

Will the Real Devil Speak Up?

ABSTRACT Ventriloquism, Edison's playback, and the sound film base their appeal to spectators primarily on the tension between the two-dimensional image and three-dimensional sound, between space and surface, as well as between body and voice. My focus is on the disembodied voice in cinema, the voice with no body attached. The meanings attached to the unaccommodated or unlocatable voices in various kinds of ventriloquism seem to produce just such a suspension. The opening of the connection between a voice and a body as its source reminds us of the voice as a partial object in the writings of Jacques Lacan, as well as Rick Altman's model of ventriloquism, in which whoever controls sound in film is a ventriloquist who "uses" the body, manipulating it as if it were a puppet. This notion becomes fascinatingly complicated when applied to *The Exorcist* (1973, William Friedkin). *The Exorcist* stages the battle between the forces of sound and image, body and voice, elevating it to a terrifying good-versus-evil theological level. This battle extends the diegetic narrative to become a battle between two actors (the voice actor and the actor seen on screen) trying to share one body, a split between two personalities. The film is an exceptional case study that allows us to examine the ways in which cinema contributes to and mediates the ventriloquial act, as well as the roles of the visual, aural, and tactile perceptual channels and their relation to each other in the cinematic experience, in particular in the horror genre. **KEYWORDS** soundtrack, ventriloquism, voice and body, dubbing, voice actor, *The Exorcist*

Ventriloquism, "the art of "seeming to speak where one is not," wasn't always associated with a dummy. It originated as a purely vocal technique: the conjuring of utterances that emanate from the belly (from the Latin *venter*, or belly, and *loqui*, to speak) and most of the time it was defined as the voice of a spirit, a ghost, or God. It is curious that the ventriloquists' incorporation of a dummy into their performance coincided with the arrival of moving pictures: the psychological relationship between ventriloquists and their dummies would eventually inspire a new subgenre of horror. To understand ventriloquism necessitates an investigation into the struggle for dominance between the senses of sound and sight—a struggle fundamental to the development of cinema.

As Rick Altman explains, "we are so disconcerted by a sourceless sound that we would rather attribute the sound to a dummy or a shadow than face the mystery of its sourcelessness or the scandal of its production by a non-vocal (technological) apparatus."¹ Ventriloquism, Edison's playback, and the sound film base their appeal to spectators primarily on the tension between the two-dimensional image and three-dimensional sound, between space and surface, as well as between body and voice. My focus is on the disembodied voice in cinema, the voice with no body attached. Using psychoanalytical theory I aim to extend the concept of ventriloquism between auditory and visual

Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture, Vol. 1, Number 3, pp. 267–278. Electronic ISSN: 2688-0113 © 2020 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/res.2020.1.3.267>

modalities. Many values of sound and the voice can only be disclosed when the experience of the ear is unnaturally and unexpectedly emphasized, or when the dominion of the eye is suspended or disrupted. The meanings attached to the unaccommodated or unlocatable voices in various kinds of ventriloquism seem to produce just such a suspension. The opening of the connection between a voice and a body as its source reminds us of the voice as a partial object in the writings of Jacques Lacan, as well as Altman's model of ventriloquism, in which whoever controls sound in film is a ventriloquist who "uses" the body, manipulating it as if it were a puppet. He is anthropomorphizing the soundtrack, suggesting that the sound maneuvering itself manipulates the image for its own ends. This notion becomes fascinatingly complicated when applied to *The Exorcist* (1973, William Friedkin).

The Exorcist, in which the words that come out of the little girl's mouth following her possession are not her own but those of the devil, uses the trope of ventriloquial manipulation in several ways. For Altman, in dubbing protocol, if there are two actors making one character, that character becomes contained in his or her voice. This notion aligns with Michel Chion's "*acousmètre*," the voice-character specific to cinema that derives mysterious powers from being heard and not seen. *The Exorcist* stages the battle between the forces of sound and image, body and voice, elevating it to a terrifying good-versus-evil theological level. This battle extends the diegetic narrative to become a battle between two actors (the voice actor and the actor seen on screen) trying to share one body, a split between two personalities. The film is an exceptional case study that allows us to examine the ways in which cinema contributes to and mediates the ventriloquial act, as well as the roles of the visual, aural, and tactile perceptual channels and their relation to each other in the cinematic experience, in particular in the horror genre. The transfer between sound and image creates a unique interdependence in *The Exorcist*, which illustrates how far sound can embody the image that can also become the signal of terror.

Steven Connor notes, "no matter where you start . . . ventriloquism is always anachronistic, never quite on time."² According to the dictionary *500 Years of New Words*, the earliest known use of this word was in 1656, when Thomas Blount defines the ventriloquist as "one that hath an evil spirit speaking in his belly, not moving his lips."³ Early practitioners of this vocal art were believed to possess magical, even devilish powers. In *Witchcraft*, published in 1718, Bishop Francis Hutchinson writes: "There are . . . many [witches] that came from Words and Voices in their Stomach, which shall seem to come from others rather than the Person that speaks them. Such people are call'd Engastriloques, or Ventriloquists." In 1749 Charles Wesley claimed, "there was a compact . . . between the ventriloquist and the exorcist."⁴ There has been a close link between exorcism and ventriloquism, since the latter was used by the necromancer to summon voices of the dead or talk to the devil, yet it was equally beloved by many Christian ministers. Ventriloquism throughout its history has carried occult associations, even when the methods behind this vocal trick were scientifically explained. A striking example would be reported in 1877, when Thomas Edison gave the U.S. Senate an early demonstration of his phonograph, the first machine to record and play back sound. According to a Washington correspondent who was present, all listened intently to "the whole

repertoire of barnyard music, from the cooing of a dove to the quacking of a ducks . . . and lowing of cows.”⁵ The phonograph then burst into poetry followed by whistling, crying, laughing, shouting, and breaking into song. As the phonograph, and later the gramophone, proliferated, stage ventriloquists shifted their attention from polyphonic, voice-throwing techniques to working with a dummy. When synchronized sound was added to film in 1927, it marked the advent of what came to be known as the “talking picture,” or “talkie.” The phrase “talking picture” reanimates the ambivalence of the earlier phrase: just as the talking machine could mean both a machine that you use for talking with and a machine that is capable of talking on its own, so a “talking picture” is both a picture to which talking has been added and a picture that has started to talk for itself.

The voice is one of the most intimate, defining things about a person. And yet, the voice can only occur when a word is spoken and allowed to leave one’s body. Connor calls this “the voice’s split condition, at once cleaving to and taking leave from myself.”⁶ Ventriloquism, therefore, makes explicit the gap between voice and body, and hence points toward a paradox of self-definition and separation. The ventriloquial voice asks to be understood in terms of the relations between vision and hearing: “The fascination and the menace of ventriloquism derived from a belief that it represented the power of sound to countermand the evidence of sight.”⁷

The operations of ventriloquism, the separation of voice from its source, and the compensatory ascription of source to those sounds, the relations between the arousing ear and the interpreting eye: these phenomena become more complicated in *The Exorcist*, whose narrative power lies in the tension between the hidden and the apparent, the divine and the depraved, the progressive and the regressive. Despite a plethora of visual effects, it is the film’s use of sound that creates phantasmagoric effects, a ghostly or haunting presence. Regan, the girl whose body becomes the site of trauma and conflict in *The Exorcist*, is the embodiment simultaneously of what is too familiar and yet all-too-feared in ourselves—an effect ultimately generated through her voice more than her image. Her voice is the manifestation of the Freudian “return of the repressed,” which supports Altman’s idea that the revelation of the soundtrack is the ventriloquial return of the repressed: i.e., language.

When we start thinking “cinema as ear” (Elsaesser), we understand better the psyche of the soundtrack, in particular that associated with the horror genre. The ear allows a sensory embodiment of cinematic experience to probe deeply into the spectator’s (and listener’s) inner self. Concentration on sound directly emphasizes the spatiality of the cinematic experience:

The main “anthropological” task of hearing [. . .] [is] to stabilize our body in space, hold it up, facilitate a three-dimensional orientation and, above all, ensure an all-round security that includes even those spaces, objects and events that we cannot see, especially what goes on behind our backs. Whereas the eye searches and plunders, the ear listens in on what is plundering us. The ear is the organ of fear.⁸

Sound transforms the screen into a spatial stage, so the edge of the screen is no longer a confining frame. Ventriloquism testifies to a remarkably persistent desire to believe in

the autonomy of the voice, in the power of the voice detached not only from its source but also from its subordination to sight. The ontological bond between a sound and its origin that appears so self-evident to us in everyday life is annihilated in the technological setup of sound cinema, whose introduction allows an actor's acoustic presence to become part of the film industry's marketing machine. Mary Ann Doane writes about the public's desire for "presence" and how the lifelike representation of sound became a commodity. She cites the Memorex recording advertisement with Ella Fitzgerald, which claimed its product was "... the equivalent to having Ella in your living room."⁹ Her argument is to highlight Hollywood's use of post-synchronous sound techniques to match the proper voice to the proper body. Sonic illusion in film makes us forget that the voice we hear is Memorex, the recorded presence of the artist, even though he or she is not the same artist on the screen, but another human personality. Memorex television commercials made a spectacle out of technology's ability to confound expert listeners, including Fitzgerald herself, with the question, "Is it live or is it Memorex?" Sound is directed at the spectator, and "the voice serves as a support for the spectator's recognition and his/her identification of, as well as with, the star."¹⁰ It's the recorded "presence" of the artist. It became imperative to consider the voice as holding an essential, unique connection to the individual, thus the machine's function was to be hidden, as if there is no mechanism between the voice and the hearer, and no intervention, no distance between the sound and its object. *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen, Gene Kelly, 1952), apart from pointing to the epistemologically problematic connection between body and voice, also thematizes the commodification of the human voice. The Silencio Club sequence in *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001), meanwhile, takes the notion of separation of body and voice, of material support and aural apparition, of ventriloquism and the supernatural, to a crystallized state.

Altman has argued that the image may provide an excuse for the onscreen voice; an unattributed sound is always marked by doubt and mystery until it can be tracked to and synchronized with its source. *The Exorcist* introduces with that kind of doubt, as Regan says, "There's these real funny voices, Mom. It's like knocking. I can't go to sleep." Although initially mistaken by Regan's mother as the sound of rats scurrying, the unknown voice kept being experienced as enigmatic or anxiously incomplete, until its source could be identified, which is to say, visualized. But in this case, because Satan is invisible, its voice creates terror with its materiality. The beginning of the story also points to the experience of auditory hallucination, of "hearing voices" in psychoanalysis, which is also a trope associated with the horror genre. Christian Metz has pointed similarly to a fundamental asymmetry between sound and vision—that in cinema, we appear to need the specific verification of seeing a speaking mouth at the very moment of its utterance in order to manage the scandal of an unattributed voice. Usually the confirming obverse of this is the uneasiness induced in us by inept dubbing, or the faulty synchronization of image. *The Exorcist* manipulates the symbiotic relationship of the sound and image and lets the voice actor crawl into the body of its screen actor.

Ventriloquism, according to Connor, "has an active and passive form, depending upon whether it is thought of as the power to speak through other or as the experience of being

spoken through the others.”¹¹ The dubbed voice of Regan, played on screen by Linda Blair, was provided by then-57-year-old radio and film actor Mercedes McCambridge, who famously stated: “I had a feeling I could become an entity, not a voice. That drives me crazy, when people say, ‘you were the voice in *The Exorcist*,’ no! I tried very hard to create a character. A demon. Lucifer.” McCambridge confirms that her voice is the embodiment of the character; not content with being “a mere voice,” she claims full authorship. In the same interview in the *New York Times*, McCambridge continued to complain that Friedkin hadn’t fulfilled his screen-credit promises. In fact, Friedkin attempted initially to convince journalists that the demonic voice provided by McCambridge was actually the voice of Blair, who won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. McCambridge replied:

I have nothing against the child. I’ve never even met her. Of course, she spoke every word. But much too fast. Why did they have her garble her words? It’s impossible to fit my words to her lip movements! It’s not true that some of [Blair’s] words were blended with mine on the final track. It was the most difficult performance of my life. All of the devilish vocality is mine, all of it. Every word!¹²

After threats of legal action, Friedkin was forced to acknowledge McCambridge’s work. He credited her, though not as “the demon’s voice.” Furthermore, McCambridge didn’t just perform the demon voice, but all of the demon sounds.

The function of the soundtrack in horror for conjuring the otherworldly or amplifying intensity draws from a polyphonic vocality, or sound in different layers. *The Exorcist* incorporates sounds from the atmospheric to the specific and revalorizes both noise and silence to infuse suspense into its acoustic space. The possessed Regan’s wheezing, for example, was generated by combining McCambridge’s voice from several microphones, elevating it a bit higher each time. So instead of one real voice, there is a synthetic compilation of sounds as a chorus. To increase the realism of sound, in particular, in the scene in which “the little girl spits out green vomit when I made the ugly sounds of violent expectoration,”¹³ McCambridge swallowed 18 raw eggs with a pulpy apple, smoked cigarettes, and got drunk to make her bronchial voice gurgle, and she was bound hand and foot. For the groaning sounds, McCambridge tightened a scarf around her neck to the point of near strangulation. She wanted to render the voice of an entity that has no freedom. Her process of making sounds resembles a sort of voice-acting method. If sound can carry meaning, enable communication, and create reference, it can also destroy or distort meaning as noise and interference. Sound is therefore more malleable than the image because it has always been endowed with the power of metamorphosis, as it can alter its form. In one scene, the possessed Regan pulls up her nightgown and grunts, in a voice clearly not her own, “Fuck me! Fuck me!” From this point onward, Blair’s voice will increasingly be swamped by McCambridge’s uncanny bark, just as Regan’s personality is consumed by the demon within her.

The exorcism sequence is also composed of both real and artificial sounds, creating a hyper-real listening experience, as though the demon’s voice is a compressor of various emotions. Sound, just like image, is constructed and shaped by intersecting forces in the

process of recording, postproduction, and reproduction. Friedkin claimed that the sounds of a real exorcism performed in the Vatican had been mixed into the film. On the one hand, sound, unlike the flat image, gives film a body, a third dimension; on the other hand, film also threatens the integrity of the body. Sound possesses tactile and haptic qualities, since it is a phenomenon related to waves, hence also to movement.

McCambridge said that working on *The Exorcist* was “a religious experience” for her; so too was it for the audience. The film starts in Iraq, with a call to prayer accompanied by the sound of a hammer striking an anvil, a sound that will later be incorporated into the exorcism, blended among the barrage of creaks and groans and imbuing the ritual with additional force. *The Exorcist* uses the antagonism between (image) surface and (sound) space, between two and three dimensions, to hyper-stimulate the spectator’s psyche in a variety of innovative ways. When performance is no longer limited to the screen alone, it becomes indeed difficult to decide whether the cinematic experience takes place inside or outside the body. As evangelist Billy Graham declared upon the film’s release, there was an evil embodied in the very celluloid of the film.¹⁴ The evil Graham responds to, in my reading, finds its most concentrated form in the auditory subliminal.

In *The Exorcist*, it is the ear that renders the image visible (Chion). Thus, sound “stands for” the space implied by the image, since listening pulls one in, while seeing creates distance. With sound, the object world invades us in the film. The gaze, in the psychoanalytic sense, is often embodied in noises and hearing. The fact that sound removes all barriers or frames from the image gives rise to various sounds that no longer have a recognizable origin but that seem to come from a superior, unlocalizable position. While the ventriloquist concept prioritizes the producer of a sound, Chion’s “acousmatic sound,” which is sound one hears without seeing an originating cause, reminds us of the receiver. He identified a specific form of maladjustment of sound and vision in cinema, which also characterizes many forms of ventriloquism. He defines what he calls a cinematic acousmètre as an acoustic agency whose position with respect to the screen is undecidable, in that it is present, audible, and effective within the visible scene, but is not seen to speak. Like the demon voice, it is disembodied, as some kind of phantom character. Satan’s voice retains a significant mystery, omniscience, and omnipotence from its absence in image. In a way, it verifies Chion’s project to locate a space where sound is central to a theoretical pursuit, since that voice inextricably affects the visual but nonetheless remains primarily an aural force. As Father Merrin says in the film, “The demon’s target is not the possessed: it is us . . . the observers . . . every person in this house”—and also all of us viewers. Its sound is enveloping, surrounding us constantly both inside and outside, and it is also a special carrier of authority.

The acousmètre is not the acousmatique voice, which is heard but does not emanate from the action on the screen. Satan’s voice exists between sound and vision and is identified with neither, but rather with a complex process of transfer and interchange in which we must see sound and hear physicality. We know the actual source of the illusion to be the visible ventriloquist, even as we are forbidden sight of the voice phenomena of the acousmètre. The place and origin of this vocal character in *The Exorcist* lie neither within film nor outside it: “The acousmètre is this acousmatic

character whose relationship to the screen involves a special kind of ambiguity and oscillation. [. . .] We may define it as neither inside nor outside the image.”¹⁵ It can see everything, know and have an impact on everything, and it is also ubiquitous, such as in the most famous acousmètres: the wizard’s voice in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and the voice of Mother in *Psycho* (1960). For Chion, the uncanny power of these voices must be exposed and broken within the diegetic world, “de-acousmatized,” in order to neutralize the terrifying threat they pose as bodiless voices to the symbolic order of the diegesis. In *The Exorcist*, the exorcism ritual is required to de-acousmatize the distressing voice. The de-acousmatization is a clear-cut battle fought between good and evil, in which priests, police officers, and a mother join forces to release a child from an all-consuming devil—to reinstate Regan’s own voice. In that regard, the voice is used and abused for a moral project, thus Mark Kermode rightly asks: “wasn’t *The Exorcist* more a fantasy of wish fulfillment than a nightmare of horror?”¹⁶

The practice of ventriloquism is the doubling figure that most keenly expresses the paradox of a voice emanating from a body while not quite being “disembodied.” There is the speaker, a virtuoso projecting a voice through another object or figure, and the conduit or vessel, who receives a voice that does not properly belong to her or him. This duality is emphasized when a psychiatrist hypnotizes both Regan and “the person inside” her. In most films about ventriloquists, such as *Dead of Night* (1945) and *Magic* (1978), the drama builds from the point where the physical link between performer and dummy breaks: they argue about who needs whom more. We can think about the conflict of authorship in *The Exorcist* as existing between Regan and Satan, but it can also be regarded in terms of the voice of the filmmaker, as manifested in the soundtrack, and the characters. Consider Friedkin’s plan for the demon voice, as he proposed it to McCambridge: “If you really do this thing right, no one will realize that the voice was dubbed.”¹⁷

Ventriloquism, in which puppetry and cinema overlap, encourages a kind of slippage between character and actor. Puppetry, which has a heritage separate from the cinema, arrives with its own preformed semiotic baggage. Ventriloquism refers to extensive reiterations of the same central joke: the pretended confusion between puppet and puppeteer, metaphorical and theoretical positions. As Candice Bergen, daughter of the famous ventriloquist Edgar Bergen, points out, her father was famous for “one-man dialogues, for snappy comebacks to his own questions: the soloist of repartee. He made his living by giving his own.”¹⁸ Who is the unruly puppet that resists the master’s instructions to behave, to remain silent or speak appropriately? The duality of voices, the foundation of the ventriloquial narrative, is the difference between puppet and puppeteer. In horror films in which ventriloquists appear with possessed dummies, such as *Dead of Night* and *Magic*, there is always the ambiguity as to whether the puppet is alive or is some manifestation of a split personality within the puppeteer. The dummy is the archetypal *unheimlich* entity: simultaneously familiar and strange, childlike and adult, alive and inanimate, which is reflected in the words of the possessed Regan: “What an excellent day for an exorcism!” Through ventriloquism, a performer sublimates into two personalities: ego and alter ego, male and female, adult and child. Ventriloquist and the dummy are two parts of a split personality. The same mental

disorder is also the central theme in *The Exorcist*, as explained by the heroic Father Karras: “Your daughter doesn’t say she’s a demon, she says she’s the devil himself. Now, if you’ve seen as many psychotics as I have, you’d realize that it’s the same thing as saying you’re Napoleon Bonaparte.”

Another point about dummies is their physical appearance. Maurice Hurling in 1955 wrote: “All too often one sees a ventriloquist dragging on to the concert platform some monstrosity which he calls a ‘figure’ or some hideous shape that has been homemade and is the apple of his eye, but absolutely grotesque and almost repulsive to an audience.”¹⁹ The dummy’s startling appearance is actually due to practicalities of working on stage in the pre-electric era. Accentuated features helped the audience to see the doll’s eyes and lips moving in a poorly illuminated theater. In *The Exorcist*, for the grotesque scene of masturbating with the crucifix, a lifelike, animatronic Linda Blair dummy was used. The dummy comes to life, when Blair yelps: “Do you know what she did, your cuntin’ daughter?”

Through a psychoanalytical reading of sound, Doane has examined female voice-over and interior monologue, and, comparing the child and the spectator, she suggested that they attain pleasure within a “sonorous envelope.” From this perspective, sound functions as the voice of the mother before birth that enfolds and encloses us. For Doane, the cinema experience is characterized by the interaction of the theater and filmic space generating as an effect the phantasmatic body “which offers a support as well as a point of identification for the subject addressed by the film.”²⁰ In a similar way, Kaja Silverman argues that fantasies associated with the voice may be linked to that first voice ever heard: the mother’s. Taking the primordial experience of being immersed and enveloped by that voice as her starting point, Silverman detects in the use of sound in classical cinema a hierarchical gender logic: “a textual model which holds the female voice and body insistently to the interior of the diegesis, while relegating the male subject to a position of apparent discursive exteriority by identifying him with mastering speech, vision, or hearing.”²¹ Silverman conceptualizes the “acoustic mirror”—i.e., the mother’s voice—in a state of tension between being a nest and a cage. On the one hand, that voice, viewed from the site of the unconscious, is a symbol of imaginary wholeness, while on the other, on the conscious level, it is a sign of powerlessness and captivity.

There’s a sexual dimension to the mother-daughter relationship in *The Exorcist*. Regan’s possession takes a new form as she tries to force a sexual encounter with her mother. She rams a cross into her bleeding vagina, grabs her mother and pushes her face into her genitals as she orders her to “Lick me!” When desire, disguised as possession, is spoken aloud in Regan’s room, the story moves in another direction. After that verbal violation of the incest taboo, the story seeks to exonerate Regan of this terrible deed by making it clear that she is possessed. Regan’s transformation is clearly a sexual one, and the devil is to blame for that. Through the inhabiting voice, repressed sexual desires between mother and daughter are manifested. Father Karras also has a mother issue: during the exorcism, the possessed Regan mimics Karras’s dead mother, asking why he allowed her to die. The voice of mother as triggering effect for Karras’s suicide confirms Silverman’s idea of maternal voice being both the nest and the cage.

Regan's possession dehumanizes her while simultaneously confirming Karras's humanity, which in turn reinforces his status as a powerful religious authority figure. Regan and her mother don't have a particularly active role in the possession or exorcism. *The Exorcist*, much like the horror genre as a whole, reflects traditional masculine values. It downplays Regan's subjective experience, and her predicament functions primarily as motivation for the Father to rediscover his faith and allegiance to patriarchal institutions and authority. We hear relatively little of Regan's voice, but we do witness her urinating on the floor of her suburban home, vomiting on the neighborhood clergy, spewing forth obscenities, and masturbating with the crucifix. The film positions her voice as threat because it can be used to speak against repressive societal structures or to transgress gender boundaries. *The Exorcist* visually represents this threat by associating that voice with the physical ugliness of the possessed. By establishing Regan as beautiful and innocent, the corruption of her physical body renders anything that comes out of it as equally corrupt, for "it is precisely the voice that holds bodies and language together."²² In that regard, possession provides Regan with an empowering voice, while exorcism subsequently disempowers her. Demonic possession can be viewed as allowing Regan to express her burgeoning sexuality and discover her own voice and sense of agency. The experience of possession enables Regan to speak her mind without fear of repercussion. Furthermore, as Christopher Olson and Carrie Reinhard note, coding the demonic voice as masculine—and it does indeed sound masculine—adds to this metaphorical reading; the possessed girl gains strength as she draws on the power of the masculine. Inhabiting a liminal space between male and female, the demon's voice suggests a transgression of gender boundaries. However, this reading is complicated when considering which actress provided the devil's voice. McCambridge is known for her butch characters who reflected her own "deviant female persona." In that sense, *The Exorcist* might be considered to posit lesbianism as deviant, since the devil's voice that resides within the body of a teenage girl induces her to act in a sexual way toward those around her. In any case it leads to "a confusion regarding Regan's possessed sexual orientation and the intent behind the sexual acts she performs."²³

The ambiguous and polyvalent position of the female voice brings us to Chion's concept of the "screaming point": "the man is but the organizer of the spectacle, the producer of this extravaganza, but [. . .] the screaming point is beyond him, just as it is beyond the woman who issues it as the medium. [. . .] The screaming point is where speech is suddenly extinct, a black hole, the exit of being."²⁴ Based on the idea of cinema—particularly the horror genre—working as a machine for producing the female scream, Chion sees that scream as without felt transition from meaning to nonsense, or as a drop into a black hole beyond and prior to signification. In *The Exorcist* the demon's voice is invasive, mobile, and malleable; additionally, the screams of Regan and her mother point to such real moments, and add to the metaphysical aspect of sound that complicates the inside/outside conundrum.

As noted above, an uncanny variant of ventriloquism arises in the gap introduced between the voice off screen and the voice embodied on screen. Taking his idea further, Chion writes that while the person whose voice we hear but who is off screen may have

been seen on screen earlier, or is shown later, enabling us to place the voice in a body, such “de-acousmatization”²⁵ remains uncanny, for an uncertainty or hesitation is introduced via the gap that splits authorship between disembodied speech and embodiment. The possessed Regan’s voice introduces a certain unreality. As Slavoj Žižek suggests, it too is spectral:

An unbridgeable gap separates forever a human body from “its” voice. The voice displays a spectral autonomy, it never quite belongs to the body we see, so that even when we see a living person talking, there is always a minimum of ventriloquism at work: it is as if the speaker’s own voice hollows him out and in a sense speaks “by itself” through him.²⁶

Mladen Dolar, drawing on Žižek, goes on to argue that “ventriloquism pertains to voice as such, to its inherently acousmatic character: the voice comes from inside the body, the belly, the stomach—from something incompatible with and irreducible to the activity of the mouth. The fact that we see the aperture does not demystify the voice; on the contrary, it enhances the enigma.”²⁷ When we apply Dolar’s exploration of the human voice as an object, the possessed Regan’s voice is as present as it is elusive, an object of desire that stands in for what is felt as lost, and thereby signifies lack. He suggests that to speak is foremost the manifest desire to be heard by an Other, to engage an encounter with an Other. The voice itself, however, is

what does not contribute to making sense. It is the material element recalcitrant to meaning, and if we speak in order to say something, then the voice is precisely that which cannot be said. It is there, in the very act of saying, but it eludes any pinning down, to the point where we could maintain that it is the non-linguistic, the extralinguistic element which enables speech phenomena, but cannot itself be discerned by linguistics.²⁸

Acousmètre, sourceless or autonomous sound, can be experienced as both a lack and an excess. It is a mystery to be explained and an intensity to be contained. Above all, the voice, as the body’s means of producing itself as sound, is associated with the display of power. Both Žižek and Dolar maintain that listening to voices (including one’s own) is always accompanied by a ventriloquistic effect. From the psychoanalytic viewpoint, the voice is the objective correlate of what Lacan calls the split subject. The ventriloquist’s voice is neither anchored in the body of the ventriloquist nor in that of the dummy; the voice is enigmatically doubled and only partially visible. The voice is a precarious frontier that separates inside from outside: while the voice emanates from within the body, it is also released into the world, an uncontrollable outside. It is not so much “I” who speaks, but rather I am spoken, the voice speaks in and through me. In Dolar’s words, the voice as intruder in psychosis points to

the sheer impossibility of sorting out the inner and the outer, for the voice heard is experienced as more intimate than the inner and more compelling than any exterior voice. This compelling voice beyond one’s power has had a long history as a divine sign, before it became a matter of psychopathology. The history of hearing voices was intertwined, up to modern times, with the history of divine signs.²⁹

If sound and image have become indispensable to each other, as well as equivalent—even to the point that each is as untrustworthy as the other—then their mutual untrustworthiness acts as the new terrain of representation. The physical encounter in *The Exorcist* in particular, like horror films generally, reflects our struggles with both our individual fears and the more abstract sociocultural anxieties, but also, by dramatizing the defeat of the devil, it restores normalcy. What’s attractive in horror stems from its tendency to depict the monster, the devil in this case, as the horrifying Other. According to Robin Wood, “Otherness” reflects that which a dominant ideology “cannot recognize or accept but must deal with . . . either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it.”³⁰ The demon voice in *The Exorcist*, which stages in various ways the collapse between body and voice, represents that horrifying Other at its most essential and unnerving.

Today, we have become habituated to the strangeness of the disembodied voice. Sound recording domesticated the ventriloquial feats of voice-throwing and necromancy—we summon the dead daily through our earbuds. Jacques Derrida believed that learning to live can only happen in the between, in an uncanny space between life and death. Developing a metaphysics of the ghost, looking for resurrections, he suggests, “what happens between two, and between all the ‘two’s’ one likes, such as between life and death, can only maintain itself with some ghost, can only talk with or about some ghost, seems to indicate the paradoxical need for the communion with the dead as primary condition of living and being.”³¹ If horror films such as *The Exorcist* make us feel more alert to the tenuousness of being while we are in their thrall, it is at least in part due to their implicit suggestion that every voice we hear hovers in some spectral zone between life and death. ■

NOTES

1. Rick Altman, “Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism,” *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 7
2. Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7.
3. Bill Sherck, *500 Years of New Words: The Fascinating Story of How, When, and Why These Words First Entered the English Language* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2004), 108.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 109.
6. Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 7.
7. *Ibid.*, 14.
8. Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 131.
9. Mary Ann Doane, “The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space,” *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 35.
10. *Ibid.*, 36.
11. Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 14.
12. Charles Higham, “Movies; Will the Real Devil Speak Up? Yes!” *New York Times* (January 27, 1974).
13. *Ibid.*
14. Mark Kermode, *The Exorcist (BFI Film Classics)* (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 9.

15. Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sounds on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 17.
16. Kermode, *The Exorcist*, 10.
17. Higham, "Movies."
18. Candice Bergen, *Knock Wood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 31.
19. Maurice Hurling, *A Short Cut to Ventriloquism* (Louth, UK: Cooper Press, 2010), 22.
20. Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema," 34.
21. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), ix.
22. Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 2.
23. Christopher Olson and Carrie Lynn Reinhard, *Possessed Women, Haunted States: Cultural Tensions in Exorcism Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 27.
24. Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 79.
25. Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 131.
26. Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 58.
27. Dolar, *A Voice*, 70.
28. *Ibid.*, 15.
29. Aaron Schuster, "Everyone is a Ventriloquist: An Interview with Mladen Dolar," *Metropolis M* (April/May 2009), 1.
30. Robin Wood, "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70's," in *Horror, The Film Reader*, ed. Mark Jancovich (New York: Routledge, 2002), 27.
31. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 176.