

# Vox dei, Vox demonium

## A Cursory Exploration of “Sound Thinking” in Horror Film

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Résumé de l'article

*Vox dei, vox demonium* constitue une brève tentative de considérer une sorte de « pensée sonore » (*sound thinking*) qui soit particulière au film d'horreur. Cet article se penche principalement sur le statut de « subjectivité métaphysique » telle qu'elle est modulée par la « pensée sonore » de films d'horreur comme *L'exorciste*, *Amityville : La maison du Diable* et *L'exorcisme d'Émilie Rose*, parmi tant d'autres qui traitent spécifiquement de conceptualisations audios de la possession démoniaque et de l'invocation.

# Vox dei, Vox demonium

## A Cursory Exploration of «Sound Thinking» in Horror Film

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*For Sheldon Sawchuk*

« Your mother sucks cocks in Hell, Karras, you faithless slime. »  
– Pazuzu, *The Exorcist* (1975)

William Freidkins (1973) *The Exorcist* dramatizes a shocking confrontation with Evil. As a central problematic, the question of what should be done with Evil figures as a sustained concern of the film's protagonists, and most central to these opening comments, the Catholic priests Fathers Merrin (Max von Sydow) and Karras (Jason Miller). To the problem of Evil dramatized through Regan's possession by the demonic god Pazuzu (Mercedes McCambridge, Linda Blair and Ron Faber), the film submits both Catholic faith and the miraculous powers of God as an antidote. The climax of the film figures on the scene of Regan's (Linda Blair) exorcism, which dramatizes both the virulence of Evil and its «defeat» through belief and sacrifice. As is now well established in horror studies literature (see, for example, Schneider, 2004 and Creed, n.d.), such sacrifice is enjoined to the restoration of Regan's body from its abject state, but also to proof in the power of faith and its triumph over Evil. Beyond this gross generality however, Freidkin's climactic dramatization of Regan's exorcism attempts to imagine the complex strategies and terms of engagement by which Evil might be combatted. For instance, Owen Roizman's virtuosic cinematography portrays the com-

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plex Symbolic forces at war in the film. Pazuzu-Regan's<sup>1</sup> use of the crucifix as an implement of sado-masochistic masturbation is indexical here for the virulent Symbolic blasphemy it perpetrates against the Catholic imaginary. Yet astride the visual image of Evil in *The Exorcist*, there persists in sound another mode of religious critique. Here, we might immediately recall the profane utterances of the Pazuzu possessed Regan, such as that salaciously plied in the epigraph of this article.

Beyond the surface of Pazuzu's blasphemy inheres a variety of rhetorical strategies including intentional obfuscation, the cultivation of doubt, and nonsense. Each of these strategies become antithetical to theological faith and its presumption of a metaphysically ordered and rational universe. Herein, and in quite obvious fashion, Freidkins uses Pazuzu's profane enunciations as a mode of critique and challenge against the Catholic faith. However, the demonstration of Pazuzu's critique of faith qua speech is only inexactly related to the idea of «sound» that will be investigated in this essay. For by evoking the idea of «sound», I intend to evoke a mode of thought distinct from either speech or its manifest, representational contents in musical Form or lyricism. Less obliquely, the aim of this essay is to inquire into the use of sound in horror film as it is utilized in a manner antithetical to God (and such attendant qualities as the Good, the rational, and ordered) and further, the metaphysical and ontological commitments which the idea of God generates. In this exploratory task, I aim not only to express a relationship between sound and horror, but further, to articulate the ways in which sound figures in a mode of critique that disturbs and delinks from the metaphysical and ontological order of reality that God qualifies.

## 1. Vox Dei: The Voice of God

In *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006), Mladen Dolar articulates a long-standing link between the voice and *being*. Drawing upon Lacanian psychoanalysis, Dolar demonstrates how the voice functions as a foundation for the «self», or rather, as what Silverman (1998) has dubbed an *acoustic mirror* for auto-affective self-recognition. The minimal condition for the production of the «self», Dolar argues, is established through the recog-

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1. I have employed the conjoined term Pazuzu-Regan as both an indication of Regan's possessed state, but also, as a marker of the multiple figures of which the possessed Regan is composed.

nition of one's voice as it constitutes a material foundation for consciousness and that kernel of narcissism through which the «self» is formed (Dolar, 2006, p. 39). Prior to the event of «self-reflection» theorized in Lacan's *mirror phase* then, Dolar foregrounds the auto-affective power of the *voice* as an ontological mechanism. Yet, for Lacan (2004), the voice is not merely a vehicle of self-recognition, but both precedes and exceeds the formation of the «self». As Lacan articulates in the graph of desire, the voice exists both in relation yet in excess to signification and meaning, hence constituting both a vehicle for the reification of the Symbolic Order<sup>2</sup> and, where the voice can no longer be sensibly recognized or otherwise attributed significance, Symbolic ruin. Importantly then, the voice constitutes both a vehicle of signification and a potential articulation of the limits of Symbolic thought (Wallin 2010). The paradoxical power attributed to the voice in Lacanian psychoanalysis is dramatized throughout *The Exorcist* (1975). Where Father's Karras and Merrin enjoin the voice to the signifying order of religious faith, for instance, the Pazuzu possessed Regan aurally remits meaning through obfuscation («*I'm not Regan*») blasphemous excess («*Let Jesus fuck you*»), and irrational nonsense («*La plume de ma tante*»). Yet, the import of the voice pertains not simply to its potential disruption of the Symbolic Order, but the very event of the «I's» aural consolidation. Where the possessed Regan is beseeched into being by the voice of the Symbolic Order<sup>3</sup> («*The power of Christ compels you*»), the lawless *voices* of Pazuzu-Regan palpate the horror of pre-individual or larval «life» disjoined from the pure, whole, and innocent life that Karras and Merrin attempt to redeem in their vocal evocation of the Symbolic Law.

That the voice inheres capacities to both produce and menace signification enjoins it not only to ontological, but metaphysical problematics. Such problems are not simply an invention of Lacan, Dolar (2006) argues, but a long-standing preoccupation of metaphysics. As early as 2200 BC, Dolar speculates, the voice figures as an anxious preoccupation of the State, where for the Chinese Emperor Chun (c.2200 BC), the voice in music ought be commanded to follow words imbuing it with sense (Dolar

2. In Lacan's graph of desire, signification is drawn through Big Other or Symbolic Order and routed upon the subject. However, and crucial to this essay, is Lacan's identification of the voice as a remainder or excess to signification.
3. The Symbolic Order, following the developments of Lacan, refers to the orthodox orders of language and law into which we enter as 'social' and 'political' beings and further, by which we become recognized as 'social' beings proper.

2006, 43). Dolar extracts a similar edict in Plato, who admonishes that music and rhythm ought to follow speech or rather, reflect in the stable metaphysical referent of established meaning should music not usher forth the end of civilization (p. 43). Dolar's brief examples obliquely resonate with Derrida's (1998) demonstration that the Western metaphysical project is founded upon a preoccupation with the voice as the instantiation of presence *par excellence*. As Derrida demonstrates, Western metaphysics fixes the play of difference by tethering meaning to an ultimate signifier or *logos*, which henceforth figures as a privileged referent, or rather, a dominant way of thinking divested of alterity and uncertainty. Within this metaphysical logic, Derrida avers, the voice achieves privileged status over writing<sup>4</sup> for its assumed proximity to the consciousness of the speaker<sup>5</sup>. While Dolar points out that this analysis fails to contend with the ambiguity of the voice articulated by Lacan, it concurrently succeeds for its demonstration that the Western metaphysical project is intimately linked to the voice as an index of presence and perhaps, as a constituting vehicle of metaphysics more generally. Of obvious significance here is the ostensible «first event» of presence impelled by the voice of God, who wills life from the cosmic void: «*Let there be light*». Significantly, while the voice founds the event of cosmological creation, it is concomitantly overcoded by the visual regime of light and ocularity that follows.

While ultimately occluded, the voice plays a significant role at the scene of both ontological and metaphysical founding. For its significance as a precursor to the instantiation of the universe, the role of the voice is at once invested with vast significance and uncertainty. As explored above, the voice of God functions as a precursor to the image of a rational, benevolent, and ordered universe. To rejoin Lacan (2004) however, the voice insists at the conclusion of signification. The voice persists as an excrescence to presence, and inheres the potential of lawlessness and disorder. Such excess is viscerally dramatized in *The Exorcist* and not simply via the foul utterances of Pazuzu-Regan. More significantly, the voice and its orthodox link to metaphysical order is virulently beset by the *schizoid* voices of Pazuzu-Regan, which are produced, in part, by the «unholy trinity» of three separate voice actors (Mercedes McCambridge, Linda

4. In *Plato's Pharmacy*, Derrida demonstrates that writing is rendered inferior for its presumed distance from the mind of the author, whereas the voice is lauded for its immediacy to the consciousness of the speaker.

5. Concurrently, writing becomes a dangerous practice for its susceptibility to manipulation and distance from presence.

Blair and Ron Faber). The multiplicity of voices attributed to Pazuzu-Regan become violently adversarial to the Symbolic and unified voice of God invoked by Fathers' Karras and Merrin, who redramatize the primordial scene of order and signification by which Regan might be restored to «normality».

The danger of Pazuzu-Regan's voice figures not only in its multiplication, but the ways in which such multiplication contravenes the ideals of order and unification characteristic of God. That is, the *schizophrenic* voice of Pazuzu-Regan registers the pure excess of the voice delinked from signification, hence evoking the voice subtracted from order and orthodoxy. Astride the multiplication of Pazuzu-Regan's voice exists its coupling with non-signifying canine growls, recordings of angry bees, fighting dogs, caged hamsters, and in the final moments of the film's exorcism, the sound of pigs being led to slaughter. Herein, the metaphysical horror of the voice is not simply an effect of revealing the multiplicity or swarm of voices subtending the unified voice of God or the voice that Freud likens to the Superegoic character of consciousness. Rather, the inhuman and visceral voice of Pazuzu-Regan figures in the expression of a referential universe that no longer takes God's unifying edict as Law, and in so doing, posits the lawlessness of a cosmos presided over by ancient gods who rally the forces of chaos and destruction. The swarm of inhuman voices and sounds associated with Pazuzu-Regan might herein be thought as a threat to metaphysical certainty given through God, revealing a horrific acousmatic universe that portends a primeval will both prior and antithetical to the world's founding in the acoustic mirror of God's enunciation. This is to say that the horror of *The Exorcist* is, in part, related to its evocation of a primitive voice that is unrecognizable from the vantage of metaphysical order and its presupposition that the universe reflects in the mind of a rational and benevolent prime mover. In psychoanalytic terms, we might consider the voice of Pazuzu-Regan, and in particular its inhuman features, as an echo of the *Real*, or rather, that which is both outside and occulted from signification. As *The Exorcist* portends, the cosmos was not simply a void prior to the ordering echo of God's voice, but resonated in the acoustic mirror of the old gods.

## 2. Anti-Refrain

Astride the organization of the voice within the Symbolic Order of meaning and sense persists the field of «sound» and its non-representational acousmatic force. While sound is conventionally remitted to Symbolic

meaning and hence, hermeneutic significance, it nevertheless inheres a non-representational quality capable of disturbing both its inscription within meaning and more significantly, the expectation that sound functions as an acoustic mirror to the *given* world, or rather, the world as it is given by the orthodoxies of Symbolic meaning. This tension is again aptly dramatized in *The Exorcist* (1975). Where Fathers Karras and Merrin function as priestly conduits of the « Word of God », or rather, the official speech of the Symbolic Order, Pazuzu-Regan harness another domain of acoustic expression that abrogates the ordering power of the exorcists' interpolation: "*The power of Christ compels you*". To rejoin an earlier point, the disruptive force of sound figured in the *Exorcist* is not simply evidenced by Pazuzu-Regan's blasphemous responses to the evocation of « God's Word » and the Symbolic Law it attempts to impel. Rather, and as it pertains to the non-representational force of sound, *The Exorcist* palpates a horrific acousmatic universe that figures in a mode of corruption and decomposition antithetical to the Good and the Natural, rational order in which God is presumed to reflect.

Beyond dramatizing the investment of faith in the Symbolic Order, Regan's exorcism articulates how sound functions as a vehicle of religious belief. For instance, the act of exorcism functions to rejoin the subject to a state correspondent with the theological-moral order, but does so through the evocation of « God's Word » as a force of interpolation. Indexical here is Karras and Merrin's repeated authoritative enunciation: « *The power of Christ compels you* ». Yet, the significance of the exorcists' refrain pertains not simply to its content (what it means), but rather, its function (what it does). That is, the repeated refrain functions as both a mode of anti-chaos and concomitantly, as an act of ordering qua the *official speech* of the Symbolic Order. Where Karras and Merrin evoke the official speech of the Symbolic Order, *The Exorcist* cultivates a mode of acoustic disorder that figures equally in the critique of God, or the metaphysical universe that takes God as an ultimate signifier and guarantor of cosmological stability.

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of the refrain is herein germane for its articulation of the process whereby one might sonically combat chaos. As an indexical example of the refrain, Deleuze and Guattari elicit the scene of a child walking home in the dark. Beset by fears of the unknown, the child marshals the forces of anti-chaos by whistling a familiar song. Through the creation of a familiar sonic milieu, Deleuze and Guattari develop, the child is capable of creating a secure territory despite

the unfamiliar surroundings that threaten to destroy it. A corollary act inheres *The Exorcist* (1975), where Fathers' Karras and Merrin attempt to marshal the forces of anti-chaos through the creation of an acoustic territory, and more specifically, the refrain of God's edict. Yet, to rejoin Dolar (2006), it is equally evident that Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the refrain refers to the auto-affective power of the voice as a means to protect the subject in the midst of perilous alterity. The scene of Regan's exorcism attends closely to the intimate relationship between the refrain and the subject, for as previously stated, the attempt to rehabilitate Regan into the Symbolic Order is effected through Karras and Merrin's dramatization of the refrain, or rather, a coded block of anti-chaos that aims, in Deleuzeguattarian (1987) terms, to deterritorialize Pazuzu-Regan by invoking order and habit via repetition and familiarity. In general terms, *The Exorcist* posits a metaphysical war waged at the level of sound, where the act of exorcism figures in the attempt to reproduce a refrain for the stabilization of Regan's subjectivity possessed by the *schizoid* and chaotic sonic affects of the ancient swarm god, Pazuzu<sup>6</sup>.

### 3. Vox Demonium: The Voice of Demons

The *schizoid* voices of Pazuzu-Regan have come to constitute its own model for sonically thinking about possession in horror film. Not only does the voice of Pazuzu-Regan *schizophrenically* divest itself from the conceptualization of a prime manifestor or rational mind in which Western subjectivity is itself modeled, but intersects with an inhuman sonic register outside the Symbolic Order of meaning and Law. Across innumerable films featuring demonic possession, the *schizoid* voice figures as a central problematic for both its lawlessness and perhaps more profoundly, its altered enunciatory affects. So it is with the scenes of possession in such films as *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *The Conjuring 2* (2016), and *The Evil Dead* (1981), where the voice assumes chaotic intensities, volumes, and timbre's that ally it with the unknown, the multiple, and wild.

As previously articulated and intimate to the focus of this section, the sound of Evil in horror cinema extends beyond the recognizable voice and into the acoustic domain of the inhuman. For example, the inhuman voice of Pazuzu is rendered audible near the outset of *The Exorcist*, when Father

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6. In Mesopotamian religion, the hybridic demon god Pazuzu is allied with locust swarms and pestilence.



Merrin confronts a monument to the Assyrian demon-god while on an archaeological dig in Iraq. Overwhelming the scene with the inhuman intensification of canine growls and frenzied insects, Freidkins stages an acoustic «master shot» in which the priestly Merrin is beset by the primitive sonic force of metaphysical alterity. Across the field of genre horror<sup>7</sup>, inhuman sounds frequently serve as an acoustic analogue of Evil and its attendant qualities of corruption and disorder. For example, Hitchcock's (1963) horror-thriller *The Birds* utilizes the alien sounds of the trautionium to imagine the sound of the antagonistic avian swarm, therein breaking from both the pedantry of direct representation and the «common sense» recognition of the film's adversary. Elsewhere, a principle scene of *The Amityville Horror* (1979) utilizes the intensified sound of swarming flies as an anathema to the priestly benediction of Father Delaney (Rod Steigler). The climax of the TV movie *Devil Dog: Hound of Hell* (1978) similarly employs the inhuman vocalization of canine enunciation as a vehicle of dominance over the film's protagonist, Mike Barry (Richard Crenna). More contemporary horror films such as *The Babadook* (2014) similarly ally an inhuman voice to its demonic antagonist, whose enunciations more closely ally to animal («baa-baa») and inhuman («dooooook-dooooook-DOOOOOK») sounds. Further, sounds associated with the Crooked Man in James Wan's *The Conjuring 2* (2016) are even more remote to human enunciation, composed from recordings of cracking wood and the sounds of almonds being crushed<sup>8</sup>.

This admittedly haphazard list of references aims to rejoin by other means a mode of ontological and metaphysical critique evoked via sound. While explored previously, it is nevertheless worth restating that the sound of the inhuman betrays the Symbolic relegation of the voice to speech (meaning). Where the cosmos are ostensibly born in acoustic resonance with the «Word of God» and «His<sup>9</sup>» attendant qualities of certainty and order, the sound of the inhuman palpates a wholly distinct universe of

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7. In this allusion to «genre horror» I am attempting at the risk of overgeneralization to articulate a style of sound thinking commensurate with the «affect of Evil» that is often the aim of horror cinema.
  8. The central role of inhuman sound in horror foley design is aptly captured in Peter Strickland's *Barbarian Sound Studio* (2012).
  9. Throughout this paper, I have deferred to the male pronoun to characterize «God». While the idea of «God» need not naturally correspond to masculinity, it is typical in horror film (particularly that dealing with demonic possession) that «God» functions to symbolize and uphold the patriarchal order.

reference. For instance, the intensified and unnatural sound of swarming flies in *The Amityville Horror* postulates a world antagonistic to the ordered and benevolent universe given by God's Natural order. As the acousmatic world of the film speculates, astride the universe submitted to God's order persists a pestilent and virulent force of lawlessness and corruption. Beyond the obvious reference to death and decay to which the sound of flies are typically associated, the inhuman sound of swarming flies in *The Amityville Horror* functions to palpate another world that Thacker (2010) dubs the *world-without-us*. In the film, this world is composed through the intensified sonic affects of the flies and their acoustic dominance over Father Delaney, culminating with their sudden silence and then, the transpiration of a demonic voice entreating Delany to «*Get out... GET OUT*». Across a litany of horror films, the dominant sound of the inhuman is significant in that it figures as a corruption of metaphysical order, or the ordering of life from the vantage of Symbolic authority. For where theology presumes the *givenness* of the world to humans, the hostile acoustic milieu of such horror films as *The Amityville Horror* postulates resistance via the sound of the inhuman. The use of animal, insectal, and vegetal sounds are herein significant in that these life-forms are always-already overcoded from the vantage of an ontological and metaphysical order in which they are rendered *for us*. Where such indexical images of thought as the Great Chain of Being are intimate to the hierarchical image of reality presumed in Western theology, horror film lets transpire the lawless voice of every sublimated urge and entity disavowed power and banished from view.

#### 4. Vox Inhumana: The Voice of the Inhuman

The horror of inhuman sound is not simply an effect of its refusal of Symbolic authority or its vague proximity to the inhuman life of beasts that humans have transcended in fealty to God. Rather, and perhaps more profoundly, inhuman sound transpires an occulted and unknown world delinked from the world *as it is for us* (Thacker 2010). Eclipsing the banal idea of a world in which man is beset by man then, Thacker describes the transpiration of the occult as a form of *religious horror* in which we encounter a world that is not simply antagonistic to the metaphysical order of things, but postulates that the given world is *always-already* an inhuman one (p. 20). This realization, Thacker contends, lies at the heart of both metaphysical and genre horror, for where the certitudes of theological

metaphysics frame the *given* world, the voice of the inhuman postulates a world outside those fixed laws of Nature that Lovecraft describes as « our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space » (cited in Thacker 2015, 119). Lovecraft's horror-fiction frequents this encounter with the occult, and moreover, founds the event of horror through the transpiration of the unknown and impossible (MacCormack 2008). So it is with Lovecraft's *The Music of Erich Zann*, wherein the eponymous viol player wards against an abyssal world extending over the *Rue d'Auseil* by plying hitherto otherworldly melodic and rhythmic sounds in daemonic counterpoint to the « deliberate », « purposeful », « mocking » « voice » of the encroaching abyss (Lovecraft 2008, 63). Herein, the horror of *The Music of Erich Zann* is not simply figured in the encroaching threat of a world indifferent to humans, but more specifically, in its enunciation of an occult « sound » both « exquisitely low and infinitely distant » remitting the recognizable and sensible sounds of the *given* world (p. 63).

*The Music of Erich Zann* allies with other genre horror works for its acoustic evocation of an unseen world. Yet, to rejoin the metaphysical critique evoked by sound, *The Music of Erich Zann* constitutes a form of *religious horror* for its speculation on the absence of God, which is not necessarily to say the absence of order, but rather, to posit an encounter with the metaphysical alterity of *another* or multitude of orders antithetical to world given by Western metaphysics and its privileged dependence on the « visual regime » of being, representation, and identity (Herzogenrath 2017, 3). Throughout Lovecraft's horror-fiction insists an ephemeral world of sound that aims not merely at the affective evocation of dread, but more specifically, the creation of dread via the acousmatic disruption of representation and the « entrenched hierarchy of the senses » presupposed in the Western metaphysical commitment to presence (Cox 2017, 100). For where the acousmatic worlds of genre horror function to disturb our conception of what things and worlds might exist astride the *given* world, they postulate an altered metaphysics or kernel of reality prior to form, categorization and identity (Herzogenrath 2017; Cox 2017). Such a mode of sonic metaphysics is intimate to the horror-fiction of Lovecraft, where it figures as the « piercing shrieks » and « creaking sound through the pitchy blackness » in *The Unnamable* (p. 132-133), the « nauseous musical instruments » and « dissonances of exquisite morbidity » in *The Hound* (p. 84), the thunderous voice of the eponymously titled *Lurking Fear* (p. 66), amongst others (Lovecraft 2008). As Harman (2012) develops, the salience of Lovecraft is in part attributable to the preoccupation

with the gap between objects and language, or things and representation that constitutes an obsession of his writing (p. 3). Crucial to his horror-fiction, Lovecraft's oeuvre is replete with the vague registration of acousmatic worlds withdrawn from « common sense », or rather, their coordination with some ready-made meaning. Here, the horror of Lovecraft's work not only stems from its subtraction of description from prior interpretive referents, but further, its speculation on a world that defies description and withdraws from the meaningful universe given via religious orthodoxy.

### 5. Vox Rem: The Voice of Things

Genre horror is unique for its style of « sound thinking » (Herzogenrath, 2017). For throughout the genre if to the point that one *anticipates* or *desires* them, there prevails the affective force of sound as it is not yet given to either musical form or representation. Significantly, the sense of dread evoked in horror film is in part a function of this acousmatic approach to « sound thinking », wherein, and against the organization of sound in the metrics of harmony and rhythm, horror film transpires the sonic forces of disruption, perturbation, and affective shock by manipulating timbre, tone, intensity, and volume, which is to say the raw materiality of sound. Herein, the function of horror cinema's « sound thinking » is metaphysically significant in that it delinks from the enchainment of sound to transcendent form, or rather, from its resemblance to some transcendent organizing metric. Herein, the acousmatic worlds of horror cinema not only reveal the raw materiality of sound beneath its ordering as music or speech, but apprehend a universe of « sound thinking » outside the standards of composition and so too the overdetermination of sound within the Godly forms or harmony and order (Varese & Wen-chung 1966; Beier & Wallin 2017).

The raw materiality of sound plied throughout genre horror film postulates a style of « sound thinking » resonant not only with a metaphysical critique of representation (the presumed *givenness* of materiality to privileged forms), where for instance sound assumes ephemeral, heterogeneous or schizoid intensities antithetical its recognition as an identity, but as an ontological critique for its creation of sonic qualities remote to categorization and the signifying coordinates of reality that such categories maintain. Herein, the sonic milieu of horror film produces a style of thinking that aims not merely at the production of meaning, even as a Symbolic and Imaginary counter-actualization of orthodox thought, but further, the

transmission of affects as they subtend thought and affect thought itself. Here, Herzogenrath's (2017) contention that the tone, timbre, and intensity of sound corporealize a «sonic» intelligence assumes horrifying import in that the acousmatic worlds of horror invoke the noumenal thought of the inhuman, or rather, an acoustic registration of the *thing-in-itself* beyond signification and the limits of thought presumed by the world's *givenness* to human life, a presumption maintained in the Judeo-Christian tradition, most notably in the familiar Biblical dictum of Genesis 9:3: «Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give all to you, as I gave the green plant».

Beyond its metaphysical critique, the «sound thinking» of genre horror aims at ontological disruption. Herein, the pun on «sound» as it designates both health and well-being is horrifically perverted in that the affects of genre horror catalyze dis-ease, terror (the anticipation that something will occur), and in certain cases, nausea. The «sound thinking» palpated in horror film delinks from the aim to create good affects in its exploration of Evil's acousmatic worlds. That Judeo-Christian ontology is founded in the privileged image of the full and complete body given by God is significant, for where the sound thinking of horror film aims to paralyze, shock, overwhelm, induce dread, etc., its powers over the body are induced from elsewhere, which is to say the «sound thinking» of another world. As Burkart (2016) identifies, the nonlinear scream of the xenomorph that kills Dallas in *Alien* (1979), the erratic choking of the diseased «baby» and low-level machine sounds<sup>10</sup> in *Eraserhead* (1977), the occult animal-child sounds that wake the filmmakers in *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), the violent cacophony of diegetic «whirring, sawing, and hollow booming» in the murder and hanging scene of Argento's *Susperia* (1977), the frequent non-diegetic use of chicken and pig sounds in the brutal slaughterhouse world of Tobe Hooper's (1974) *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, each, among other examples, intersect with the body to potentially, and further to other aspects of film, induce an experience delinked from the supposedly «good affects» of the healthy, bounded, and controlled body normalized in Western rationalist ontology heralded by the Judeo-Christian image of the body (Powell 2012, 170). That the «sound thinking» of horror cinema aims to produce disorder in the body hence aligns it to a maligned universe of occulted affects both psychologically «unsound» and indelibly *Evil* for their violent disruption of the refrain as it characterizes

10. Throughout his filmic oeuvre, Lynch frequently relies on the low-level machine sounds plied in *Eraserhead*, perhaps most notably again in *Mulholland Drive*.

continuity and stability. That is, the «sound thinking» of horror cinema palpates against the image of supremacy, control, and self-regulation intimate to Western *being* a form of *becoming* in which the body is shocked, disordered, if not generally *possessed* by its contact with a style of «sound thinking» oriented to overtaking the body and inducing its sensory reconfiguration.

It is significant that the sound design of horror cinema not only registers other universes, particularly those remote the world's *givenness* to humans, but transversally induces our relationship with such universes beyond our conscious willing. This is to say that the «sound thinking» used in horror film sound design aims less at representational meaning and more so at the production of raw affects registered at the neuronal level. The use of such nonlinear sounds (rapid frequencies, nonstandard sounds, and noise) as animal screams in *The Shining* (1999) and *The Exorcist* (1973) were intentionally plied to produce affective, unconscious fear responses (Blumstein, Davitan & Kaye 2011). Tapping into primitive mammalian experience and base affects, the recorded and sometimes instrumentally mimicked sound of animal screams have been found to catalyze affects of unease and distress (Marriott 2010). The use of infrasound, or sound recorded below the threshold of human audibility (1-20Hz.) has been plied in horror cinema to a similar effect. While consciously inaudible, infrasound has been found to induce a range of «bad affects» from panic through vomiting. Gaspar Noé's extensive use of infrasound throughout the first 30 minutes of the controversial horror film *Irreversible* (2002) saw viewers leaving the theaters even prior to brutal assault that appears in the film (Goodman 2002). The affects of terror and horror linked to infrasound are encountered in even the non-eventful yet undeniably terrifying scenes of *Paranormal Activity* (2007), where infrasonic sub-frequencies were reportedly used to induce terror (Stewart 2013). Like animal screams, infrasound is naturally occurring and emitted by such natural phenomenon as storms, earthquakes and even low frequency animal communications to which we seemingly remain unconsciously and primitively fearful. Yet, beyond its speculative evocation of a primal fear response, the body registers infrasound at a speed faster than it receives images, and further, has been found to vibrate the human eyeball, vibrate the chest wall, and induce sensations of gagging (Bryan & Tempest 1972). This is to say that infrasound catalyzes a physiological response in the body not necessarily linked to primal fear but the thresholds of the human organism and its capacity to withstand certain frequencies of sound (Goodman 2010).

## 6. Vox Rem II: The Voice of Things II

Where the onto-theology of Judeo-Christianity presumes the superior value of God over that which it constitutes, the occulted sound of the inhuman constitutes a style of «sound thinking» that stymies and disturbs the presumption of a Natural order (Beier & Wallin 2017). It is, or course, a genre convention that horror film aims to palpate unnatural orders of monstrosity and aberration. While the study of horror film has overwhelmingly oriented its consideration of such aberration upon the image of the monster and its narratological relation to other filmic characters and events, the «sound thinking» of horror film too contravenes the accepted order of things upon which ontological being is founded (Levina & Bui 2013). Perhaps most significantly, the «sound thinking» of horror film «frustrates perceptual compulsions» by delinking sound from its object or cause (Goodman 2010, 66). Even the familiar horror feature of an occulted «thing» going bump in the night remains infused with unfamiliar potential in that such sounds delink from the expectation of a causal agent and further, the presence of some *being* to which sound might be correlated. As with Heather's panicked plea «*What the fuck is that?*» in *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), the horror movie goer is often deprived of a stable or representational referent through the occultation of its causal manifestor. Herein, the «sound thinking» of horror betrays sound's auto-affective, or identity producing power by occulting its source, or rather, by subtracting its relation to the privileged conditions of metaphysical presence.

Such subtraction of the signifier or causal referent is, for such psycho-analytic film scholars as Levine (2004), a vehicle for the production of anxiety linked to lost and unobtainable objects. Further still, the occulted referent often intimated in horror cinema's «sound thinking» delinks from the idea that sonic enunciation correlates to being and further, that the symbolic correspondence of a thing and its enunciation might be enjoined in representation and identity. It is this fundamental correspondence that is remitted in the «sound thinking» of horror cinema, which ultimately betrays the order of causal thinking if not the presumption of a foundational *being* to which sound might be attributed. Herein, the fundamental primacy of *being* intimate to Western ontology is undone. In the «sound thinking» of horror film, what insists but the eradication of *being* as a necessary precursor to enunciation. Herein, the «sound thinking» of horror film speculates on both an alter-ontology in which the body is sonically rethought in terms of what Deleuze and Guattari might dub *the Body*



*without Organs*, and following, a universe of raw affects that subtend the presumed foundation of *being* intimate to Western ontology (Beier & Wallin 2017). As the «sound thinking» of horror film suggests, ontology begins not with a *ready-made* body, but rather, with the raw materiality of sound that both gives shape and yet functions independent of the body as a essential referent for thinking about life.

That Judeo-Christian onto-theology pivots on the primal moment of God's enunciation «Let there be light», or more generally, the attribution of sound to a primary referent is significant insofar as the «sound thinking» of horror cinema stymie's correlation, or rather, the presumption that the world is as a benevolent and rational God thinks it. For replete throughout genre horror sound design is the speculative presumption of a world astride the world *as-it-is-for-us* (Thacker 2011). As previously explored, the occulted worlds made manifest in horror cinema emerge through the deprivation of a representational cause, and perhaps more significantly, through the embodied registration (if but neuronally) of «bad affects». Yet further, the «sound thinking» of horror cinema registers the *world-without-us*, or rather, a sonority detached from human life. For the inhuman sounds that populate the horror soundscape are not simply a means of inducing cognitive dissonance wherein the habitual pathways of meaning making are parried, but rather, to dislocate from human cognition and its modes of sensing the world. At its most basic level, such dislocation is evident in the dissonance produced when familiar and ostensibly comforting refrains are beset by visual or other auditory asynchronicities, as in the use of Tiny Tim's *Tip Toe through the Tulips* in *Insidious* (2010), or more generally, the use of songs and instruments associated with childhood (the music box sounds of the Lament Box in *Hellraiser* (1987), for example). In less direct fashion however, the abundance of arcane sounds plied in horror's «sound thinking» speculate on a remote world in which humans are not. The use of sounds approximating vacuums, voids, and empty spaces into which sound is siphoned is indexical as a form of sonic speculation on an empty and voracious universe at the limits of the world *for-us*. The intensified volume and low intensity «whoosh» that accompanies the emergence of the monster in *Mulholland Dr.* is registered filmically through Dan's death upon encountering it. Hutchinson (2001) identifies this sound again in the terrifying «call» of the *Babadook*, where the monster vocalizes the inhaled phonemes «*doook-doook-DOOOK*» resembling both the sounds of asphyxiation, but also, the intake of air into void space.



## 7. A Horrific Conclusion

As Powell (2005) articulates in concluding thoughts of *Deleuze and Horror Film*, the study of sound remains largely unthought in studies of the genre. As Powell articulates, the impact of sound upon the human sensorium, its direct line to the nervous system of the body, and nonrepresentational qualities make it a crucial area for further inquiry (p. 206). Most generally, the approach to sound pursued in this essay has attempted to articulate ways of thinking sound as it is not yet married to representation, or more accurately, where it attempts to short circuit meaning and those forms of musical and vocal enunciation to which sound is typically associated. It is in this vein that I have attempted a cursory sketch of «sound thinking» in horror as a means to evoke the implicate challenge such thinking hold for both the metaphysical and ontological commitments of Western theology. In metaphysical terms, the presumption of an ordered and lawful universe of reference advanced by in Western theology is perturbed by the «sound thinking» of horror, which posits other worlds in which the *given* order of things no longer hold. Against the privileged status of presence foundational to Western metaphysics, the «sound thinking» of horror reveals an occulted world antithetical to *logos*, or rather, those orthodoxies of thought so evidently «troubled» by the sounds of filmic horror. In ontological terms, the privileged emphasis on identity in Western theology is too radically perturbed. Not only is the hierarchical emplacement of life-forms within a chain of significance undone by the revelation of an occulted world in which such orders of being are antagonistically counterposed, but the «sound thinking» of horror often demonstrates that *being* is always-already subtended by affects that command, possess, and produce it in the first case. The familiar ontological categories of identity are nearly obliterated in the «sound thinking» of horror, which aims not at representational correspondence, but with betraying «common sense» by plotting its encounter with those inhuman and alien intensities by which it is rendered impotent. Here, the «sound thinking» of horror film implicitly questions the presumed foundations of reality by surveying the affective corridors of other experiences and worlds in which human beings and their castigation to God are violently beset by the terrifying instability and fluidity of reality (May 2005).

As this essay has attempted to demonstrate, the «sound thinking» of horror aims at the perturbation of both cognition and physiology. Yet more generally, and as horror film fans might attest, the «sound thinking»

of horror functions as an affront to sense for its violent « shock to thought », where the sounds of Evil that horror film attempts to think aim to agitate the coordinates of reality conditioned by our automatic relationship to the Good. In this task of attempting to think the acousmatic universe of Evil, the « sound thinking » of horror implicitly intervenes with the preoccupations of theological metaphysics and ontology, namely, by palpating the very affects such preoccupations function to occult. Following Dolar (2006), it might be said that the « sound thinking » of horror actualizes the excessive *Real* of the Symbolic and Imaginary Orders. Put differently, the sound of Evil in horror functions as a vehicle for surveying that accursed and lawless part of sound that returns, like Lacan's voice and Freud's (1919) *unheimlich*, to upend our sense of being rooted in a stable universe. Further still, the true Evil of horror's « sound thinking » is realized through the creation of an acousmatic mirror that reflects the *world-without-us*, or rather, an inhuman world populated with quasi-animal, unnatural, and unfamiliar sounds remote to the habitual refrains in which human life develops (Thacker, 2011). Remote to the *world-for-us*, the « sound thinking » of horror hence posits a cosmology in which neither God or « His' reflection in human life is primary. This is, of course, to « shock » the theological refrain. Yet, it is also a critical passage for thinking a world beyond the *given*, which is to say, a world that is populated by forces and wills beyond our apprehension, control, and desire.

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## Résumé

*Vox dei, vox demonium* constitue une brève tentative de considérer une sorte de « pensée sonore » (*sound thinking*) qui soit particulière au film d'horreur. Cet article se penche principalement sur le statut de « subjectivité métaphysique » telle qu'elle est modulée par la « pensée sonore » de films d'horreur comme *L'exorciste*, *Amityville: La maison du Diable* et *L'exorcisme d'Émilie Rose*, parmi tant d'autres qui traitent spécifiquement de conceptualisations audios de la possession démoniaque et de l'invocation.

**Abstract**

*Vox dei, vox demonium marks a cursory attempt to consider a kind of «sound thinking» largely singular to horror film. The essay focuses in particular on the status of «metaphysical subjectivity» as it is modulated by the «sound thinking» of such horror films as The Exorcist, The Amityville Horror, and The Exorcism of Emily Rose, amongst others dealing specifically with audio conceptualizations of demonic possession and invocation.*