguerite's life, the latter confesses 'J'avais cru que c'était une petite sauvageonne, un petit animal' ['I had thought she was a little savage, a little animal']. However, Marguerite's use of the pluperfect tense ('j'avais cru') is important. For as Marguerite learns more about Marie, she also learns that Marie's world is far more complex and sensorial than she had initially believed. Even the most sympathetic or optimistic Deaf cinema tends to code deaf or deaf–blind characters' journeys in terms of 'discovery', of entry into a 'world' hitherto closed to them. *Marie Heurtin* is not innocent of this (Marguerite wants to teach Marie sign 'pour qu'elle puisse entrer dans le monde' ['so that she may enter the world']). However, the film is unique in that Marguerite closes her voiceover, just before her death, with a reflection on how educating Marie likewise opened a whole new world to *her*, one that she had not been sensitive to when her life had been driven by the dominant senses of sight and sound: 'Marie m'a offert tant de choses. Elle m'a fait découvrir un autre monde, dont j'ignorais tout. Un monde que l'on touche' ['Marie showed me so many things. She helped me discover another world, one I was entirely unaware of. A world that you touch']. The film thus avoids coding its two main characters as a 'savior' (Marguerite) or an extraordinary 'super-crip' (Marie) as in conventional disability narratives; instead, they are a diverse pair, each abled and disabled in their own ways, engaged in a process of mutual teaching and learning.

Indeed, the film does not present Marie as without sensation, cognition, or insight. In fact, the very first shot begins with Marie's unique yet profound sensorial interaction with her world: a hand waving and reaching, fingers outspread, up to the radiating warmth of the sun, interspersed with dappled shade, as she rides with her father in a carriage down the leafy lane to the school. We sit quietly beside Marie as she rejoices in dipping her fingers into the babbling water of a creek, as she presses her cheek to the grooved bark of a tree, as she clutches her most treasured possession, an ivory pocket knife, whose

cool, smooth handle she loves to run over her face. We stand beside Marguerite and Marie as the latter embraces a cow, her arms draped over its bristly hide and warm, beating chest. We see her spin and dance – never skipping a step – beneath her first snowfall, feeling the cool crystals in flight. And eventually, we come to appreciate her interaction with various languages – both LSF and braille – as profoundly haptic and spatial codes. Unlike for seeing deaf people, sign is not a visual mode for Marie, but a tactile one. Yet the depth of spatiality built into sign means the language is still meaningful and comprehensible to Marie, in ways that speech for deaf people largely is not (notwithstanding the limited aid of lip reading). Marie may not be able to see the signs of others standing away from her, but she is eventually capable of comprehending them as they are pressed and traced against her hands, face, and body. Crucially, she is also eventually able to perceive her own movements in space with such precision that she herself is able to sign non-modified LSF to those around her.

Indeed, though the medium of cinema is limited to audiovisual projections, *Marie Heurtin*'s greatest achievements are the moments in which it uses the dominant senses of sight and sound to allow us to witness – tactilely, immersively – Marie's experience of the sensorial experiences available to her: temperature, equilibrium, taste, texture, vibration, stillness, movement. Marie's experience of space and sensation is extremely different from that of a seeing and/or hearing person, detached from any reference points in audition or sight. But even before she learns to sign, she does not inhabit a black hole. Though the film's characters do not necessarily comprehend this, we as viewers are afforded a privileged perspective to witness the fear, joy, and peace Marie finds in her contact with her environment. Pascal Binétruy pinpoints this in his review of the film for *Positif*: 'Cette réflexion sur l'enfermement et la libération n'oublie pas le monde extérieur et l'environnement de l'enfant' ['All this reflection on enclosure and liberation does not ignore the child's external world and environment'] (2014: 52). Sandra Benedetti also underlines the film's ability to draw out the subtler sensations most relevant to Marie, in

> une histoire d'amour humble, sensitive, où les mots s'apprennent du bout des doigts, par la rudesse d'une écorce, la douceur du soleil ou le fil d'un couteau […] des mains qui dansent pour dire enfin la joie et la peine.
>
> [A humble, sensitive love story, in which words are learned on fingertips, through the roughness of bark, the warmth of the sun or the edge of a knife […] hands which dance to express joy and pain.] (2014)

Marguerite eventually learns to experience the objects around her from Marie's perspective, at first from the exterior – watching her rejoice in the texture of running water or falling snow – and then from within – learning to touch the faces and sniff the hands of those she loves in order to know them better and express affection and intimacy. Noémie Luciani even goes so far as to suggest that the film's greatest weakness is its unnecessary extradiegetic sound – a dramatic, classical score and Marguerite's diary entries in voiceover – in a film which is ultimately not 'about' sound at all. She uses the relevant motif of a 'barrier' to describe this:

> Porté par des intentions que l'on sent pures et belles, par une histoire forte et un message d'espoir, *Marie Heurtin* est de ces films que l'on voudrait aimer inconditionnellement sans y arriver, comme retenu par une barrière invisible. Ici, la barrière tient du hiatus. Voulant faire un film sur le geste et son sens, Jean-Pierre Améris pose sur ses images la voix off très présente d'Isabelle Carré, et une musique jolie mais souvent superflue … Cette forte présence du son autour de la jeune sourde nous distrait un peu du geste pourtant magnifié par l'image au point qu'il se serait aisément dispensé de la narration comme de la musique.
>
> [Carried along by intentions which feel beautiful and pure, by a strong story and a message of hope, *Marie Heurtin* is one of those films one would like to love unconditionally but cannot, as though held back by an invisible barrier. Here, the barrier is a disconnection. Wanting to make a film about gesture and its sensations, Jean-Pierre Améris superposes a distracting voiceover from Isabelle Carré, and pretty but superfluous music, over the images … The dominance of sound around the deaf-blind girl distracts us a little from the gesture, nonetheless so glorified by the visuals that it could do without both the voiceover and the music.] (2014)

Marie Heurtin's narrative focus is on the seemingly impossible task of educating a deaf–blind child. However, the film's most radical contribution to Deaf cinema more broadly is not so much its representation of the profoundly 'Othered' Marie, but the supposedly 'normal' society that surrounds her. Much as Aristotle 'asserted that audible speech alone enabled the development of human reason and separated humans from beasts' (Johnson 2017: 2), oralist rhetoric of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century used civilizing rhetoric to argue that deaf children must abandon sign and learn oral speech in order to comprehend

complex communication and participate in society. However, while Marguerite and her colleagues use much of the same civilizing vocabulary to discuss Marie's need to 'learn language in order to enter the world', this 'civilized world' is one not of vocal speech, but of sign.

By far the most frequently used language in the school is French Sign Language. Many of the schools' nuns are deaf, as are all its students, and it appears the only nun unable or unwilling to sign is the Mother Superior herself, who is frequently portrayed as disconnected from the practical and emotional needs of her charges. Practically the only French spoken is between Sister Marguerite and Mother Superior, in the Bible stories recited during dinner by a hearing nun (accompanied by another interpreting in LSF), and in Marguerite's solitary voice as she speaks to herself and in voiceover. Though Marguerite's voiceover as she reads from her diary is intended as accompaniment to the narrative for the benefit of the viewer, her quiet comments to herself while working with Marie are not really directed at anyone around her. The language used for conveying information in most interpersonal contexts is sign.

Marguerite and Mother Superior are the two characters with the most power and authority in the film, yet their hearing abilities are not coded as giving them any particular advantage or insight in the context of the school. French Sign Language is so normalized it is barely even referred to among the school's inhabitants, and the distinction between spoken French and French Sign Language is frequently blurred, with the verb *parler* ['to speak'] used to describe both.

> Marguerite, français: 'Cette jeune fille ne peut pas rester enfermée dans sa prison, quelqu'un doit l'en sortir. Quelqu'un doit lui apprendre à parler.'
>
> Mère Supérieure: 'Et comment vous, vous y prendriez-vous ?'
>
> M: 'La langue des signes.'
>
> MS: 'Mais elle est aveugle !'
>
> M: 'Je ferai des signes dans sa main.'
>
> [Marguerite, French: 'This young girl cannot remain trapped in her prison, someone has to get her out. Someone has to teach her to speak.'

Mother Superior: 'And how will you do that?'

M: 'Sign Language.'

MS: 'She is blind!'

M: 'I will sign into her hand.']4

When Marguerite describes Marie's potential to 'speak', she really means to sign. For sign is the school's – and the film's – lingua franca, accessible to all its characters in ways that spoken French is not. Indeed, when the deaf Sister Raphaëlle describes how the world opened up to her when she learned to 'speak' (again, the sign is subtitled in French as 'parler'), she describes moving from 'silence' to language: 'I lived in silence until I was four. My parents didn't know sign language.' For Raphaëlle, 'silence' is not sonic, but ontological, and sign language ruptured this disempowering silence in a way no verbal language could. This representation is a far cry from the reductive criticisms that would arise around sign language following the Milan Conference. Many clichés of deaf cinema revolve around 'the notion that silence, therefore deafness, is to be associated with powerlessness' (Avon 2006: 190). In direct contrast, in *Marie Heurtin*, sign language is social, connective, and empowering. Indeed, in the only openly hostile scene in the film, when Marie first arrives at the dormitory, she is bullied by the d/Deaf children for being different, in a subversion of the trope of hearing children teasing a d/Deaf child. Not only is the Institut Larnay's society functional, it is complete, with its qualities and faults; deafness is the norm, and the community's lingua franca is never presented as lacking the complexity, precision, or nuance required of any other 'civilized' language.

The (domestic) language barrier as (internal) frontier

Of course, multilingualism is a requirement of anyone who wishes to participate in the school's society, and hearing characters such as Marguerite must learn to sign. However, language barriers among seeing characters are not portrayed as an insurmountable barrier and LSF is never represented as a mysterious or impenetrable code. Instead, the film features a number of characters at various stages of sign language learning, from the deaf students who learned or are learning in childhood, to the fluent Marguerite who learned from Raphaëlle, to Marie's parents, who begin their LSF journey after visiting Marie and

learning with shock that they now have a potential common language with their daughter. Their monolingualism is unproductive – as would be the monolingualism of the staff in the asylum to which Marie would otherwise have been sent – and language learning the site of social and cultural progress and connection. Most importantly, there is a complete lack of oralism present in the school's pedagogical approach: though Marie does learn to use her voice strategically (mostly the sounds 'eh' and 'ah') to catch Marguerite's attention, Marie and the school's seeing deaf students alike are never pressured to form specific vocal words in French.

Despite this, *Marie Heurtin*, like most films depicting deaf or blind characters, represents sensory disability as having the potential to be profoundly isolating, a physical and cultural barrier to society. More unusually, the barrier in this film is not deafness, nor even blindness, but the rarer combination of the two. The condition of deaf–blindness is characterized using motifs of darkness and disconnection: in early voiceover reflections read from her diary, Marguerite describes Marie as living 'en nuit, en silence' ['in night, in silence']. When pleading her case to her Mother Superior, Marguerite explains that she feels it is her 'mission' 'de lui offrir la parole pour qu'elle puisse entrer dans le monde des hommes et de Dieu' ['to offer her speech so that she may enter into the world of men and God'].

Yet again, essential here is what Marguerite means by 'speech', for she is not referring to vocal communication, but to sign. In his formative book on disability in cinema, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*, Martin F. Norden writes that 'most movies have tended to isolate disabled characters from their able-bodied peers as well as from each other' (1994: 1). This is also true in *Marie Heurtin*, and overcoming the isolation of Marie's deaf–blindness is the central narrative fulcrum of the film. However, what makes the film unique is its construction of these 'able-bodied peers' as always including deaf people. The film establishes a dynamic that is extremely rare in cinema (and perhaps unprecedented in French film), in which sign is positioned as the civilizing language to Marie's deaf–blind languagelessness. This *mission civilisatrice* is rendered explicit by the fact that, at the outset, Marguerite's task is to 'tame' Marie on two fronts: to teach her sign language, and how to bathe and dress herself for the first time.

This civilizing arc runs counter to reductive yet pervasive audist discourses that dominated the Francophone and broader worlds throughout much of the twentieth century (and thus much of the history of cinema), which positioned speech as the civilizing language to sign's languagelessness. In fact, though

Marguerite is seeing and hearing, she is coded as more fragile and disabled due to the long-term tuberculosis which will eventually kill her than, for example, her deaf but healthy colleagues at the school. And in her last days, it is in fact Marie who will take care of Marguerite. In the film's final scene, Marie visits Marguerite's grave and signs a poetic message to her beloved carer. She relates how a new deaf–blind girl has arrived at the school, how the Sisters are now prepared for her education, and how Marie herself is assisting the child to learn to communicate. Though her blindness will never be cured – and is never the film's focus – she ultimately assumes a bridging position as intermediary between the uneducated deaf–blind, who do not have language, and the educated deaf, who do.

This positioning of French Sign Language as the lingua franca of a diverse French community, not all of whom are actually deaf, disrupts monistic notions of national language. The linking of deafness with language, culture, and civilization not only declines Aristotelian notions of the deaf as 'lacking language' and therefore 'reason'. It also troubles the xenophobic othering of linguistic difference that haunts so much discourse around multilingualism, which is made explicit in the very term 'foreign language', denoting a language that arrives on French territory from somewhere beyond. For though it had already travelled to North America by the time of the film's setting, the sign language used in this community is a domestic language, of Hexagonal origin, one which exposes the myth of a monolingual, French-speaking France from within.

Cinéma-monde is always about frontiers: as Marshall writes, 'the most significant structuring pole is of course the frontier... borders are as much about non-identity as identity, internal limits as well as external boundaries' (2012: 47). No national borders are crossed in *Marie Heurtin*, yet the film's translingualism – in languages that are both of national origin and have transnational histories – allow us to examine the linguistic dimension of these 'internal limits'. The prominence of language barriers in *Marie Heurtin*, however, is not so much emblematic of cultural separation as it is of the possibilities of transcultural connection.[5] In fact, there is no racial, religious, ethnic, or national diversity represented in *Marie Heurtin*: all the film's characters are white, of Gallic origins, Catholic, and presumably of relatively local provenance. The only travel portrayed is between Marie's home and the school, and when Marguerite leaves to convalesce in a sanatorium. The two languages portrayed in the film – LSF and French – are Hexagonal in origin. And yet *Marie Heurtin* is a fundamentally translingual and transcultural film in which language learning is crucial, monolingualism in French is disadvantaging, and different languages are used by different groups to foster different cultural

environments. *Marie Heurtin* is not multilingual in the same way as films such as *Code inconnu*; Haneke's film is punctuated by languages from across the globalized world, including English, French, French Sign Language, Malinka, and Romanian. Instead, *Marie Heurtin* emphasizes the domestic, *internal* diversity of the Hexagon. In so doing, it refocuses Marshall's description of *cinéma-monde* from a (trans) national to a (sub)national context:

> Language is historically and textually affected by these particles and movements. Because the guilty secret of 'Francophone' is of course that these films are not always in French, or rather, that the term 'Francophone' forces a problematisation of what 'French' is and what its relationship is with other languages. (2012: 43)

French Sign Language has itself travelled transnationally, and many of the similarities between LSF and American Sign Language are thanks to the employment of French sign teachers in early U.S. schools for the deaf. But in its representation of French Sign Language as the domestic language of a discrete but diverse subsection of French society, *Marie Heurtin* also reveals the extent to which language barriers and multilingualism are enacted not only across national borders, but within them.

Conclusion

Cinéma-monde gives us the tools to imagine cinema transnationally, without the binary and hierarchical structures imposed by the terminology 'French (versus) Francophone'. It also allows us to imagine contact across borders in both Francophone and diverse non-Francophone contexts. However, an underexplored function of *cinéma-monde* is how the democratizing, plural, multilingual, and transcultural properties of this cinema also allow us to undo the domestic hierarchies within Hexagonal borders, and understand the multiplicity of domestic languages and cultures that not only operate in metropolitan France, but originate from it.

Regional languages and sign languages existed before modern French, were used more widely prior to the Revolution, and continue to be used – often as a first language – in regional and Deaf French spaces today. The monologic myth of solely French-speaking Frenchness has been exposed in many cinematic and cultural contexts, whether postcolonial, globalized, or trans-European. Yet *Marie Heurtin* also shows us that, beyond the transnational diversity of contemporary

France, the notion of a monolingual Hexagon was always already a myth. In his formative *cinéma-monde* essay, Bill Marshall taught us how 'the boundaries of, say, national identification have to be understood as being reflected in the nation's internal limits, the impossibility of being fully, purely, and unproblematically French' (2012: 42). Folding this idea in on itself, films such as *Marie Heurtin* prompt us to consider the possibility of being French without speaking French at all.

Notes

1 Though not always; consider the European border-blurring of French regional languages such as Basque (Spain), Catalan (Catalonia), Corsican (Corsica, and to a certain extent Italy), and Langues d'oïl (Belgium).
2 See the studies of this era and the U.S. National Association of the Deaf (NAD) sign language films in particular: Padden and Humphries 2005, Schuchman 2004, Johnson 2017.
3 The film's sequel, *A Quiet Place Part II*, was released in 2021, and a third film in the series has been announced.
4 Jean-Pierre Améris (dir.) (2014), *Marie Heurtin*, 00:09:43–00:09:57.
5 This is a common trope of multilingual *cinéma-monde*, as I have explored in relation to Christian Carion's 2005 film *Joyeux Noël* for Thibaut Schilt and Michael Gott's 2018 volume, *Cinéma-monde: Decentred Perspectives on Global Filmmaking in French*. In *Joyeux Noël* as in *Marie Heurtin*, 'while lines, barriers and borders [remain constant], the film's narrative arc centres on the traversal of such borders, and on the establishment of meaningful cultural exchange between groups' (King 2018: 186).

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