



Disturbing Flesh. Analysis of the Female Body in the Film the Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973) and the Performance Interior Scroll (Carolee Schneemann, 1975)

Antonio Sustaita  
Research Professor, University of Guanajuato, Mexico

\*Corresponding Author: Antonio Sustaita, Research Professor, University of Guanajuato, Mexico

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<div><div>Received: 01 Feb 2025 Accepted: 14 Feb 2025 Published: 24 Feb 2025</div></div> <div><p><b>Cite this article as:</b></p><p>Sustaita, A. (2025). Disturbing Flesh. Analysis of the Female Body in the Film the Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973) and the Performance Interior Scroll (Carolee Schneemann, 1975). International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies, 12(1), 9-12.</p><p>DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.62557/2394-6296.120102">https://doi.org/10.62557/2394-6296.120102</a></p></div> <div><p><b>Copyright:</b> © 2025 The author(s). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License.</p><div></div></div>	<p>The aim of this essay is to compare the way in which the female body rebels against phallogentric roles in two artistic works: the film The Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973) and the performance Interior Scroll (Carolee Schneemann, 1975). Such works have as context the Feminist Revolution of the 1970s. Through a semiotic and aesthetic analysis, focused on the image, the word-body relationship is analyzed. Concepts associated with the Unheimlich, the sinister, ominous, terrifying and disturbing, are associated with the woman's body that, in order to fight against a phallogentric order, uses the exhibition of her highest bodily emblem, the vagina.</p> <p><b>KEYWORDS:</b> Body, phallogentric power, feminist strategy, Unheimlich, corpo-linguistic writing.</p>

THE NYMPHET AND PHALLOCENTRIC SCOPIC REGIMES

*The Exorcist* (novel by William Peter Blatty, 1971; film by William Friedkin, 1973) tells the story of Regan McNeil, a 12-year-old girl possessed by the devil. Unable to remedy her health with the intervention of medical and psychiatric knowledge, in desperation, her mother turns to representatives of the Church in order to perform an exorcism. Crude, abject, perverse, sinister and filthy scenes, bordering on pornographic, passed in front of the viewers of this film in 1973.

The images showed what should not be seen. Showing, understood by Jean Clair as the immoderation that unbalances the act of looking to the point of annulling it, came into play, provoking a problem that Guy Debord had already anticipated in 1952 with *Hurléments en faveur de Sade*: a blank screen.

It is very likely that for some of the first viewers of *The Exorcist*, in 1973, the shock provoked by the images

triggered an effect similar to that provoked by Debord, as if during certain moments a blank screen had been placed there. It is enough to remember George Didi-Huberman, when he warns that, in order to see certain things, it is necessary to close one's eyes. And what Jean Clair expressed, in the sense that one refuses to accept what the eye has seen (Clair, 2004). Would there be, in fact, implicit in this film a problem of vision or visibility, that is to say, of scopopic regime? As a result of a satanic possession, abject and obscene images, corresponding to the body of Regan, a 12-year-old girl, flash across the screen. The transformation of the sweet and charming little girl reminds us of Vladimir Nabokov's assertion that there are girls between the ages of nine and fourteen whose true nature is not human, but that of nymphs (demonic), who present themselves to certain fascinated pilgrims, much older than they are. With the name of nymphs designates such disturbing girls.

From this change, which would give an account of the girl's true nature, reality is disrupted, to the point that the

familiar -Heimlich- appears as monstrous -Unheimlich. Everything indicates that reality, our reality, is not a safe realm. The unclean, summed up in the term *sacer* as opposed to *sacre* (sacred), reveals the ambiguity present at the core of the real. The sweet and affectionate girl, in reality, would be a project of a woman, a perverse and dangerous, threatening Lolita. She is a nymphet from whose body it is necessary to expel evil in order to put an end to its threat.

Each of the aesthetic categories referred to above - the abject, the obscene, the sinister, the grotesque, the formless and the monstrous - while defining Regan's body, pose the aesthetic and semiotic problem of vision in relation to power. Against the bad, defined by an unclean body and mind, stands the figure of the normalizer, represented by three phallogocentric figures carrying discourses and practices that reduce the real: the doctor, the priest and the policeman. The main challenge for them will consist in being able to perceive evil, the bad, in order to subsequently designate and delimit it. Finally, to be able to amputate it, to expel it. It is curious that the father is absent throughout the film. He is a ghostly figure to whom we telephone without getting an answer. Faced with his absence, it is necessary the participation of the three paternal figures who will remedy his lack of eye and hand. Seeing and guiding are the problems they face with the nymphet.

The mundane, as opposed to the unclean (*Immundus*), would consist in the construction of the social space permitted by the norm. A very limited domain, where everything that exceeds the repressive exercise ends up expelled towards the realm of the unclean. Outside the semiosphere or space of production of valid meaning, according to the approach of the semiotics of culture of Iuri Lotman, we find the allosemiotic space, where the significance of the phenomena that are manifested there is impossible. Similarly, the mundane corresponds to an effective scopic space, where visual perception, the mechanism and the perceived phenomenon correspond to the norm. Every unclean act, therefore, becomes an alloscopic phenomenon, impossible to be seen according to a logic of normalized visibility. The question presented here is about the feasibility of perceiving Regan's unclean body and actions.

As Jean Clair has explained, in relation to the body deformed by the scopic exercises in the painting of the first decade of the twentieth century, especially cubism and futurism, there would be a radical opposition between the process of traditional representation and exorcism (Clair, 2008). We would be talking about the opposition between mimesis and the impossibility of all mimesis because while traditional representation gives us a finished work, whose conclusion, for better or worse, is unquestionable for the viewer, exorcism, like

cubism, offers a work whose completion is always in question, it is, therefore, a work in destructive process.

The stylized ritual known as exorcism would correspond to a body in constant transformation, an unfinished, deformed body, subject to a permanent process of destruction. A body like that of G. Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* (F. Kafka), which manages to destabilize the system of narrative production and, consequently, calls into question the normalizing powers (Weiss, 2003). It is a body incapable of being perceived in its totality, for the simple reason that it lacks it: surprising, abnormal, disfigured, formless: it is a body without law, which, under no circumstances submits to phallogocentric designs.

In the girl's body, during the specific moments in which the nymphet (her *Unheimlich* nature) manifests itself, we find anatomically grotesque and impossible postures. She turns her face towards the spectator, turning her head one hundred and eighty degrees, so that she symbolically presents herself backwards and forwards. Cubist body, which destroys the planes of representation as much as the normalizing ones (religious and moral).

Cubist is also the space where evil manifests itself, Regan's room. There, the furniture rebels against the structure of placement imposed by humans and assumes, as it is, its movable nature: it moves without the need for hands and arms to push or hold it. In the sum of anomalies that is the cinematic scene, the room is a device that is destroyed and disintegrates as Regan's body suffers the same fate.

Something similar happened in G. Samsa's room in *The Metamorphosis*. The body of the young man turned into an insect on the bed, with a shell that interferes with his daily performance, is the symbol of the bourgeois imposition on a body that is no longer willing to submit to the rule. The most categorical rebellious action, in performative terms, is the posture of the young man with his legs on the ceiling, held in place with the tiny tentacles of his legs. The initial clumsiness of the new body, an unmistakable sign of its domestic incompatibility, shows a permormatic evolutionary curve whose culminating point consists in moving in the opposite plane to that of the human being, once the furniture has been removed in its entirety from what had been its room.

In Regan's case, we would find a political phenomenon of performative manifestation similar to that of G. Samsa. It is an individual exercise of power in the Faulstichian sense, from which an aesthetic phenomenon is derived. The girl's response to the phallogocentric technological harassment by the normalizing figures transforms her into a nymphet. It is a transformation and transfiguration that is not only formal, but performative

and moral, involving both the bodily and semiotic faculties of Regan's body.

The political action (the exercise of phallogocentric power) exercised on the prodigious and dangerous girl, whose purpose is the delimitation and repression of that energy that we understand as the feminine, triggers a radical anatomical-semiotic change. Perhaps the main problem, in the initial stage of this process, is of a scopic nature, since it implies the perception of an active principle in order to identify it, delimit it and, only then, be able to administer it. But the feminine, as Jean Baudrillard has pointed out in a text with an emblematic title, *Of Seduction*, is always to be found elsewhere, in which lies its strength (Baudrillard, 1998). Beyond its projection, always ghostly, the feminine is in-situated, as an act of insubordination, a play of planes that provoke a *tromp l'oeil* where, by losing itself, the masculine loses its powers.

### **INTERIOR SCROLL AND THE EXORCIST, SEXUALITY ON DISPLAY**

Two years after the making of *The Exorcist*, the artist Carolee Schneemann presented a performance entitled *Interior Scroll*, which is about the reading that the artist, naked and smeared with paint, made of the words written on a roll of paper that she was pulling out from inside her vagina. It was a poem written by herself.

The work begins with the artist undressing and then wrapping her body with a sheet. She read her book *Cézanne, She was a Great Painter*. The artist released the sheet and covered her body with broad brushstrokes of paint along its contours. After which she pulled a roll of paper from her vagina and read a text from her work. (Schneemann, 2001) Schneemann clarifies that she used nudity in her work in order to break taboos related to the human body in motion, to show that the life of the body is more expressive than a sex-denying society can admit

The display of the artist's nudity is impressive to the public. Even more so is the fact that they see a roll of paper coming out of her vagina, which represents a stream of words. This verbal flow, symbolic of giving birth, has a greater impact than the sudden nudity, as it is of a sinister obscenity.

In *Interior Scroll* the word is generated and processed by the female body itself. A vision far removed from the Cartesian tradition, in which the logos corresponds to the male, as denounced by Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatil bodies* (Grosz, 1994).

The double birth present in this work, of the discourse and the subject, occurs without the intervention of a male operator. It is a word consubstantial to the female body. In this way, Schneemann establishes a triple bodily relationship with the word. First, as a woman, he brings her into the world, gives birth to her, illuminates

her existence. Since the word of *Interior Scroll* is born, it is possible to speak of a congenital relationship between the word and the artist's body. The woman's body is reborn. It is not the Cartesian word, the product of mental activity, but the incarnated word. On the other hand, the woman's body is related to the word from the beginning through touch, since the hands unroll the paper on which the words are written. Finally, the word is related to sight, right at the moment of reading. It goes from a genetic relationship (birth) to an abstract, conceptual relationship, passing through tactile action.

On the other hand, in this work an eminently obscene relationship is established with the word, since it not only alludes to an unknown interior, but also evidences what Schneemann calls the "human fracture", the vulva. The artist wonders about the taboo concerning the vagina and finds that, although similar fractures exist in the animal, mineral or vegetable world, it was never forbidden to look into a concavity or convexity of something that was animal or mineral or vegetable... only human fractures are explicitly taboo (Juno, 1999).

As in *Interior Scroll*, the obscenity activated by the exhibition of bodily fracture is present in *The Exorcist*. As with Schneemann, Regan understands that the exhibition of the taboo object, the fulva, is a strategy that allows her to destabilize phallogocentric power structures.

In Schneemann's work we are confronted with an abject act, constructed through a powerful metaphor. The vagina spews words, despite the fact that the only thing that can pass through it is liquid (urine, discharge) or solid (the body of the newborn). In this way, the word that Schneemann's body throws out acquires the symbolism of the liquid, but also of the solid, of tangible life, since it provokes the birth of the artist herself. In the curl that draws the path of the word we find that it is thrown by the body in two different ways, firstly, it is the written word, which is in the scroll; on the other hand, it is the spoken word, which, through the reading aloud, finds its way out through the mouth of Schneemann.

In *The Exorcist* we identify the same organic-semiotic problematic present in *Interior Scroll*, based on the relationship of indexical signs (the flesh) and symbolic signs (the words), according to the triadic classification of the semiotic Charles Sanders Peirce. In Regan's body, seeking the surface to reach the outside, two types of words appear. By means of different strategies these signs struggle to manifest themselves. The first, verbal in nature, reveal an individual concern: inscribed on her flesh, we read help me. The other words seem to come from the demon that possesses her; it is a matter of oral discourse that manifests itself in different languages. This oscillating play of otherness, which reveals a

multiplicity of beings within the girl, fulfills the function of a scopic narrative switch, whose function is to change the semiotic flows, and those that arise from them, preventing the identification of the object of study. Let us recall that the three phallogentric figures investigating the case of the unclean girl, the doctor, the psychiatrist and the detective, are professionals of semiotics.

For Paul Ricoeur, writing is the integral manifestation of something that is in a virtual state, something incipient and rudimentary that occurs in living speech: the separation of meaning and event (Ricoeur, 2003). This separation between written and spoken word, which alludes to the defective nature of the latter, would be overcome in *Interior Scroll* due to the integration of one and the other, to the almost synchronous two-dimensionality in the artist's performance, which also includes touch. The same happens in *The Exorcist*. The difference is that, in Regan's case, it is not possible to identify a harmony between the two verbal manifestations, but a disruption. In such a way, the body, in its narrative nature, seeks to abruptly break coherence as narrative intelligibility. In this sense, despite the fact that it is a commercial film and not an artistic performance, it is possible to better understand the historical moment of the feminist revolution.

In conclusion, it is necessary to make some clarifications that allow us to understand the relationship between the two works mentioned. In *Interior Scroll*, painting, the word and the female body meet in the desire to snatch herself from an alien will. In an interview with Kate Haug, Schneemann says that she must tear her body away from conventional history (Schneemann, 2001). In the case of *The Exorcist*, a film set in the midst of the feminist revolution, we understand that each of Regan's obscene actions would point to the appropriation of her own body, of her sexuality. It is about wrenching her body, that of the young woman, from domination, submission and reduction. In short, to wrest it from a phallogentric order of bodily production.

According to the perspective constructed so far, it could be understood that *The Exorcist* can be taken as a film whose main theme is art and not religion; in particular, performance art in the context of the feminist revolution of the first half of the 1970s.

The putting the female body to work, in order to free itself from a phallogentric production system, is a central theme in *The Exorcist* and in *Interior Scroll*. Essential to this confrontation is an obscene strategy activated by the exhibition of the vulvic space. In both works a close relationship between the vagina and the word can be found. Schneemann would seek to reunite, after an interruption that spans thousands of years, ancient knowledge of a feminine nature with an urgent need of contemporary women to know themselves, revalue themselves and fight for a new body in Western society. The same happens in *The Exorcist*.

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