Who Speaks Through Regan? Possession, Voice, and the Crisis of Subjectivity in *The Exorcist*

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Abstract

William Peter Blatty's 1971 novel *The Exorcist* and William Friedkin's 1973 film adaptation organize the possession of twelve-year-old Regan MacNeil around a struggle over who may speak for, about, and through her. Existing scholarship has productively examined the work's conflict between science and religion, its medical imagery, gendered body horror, and the acoustic construction of demonic evil. This article shifts the question from what Regan's possession means to how the disruption of voice, agency, and interpretive authority makes possession horrifying. Drawing on Freud's uncanny, Lacan's accounts of the divided subject, the signifier, and the Other, and psychoanalytic work on cinematic voice, I argue that possession functions as an extreme crisis of enunciation. Regan's body becomes the site where medicine, psychiatry, maternal testimony, Catholic ritual, and the demon compete to determine the truth of her condition. Comparison of novel and film shows that adaptation intensifies this crisis by separating visible body from audible agency. The horror of possession lies not only in bodily invasion, but in the possibility that one's voice may cease to guarantee one's authorship of speech.

Keywords: The Exorcist; psychoanalysis; possession; voice; subjectivity; Lacan

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Introduction: The Problem Is Not Only What Possesses Regan

Few scenes in modern horror are as immediately recognizable as the possessed Regan MacNeil speaking in a voice that no longer seems to belong to her. In William Peter Blatty's 1971 novel *The Exorcist* and William Friedkin's 1973 film adaptation, the transformation of a twelve-year-old girl's body is inseparable from a transformation in speech. Regan curses, accuses, imitates, predicts, lies, pleads, and speaks in voices that destabilize the relation between body and speaker. The question posed by possession is therefore not simply whether a demon exists. It is also a question of enunciation: who is speaking when Regan speaks?

That question is surrounded by other speakers. Chris MacNeil narrates her daughter's changes to physicians. Doctors translate Regan's body into neurological and psychiatric hypotheses. Psychiatrists interpret the possibility of possession as belief or disorder. Father Damien Karras, simultaneously priest and psychiatrist, listens for evidence that would distinguish fraud, illness, and the demonic. Father Merrin eventually names the encounter within the ritual vocabulary of exorcism. The possessing entity, meanwhile, repeatedly claims authority over Regan's body and over the private knowledge of those who approach it. Regan herself becomes increasingly difficult to locate as the subject of her own speech.

Scholarship on *The Exorcist* has already established the importance of these competing explanatory systems. Cade (2016) analyzes the complex presentation of scientific method in both novel and film, especially the recurring imagery of excavation and stratification. Chambers (2021) situates Friedkin's film at the intersection of science, psychiatry, religion, and the institutional anxieties of 1970s America, emphasizing both the graphic medical procedures inflicted on Regan and the film's historically specific negotiation of scientific and Catholic authority. Other scholarship has examined gender, abjection, monstrosity, and the cultural force of the possessed female body. More recently, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen (2023) has shown how the acoustic qualities of possessed Regan's voice communicate moral corruption to audiences, making vocal degradation an expressive sign of evil.

The present article builds on those accounts but changes the organizing question. Rather than treating the work primarily as a binary contest between science and religion, I distinguish among somatic medicine, psychiatry, and Catholic ritual as overlapping but differently authorized explanatory discourses. I ask how the novel and film distribute the authority to define Regan as a subject and, more specifically, how the breakdown between voice and agency makes possession horrifying. The central claim is that possession in *The Exorcist* functions as a crisis of enunciation. Regan's body remains visible and materially present while the relation between that body and the apparent source of speech becomes radically uncertain. Around this uncertainty, institutions and individuals compete to produce a truth about her. The horror lies not only in invasion of the body but in the possibility that speech can emerge from one's body without guaranteeing one's authorship of it.

This argument requires a distinction between voice and subjectivity. A voice can be heard without establishing who speaks. Psychoanalysis is particularly useful here because it refuses the fantasy of a fully transparent speaking subject. Freud's account of the uncanny describes disturbances in which what should remain familiar becomes strange, while psychoanalytic theories of symptom and unconscious formation already complicate the idea that speakers master everything they say. Lacan radicalizes this complication: the subject is constituted in language and divided by the signifier rather than existing as a self-identical consciousness that subsequently uses words. His distinction between statement and enunciation, and his concept of

the Other as the symbolic locus from which language acquires authority, make possession an unusually concentrated dramatization of a problem that is structurally present in ordinary speech.

This does not mean that Regan's possession should be reduced to a psychoanalytic diagnosis. Such a move would merely replace the demon with a theoretical master explanation and repeat the struggle for interpretive possession that the narrative itself stages. The psychoanalytic reading offered here instead treats the supernatural premise seriously as a formal device through which the works estrange ordinary assumptions about speech, agency, and identity. The demon is not "really" the unconscious in this argument. Rather, demonic possession literalizes the disturbing fact that a voice can be intimate and alien at once.

Comparison between Blatty and Friedkin is essential because prose and cinema organize this uncertainty differently. The novel can qualify voices through narration, describe hesitation, provide interiority, and move among interpretive perspectives. The film must render possession audiovisually. It gives viewers Regan's visible body while giving them an audible voice famously performed by Mercedes McCambridge and technologically manipulated in postproduction. Cinema thus makes the separation between body and vocal agency materially perceptible. The audience sees Linda Blair's Regan and hears a voice constructed elsewhere. Adaptation does not merely reproduce possession; it intensifies the ontological instability of the speaking body.

The article proceeds through six movements. First, it situates the argument against existing accounts of science, religion, medicine, and demonic voice. Second, it examines Regan's pre-possession speech and the gradual transfer of interpretive authority away from her. Third, it analyzes medicine and psychiatry as discourses that make her body legible while rendering her increasingly object-like. Fourth, it develops the Lacanian problem of enunciation and the Other. Fifth, it turns to the film's audiovisual construction of the possessed voice. Finally, it considers exorcism as a paradoxical attempt to return Regan to herself through a ritual that requires others to speak on her behalf.

From Explanation to Authority: What Existing Readings Leave Open

The Exorcist repeatedly invites an epistemological reading because its plot is structured through failed and competing explanations. The narrative delays exorcism by requiring a sequence of tests. Before the supernatural can become institutionally actionable, the medical and psychiatric possibilities must be exhausted. This structure has made science and religion a central axis of criticism.

Cade's (2016) reading of science in Blatty's novel and Friedkin's film is especially useful because it resists the simplistic conclusion that *The Exorcist* merely humiliates science so that religion can triumph. Scientific inquiry is represented as a process of sifting, excavation, and inference. The archaeological prologue establishes a visual and conceptual pattern that later returns in medicine and psychiatry: investigators search beneath surfaces for a buried cause. Chambers (2021) similarly shows that Friedkin's commitment to scientific and ritual detail makes the film's relation to medicine more complex than a straightforward rejection of modern knowledge. The invasive procedures are horrifying, but they also belong to an institutional attempt to know what is happening.

The limitation of framing the conflict primarily as science versus religion is not that the frame is wrong. It is that the binary can obscure a more differentiated field of interpretive authority. Somatic medicine, psychiatry, and Catholic ritual each claim the authority to translate Regan's condition into a legible discourse. Medicine asks what lesion, neurological disorder, or

physiological malfunction might account for her symptoms. Psychiatry asks what psychic condition or belief structure might produce possession-like behavior. Catholic ritual asks whether the signs meet criteria for demonic possession. These discourses overlap institutionally and historically, especially medicine and psychiatry, but they differ in method, object, and evidentiary logic; all nevertheless transform Regan from a speaker into a case to be interpreted.

This transformation is visible in the Barringer Clinic sequence in Friedkin's film. Regan appears remotely on a monitor while Chris faces a group of physicians. Chambers (2021) notes the scene's striking displacement of Regan from the discussion of her own condition. The child becomes an image for specialists to evaluate while adults debate explanatory possibilities. The arrangement condenses the article's central concern: Regan's body is present as evidence while interpretive speech circulates elsewhere.

Kjeldgaard-Christiansen's (2023) analysis of the demonic voice establishes another crucial point. The possessed voice is not an arbitrary marker. Its low, rough, guttural qualities are culturally and perceptually congruent with disease, corruption, and threat. The vocal transformation communicates an altered inner state even before the spectator decides what metaphysical account to accept. Yet this raises a further psychoanalytic question. If the voice sounds like an expression of corrupted subjectivity, whose subjectivity is being expressed? The film's horror depends on an impossible conjunction: the voice unmistakably issues from Regan's body while insisting that Regan is not its source.

Voice studies help sharpen this problem. Chion (1999) describes cinema's capacity to detach voice from visible source, creating forms of acousmatic power in which a voice gains authority precisely because its origin is uncertain or withheld. Silverman (1988), from a psychoanalytic and feminist perspective, emphasizes how classical cinema works to synchronize voice with body and thereby stabilize sexual and subjective identity. *The Exorcist* violently disrupts such synchronization. The possessed voice is embodied and disembodied at once: localized in Regan's mouth, yet acoustically and narratively assigned to an other.

The interpretive gap, then, lies between studies of what the voice signifies and the question of what voice does to the category of the subject. *The Exorcist* is not only about a girl whose voice becomes evil. It is about a body becoming unreliable evidence of who speaks. That unreliability produces the demand for expert interpretation and gives the demon a peculiar form of power. It can speak from the place where Regan should be, forcing everyone around her to answer a question that ordinary conversation usually suppresses: what authorizes us to identify a speaker with the voice we hear?

Before Possession: The Ordinary Fiction of a Self-Present Voice

The force of Regan's possessed voice depends on the narrative first establishing an apparently ordinary relation among child, body, and speech. Early Regan is affectionate, playful, curious, and linguistically recognizable to Chris. Her speech participates in the domestic intimacy of mother and daughter. She has preferences, jokes, questions, and a recognizable tone. This ordinary vocal identity creates the baseline against which later speech becomes uncanny.

Freud's (1919/1955) uncanny is useful because it names a disturbance of familiarity rather than simple encounter with the unknown. The uncanny emerges when something known becomes estranged, when boundaries that normally organize experience lose their stability, or when supposedly superseded forms of thought return with affective force. Possessed Regan is frightening not because her body becomes entirely foreign. It remains insistently familiar. The

face, bedroom, voice-producing body, and familial setting persist while becoming the vehicle of something that does not belong there.

The transformation therefore attacks a common fiction of subjectivity: that the voice is immediate evidence of the person. In everyday life, hearing someone speak seems to provide privileged access to presence. Voice appears to emerge from inside the body and to carry intention outward. Psychoanalysis has always complicated this apparent transparency. A slip of the tongue, symptom, dream, joke, or repetition can reveal that speech exceeds conscious intention. Freud's discovery of unconscious formations does not make speakers irrelevant; it makes them non-sovereign. One can speak more than one means to say.

Possession radicalizes that non-sovereignty into horror. The difference is important. In a Freudian slip, the subject remains implicated in the speech that surprises consciousness. In demonic possession, the narrative imagines a second agency that claims the body as an instrument. The uncanny effect arises because this supernatural scenario resembles, in grotesquely literal form, an ordinary psychoanalytic proposition: the speaking subject is not identical to conscious mastery.

The novel can stage this instability gradually through changes in behavior, vocabulary, knowledge, and narrative focalization. It can ask whether Regan is ill, performing, dissociated, or possessed while maintaining access to characters' doubts. Friedkin's film intensifies the rupture through sound. The spectator does not merely learn that Regan's voice has changed; the spectator hears an acoustically different vocal body issuing from the visible child. The familiar becomes strange at the level of synchronization itself.

This is why the possessed voice cannot be treated simply as a symptom among others. Levitation, bodily lesions, extraordinary strength, and impossible knowledge all challenge ordinary causality, but voice challenges identity in a uniquely intimate way. Speech is one of the primary means by which characters recognize persons as persons. Once speech can no longer securely identify its speaker, every utterance becomes an interpretive trap.

The demon exploits this instability. It does not only threaten or blaspheme. It imitates, reveals secrets, changes registers, and addresses listeners through what they most fear or desire. Its speech is relational. It speaks differently to Chris, Karras, and Merrin because its authority depends on occupying the intimate space between a listener and the person presumed to be speaking. Possession thus converts voice from a sign of self-presence into an instrument for destabilizing others.

The Medical Body: When Regan Becomes Evidence

The medical sequences are among the most disturbing passages in Friedkin's film despite containing no explicit demon. Their horror comes from a different mode of possession: Regan's body is taken over by procedures of knowledge. This does not make medicine equivalent to demonic violence, nor does it imply that the physicians act maliciously. The point is structural. Once Regan becomes a diagnostic problem, her body increasingly functions as evidence to be read by others.

The angiography sequence is exemplary. Machinery surrounds Regan; blood appears; her body is positioned, penetrated, imaged, and translated into technical information. The scene insists on materiality. Whatever else possession may be, Regan is a body vulnerable to institutional procedures. Chambers (2021) emphasizes the film's unusual commitment to graphic scientific detail and the broader 1970s context in which medicine and institutional authority were culturally contested. Cade (2016) reads the scientific process through the recurring metaphor of

excavation. Regan is searched for a cause as though something hidden could be extracted from depth.

Psychoanalytically, what matters is the division between the speaking patient and the body as object of knowledge. Lacan's account of modern subjectivity repeatedly returns to the fact that scientific discourse can produce knowledge about a body that does not coincide with the subject's lived position. In *The Exorcist*, this gap becomes visual. The more information medicine produces, the less Regan appears as an interlocutor. Tests proliferate while her authority diminishes.

The Barringer Clinic scene extends this displacement from somatic medicine to psychiatry. Regan is observed and discussed. The possibility of exorcism itself is translated into a therapeutic hypothesis: if she believes she is possessed, ritual might function through suggestion. This is a sophisticated moment because psychiatry can accommodate exorcism without accepting the demon. Ritual is reclassified as technique.

Such reclassification demonstrates the power of discourse to absorb rival explanations. What Catholicism calls exorcism, psychiatry can call psychodrama or suggestion; what the demon calls possession, medicine can call symptom. Regan's condition becomes the site of a struggle among vocabularies. Yet none of these vocabularies is spoken primarily by Regan. The narrative repeatedly asks adults to decide what her body means.

The problem becomes especially sharp because Regan is a child. Her age intensifies asymmetries already present in medicine and family life. Chris must consent, report, decide, and seek help. The film does not present this maternal authority as illegitimate; Chris is desperately trying to protect her daughter. But protection necessarily involves speaking for a subject whose capacity to speak is becoming unreliable. The ethical paradox is that Regan most needs others to interpret her precisely when interpretation most risks replacing her.

Possession therefore reveals an instability that precedes the demon: no subject fully controls the discourses through which a body becomes socially intelligible. Each discourse can enable care while also claiming interpretive authority. Diagnosis can be lifesaving, but it also names. Family testimony can advocate, but it also narrates another person's experience. Religious ritual can recognize suffering, but it also assigns that suffering a cosmological meaning. *The Exorcist* makes these ordinary structures terrifying by placing them around a body from which an explicitly alien voice emerges.

A reductive psychoanalytic reading would reproduce the very structure under examination if it simply announced that Regan's possession "really" represents puberty, repression, hysteria, family conflict, or sexual anxiety. Psychoanalysis would become one more adult discourse claiming to know Regan better than she can know herself. A more productive use of psychoanalysis is reflexive: it asks how interpretation itself participates in the struggle for authority.

Lacan: Statement, Enunciation, and the Voice of the Other

Lacan's theory of the subject offers a vocabulary for understanding why possession is more than a conflict between two identities inside one body. For Lacan, the subject is not a self-contained consciousness that exists prior to language and then expresses itself through words. Subjectivity emerges through signifiers that precede the individual. Names, kinship positions, prohibitions, desires, and social meanings are encountered in what Lacan calls the Other: not simply another person, but the symbolic locus from which language and law acquire their structuring force.

This makes speech constitutively strange. The words with which a person says "I" are never purely private inventions. The subject speaks through a language received from elsewhere. Lacan's formula that the unconscious is structured like a language points toward a division between the ego's sense of mastery and the signifying processes that exceed it. The subject appears in speech but is not reducible to the conscious speaker's intention.

The distinction between statement and enunciation is particularly useful for *The Exorcist*. The statement concerns what is said; enunciation concerns the position from which the saying occurs. In possession, the two become spectacularly dissociated. A sentence emerges from Regan's mouth, but the narrative asks whether Regan occupies the position of enunciation. The body supplies the site of articulation while the demon claims the "I."

This is why the entity's use of personal knowledge matters. The demon does not merely produce impossible information as proof. It attacks the symbolic positions of its listeners. With Karras, it mobilizes guilt concerning his mother and his crisis of faith. The speech gains force because it seems to come from a place that knows what should be private. The Other ceases to be an abstract structure and is horrifically personified as an obscene interlocutor who appears to know the subject from the inside.

Yet the demon's authority is unstable. It lies. It performs. It manipulates. Its claim to be the speaker cannot simply be trusted. Possession therefore does not solve the problem of enunciation by replacing Regan with a demon; it multiplies uncertainty. If the entity is deceptive, even the statement "I am the demon" cannot guarantee who enunciates it. Karras must infer agency from inconsistencies, knowledge, languages, reactions, and signs. The exorcist becomes a reader of speech.

The Lacanian voice, especially as later developed around the objet a, is not equivalent to meaningful speech. Voice can be understood as a remainder produced when language is separated from the fantasy of a fully present speaker. In ordinary conversation, semantic content and visual identification help domesticate this remainder: we hear a person speaking and treat voice as belonging to that person. *The Exorcist* tears away that reassurance. Regan's voice becomes excessive, detachable, and threatening.

The demon also literalizes the phrase "voice of the Other." It speaks through a subject while presenting itself as radically external. But a Lacanian reading should resist making this literalization into a metaphysical claim. The point is not that Lacan proves possession. The point is that possession gives narrative form to an anxiety internal to language: the fear that what speaks through us may never be wholly ours.

This anxiety is intensified by blasphemy and obscenity. The possessed speech violates the expected relation between childhood and language. Words socially coded as sexual, sacrilegious, aggressive, or adult issue from a child's body. Horror arises partly from incongruity, but also from the collapse of the symbolic categories that ordinarily organize who may say what. Regan becomes the impossible junction of child and obscene authority.

Lacan's framework also clarifies why Karras is uniquely vulnerable. As both psychiatrist and priest, he occupies two symbolic positions that promise interpretive authority while he privately doubts both. The demon speaks into that division. Karras does not confront possession from a secure outside; he confronts it from within his own crisis of authorization. He must decide whether he speaks as clinician, skeptic, priest, son, or believer. The struggle over Regan's enunciation is mirrored by Karras's struggle over the position from which he himself can speak.

Cinema Makes the Split Audible

The film adaptation transforms the crisis of enunciation into a material feature of audiovisual form. This is one of the strongest reasons to read novel and film together rather than treating Friedkin's work as a transparent visualization of Blatty's text. Prose can tell readers that a voice sounds unlike Regan's. Cinema can make viewers experience the mismatch between the body they see and the voice they hear.

Mercedes McCambridge's performance is central to this effect. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen (2023) analyzes how the possessed voice's lowered pitch, roughness, rasp, and guttural qualities communicate sickness, threat, and moral corruption. The production history is itself revealing: the demonic voice is literally constructed from a performer other than Linda Blair, supplemented and manipulated through sound design. The cinematic Regan therefore becomes a composite body. The image presents one performer while the soundtrack introduces another vocal body.

Chion's (1999) theory of the voice in cinema helps explain the power of this arrangement. Cinema routinely binds sound to image through synchronization, encouraging viewers to experience a voice as emanating naturally from a visible body. Yet sound can also exceed, precede, or detach from its source. The acousmatic voice - heard without a fully secured source - can acquire extraordinary power because it seems both present and unlocatable.

Possessed Regan occupies a paradoxical version of this condition. The source is apparently visible: her mouth moves, her body speaks. But the narrative tells us that the visible source is not the true agent. The film creates an embodied acousmêtre, a voice localized in a body while metaphysically displaced from it. The result is more disturbing than simple off-screen sound because the image offers the very evidence that should settle the question and fails to do so.

Silverman's (1988) psychoanalytic account of the cinematic voice is equally relevant. She argues that dominant cinema frequently works to contain voices within bodies, stabilizing identity through synchronization and visual anchoring. Female voice in particular is often subordinated to visible embodiment. The Exorcist both exploits and violently disturbs this logic. Regan is hyper-embodied: the film subjects her body to extraordinary visual scrutiny. Yet the more insistently the camera shows the body, the less securely the voice belongs to it.

This produces an important inversion. Ordinarily, seeing the speaker resolves uncertainty about a voice. In The Exorcist, seeing Regan intensifies uncertainty. The visible child becomes evidence of absence: the person we expect to hear is precisely the person whose vocal authorship has vanished.

The bedroom setting amplifies the effect. Regan is increasingly confined to a room that becomes a theater of interpretation. Visitors enter, question, observe, test, pray, command, and listen. Her bed resembles at different moments a sickbed, diagnostic site, stage, altar, and battlefield. The film repeatedly positions the spectator alongside these visitors. We too look at Regan and try to determine who speaks.

The sound design refuses a stable answer. The voice can be intimate, grotesque, mocking, weak, commanding, or imitative. It can sound more embodied than ordinary speech because breath, rasp, and throat are emphasized, yet it simultaneously denies the identity of the visible body. This contradiction is fundamental: possession does not make voice immaterial; it makes vocal materiality unreliable as evidence of personhood.

The film also exploits moments when Regan's ordinary voice seems to return. Such moments are affectively powerful because they promise resynchronization: perhaps the child is still there and can again occupy her own speech. But the possibility of imitation contaminates

that promise. Once the demon can mimic voices, vocal familiarity no longer guarantees identity. The uncanny reaches its purest form when the familiar voice itself becomes suspect.

Adaptation thus adds a specifically cinematic dimension to Blatty's crisis of subjectivity. The novel thematizes uncertainty about speakers; the film engineers that uncertainty through the spectator's sensorium. Possession becomes not only something represented but something the audiovisual apparatus performs.

Chris, Karras, and the Ethics of Speaking for Regan

If possession removes Regan's reliable capacity to speak for herself, the narrative necessarily becomes a story about proxy speech. Chris and Karras are the two figures most intensely forced to decide what Regan needs and what her condition means.

Chris's position is ethically impossible in a precise sense. She cannot wait for certainty because her daughter is suffering, yet every available action depends on an interpretation she cannot fully verify. She moves through medical specialists not because she is naïve about science but because she wants an explanation capable of producing care. When conventional medicine fails, she asks for an exorcism despite lacking religious belief. Her movement is pragmatic before it is theological.

This matters because Chris does not simply "choose religion." She chooses an intervention on behalf of someone who cannot reliably consent or narrate. The horror of parental responsibility is therefore embedded within supernatural horror. To protect Regan, Chris must authorize others to act upon Regan's body. Each authorization risks another form of dispossession.

Karras's position is different. His dual training makes him the narrative's privileged interpreter, but it also prevents interpretive certainty. As psychiatrist, he knows the danger of mistaking pathology for supernatural agency. As priest, he belongs to an institution in which possession is doctrinally thinkable. As a man in crisis, he doubts the symbolic authority of the position he occupies.

The demon attacks precisely this division. It does not merely present evidence to Karras; it implicates him. His mother's death and his guilt become part of the encounter. Interpretation ceases to be detached clinical judgment. The interpreter is interpreted in return.

This reciprocity is crucial to a psychoanalytic understanding of the film. Analysis itself is not a neutral extraction of hidden meaning by an untouched expert. Speech affects the listener; transference implicates positions of knowledge and desire. The Exorcist grotesquely stages such implication when the entity seems to know the one who has come to know it.

Merrin appears to offer an alternative: he enters with greater certainty and refuses some of the demon's invitations to dialogue. His authority rests less on discovering what the demon is than on refusing its control over the terms of interpretation. The ritual provides a fixed symbolic script. Names, commands, prayers, and repetitions counter the demon's proliferating speech with an institutional language whose authority precedes the individual priest.

Yet exorcism does not restore Regan's agency by allowing her to speak. It attempts to restore her through others speaking over, against, and for the entity occupying her body. This is the paradox at the center of the cure. Regan can be returned to herself only through a procedure in which she is least able to function as autonomous interlocutor.

The climax intensifies this paradox when Karras invites the demon into himself. The transfer of possession dramatizes subjectivity as transferable occupancy: a body can become the place from which another agency speaks. But Karras's final act also depends on a moment of

regained agency. Once possessed, he struggles against the entity long enough to throw himself from the window. The scene is powerful because the boundary between self and possessor is neither completely erased nor securely restored. Agency survives as conflict.

Regan's recovery similarly resists triumphant self-explanation. She does not emerge to provide a definitive account of what happened. The narrative's epistemological drama has occurred around and through her, but its resolution does not grant her a retrospective monologue that organizes the event. This absence should not be treated as a narrative defect. It is consistent with the film's deepest horror: an experience may determine one's body and one's life without becoming fully available as one's own story.

Possession, Puberty, and the Risk of Psychoanalytic Mastery

The Exorcist has often invited readings of possession through puberty, sexuality, maternal anxiety, abjection, and the monstrous feminine. Such approaches are understandable. Regan's age, bodily transformation, sexualized obscenity, blood, fluids, and violent repudiation of normative childhood all make gendered embodiment impossible to ignore. Creed's (1993) account of the monstrous-feminine remains foundational for understanding how horror constructs female bodies as sites of abjection, reproductive anxiety, and boundary collapse.

Yet psychoanalytic interpretation becomes least persuasive when it treats the supernatural plot as a code whose solution is simply puberty or repressed sexuality. Such decoding repeats the structure of the diagnostic scenes: a complex and resistant event is translated into the critic's preferred vocabulary, and Regan once again becomes an object whose truth is spoken elsewhere.

A more reflexive psychoanalysis asks why the desire to decode is so strong. *The Exorcist* solicits interpretation at every level. Characters interpret symptoms; audiences interpret signs; critics interpret the film. The narrative's power partly derives from making interpretation feel necessary while repeatedly demonstrating its instability.

This is where the concept of the uncanny is preferable to a one-to-one symbolic translation. Freud's uncanny does not require that the possessed girl "stand for" a hidden content. It describes the affective destabilization produced when familiar categories fail. Child/adult, innocent/obscene, self/other, body/voice, illness/evil, science/religion, and voluntary/involuntary cease to remain cleanly separated. Regan is horrifying because she becomes the site where these oppositions collapse.

Lacan likewise helps when used to theorize division rather than to provide a secret key. The subject divided by language is not equivalent to a demonically possessed subject. The analogy is structural and deliberately limited. Possession exaggerates the noncoincidence between speaker and speech until it becomes narratively literal. It gives monstrous form to the question of whether "I" am ever the complete origin of what I say.

The risk of theoretical mastery is particularly important in interdisciplinary psychological interpretation of art. Such interpretation should illuminate formal and affective structures without pretending that a character is a clinical patient. Regan cannot be diagnosed, and the film should not be treated as a disguised case history. Psychoanalysis is most productive here as a theory of representation, spectatorship, language, and divided agency.

Such restraint also preserves what is aesthetically powerful about The Exorcist. The work is frightening because competing explanations do not cancel one another cleanly. Medical procedures remain materially real even if possession is supernatural. Psychological vulnerability remains meaningful even if the demon exists within the fiction. Religious ritual has symbolic and

interpersonal effects even before its metaphysical efficacy is decided. The supernatural does not abolish psychology; psychology does not dissolve the supernatural.

My claim is therefore narrower and stronger than a total interpretation: *The Exorcist* constructs possession as a crisis in the presumed relation between voice and subject. That crisis organizes the medical, psychiatric, familial, religious, and cinematic dimensions of the work. It also explains why Regan's possession remains disturbing after the question "Is the demon real?" has been answered affirmatively by the plot. Even when viewers accept the demon, a more intimate horror remains: Regan's body can speak without Regan.

Exorcism as a Struggle over the Right to Enunciate

The ritual of exorcism is usually understood as the narrative moment when religious explanation replaces failed medicine. At the level of enunciation, however, it is also a battle between speech acts. The priests do not defeat the demon through superior descriptive knowledge. They command, pray, name, repeat, prohibit, and invoke an authority located beyond themselves.

This makes the ritual deeply Lacanian in structure without making it "Lacanian" in theology. Its efficacy within the fiction depends on symbolic authorization. Merrin and Karras do not speak merely as private individuals. Their words derive force from an institution, a tradition, and a divine order they invoke. The demon, conversely, attempts to detach them from those positions by addressing their personal vulnerabilities.

The conflict is therefore between different uses of language. The demon proliferates meanings, accusations, obscenities, imitations, and doubts. The ritual narrows speech into formula. Where the demon seeks to personalize and destabilize, the exorcists repeat an inherited symbolic script.

Regan's position within this verbal struggle is painful. Her body becomes the medium through which antagonistic authorities speak. Yet the goal of the ritual is precisely to end that condition: to restore a relation in which Regan's body and Regan's speech can again be treated as belonging together.

The ending's relative quiet is consequently significant. The restoration of Regan is not marked by a grand declaration of identity. Ordinary social speech returns. The extraordinary voice disappears, and with it the demand to ask at every utterance who is speaking. Normality is represented as the renewed possibility of taking voice for granted.

But psychoanalysis prevents that normality from becoming philosophically innocent. The possessed voice has exposed a fracture that ordinary life usually covers. Once the audience has heard speech detach from personhood, the simple equation voice = self can never be entirely secure. The demon leaves not only narrative trauma but a conceptual remainder.

That remainder may help explain the work's extraordinary cultural persistence. *The Exorcist* is certainly a film about religious fear, bodily violation, adolescence, institutional authority, and evil. It is also a film about one of the most intimate technologies of identity: the human voice. Possession turns voice against the fantasy that a person is transparently present in speech.

The title question - who speaks through Regan? - therefore has no single psychoanalytic answer. Within the fiction, the demon speaks through her. Within the film's production, McCambridge's performance, Blair's body, sound editing, direction, and spectatorship construct the possessed voice. Within the narrative, medicine, psychiatry, family, and religion all speak

about Regan and sometimes for her. At the theoretical level, language itself makes the speaking subject dependent on structures that exceed individual mastery.

These answers do not compete; they occupy different levels. Their convergence is precisely what allows possession to dramatize divided subjectivity as a conflict among body, voice, agency, and interpretive authority.

Conclusion

The Exorcist has often been organized critically around oppositions: science and superstition, medicine and religion, innocence and obscenity, body and spirit, skepticism and belief. These oppositions remain indispensable, but the question of enunciation reveals a structure running through all of them. Regan's possession creates a crisis in the relation between visible body, audible voice, and speaking subject. Once that relation becomes uncertain, everyone around her must compete to determine who or what can speak the truth of her condition.

The medical and psychiatric sequences do more than delay supernatural recognition. They show Regan becoming an object of expert discourse. Chris must speak for a daughter who cannot reliably speak for herself. Karras must listen as both clinician and priest while his own authority is destabilized. Merrin counters the demon with a ritual language whose force comes from an institutional Other. The demon's most disturbing power is linguistic: it occupies the place from which Regan should be able to say "I."

Freud's uncanny clarifies why this occupation is horrifying. The possessed body is not wholly alien but intolerably familiar. Lacan's divided subject and distinction between statement and enunciation clarify why speech need not coincide with conscious mastery. Neither framework requires reducing the demon to a symptom. Instead, possession can be understood as a supernatural literalization of a structural unease already present in language: the speaker is never the absolute proprietor of the signifiers through which the self becomes speakable.

The comparison between Blatty and Friedkin makes this argument especially visible. The novel narrates uncertainty about voice; the film materializes it. Through dubbing, performance, synchronization, and sound design, cinema gives the spectator a body whose voice is simultaneously attached and alien. The film does not merely show possession. It makes possession audible as a failure of vocal ownership.

Exorcism finally seeks to restore Regan by ending the demon's right to enunciate through her. Yet the restored child does not explain the experience from a position of retrospective mastery. The narrative closes without giving her possession back to her as fully narratable knowledge. That silence is theoretically important. Subjectivity is restored not when Regan can explain everything that happened, but when her ordinary voice can once again be heard without immediately provoking the question of who speaks.

The enduring horror of *The Exorcist* therefore exceeds the spectacle of a demon inside a child. It concerns the fragility of one of the assumptions through which personhood is recognized: that the voice issuing from a body belongs to the person we see. Possession breaks that assumption. Psychoanalysis helps explain why the break remains frightening even after the demon is gone.

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