

# Sights and Sounds of Disgusting Abjections: The Monstrous Feminine in *The Exorcist* (1973)

Ilaria Franciotti

[ilariafranciotti90@gmail.com](mailto:ilariafranciotti90@gmail.com)

Valerio Sbravatti

[valerio.sbravatti@uniroma1.it](mailto:valerio.sbravatti@uniroma1.it)

The film *The Exorcist* contains many excessive and gross images, which made its reputation as a milestone in the history of horror. The representation of the possessed Regan as an abject creature entails the concept of monstrous feminine, revealing the terror that the patriarchy has towards the psychophysical development of women, who achieve emancipation through puberty. Regan becomes angry, opposes earthly authorities and God, and speaks of sex: in other words, she transforms from an “innocent” girl into an abject woman, which is sanctioned by the scene in which she masturbates with a crucifix and pushes her mother’s face onto her genitals. *The Exorcist* shows taboo behaviors before re-establishing (male) order: the priests perform the exorcism by entering Regan’s body and the matriarchal home of the MacNeil family. Visual abjections are linked to Regan’s body vomiting green bile, urinating on the floor, initiating incest with her mother; her skin changes color, becomes covered with sores and pus, and her hair becomes greasy and disheveled. These disgusting alterations are related to the adolescent menarche, and they are instrumental in highlighting the battle between patriarchal structures and the disruptive sexuality represented by the female body at the beginning of puberty. However, such representation not only is visual, but also aural: Regan’s voice is replete with excessive features, in terms of both form – the profanities she says – and substance – the acoustic quality of the voice, which contains nonlinear analogues of animal sounds produced under duress. Regan is aurally “possessed”, since her demonic voice is not that of the teenager actress that visually plays the character (Linda Blair) but rather that of a mature woman (Mercedes McCambridge). The vocal sounds of the demon are in some cases dialogue proper, but they are also used as non-verbal sound effects in order to denote Regan’s abnormality and elicit a disgusted reaction in the audience. The choice of McCambridge is interesting not only because of its raucous, wheezing sound, but also because of her connotation as queer. Regan’s vocal excess is queer itself, since Pazuzu is connoted as male while the possessed person is female and speaks with a female voice – although mannish. Such vocal excess reveals to Regan’s mother and to the rest of the characters the uncanny emergence of womanhood and sexual drive from the child’s psyche and body.

Keywords: Monstrous Feminine, Patriarchy, Psychology, Soundtrack

# Sights and Sounds of Disgusting Abjections: The Monstrous Feminine in *The Exorcist* (1973)

Ilaria Franciotti

ilariafranciotti90@gmail.com

Valerio Sbravatti<sup>1</sup>

valerio.sbravatti@uniroma1.it

The US film *The Exorcist* (1973) contains many excessive and gross images, which made its reputation as a milestone in the history of horror as a body genre. The representation of the possessed Regan as an abject creature entails the concept of monstrous feminine, revealing the terror that the patriarchy has towards the psychophysical development of women, who achieve emancipation through puberty. Abjection rises from a horrified or disgusted reaction to an experience that disrupts the difference between oneself and another, between subject and object – thus, menacing the linguistic order of meaning. In other words, abjection refers to what menaces our sense of identity, the rules and the borders that establish our norms. Abjection is linked mainly to repulsive or uncanny aspects of our bodies and to what menaces its integrity – e.g., vomit, menstruations, childbirth, death. Julia Kristeva<sup>2</sup> states that abjection happens also when a person, such as Regan in *The Exorcist*, tries to separate from the mother. Kristeva considers the mother-child relationship as a conflict, since the mother is reluctant in letting go. Barbara Creed<sup>3</sup> examines how the “monstrous feminine” bases itself on corporeal functions, and causes the abjection that menaces the patriarchal order, which in turn tries to suppress it.

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors wrote the introduction together. The first paragraph is by Ilaria Franciotti, the second is by Valerio Sbravatti.

<sup>2</sup> J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, New York 1982.

<sup>3</sup> B. Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London-New York 2015.

In *The Exorcist*, Regan becomes angry, opposes earthly authorities and God, and speaks of sex: in other words, she transforms from an “innocent” girl into an abject woman, which is sanctioned by the scene in which she masturbates with a crucifix and pushes her mother’s face onto her genitals. *The Exorcist* shows taboo behaviors before re-establishing (male) order: the priests perform the exorcism by entering Regan’s body and the matriarchal home of the MacNeil family. Visual abjections are linked to Regan’s body vomiting green bile, urinating on the floor, initiating incest with her mother; her skin changes color, becomes covered with sores and pus, and her hair becomes greasy and disheveled. These disgusting alterations are related to the adolescent menarche, and they are instrumental in highlighting the battle between patriarchal structures and the disruptive sexuality represented by the female body at the beginning of puberty. However, such representation not only is visual, but also aural: Regan’s voice is replete with excessive features, in terms of both form – the profanities she says, *i.e.*, the linguistic content of the voice – and substance – the acoustic quality of the voice (as a result of acting, sound mixing and sound editing), which arguably contains nonlinear analogues of animal sounds produced under duress. Regan is aurally “possessed” as it were, since her demonic voice is not that of the actress that visually plays the character – Linda Blair, a teenager whose body we see on screen – but rather that of Mercedes McCambridge – a mature woman. McCambridge created the vocal sounds of the demon Pazuzu: these are in some cases dialogue proper, but they are also used as non-verbal sound effects in order to denote Regan’s abnormality and elicit a disgusted reaction in the audience. The choice of McCambridge is interesting not only because of its raucous, wheezing sound, but also because of her connotation as queer, *i.e.*, a woman not conforming to the traditional female role. Regan’s vocal excess is queer itself, since Pazuzu is connoted as male while the possessed person is female and speaks with a female voice – although mannish. Such vocal excess reveals to Regan’s mother and to the rest of the characters the uncanny emergence of womanhood and sexual drive from the child’s psyche and body.

### **1. The Disgust of Female Abjection**

In 1973, William Friedkin’s film *The Exorcist* – adapted by William Peter Blatty from his 1971 novel of the same name – changed the course of horror cinema with its depic-

tion of the demonic possession of 12-year-old Regan MacNeil (Linda Blair) in an upscale Georgetown neighborhood. The story was inspired by an incident happened in Maryland in 1949, involving a 14-year-old boy who underwent months of exorcisms by Jesuit priests. In *The Exorcist*, the monster is a demon (claiming to be the Devil) who threatens not only pubescent Regan, but the entire society. The images of Regan vomiting, piercing her genitals with a crucifix, and walking down the stairs backwards, have shocked entire generations. Although on the surface the film is about demonic possession, there is definitely much more to it. There are implications of abuse caused by Chris MacNeil's (Ellen Burstyn) reluctance to be a "real mother" to Regan. Arguably, the film condemns Chris and shows how the family becomes chaotic without a male presence. *The Exorcist* can be read as a critique of motherhood in the 70s: Chris seems to be a neglectful mother due to her autonomy and her work as an actress, as we will see. Ostensibly, the film portrays the archetype of the battle between good and evil, faith and apostasy, through the story of Father Karras (Jason Miller) and his spiritual struggle with the Devil. But leaving aside the metaphysical *gravitas*, it would be equally accurate to summarize *The Exorcist* as the terrifying story of a little girl who becomes a rebellious teenager.

*The Exorcist* recounts the terror that patriarchal culture harbors towards the development of women – who achieve emancipation precisely through puberty. This evolutionary phase is the one when females cease to be submissive to males through active sexual choices. The entire film makes us understand this stigma very well thanks to Regan's tortured body (we gradually see it covered in scabs, urine, pus and vomit). When the first menstruation arrives, Regan's skin begins to crack and becomes unrecognizable and colorless. Furthermore, the girl explodes with anger, opposes earthly authorities and God, and talks constantly about sex. Are we sure that this is an abnormal demonic possession rather than a normal entrance into adolescence? Obviously, the discourse is allegorical, and the real "Devil", as Sady Doyle explains very well, is menstruation<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, Regan changes and becomes someone else: the girl transforms into a woman, and the moment in which this transformation occurs is the same in which Regan masturbates with a crucifix and puts her mother's face on her genitals. The moment of the first men-

---

<sup>4</sup> S. Doyle, *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy, and the Fear of Female Power*, Melville House, Brooklyn-London 2019, pp. 8-14.

stration coincides with one of the most reprehensible action on the face of the Earth, as it were.

Cultures existing within patriarchal societies are replete with mythological and folkloristic beliefs that present female qualities and anatomy as innately monstrous. Julia Kristeva argues that the process of monstification of women occurs because of their close proximity to abjection, especially through menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth<sup>5</sup>. The female body constantly challenges and destroys the established boundaries between inside/outside and alive/dead. Abjection calls forth desire, but it must be rejected in the name of self-preservation. Regan's behavior in *The Exorcist* is outrageous, since she pushes the limits of what is permissible or even thinkable. However, at the end of the film, Regan appears ready to return to childhood, after being freed from the Devil – and, in a sense, from puberty. Thus, paraphrasing Barbara Creed, *The Exorcist* resembles a “ritual of putrefaction” since it makes the audience witness taboo behaviors before the restoration of order<sup>6</sup> – a job that must be undertaken by men (as substitutes of the Father). The priests perform the exorcism by entering both Regan's body and the MacNeil family's matriarchal home. Various forms of abjection are presented, which are almost always tied to Regan's body as she vomits green bile, urinates on the floor, bleeds from her genitals (is this menarche or a consequence of masturbation with the crucifix?), engages in incest with her mother, her skin becomes covered in sores and pus, and her hair becomes greasy and matted.

This type of representation helps to highlight the battle between the film's patriarchal structures (the medical and religious ones) and the disruptive sexuality represented by the female body at the onset of puberty<sup>7</sup>. The MacNeil household, as mentioned, is a matriarchal environment, and therefore problematic for patriarchal social structures. Chris, the head of the family, is a single mother who swears, drinks, and is often at work. Hence, not only is Regan on the cusp of adolescence, but she also lives in a single-parent home. This may not seem out of the ordinary to contemporary audiences, but in 1973 breaking up the traditional heteronormative nuclear family was arguably still awkward. While Chris's working autonomy *per se* may be seen as liberating for a wom-

---

<sup>5</sup> J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, cit.

<sup>6</sup> We're deliberately misquoting B. Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, cit., p. 37 («*The Exorcist* is not unlike a “ritual” of purification»).

<sup>7</sup> Notice that in the Netflix animated series *Big Mouth* the impact of puberty is portrayed through hormonal monsters that cause wild changes in behavior.

an, it contributed to Regan's downfall. As Reynold Humphries argues, the girl's possession seems to begin once she is alone, while her mother is busy with her acting career<sup>8</sup>. Creed states that the main cause of Regan's possession is due to the decline of the mother-daughter relationship, resulting from Chris's work commitments<sup>9</sup>. Despite traditionalist views according to which a woman should invest all her emotional energy and life in her children, in the 1970s more women were entering the working class: mothers became the scapegoat for the breakdown of traditional patriarchal society and their children's lives. Rowe argues that going to work instead of staying home with the children was defined as an act of abandonment: the public sphere of work and the world outside the home was seen as the domain of men, and therefore unsuitable for women – let alone mothers.

The freedoms fought for (and won) by second-wave feminism still had their detractors: this is relevant since *The Exorcist* is about a single woman being punished for challenging the social order of a traditional family, which is re-established thanks to the authority of two men (not to mention the male psychiatrists and other physicians). In addition to being a successful actress, Chris leads a small group who helps her, including a man takes care of the annoying mice who are presumably the cause of the noises coming from the attic. Chris socializes and flirts, and she still has time to take an interest in her daughter's hobbies, as well as planning a fun birthday trip to unknown places. But the close bond with her daughter and the happy atmosphere are not much a protection against demons when there are no powerful men in the house. The absence of Regan's father seems to be Chris's fatal flaw, although he doesn't even seem to bother calling his daughter on her birthday. Can the Devil not sneak in between these interstices?

While Freud argues that women terrorize men because they are abnormally castrated, Creed seeks to dismantle these assumptions by arguing that the monstrous feminine is precisely men's fear of women as a castrating agent. Creed's theory is supported by a reversal of Freud's patriarchal worldview that considers women to be "incomplete" human beings. In response to Freud's male-centric views, Creed argues that women are whole without penises: it is precisely this wholeness despite the absence of a penis, together with the female reproductive features, that causes men to fear women. This new

---

<sup>8</sup> R. Humphries, *The American Horror Film: An Introduction*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2002, pp. 90-91.

<sup>9</sup> B. Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, cit., pp. 31-42.

interpretation would reveal important clues about patriarchal society, masculinity, and their anxieties. The *vagina dentata* is the image Creed uses to illustrate this male fear<sup>10</sup>. She also draws heavily on Kristeva's literary concept of «abjection», which derives from bodily fluids and excrement<sup>11</sup>. When discussing *The Exorcist*, Creed notes that the monstrous woman is almost always so in relation to her maternal and reproductive functions<sup>12</sup>. Chris cannot control her temper or her language when dealing with Regan's absent father; her inability to refrain from obscenities is infecting Regan's language – at least, we are led to believe so when the doctor asks Chris about her daughter's extended vocabulary. Chris flies into a rage when her ex-husband (Regan's father) is mentioned, and since we never see him it is easy to blame the present parent – and her contemporary lifestyle. Regan behaves aggressively towards the men who want to attack her body and mind: she even squeezes a psychiatrist's genitals with her hand. Since Regan's body is being attacked, the girl reacts in the only way she knows. Carol Clover explains that female-led possession films often revolve around the female body being put on trial<sup>13</sup>. In the case of *The Exorcist*, Regan is subjected to multiple medical tests, followed by hypnosis, in an attempt to find a scientific reason for her behavior. Father Karras later explains that exorcisms are no longer practiced (except in extreme cases), as science has unraveled the mysteries of these disorders. While Regan would undoubtedly have been accused of witchcraft had she been in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, there are now allegedly logical explanations for her strange behavior. However, centuries have passed, and teenage girls are still the focus of many male fears, as the images and the sounds of this film demonstrate.

## 2. Disgusting Sounds of Abjection

As mentioned, the disgusting impact of *The Exorcist* is based not only on its abject images, but also on its abject sounds. Sound has often been considered as a more effective means than image of eliciting fear in film<sup>14</sup>. Horror cinema has its own acoustic *tòpoi*:

---

<sup>10</sup> Ivi, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, cit.

<sup>12</sup> B. Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, cit., pp. 31-42.

<sup>13</sup> C. J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Princeton University Press, Princeton-Oxford 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. G. N. Martin, *(Why) Do You Like Scary Movies? A Review of the Empirical Research on Psychological Responses to Horror Films*, in "Frontiers in Psychology", 10, 2019, article 2298; V. Sbravatti,

in typological terms, ambiguous and uncanny sounds, acousmatic whispers, screams, bestial and aberrant voices, dissonant and noisy music, etc.; in parametric terms, strong intensity contrasts, extreme frequencies, harsh timbres. In other words, horror films are full of «raw» sound effects<sup>15</sup>. This is consistent to the seminal definition by Linda Williams of horror as a «body genre», a gross and excessive spectacle that shares psychoanalytic and phenomenological characteristics with pornography and melodrama<sup>16</sup>. A similar idea can be found also in natural sciences: Blumstein, Davitian and Kaye state that horror films are replete with nonlinear sounds that are analogue to the ones produced by various vertebrates when they are under duress, being useful as a call for help to conspecifics. Such nonlinearities include characters that we more commonly describe as noise and sudden variations of amplitude (hence, loudness) and frequency (hence, pitch)<sup>17</sup>. As regards music, one that features dissonance, noisy use of instruments, fast tempos, string tremolos, primitive sounds (electronic or acoustic), and the like, may elicit negative emotions by itself<sup>18</sup>, in its crossmodal interaction with images<sup>19</sup>, and in its relationship with the narrative.

Being *The Exorcist* a paradigmatic example of horror film, one that is notoriously filled with psychophysical abnormalities and disgusting images – in other words, a milestone of horror as a body genre –, one can reasonably expect to find many acoustic nonlinearities. The following analysis considers the soundtracks of both versions of the film – the original 122' edit (1973) and the 132' director's cut (2000) – and different variants thereof: as per the former, the original mono soundtrack (Academy Award winner for Best Sound Mixing), taken from a 1985 Japanese Laserdisc, and the 6-channel Dolby Stereo remix (1979 rerelease), taken from the 1997 US DVD; as per the latter, the

---

*Acoustic Startles in Horror Films: A Neurofilmological Approach*, in "Projections", XIII/1, 2019, pp. 45-66.

<sup>15</sup> W. Whittington, *Horror Sound Design*, in H. M. Benshoff (ed. by), *A Companion to the Horror Film*, Wiley Blackwell, Oxford 2014, pp. 168-185.

<sup>16</sup> L. Williams, *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess*, in "Film Quarterly", XLIV/4, 1991, pp. 2-13.

<sup>17</sup> D. T. Blumstein, R. Davitian, P. D. Kaye, *Do Film Soundtracks Contain Nonlinear Analogues to Influence Emotion?*, in "Biology Letters", VI/6, 2010, pp. 751-754. Cfr. E. K. Blesdoe, D. T. Blumstein, *What is the Sound of Fear? Behavioral Responses of Whitecrowned Sparrows Zonotrichia Leucophrys to Synthesized Nonlinear Acoustic Phenomena*, in "Current Zoology", LX/4, 2014, pp. 534-541.

<sup>18</sup> G. N. Martin, *(Why) Do You Like Scary Movies?*, cit., pp. 5-6.

<sup>19</sup> I. Pavlović, S. Marković, *The Effect of Music Background on the Emotional Appraisal of Film Sequences*, in "Psihologija", XLIV/1, 2011, pp. 71-91.



6.1 soundtrack (a remix of the original one)<sup>20</sup>, and the 2023 Dolby Atmos soundtrack (derived from the 6.1 one).

As explained, possessed Regan is an abject creature who glaringly embodies the monstrous feminine: such abjectness not only is visual but also aural. Regan's voice is replete with gross and excessive features in terms of both form – the linguistic content of her speech, *i.e.*, the profanities she says – and substance – the acoustic quality of her utterances, as a result of acting and sound mixing, editing and re-recording. Regan is aurally “possessed”, as it were: we happen to see teenager Linda Blair's body and simultaneously hear the voice of Mercedes McCambridge, a mature woman. McCambridge's voice denotes Regan's abnormality and helps eliciting a fearful and/or disgusted reaction in the audience. According to Beck, «The demon's voice [produces] a deliberate break with the ontological nature of sound»<sup>21</sup>, because of dubbing. Similarly, Chion affirms that «dubbing may produce disturbing effects of mismatching, where voices seem to waver around bodies (Fellini, Tati), or produce monsters and ghosts (*The Exorcist*)»; this film «contributed significantly to showing spectators how the cinematic voice is “stuck on” to the cinematic body. This grafting of heterogeneous elements can be seen as *The Exorcist*'s very subject»<sup>22</sup>. McCambridge created most of the vocal sounds of the demon<sup>23</sup>, which can be classified in dialogue proper, non-verbal sound effects, and wheeze, helped by the actress's chronic bronchitis<sup>24</sup>. A relevant role in *The Exorcist*'s soundtrack is also played by animal sounds. One instance of these is decidedly evident, being presented as such and within an uncanny context: the dogs that fight during the prologue, set in Iraq. Their “voice” exceeds denotation and becomes strongly connotative, as if it were a sign of evil manifestation. Another occurrence of animal sounds is subtle, such as those supposedly made by rats in the attic: actually, these sounds were made by recording guinea pigs running, mixed with other effects<sup>25</sup>. As a matter of fact, the source of such noise is never unraveled in the narrative, once again alluding to an

---

<sup>20</sup> The soundtrack also contains new sound effects.

<sup>21</sup> J. Beck, *William Friedkin's «The Exorcist» and the Proprietary Nature of Sound*, in “Cinephile: The University of British Columbia's Film Journal”, vi/1, 2010, pp. 4-10: 7.

<sup>22</sup> M. Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, transl. and ed. by C. Gorbman, Columbia University Press, New York 1999, pp. 154, 164. See also *ivi*, p. 171.

<sup>23</sup> Blair herself and Ron Faber (who plays Chuck, the assistant director) played the demon's voice in some instances as well.

<sup>24</sup> J. Beck, *William Friedkin's «The Exorcist»*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ivi*, p. 7.

evil presence. Finally, there are subliminal insertions of bees buzzing and of pigs screaming in the slaughterhouse, mixed with additional sounds pertaining to the demon<sup>26</sup>. Especially from an anti-speciesist perspective, one may further expound this argument: are these insertions of nonhuman animal sounds simply based on ecological reactions, such as that of «core disgust» or of «animal reminder disgust» as «pathogen avoidance»<sup>27</sup> (rats/guinea pigs), and that of subconscious fear (bees) and empathetic distress (slaughtered pigs)? Or do they imply the idea that associating highly evolved human beings to other nonhuman animals make the latter subhuman/inhuman, disgustingly reminding them of their animal nature<sup>28</sup>, hence requiring physical or spiritual healing?

Interestingly, the demon manifests itself mainly as a voice – a patently noisy one – rather than an image. As a result of possession, Regan's voice changes and becomes multifarious: it can be a girlish voice, albeit uncanny; it can be a womanly voice, as per an ontogenic anachronism; it can be a beastly voice, thus horrific; finally, it can constitute the voice of other persons, such as the mother (Vasiliki Maliaros) of Father Karras, or the homeless man (Vincent Russell) met by Karras in the subway. The demon's sounds – through Regan's vocal tract – disrupt dialogue and language. What we hear can be classified in at least four different categories: profanities in English, which are disturbing *per se* and even more so being spoken by a devilish girl; English in reverse, which makes sense only when recorded and played backwards; naïve Latin («Mirabile dictu», «Ego te absolvo») and French («Bonjour», «La plume de ma tante»); finally, perhaps most significantly, voice as noise, as previously noted. Such an acoustic approach is accordant with Carroll's philosophy of art horror, which stresses the *impurity* of objects or beings that are «categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless»<sup>29</sup>. Sound helps denoting possessed Regan as a «fusion figure»<sup>30</sup>, since she is both human and demonic, and connoting her as a monster, *i.e.*, a disgusting and repulsive being. Incidentally, the most typical vocal noise in horror cinema is the

---

<sup>26</sup> M. Evans, *Rhythms of Evil: Exorcizing Sound from The Exorcist*, in P. Hayward (ed. by), *Terror Tracks: Music, Sound and Horror Cinema*, Equinox, London-Oakville 2009, pp. 112-124: 119.

<sup>27</sup> P. Rozin, *Disgust, Psychology of*, in J. D. Wright (ed. by), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, Elsevier, Amsterdam 2015, pp. 546-549.

<sup>28</sup> «[A]nything that reminds us that we are animals may disgust us [...]. Disgust serves to “humanize” our animal bodies. [...] People who ignore these prescriptions are reviled as disgusting and animal-like»; *ivi*, p. 547.

<sup>29</sup> N. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, Routledge, New York-London 1990, ch. 1.

<sup>30</sup> See *ibidem*.

scream, which indeed occurs repeatedly in *The Exorcist*: apropos the excessiveness of such an acoustic event, consider how screams are arguably the only sounds used a few times in the film as sound bridges – as if they exceeded space-time, so to speak.

Another interstitial attribute of Regan pertains to gender. In fact, the vocality of the possessed girl is queer: the demon is connoted as male, while the possessed person is female and speaks with a female voice – although mannish<sup>31</sup>. The monster's vocal excess, as well as her abnormal physical behavior, reveals to Regan's mother Chris and to the rest of the characters the uncanny emergence of womanhood and sexual drive from the child's psyche and body. Kaja Silverman's theory on female voice and psychoanalysis might be apt to advance a different kind of interpretation of *The Exorcist*. According to her, in Western patriarchal culture, the maternal *voice* is opposed to the paternal *word*, viz., the mother is identified with *sound* and the father with *meaning*<sup>32</sup>. It may be argued that possessed Regan's vocal excess increases «The characterization of the mother's [in this case, more generally, the female] voice as babble or noise», a voice which must be silenced by men as a defense mechanism in order to avoid a perilous regression to an infantile state of «perceptual and semiotic insufficiency»<sup>33</sup>. Besides, the obscenities that Regan addresses to Chris evoke what Silverman describes as the desire for the fusion – i.e., «the corporeal union» – of the daughter with the mother<sup>34</sup> – or, through displacement, Chris's unconscious desire to reunite with Regan.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, music is quite sparse in *The Exorcist*. The beginning of Mike Oldfield's rock album *Tubular Bells* (1973), made popular by the film, is so strongly associated to it that it is commonly known as *The Exorcist's* theme *de facto*. However, the musical excerpt is heard only twice in the film – the first time, briefly, during a non-horror sequence, and the second time during the end credits, thus outside the narrative frame. At any rate, the rest of *The Exorcist's* score – made up of mostly preexisting pieces – has a different style, being *avant-garde* music that includes instrumental techniques which blur the traditional distinction between music and noise, so that music may be treated as noise, and vice versa. Such features made *avant-garde* mu-

---

<sup>31</sup> D. Humphrey, *Gender and Sexuality Haunts the Horror Film*, in H. M. Benshoff (ed. by), *A Companion to the Horror Film*, Wiley Blackwell, Oxford 2014, pp. 38-55.

<sup>32</sup> K. Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1988, p. 75.

<sup>33</sup> *Ivi*, p. 100.

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi*, p. 110.

sic become a reference for horror film scores<sup>35</sup>. Let us consider two prominent music excerpts: in Krzysztof Penderecki's String Quartet No. 1 (1960) and in George Crumb's *Threnody I: Night of the Electric Insects* (from *Black Angels*, 1970, a composition for electric string quartet and percussion), the strings seem to be screaming, thanks to dissonances and extremely high pitches. This certainly is no novelty, being a musical feature of one of the most famous horror scenes in film history: the shower murder in *Psycho* (1960, original score by Bernard Herrmann). Similarly, in other pieces by Penderecki such as *Polymorphia* (for 48 strings) or *Kanon* (for 52 strings and two tapes), the instruments produce more noisy sounds than traditional musical sounds<sup>36</sup>.

According to Michael Brown, «the demon is in fact best understood as “noise”», which functions as «a disruptive and destabilizing agency». This produces a «diffuse kind of horror, one that, like the presence of noise, disturbs our ability to make sense of the world as something essentially knowable and hence, meaningful»<sup>37</sup>. The corporeal, animalistic noises of Regan contrast with the mechanical noises of highly technological medical equipment. Such noises are indeed artificial and unnatural, but they respond to rational and sophisticated criteria of science, they are thoroughly controlled, rather than being disordered, uncontrolled and primitive – hence reminding us of our supposedly disgusting animal nature<sup>38</sup>. Most notably, the noisy, nonlinear and aberrant female voice of possessed Regan, which often reduces speech to visceral or inarticulate cries, is opposed to the scientific or religious voices of male characters – *i.e.*, to the formal and linear discourses of physicians and clergymen. As Brown explains, «The exorcist is called upon to expel noise and re-establish meaning through restorative acts of language»<sup>39</sup>: according to Mark Evans, the phrase «The power of Christ compels you!» is «rhythmic and repetitious, the sound of the natural order fighting back against the forces of dark-

---

<sup>35</sup> «Many of classical music's most modernistic devices have been relegated almost exclusively to shock horror flicks»; R. S. Brown, *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music*, University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles 1994 (Kindle edition), ch. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Penderecki's *Polymorphia* and *Kanon* also feature in another celebrated horror film, *The Shining* (1980), along with other preexisting compositions by the same author. Regarding his original score for the slasher film classic *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980), composer Harry Manfredini stated that he had been influenced by Penderecki: Jason Arnopp, *Deconstructing Harry*, “Slasherama”, 2005, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060511052302/http://www.slasherama.com/features/harry.HTML> (accessed 2024-10-04).

<sup>37</sup> M. Brown, *The Demon Pazuzu as Noise in The Exorcist*, in “Revenant”, 3, 2018, pp. 20-34: 20.

<sup>38</sup> See P. Rozin, *Disgust*, cit.

<sup>39</sup> M. Brown, *The Demon Pazuzu as Noise in The Exorcist*, cit., p. 20.

ness, discord and dysrhythm [*sic*]]<sup>40</sup>. Noteworthy, in a famous article hypothesizing the existence of a «cinematic neurosis» following *The Exorcist*, James Bozzuto found that sound was important in the symptomatology of three out of four subjects, who referred hearing «creaky noise» in the evening, the tendency to «misinterpret sounds», and «sensitiveness to sounds», respectively<sup>41</sup>.

The original soundtrack of *The Exorcist* was monophonic, while most of all subsequent releases since 1979 (in theaters or home video) are stereophonic. Effects have been inserted in the surround area, in order to envelop the audience in a “superfield” – *i.e.*, a loose expansion of the diegetic space through sound<sup>42</sup>. In some crucial moments of the narrative, the surround area contains also voices, contributing to the horrific impact of the film. This is consistent with both the cultural *praxis* of horror cinema and the natural characteristics of humans as animal organisms, since spread sounds and those propagated from an area outside our visual field are more ecologically alarming than point-like ones and those propagated from in front of us, respectively<sup>43</sup>. The sonic space becomes itself “abject”: we are literally surrounded by devilish forces that manifest aurally and that besiege us.

In sum, *The Exorcist* boasts a memorable audiovisual representation of disgust. Its gross images are consistent with what feminist theorists like Kristeva, Creed, and Doyle attribute to the abjection, and specifically to the monstrous feminine, which Regan memorably incarnates. Sound works together with the film’s disturbing visuals in enhancing the disruptive power of abjection – at least, until the restoration of (aural) normal order. Along with similar characters, such as the eponymous protagonist of *Carrie* (1976), Regan irreversibly influenced the history of horror films. We still have much to learn from her.

---

<sup>40</sup> M. Evans, *Rhythms of Evil*, cit., p. 121.

<sup>41</sup> J. C. Bozzuto, *Cinematic Neurosis Following The Exorcist: Report of Four Cases*, in “The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease”, CLXI/1, 1975, pp. 43-48.

<sup>42</sup> M. Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, cit., p. 150.

<sup>43</sup> I. Ekman, R. Kajastila, *Localization Cues Affect Emotional Judgments. Results From a User Study on Scary Sound*, in *Audio Engineering 35<sup>th</sup> International Conference: Audio for Games*, 2009, paper 23, online: <https://aes2.org/publications/elibrary-page/?id=15177>; V. Sbravatti, *Acoustic Startles in Horror Films*, cit.