

Favourite Moments of Film Sound

Sound, Silence and Horror

By William Whittington

The arrival of the exorcist Father Merrin (Max von Sydow) to the home of Regan MacNeil (Linda Blare), a young girl possessed by the devil, is one of the most resonant scenes in horror film history. It is the haunting lull before the terrifying ritual of exorcism that is performed to purge the demon from Regan's body and save her soul. Yet woven into this struggle is the battle for another soul, that of Father Damien Karras (Jason Miller), a priest and psychologist who fears a loss of faith brought on by mounting personal doubts and augmented by a family crisis. In the end, Father Karras finds that his ultimate redemption may lie in the fate of this young girl.

Though I've seen this film more than a half a dozen times, I still find it both provocative and terrifying, primarily because of the sound design (for which it won an Academy Award along with Best Screenplay). On initial viewing, the narrative appears somewhat fragmented as it moves from a dig in Northern Iraq to the domestic setting of a home in Georgetown. But the sound design for the film binds the narrative in subtle and idiosyncratic ways, clarifying the thematic opposition of good verses evil. More importantly, the film also demands a reading

strategy that is highly invested in understanding how the story is structured by the sound.

For me, the most compelling sequence of the film is the opening set in Northern Iraq. Here, sound is used to establish the various conflicts that will recur throughout the film. Most notably among these conflicts is the tension between life and death that culminates in the transfer of the exorcism ritual from Merrin to Karras upon the former's expiration near the end of the film. The inevitability of Merrin's death is established from the beginning of the film as we find the priest on an archeological dig. Our initial impressions are formed by the wail of an Iraqi's song against the blistering sun followed by the sounds of axes picking away at the earth. Yet an ominous tone linked with the discovery of a small demonic statue with a fierce expression indicates this will be a story of contrasts. As Merrin dusts off the figure, the metered rhythm of nearby diggers suggests a heartbeat. This rhythm is picked up in the next scene as we hear the sounds of steel being pounded at a nearby foundry and the drumming of local musicians, while Father Merrin sits at a street side café. This motif reflects Merrin's heart condition suggested by the pills he takes with his tea. His hands shake and his face is drawn as he contemplates the dangerous spiritual task that he knows he must undertake in Georgetown. The pounding then becomes more pronounced as he makes his way through the streets next to the foundry, pausing only briefly to reveal a metal worker who has lost an eye, presumably from his work with the molten metal. The uncanny image suggests that perhaps all efforts

in life take their physical and emotional toll. Meanwhile, the chanting and music within the sequence offer a variation on the motif of anxious flutters.

Moments later this sequence builds to a frightening crescendo inside the study of a fellow archeologist, yet it is a culmination founded upon the absence of sound. An abrupt cut takes us to the image of a wall clock, accented by the click of the pendulum mechanism. The sound of the street is now little more than a murmur. The close recordings of the Foley effects of a pen writing and Merrin examining the artifacts of the day bring a sense of intimacy and calm, reflecting perhaps the relationship between the two colleagues. But the calm is broken when Merrin's associate mutters, "Evil verses Evil" as Merrin examines the figure he found earlier. The ticking clock suddenly stops. Silence. The moment is chilling. This abrupt end to the sound foreshadows Merrin's eventual heart attack. What makes the sequence so rich for me is that, in this instant, the sound design accesses the metaphysical discourses around death and the afterlife, which sets the tone for the rest of the film.

When Merrin then says, "There is something I must do," his character is illuminated even further. This is a man who knows he will die in a struggle that has gone on for centuries. His battle is only one in a long series. The Iraq sequence ends by reinforcing this notion through another sonic metaphor. This final sound spectacle occurs when Merrin goes to face the statue of the laughing demon. Suddenly, the sound of two dogs fighting blankets the soundtrack. The sound design begins as a realistic accompaniment to a shot of nearby dogs at each

other's throats. But then the sound becomes amplified and processed, exceeding its grounding in the tangible world and assuming a privileged position beyond. This mixing strategy reveals the endless battle between good and evil that will find echoes throughout the film (such as when the butler and the film director fight and snarl at one another during the MacNeil dinner party). Most important among these echoes is when the possessed Regan growls and attacks the two priests during the exorcism, bringing Merrin's experience in Iraq full circle with the moment of his impending death in Georgetown, just before passing the battle on to the next in line. The film depends on such echoes to tightly weave together the narrative and themes of the film. The effect is sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious, yet these variations function skillfully to structure the storytelling and draw us into this world of sound, silence and horror.

Bio:

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