
William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* and the Proprietary Nature of Sound

Jay Beck

The *Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) was one of the first films of the 1970s that sought to break down the rigid barriers between the industrial definitions of dialogue, music, and sound effects, while also actively engaging questions about the ontological nature of sound in motion pictures. Released on December 26, 1973, the film represents director William Friedkin's calculated attempt to shock and terrify his audience using any means at his disposal. *The Exorcist's* subject matter, drawn from William Peter Blatty's best-selling horror novel of the same title, guaranteed a large audience for the film. But Friedkin wanted to make it more than just a simple adaptation. Along with a number of questionable methods for eliciting the 'proper' reaction from his actors—including the firing of guns on the set, physically striking his actors, and submitting them to torturous stunt work—Friedkin also experimented with a variety of special effects, makeup, and a highly expressive soundtrack. In light of these elements *The*

Exorcist can be evaluated for its attempts to directly stimulate the audience through formal means, especially through sound's ability to evoke the supernatural.

Most tellingly, Friedkin and his sound team utilized experimental sound techniques to further these goals and as a result the film was honoured for its accomplishments with an Academy Award for best sound.¹ Very often the result of these acoustic experiments was the pure physical stimulation of his audience. Friedkin claimed that, like

1. The Oscar was awarded to production mixer Christopher Newman and re-recording mixer Robert "Buzz" Knudson. The irony in this traditional breakdown of the award between production and post-production sound is that it effaced the contribution of several other individuals on the sound team. By means of contrast, the nomination for Best Sound Track at the 1975 BAFTA [British Academy of Film and Television Arts] Awards recognized the contributions of Christopher Newman, Jean-Louis Ducarme, Robert Knudson, Fred J. Brown, Bob Fine, Ross Taylor, Ron Nagle, Doc Siegel, Gonzalo Gavira, and Hal Landaker.



Hitchcock, he was attempting to manipulate the emotional responses of his audience. Yet, unlike Hitchcock, Friedkin was not interested in playing on the audience's narrative expectations, instead he preferred to affect them directly. According to the director, "People want to see movies because they want to be moved viscerally [...] I mean, I'm not interested in an interesting movie. I am interested in gut level reaction" (qtd. in McCormick 18). This emphasis on a "gut level reaction" meant that Friedkin was trying any and every possible effect to stimulate the audience. The result was a film that worked well in this regard, but it remains open to debate whether the presence of such creative sound work is a contribution of the director, his sound team, or if it is a byproduct of a large budget and a serendipitous labour situation.

What distinguishes *The Exorcist* in the history of 1970s film sound is the way in which any number of effects—visual and acoustic—are intrinsically tied to the supernatural aspects of the story. Often moving from a fully modulated optical soundtrack to absolute silence, the film primarily attempted to use the dynamics of the soundtrack to manipulate the emotions of the audience. Supervising sound editor Cecelia Hall has noted: "*The Exorcist* was one of the first films to understand the importance of affecting the audience psychologically. William Friedkin said he wanted it to be too loud because he wanted the audience to be slightly on edge by the middle of the film" (qtd. in LoBrutto 199). Though Friedkin's main concern was with standardizing audience reaction, a great deal of subtlety went into

the original construction of the sounds for the film. This was possible because Friedkin's willingness to experiment gave the effects teams wide latitude in the creation of new and shocking techniques. Importantly, none of the sound effects artists were members of the traditional Hollywood sound unions. Instead, each was hired as a freelance sound 'artist' outside of the jurisdiction of the unions or Warner Bros. studio. Bob Fine,² Gonzalo Gavira,³ Doc Siegel,⁴ Ken Nordine,⁵ and Ron Nagle were each contracted separately to design special sound effects for the film.

2. More than being just the developer of the Perspecta Sound system in the mid 1950s, Bob Fine was also a recording engineer and producer as well as the owner of Studio A in New York City. In the late 1950s and 1960s, Bob Fine and his wife Wilma Cozart Fine pioneered the "Living Presence" 3-channel recording series for the Mercury classical label. Although he is principally known for his vast contributions to the recording industry in the 1960s and 1970s, he also lent his talents as a sound mixer to two other film productions, *House of Dark Shadows* (Dan Curtis, 1970) and *Hercules in New York* (Arthur Allan Seidelman, 1970).

3. Gonzalo Gavira is best known for his sound effects work in Mexican cinema, especially for his contribution to Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (1970).

4. Doc Siegel was a recording engineer associated with many rock bands from the late 1960s and early 1970s including The Seeds, Buffalo Springfield, The Monkees, The Spencer Davis Group, and Black Oak Arkansas. It is through his work with Buffalo Springfield's 1967 eponymous debut that he would have first encountered composer/arranger Jack Nitzsche.

5. Chicago-based radio host Ken Nordine, who was not credited in the film, was hired by Friedkin in 1973 to develop a number

San Francisco-based musician Ron Nagle was hired by the film's editor Bud Smith to create custom sound effects,⁶ and Nagle combined his musical training with an astute knowledge of recording technology to develop several of the familiar sounds in the film (Ehrlich 16). Nagle had never worked in film sound before, but working both in San Francisco and with Jack Nitzsche in Los Angeles, he set forth to craft a number of unique sounds that were used on the final soundtrack. While in San Fran-

The Exorcist is unique in the evolution of film sound for how it blurred the boundaries between sound effects and music. The score itself was created by using extracts from experimental 20th century classical pieces by Anton Webern, Krzysztof Penderecki, and Hans Werner Henze, yet these extracts were exclusively used only during moments of narrative transition. The two main exceptions to this rule are also probably the most recognizable pieces from the film. The first is guitarist/composer Mike Oldfield's

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cisco, Nagle created sound effects by agitating several bees trapped in a jar, getting his dogs into a fight, and recording his girlfriend's stomach while she drank water (Ehrlich 16). Several of Nagle's sounds can be heard during the film's prologue set in Iraq, and each of the sounds was treated in the studio to estrange it from a recognizable source. This led to the creation of a number of 'signature sounds' within the film, each associated with a particular narrative event: the insect buzz of the amulet, the rats scratching in the attic, the bouncing bed, and, of course, Regan's (Linda Blair) demonic head twist.

of the effects for *The Exorcist*. Although the director claimed that none of Nordine's sound effects were used in the film, Nordine filed suit against Warner Bros. on 23 January 1974 to recover his contracted payment of \$35,633 and to seek proper screen credit. Although Nordine subsequently did not receive screen credit, he did receive a cash settlement from Warner Bros. in 1979 after it was demonstrated that some of Nordine's sound effects were used in the final film, specifically a number of the animal squeals and "the sound of hamster feet scratching inside a cardboard box" ("Nordine Vs. 'Exorcist'" 6). Also see "WB Settles On Trial's 4th Day" 6.

6. Bud Smith was hired to edit the Iraq prologue only. This was done so that Smith could edit and supervise the sound construction of Reel 1 while Evan Lottman and Friedkin were editing the rest of the film. See "Seeing The Invisible—Evan Lottman" in Oldham 219-234.

"Tubular Bells," when Chris (Ellen Burstyn) returned from location shooting and stumbled upon Father Karras (Jason Miller) for the first time, and the other is George Crumb's "Threnody I: Night of the Electric Insects" from his *Black Angel* composition, when Father Karras witnessed Regan's stigmata. Because each piece is associated with a significant narrative event, they achieved thematic status in relation to the film. However, this is most likely an effect that Friedkin did not want because the vast majority of the music in the film was marked by understatement, straddling the line between being perceived as music or ambient effects. According to the director, "the kind of music I wanted was number one, nothing scary. No so-called frightening music. No wall-to-wall music. [...] No music behind the big scenes. No music ever behind dialogue, when people are talking" (Friedkin 4).

Conversely, most of the signature sound effects created by Nagle and the sound artists did take on the musical function of leitmotifs throughout the film, and their repetition carried an emotional connection to a prior scene. This is because Friedkin did not want the music to carry most of the emotional weight in the film and thus the sound effects take up the work of stimulating emotions in the audience. Often this was done by the previously mentioned manipulation of the film's dynamics. This is especially noticeable during the Iraq prologue where the soundtrack expanded to its full dynamic range during the archaeological dig. Yet



with Father Merrin's (Max von Sydow) discovery of the amulet, the soundtrack immediately shrank to a perceptual 'silence' by eliminating the hard effects, music, and ambient wind, leaving just the sound of Foley footsteps. The sound that followed and which engulfed the soundtrack, Nagle's 'insect buzz' track, was one of the first signature sounds that occurred throughout the film and created thematic connections between their representative scenes. Another signature sound was that of the scratching in the attic, a sound heard in a number of scenes in Chris's apartment during the first half of the film. Constructed from a combination of "guinea pigs running on a board covered with sandpaper, the scratching of fingernails, and the sound of a bandsaw as it flew through the air," the effect, repeated several times, each time further unsettled Chris and the audience because the source of the sound was never revealed ("Warner Bros. Inc. and Hoya Productions, Inc."). By keeping the sounds offscreen, Friedkin enhanced the film's horror by letting the audience imagine the sources. For example, as Regan's possession developed, the audience was not allowed to see the events transpiring behind closed doors and was left to imagine the horrific visual elements that corresponded with the bangs, crashes, and unearthly moans emanating from the room.

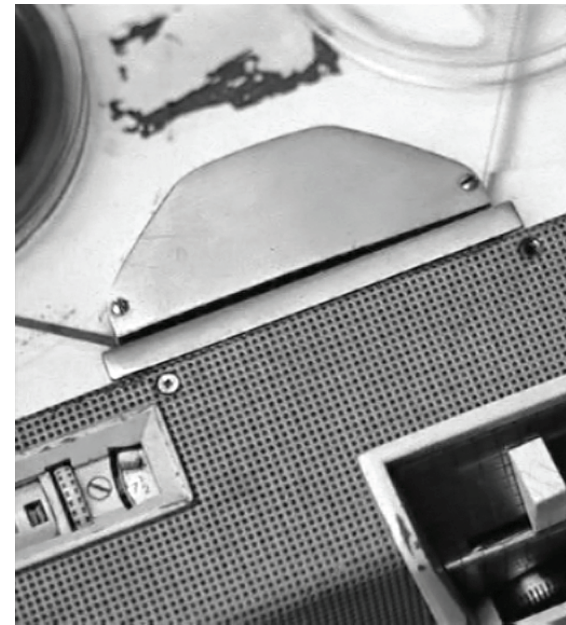
While these signature sounds are highly evocative and meticulously crafted, often their use fell short for reasons that have nothing to do with the sound team. *The Exorcist* is a compendium of interesting

scene-specific sound work without a larger system of sound use to integrate the sounds into the narrative. Because there is little subtlety in the dispersal of sound effects throughout the film, the film became anti-climactic once the exorcism begins. The presence of the most powerful and arguably least subtle sound effect, the demon's voice, introduced a highly conflictive element into the film: a deliberate break with the ontological nature of sound. By substituting Linda Blair's voice with any number of other voices, Friedkin created a powerful statement about the constructed nature of the soundtrack. The basic premise behind the exorcism scenes is that the audience has to believe that the voice of the devil is speaking through the girl's body. Although there is a powerful effect of cohesion created by the synchrony of the voice and lip movements, ultimately the audience was often pushed out of the diegesis by the overt number and types of sounds that the demon produces. The build-up of sound effects in the film thus left Friedkin with no choice but to overload the girl's voice with as many acoustic tricks as possible.

According to sound recordist Christopher Newman, Friedkin initially wanted the demonic voice to be heard as gender neutral, and Friedkin started to explore the possibility of utilizing other voices during the dubbing phase of the picture ("Fear of God"). According to Michel Chion, the powerful effect in the "mismatching" of actress Mercedes McCambridge's voice with Linda Blair's body was a pivotal moment in the status of the voice in cinema: "*The Exorcist* contributed significantly to showing spectators how the cin-

ematic voice is ‘stuck on’ to the cinematic body. This grafting of heterogeneous elements can be seen as *The Exorcist’s* very object. Audiences could stop thinking of the voice as a ‘natural’ element oozing from the body on its own” (164). Yet even though Chion positions the film as a progressive moment in the evolution of film sound, the ultimate result of the film’s impact was to foreground claims about the ontological ‘purity’ of film sound and the proprietary value of sound effects.

effects added to Linda Blair’s portrayal of Regan. In an interview with Charles Higham of the *New York Times*, McCambridge recounted her contribution to the film as follows: “Doing that sound track was a terrible experience. I didn’t just do the voice, I did all of the demon sounds. That wheezing, for instance. My chronic bronchitis helped with that” (qtd. in Higham D13). Upon the completion of her dubbing work, Friedkin supervised the mixing of McCambridge’s voice and his notes include marks to slow down



Because the demon voices were considered sound effects rather than dialogue, Mercedes McCambridge’s work creating the sounds was literally effaced from the film. In technical terms, her ‘vocals’ were edited and manipulated as sound effects, physically separated from the dialogue in the editing and mixing process (Buskin 33). Not only does this create a strange disjunction between the speaking voice and the voice that is ultimately heard in the film, but it also creates a labour conflict in terms of who is acting at any given moment. This makes *The Exorcist* an extremely interesting case on the proprietary nature of sound effects for two reasons. First, it sparked a controversy between the filmmakers and Mercedes McCambridge over the credit for vocalizing the demon’s voice. And second, Friedkin’s claim that the film’s sound effects were the legal possession of the studio led to a well-documented court case that questioned the very ownership of sound.

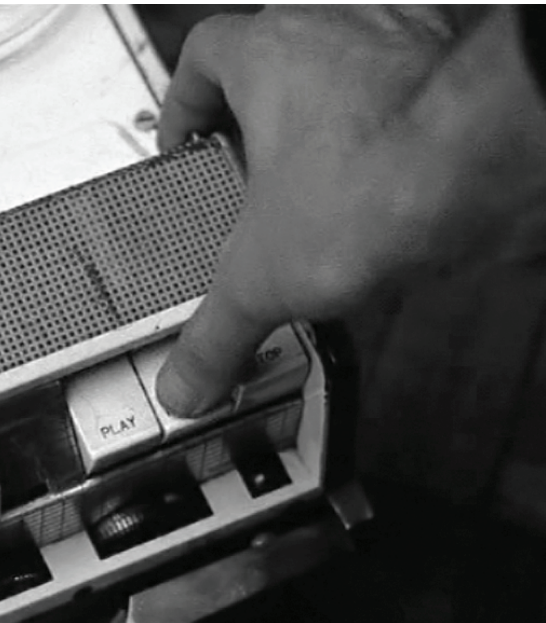
In the first instance, Mercedes McCambridge was not credited for her contribution to the film on its initial release in 1973 because her vocalizations were considered to be

certain sounds, to switch between the demon and Regan’s voice, to build tracks from multiple takes, and to create a ‘backward’ voice by reversing the tape. Despite the manipulation of McCambridge’s voice as an effect, her vocal phatic qualities are easily recognized and her performance lends a great deal of weight to the creation of the demon.

The suppression of McCambridge’s screen credit was done in part to increase Blair’s chance of receiving an Academy Award nomination for best supporting actress by not having to acknowledge the work of another actress in creating Regan’s character. It was only after the Oscar ballots were tabulated in late January 1974 and Blair received the nomination that news was leaked to *Variety* and *Time* about Mercedes McCambridge’s contribution (Higham D13). In an interview in early 1974, William Friedkin admitted that he chose McCambridge precisely for the desired “emphysemiac” wheeziness of her voice, a sound that was used prominently whenever the demon was not speaking (Friedkin 9). Friedkin’s refusal to credit McCambridge’s contribution exposes an abiding Hollywood assumption

about film sound operating in the 1970s: that the voice of the ‘speaking body’ was intrinsically the real voice, while the voice being added in dubbing was somehow an added ‘effect.’ Despite the fact that almost all of the dialogue in the film was replaced in post-production, Friedkin established a precedent whereby the voice of the actors, whether recorded live or in ADR, was somehow the ‘proper’ voice to match to their body.⁷ Also, because the effects in the film were ‘created’ instead of ‘generated’ by the objects to which

several of the signature sounds created for *The Exorcist*. In the suit, the litigants claimed they were entitled to reparations because “the creation, development and execution of the sound effects in *The Exorcist* was a monumental task extending over many, many months at a cost of several hundred thousand dollars” (“Warner Bros. Inc. and Hoya Productions, Inc.”). Claiming that the sound effects were copied by the Italian film did not mean that the actual effects were electronically duplicated, rather that they were



they are attached, it was assumed that they somehow held a proprietary value that was greater than the original sounds themselves.

This was evidenced in October 1975 when Friedkin and Warner Bros. brought suit against the Italian horror film *Beyond the Door* (*Chi sei?*, Ovidio G. Assonitis, 1974; U.S. release July 31, 1975) claiming that the film copied

7. This assumption of an ontological link between the speaking actor and the uttered voice is a notion that gained greater acceptance throughout the 1970s. The use of ‘doubled’ or dubbed voices in cinema is as old as cinema sound and can be traced from Warner Oland’s singing voice in *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927) to the explicit display of voice-doubling in *Singin’ In the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952). However, due to the breakdown of classical recording and mixing strategies with the dissolution of the studio system, a countercurrent developed in opposition to the various experiments in sound and image presentation. This mode of filmmaking sought to reconstruct an ontological link between sound and image to cover over their split during the production and post-production process. For more, see Beck.

emulated and “arrived at only after the Italian film makers had ‘studied and dissected’ the effects achieved in *The Exorcist*” (“Warner Bros. Inc. and Hoya Productions, Inc.”). Effectively what Friedkin and Warner Bros. sought to demonstrate was that the originality of the sound effects made them proprietary and therefore covered under copyright law. But the most disturbing aspect of the lawsuit was the way that it entirely downplayed the special contributions of McCambridge, the sound effects artists, and the musicians. Oddly, the suit cited only three sounds that were emulated in the Italian film: the sound of the loud scratching, the devil’s voice within Regan, and the multifaceted voice of the devil (“Warner Bros. Inc. and Hoya Productions, Inc.”).

Perhaps McCambridge not receiving proper credit is overshadowed by the way Friedkin and Warner Bros. did not recognize the basic conceit behind the sound effects in *The Exorcist*. Even though Friedkin posited the transparency of McCambridge’s voice in creating the demon vocals, the lawsuit excoriates *Beyond the Door* for bearing “the heavy hand of the copyist” in recreating the effects (Smith 22).

What this implies is that the sounds being created for *The Exorcist* went beyond aiding and advancing the story to the point where the sound effects drew attention to themselves. However, in the process of doing so, the filmmakers contradicted the discursive function of effects work not bearing the trace of its artificial origin. In the end, it is precisely the fact that these effects stood out in the sound mix that made them open to replication.⁸

Ultimately the advances in sound technique and sound effects design in *The Exorcist* were overshadowed by William Friedkin's single-minded desire to stimulate his audience by any means available. Whereas the creation of the sound effects and musical elements in the film were produced on an unprecedented scale, the end result of their use was simply to manipulate the audience rather than to augment Blatty's story. Nearly every device in the film, from its makeup and prosthetics to its foul language and shock cuts, was calculated to have a maximum impact on the audience. Unfortunately, the result of the careful work that went into the creation of the sounds is that they are regularly overwhelmed by the cumulative weight of the other effects. Unlike the restrained use of sound in Hitchcock's thrillers, Friedkin's emphasis on affect strains the narrative coherence of the film.

Film critic James Monaco echoed this point when he wrote that:

[a]s an engine of manipulation, *The Exorcist* succeeds magnificently. What other film of recent years has had the medical, psychological effect it had? It is violently effective [...] From plot elements to special effects to the handling of sound (Friedkin has always been very conscious of the effect the level of the soundtrack has) to the nervous cutting of the music, *The Exorcist* is a catalogue of devices that work. But to what end? Technique is admirable, but eventually audiences want to hear the voice of the person who's telling the story. They may not like Bogdanovich's voice, but they can't even hear Friedkin's." (148-149)

What had the potential for being a taut psychological and supernatural thriller became a compendium of effects solely designed to manipulate the audience and to generate box office success. In the wake of the blockbuster aesthetic that emerged with films like *The Godfather* (Francis Ford

Coppola, 1972), *The Exorcist*, and *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), it became more and more difficult to integrate creative sound work into major motion pictures. Subsequently, a history of experimental sound creation and the contributions of several sound artists wound up lost in the mix.

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8. The case of Warner Bros. Inc. and Hoya Productions, Inc. v. Film Ventures International was heard on 10 October 1975. Although Judge David W. Williams ruled that the advertising campaign for *Beyond The Door* improperly suggested that the film was a sequel to *The Exorcist*, he did not find sufficient grounds to rule on the claim of character protectability under copyright laws. *Beyond The Door* completed a limited theatrical run where it received universally negative reviews and a minimal box office.