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**Unheard Possibilities: Reappraising Classical Film
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Southern Discomfort: Clanking, Rattling, and Screaming in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974)

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Southern Discomfort: Clanking, Rattling, and Screaming in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974)

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Introduction

- ¹ In his introduction of *Music in the Horror Film*, Neil Lerner stresses the prevailing role of sounds in horror films: sounds are essential because one cannot just cover one's ears to make the soundtrack fully disappear (whereas two eyelids are enough to cancel an unwanted image) (VIII). Referring to Charles Darwin, the scholar also insists on the vital role of ears in the development of man as a species, and he even goes further than the biologist, asserting that a wider range of emotions can be triggered by music. Agreeing with Darwin, Lerner admits that music can awaken gentle feelings like tenderness and love, but he adds that it can also exacerbate feelings of horror, fear, and rage in films (VIII).
- ² Many things have been written on *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), by Robin Wood (1979) and Christopher Sharrett (2004) among others. In France, Jean-Baptiste Thoret has also brilliantly studied Hooper's film and has underlined the importance of the soundtrack in the introduction of his book; for him, it is a "real chamber of sonorous tortures," and the film is characterized by the "auditory horror" it conveys (9, my translation). Throughout his analysis, Thoret focuses on the key idea of excess, but surprisingly enough, he does not really develop his thoughts on the film's soundtrack properly speaking. For a thorough analysis of it, one had better read the section that David Roche devotes to the "orchestrated dissonance" of Tobe Hooper's film in *Making and Remaking Horror in the 1970s and 2000s* (190-211).

- 3 Starting from this pre-existing research, I will nonetheless try to go off the beaten track by showing the prevailing role of the film's soundtrack in the director's attempt at producing discomfort in the spectators' minds and bodies. Indeed, when experiencing the film, the audience is assaulted by many sorts of hostile sounds, and even when some supposedly reassuring diegetic country music can be heard, the contrast established with the rest of the unfriendly atonal score is such that uneasiness inevitably intensifies. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* cannot be analyzed without a minute perusal of its aural structure, for if the latter were to be ignored, most of the impact of the film would then be missed. Conversely, any examination of the film's score disconnected from the raw nature of its images and editing would only lead to a partial account of the soundtrack's staggering effect on the audience.
- 4 Thus, keeping in mind the director's desire to aim at the spectators' senses in general, but concentrating on the sense of hearing, I will first highlight the clever use of sounds that are meant to trigger a feeling of uneasiness. Yet given that diegetic sounds tend to merge with an unfriendly atonal underscore, it will then be necessary to examine to what extent music (whether diegetic or not) contributes to the build-up of fear. If *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is still worthy of interest decades after its release, it might well be that, once the end credits are over, the audience can still experience some latent, yet persistent, feeling of unease, that feeling being on no account allayed by the conclusion of the film. This is why special attention will be paid to the closing scene and the end credits, whose violence leaves the spectators dumbfounded, all the more so as the soundtrack efficiently manages to fuse clashing sounds with deadly silence.

The Sounds of the Fury, and the Assault on the Senses

- 5 From the outset, the five youths who will be the victims of the crazy family are shown facing a hostile world, and this hostility is easy to grasp as all their senses suffer from the unpleasant setting in which they feel trapped. Before dealing with sounds and music, a rapid perusal of the mistreatment of the spectators' other senses might help us realize what a sensory ordeal the film is.
- 6 In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, everything is physically linked to the notion of repulsiveness. Visually speaking, Hooper resorts to an "aesthetics of ugliness" which evokes outsider art (*art brut*) without resorting to gory scenes (Thoret 37, my translation). But the film's content is also very effective owing to the jolting and non-linear editing which hurts the spectators' eyes. The other senses are also called upon very early in the film. From the start, we can feel the stickiness of the youths' skins, especially since the scorching sun rules supreme over the film's overture and the youths keep complaining about the heat. As they approach the slaughterhouse, they retch when they smell the stench of the place [9:15].¹ The sense of taste is also challenged when the hitchhiker starts explaining in minute detail how headcheese is made [12:45].
- 7 The emphasis on food and physicality obviously links the film to the spirit of the carnival and the grotesque.² However, with "Saturn [...] in retrograde," as one of the youths (Pam) says when reading the horoscope [7:20], we can be sure that the regenerative spirit of the Saturnalia will be absent from the picture. Hooper's carnival is, in effect, deprived of its regenerative features and partakes of Bakhtin's "romantic grotesque," in which goodness and euphoria are replaced by malevolence and despair

(48). The film is suffused with a sense of degenerative and generalized chaos, which is experienced all the more acutely when the spectators prick up their ears.

- 8 Michel Chion remarks that the impact of sound must not be underestimated because sound is “bi-sensorial;” not only does it affect the ear, but its frequencies also create vibrations that can be felt in the skin and deep down to the bone (2013, 12). The film scholar notes the propensity of high-frequency sounds to make the listeners more alert. Needless to say, then, that the spectators cannot fall asleep with Sally’s constant high-pitched screaming in the last third of the film, in addition to the shrill stingers that punctuate some of the most shocking scenes. For Chion, sounds saturate our conscious perception faster than images, and the most disquieting aural devices manipulate our emotions even more powerfully than the most shocking image possibly can (2013, 33). When Hooper shot and edited the film, and when he created the score, he was assuredly aware of the impact he could create in his spectators’ bodies and minds thanks to the soundtrack; he decided to opt for an excessive sound-flow (*flux sonore*), with an “external logic” that favored discontinuities and jarring sounds (Chion 2013, 42-43). Hooper successfully built an apocalyptic soundtrack thanks to the atonal score, and this level of chaos could never have been reached if he had not only relied on diegetic sounds (like the characters’ screams), but also on sound props whose noises are nerve-racking to say the least (the roar of the chain saw, or the whirring of the generator).³ The unrelentingness of all these confusing sounds ushers the spectators into a dysphoric mental realm where frightful images are then triggered. This may be why many critics refer to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as a gory film when there are actually no gory special effects, but simply a soundtrack that evokes the meanest forms of violence conceivable.
- 9 Sounds act on us indeed, and from the opening scene to the last second of the end credits, everything in this film’s soundtrack is designed to make the audience feel uncomfortable. Before analyzing the unnerving atonal underscore and the film’s apocalyptic music, I will first concentrate on some of the unfriendly sounds that abound in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.
- 10 The five youths are introduced in a wordless scene in which Kirk helps Franklin, Sally’s handicapped brother, get out of the van before he can be heard urinating in a can [6:10].⁴ This occurs just before a huge speeding truck sends Franklin and his wheelchair down the hillock, as it drives past them at full speed. The sounds of the scene clearly announce the intended rawness felt throughout the film.
- 11 Words do not seem to matter much in the unfolding of the plot; very few words are uttered in the film (especially in the second part), and when they are, their meaning is either unreliable (the cook trying to reassure Sally [59:00]) or incorrect (Sally believing that “everything means something” [43:10] while the whole film shows the meaninglessness of our chaotic world). Words are also useless and remain ignored by the interlocutors. In her final cue, Sally proposes to do anything the killers want, but her offer is not even taken into account [1:14:35]; her speech then dissolves into a frantically garbled plea, which only triggers the killers’ jeers and sneers. Language and reason are proved defunct: mediation cannot exist in a decaying world which favors immediacy and sensations of the most twisted sort. All that Sally experiences tends to validate Michel Chion’s statement on the “screaming point” (*point de cri*): “The screaming point is where speech is suddenly extinct, a black hole, the exit of being” (Chion 1999, 24).

- 12 Words are dead, and only disquieting noises remain (like Leatherface's inaudible mumblings or the ghastly rattling of the chainsaw). Christopher Sharrett rightly alludes to Hooper's "cosmic upheaval," which is "apparent in his sound/image conjunction, the overlaying of the soundtrack, the non-linear nature of his editing, and the de-emphasis of the spoken word" (307). Sharrett's idea of the "sound/image conjunction" is the empirical version of Michel Chion's idea of "synchresis" (*synchrèse*) (Chion 1995, 206); for him, synchresis occurs when a sound perfectly fits the image with which it is associated ("Mickeymousing" is one example of synchresis, since the music mimics the action on the screen). Tobe Hooper resorts to this coincidence of image and sound at key moments in the film. David Roche has already pinpointed the initial correspondence between what the flashes show and the "zinging sounds" in the graveyard scene [1:50] (Roche 191), and one may also refer to one of the scariest shots in the film: the scene of Franklin's death. Leatherface's sudden appearance in the beam of the flashlight is synchronized with the starting of the chainsaw's roar, while the murderer was nowhere to be seen up to that point [52:37] (Fig.1). The chain saw's instantaneous cranking takes the spectators off-guard, the film associating the aggressive sound with the killer's awful face. From then on, Leatherface and his machine will be one destructive entity characterized by this twofold attack on the spectators' senses (sight and hearing).⁵

Figure 1



Leatherface's appearance coincides with the cranking of the chain saw.

- 13 But the reason why the film's soundtrack is so brilliantly nerve-racking is that its effects vary so as to keep the audience tense the whole time. Besides screams and stingers, the film purposefully delays the visual explanations of some of its eeriest sounds. By resorting to "acousmatic" sounds—i.e., sounds whose origins remain offscreen⁶ (Chion 2013, 64)—the film keeps spectators alert as they try to guess what is about to be shown on screen. Sometimes the origin of a sound is revealed, causing shock or dismay in the spectators' minds (for instance, the grunting Kirk can hear in the house turns out to be Leatherface's [35:30], while the clucking heard by Pam is that of a real caged hen [37:30]). However, some mysterious offscreen sounds are not always "desacoumatized" (Chion 2013, 65), and their origins remain obscure. Thus, just before

his murder, Jerry is also lured into the house by an offscreen sound that recurs five times, but if the first sound again evokes the cackling of a hen, the other four sonorous occurrences are of indefinable origin [45:10];⁷²³ the latter sound like a mysterious animal or an infant moaning, and since Leatherface does not kill Jerry in the following seconds (the killer even looking surprised at the youth's arrival), he may not be the origin of the sound. These unexplainable sounds do not question the unfolding of the diegesis, but they leave the audience a little bit more perplexed as to the nature of the gruesome world, which is being shown. And this hesitation only confirms David Roche's statement according to which the film's effectiveness is based on the uncertainty between diegetic and nondiegetic sounds (192).

- 14 Creating disorientation in the spectators' minds is certainly one of the director's main concerns when shooting and editing his film, and disconnecting sounds and images is one way of achieving it. Thoret, Roche, and Phillips Kendall R. have all shown how essential Hooper's editing is in the destruction of fluidity and harmony. Indeed, as the film nears its end (especially in the dinner scene), Hooper aims at "interrupting the narrative development" of the film with jarring shots whose succession has no diegetic logic, and with highly discordant sounds (some diegetic, others nondiegetic) (Phillips 115). Everything is geared toward making viewers immediately feel horror through their senses, leaving no doubt about the doomed condition of the protagonists, and more generally of the world people live and die in.
- 15 The film thus leads us toward a state of hopeless chaos. This should come as no surprise. Indeed, it was foreshadowed by a radio news bulletin, characterized by its nihilistic content, which fades in before the opening credits; it soon becomes clear that the news is about the desecration that is disclosed on screen. And as the track-out in the cemetery pauses for the audience to contemplate the body snatcher's macabre sculpture in a full shot (a "grisly work of art," says the journalist), then the opening credits suddenly start [3:54]. This sonorous atonal piece of music is composed of what sounds like a series of explosions, with a lot of reverberating sounds and with the irregular clashes of cymbals that had already started in the underscore, when the sculpture had become visible. In the commotion, the news presenter can still be heard, though the news is no longer comprehensible. When the opening credits end, the spectators can see the scorching sun, a dead armadillo on the road, and then the youths' van, from which the radio program can be heard. But even if the news is more audible than during the opening credits, it is impossible for the first-time viewer to distinguish all that is said because of all the diegetic noises caused by the cars and trucks passing by. Depending on the traffic, some words or bits of sentences emerge from the soundtrack. And given the tragic nature of the fragments that can be heard, it is as if the initial news item on grave desecrations had symbolically given birth to a series of horrors and disasters that was then spreading all over the planet.⁸ Besides, whereas such disorderly conduct is apparently on the increase, language is losing its power to signify, since the full understanding of the news bulletin has become impossible. The spectators are thus made to feel that, as the film opens, the world has already started to disintegrate.⁹ This feeling is conveyed by the macabre sculpture, the black and red solar flares, the resounding score, as well as the documentary-like aspect of the introduction, which is emphasized by the grainy nature of the image and the poor sound quality of the radio programs.¹⁰ In effect, the film's soundtrack owes part of its unrefined quality to the news report and to the country music that can be heard

from rudimentary radios (in the van and in the gas station). In his typology of sounds, Chion calls these diegetic sounds coming from such sources “on the air sounds” (*sons “on the air”, sons sur les ondes*), and he insists on their specific autonomy (Chion 2013, 68). This autonomy can be questioned, since these sounds actually partake of the film’s disharmonious and chaotic mood. Like Michel Chion, Pierre Berthomieu shows that sounds and scores are two separate things that should be combined with care. However, the critic admits that, with some directors (David Lynch, Martin Scorsese, George Lucas), the association can be fruitful (125). Tobe Hooper could be added to this list, as the director excels in composing an unsettling film score by adding dissonant sounds. The technique of “double-tracking”¹¹ thus prevails in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and it occurs throughout most of the film, as the atonal score often remains in the background. In their analysis on music for films (first published in 1947), Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler assert that it is often required to associate music and sound if one wants sounds to appear less dulled and hollow in the soundtrack; for them, music must leave room for sounds (113). The statement makes sense, but when it comes to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and given the film’s emphasis on hostile diegetic sounds, the formula could very well be reversed: yes, double-tracking takes place in Tobe Hooper’s film, but then, one has the feeling that sounds come first, and that they leave room for some music.

The Score behind the Scare: Music and Noise in a Brutal World

- 16 The radios of the diegesis do not simply broadcast news bulletins; country music can also be heard both in the van [7:20] and in the gas station [19:10]. The reassuringly balanced tonal structures of the country songs that the youths listen to can hardly be considered as apocalyptic. In fact, such music is largely “empathetic” in relation to the youths’ states of mind, as its happy-go-lucky rhythm echoes their initial carefree attitudes (Chion 1995, 228). But this light-heartedness has its limits, and when the hitchhiker comes in, tension builds up, and the cool sound of Roger Bartlett’s song “Fool for a Blonde” (1974) contrasts with the growing uneasiness felt both by the youths and the spectators [11:15]. “On the air sounds” have thus become “anempathetic” (conflicting) (Chion 1995, 229). Diegetic country music is used in a similar fashion later on, when tension is at its peak and a terrified Sally is beaten up by the cook in the gas station [1:01:30].
- 17 Just like the news bulletin in the opening credits, the diegetic and tonal music of the radio is used in order to add another layer of sound in the deliberately cacophonous moment when the hitchhiker cuts Franklin with his straight razor [17:25]. The country song is then combined with the youths’ screams and the nondiegetic atonal score (with the presence of the “zinging sound” that also connects the hitchhiker to the grave digging scene). What is paradoxical about the use of country music is that, even if the youths are southerners and therefore accustomed to that kind of music (they do listen to it willingly in the first place), they become estranged from the songs’ warm mood, as they meet local people who represent a degenerate version of the Old South. Southerners though they may be, the youths are made to feel as intruders in the backcountry where rednecks smile only to reveal their fangs. Country music thus reproduces the two-facedness of the locals, as in John Boorman’s *Deliverance* released

two years before. After all, the combination of the visibly slow-witted window-washer and the country song “Daddy’s Sick again” by Arkey Blue (1972) at the gas station recalls the 1972 banjo-player (Fig.2). Both films thus manage to show how terror can emerge from the most homely places. In fact, Hooper goes even further with his use of rural music by insisting on its deceiving aspect, as he later resorts to the same song (“Daddy’s Sick Again”) when the cook manhandles Sally and puts her in a bag [1:02:30].¹² Besides, the director’s next film, *Eaten Alive* (1977), also includes a nightmarish soundtrack in which country music plays an active part. As Robin Wood notes, “unresolved dissonances” are far from being the only means for composers to create unease,¹³ and one of the most shocking examples could well be the use of a romantic song entitled “Now You’re All Alone” after Mari’s rape in Wes Craven’s *Last House on the Left* (1972). The country songs of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* do not produce the same kind of nausea as the ballad in Craven’s film, but they do contribute to the film’s rawness, and the poor quality of the radio transmission is but another audio component leading to the generalized feeling of discomfort.

Figure 2



Country folks and folk songs

- 18 Of course, as far as music is concerned, the most striking element of the film remains the explosive atonal score that Tobe Hooper and Wayne Bell created in order to “bombard the spectators’ senses.”¹⁴ Atonal music is characterized by the absence of a tonal center: there is no harmonic structure, which implies that heterogeneous and highly dissonant sounds are frequent (Donnelly 14). Atonal pieces of music convey a feeling of immediacy, as there is no recurring tune one might notice and remember. This makes it impossible for the listeners to reach some sort of acoustic stability.¹⁵ In 1913, Italian composer Luigi Russolo observed that the current tendency of music was to create the most discordant and strident sounds, while the realm of machines kept expanding (Chion 2010, 76). His remark is noteworthy for it suggests that Hooper’s score was, in a sense, born of the chainsaw, which links diegetic sounds and nondiegetic music.

- 19 More recently, many critics have commented on the use of atonal pieces of music as scores for films. Mario Litwin asserts that atonal scores have an unsteady nature that is likely to create anxiety (31). For Pierre Berthomieu, they tend to exacerbate disruption and violence, and that is why they are so frequently used in horror films to evoke the domain of fear, horror and the unknown (106). K.J. Donnelly confirms that atonal elements are “cultural anti-matter, typical of horror films” (21). But one of the most relevant and detailed definitions of that very learned kind of music can be found in Adorno and Eisler’s book. Adorno first relates the birth of cinema to funfairs and horror shows, which partly explains the propensity of films to stress sensations. For Adorno, it is only when cinema creates shocking effects that it displays its singular and uncommon nature; atonal music can be instrumental in achieving this (46).¹⁶ For him, modern cinema must consequently be direct and immediately grasp the spectators’ attention. That is why filmic metaphors and aesthetic stylization must be avoided. With this purpose in mind, the director must choose a musical score that causes pain, a sort of “sonorous punishment” (48). *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and its score therefore fit Adorno’s words. Hooper indeed refuses mediation and he targets the spectators’ visceral reaction, his music being undoubtedly meant to amplify this disquieting sensation as everything in the film makes the audience feel that they are condemned to some harsh aural punishment.
- 20 Adorno also associates the profound fear expressed by Arnold Schonberg’s radical dissonances with the historical fear of what he calls “the dawn of some social catastrophe” (46). For Adorno, atonal scores thus express a form of social anger and anti-capitalist feelings. The connection is worth mentioning since many critics see *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as a biting comment on the inhuman aspects of Western capitalistic societies—Reynold Humphries, for instance, considers the film as the representation of the “return of the proletariat repressed” (123), while Naomi Merritt focuses on George Bataille’s ideas on cruelty so as to insist on the film’s “cannibalistic capitalism” (202).
- 21 For all these reasons, music in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is poles apart from Hollywood’s predominantly tonal melodies, which are meant to emphasize the fluidity of the narrative. But the film’s score also deviates from conventional horror soundtracks in which unmotivated stingers are often used to deflate tension by resorting to a playful “Lewton bus effect.”¹⁷ Nothing of the sort occurs in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* where the score always induces unease or fear, whether it be the background of low droning sounds or the foreground of loud reverberating crashes.
- 22 Once again echoing Adorno’s recommendations, Hooper explains that, from the start, he had a very precise idea about the nature of the score he wanted to create for the film. While confessing that he isn’t a musician, the director admits that he has always enjoyed atonal pieces of music, and for his film, he acted like a sound researcher. He started inventing “organic” sounds, “explosive sounds” because he wanted to make his film more real than if he had simply added some ready-made “musical sting” on the offensive images he had shot: “I wanted to show a crescendo of emotional nitroglycerin.”¹⁸ To that effect, he created all these sounds with the most unlikely instruments, toys mostly, but also an African string instrument made of metal, a cardboard tube and even a pitchfork (with which he produced the nerve-racking “zinging sounds” by sliding it along some hard surface). All these unfriendly sounds

were recorded in a little bedroom and introduced during the editing, which took place in the director's living room.¹⁹

- 23 Hooper's musical instruments were unique, and so was their utilization. The atonal pieces of music are, in effect, quite close to the diegetic sounds that can be heard throughout the film, and this closeness creates a sort of added-value in the description of the people and places.²⁰ By echoing the diegetic noises of the film, these nondiegetic sounds create in the spectators' minds an impression of repetition that could be assimilated to an aural version of the feeling of "déjà vu." As these eerie sounds, diegetic *and* nondiegetic, create some feeling of estrangement, the audience may then experience the Freudian uncanny, even in the quiet moments of the film when chaos does not rule supreme. The nondiegetic underscore thus also partakes in the perplexing of the sense of hearing, and that might explain why even the most detailed studies of the film's soundtrack sometimes confuse diegetic and non-diegetic sounds.²¹ One example among many others could be the transition from the nondiegetic underscore composed of rattles and reverberating clanking sounds to the diegetic underscore in which the generator's purring can be heard progressively [30:20-33:20].²²
- 24 This association is also quite obvious in moments when chaos and frenzy steal the show, and the mixing of these sounds result in the feeling of sheer terror rather than mere uncanniness. The dinner scene—with its series of extreme close-ups of Sally's eye—is probably the most striking example of how disturbing the soundtrack can be [1:14:50]. The loud, aggressive score merges with Sally's screams into a form of apocalyptic sonorous magma, which is very trying for the spectators' sense of hearing, all the more so as the frantic and non-linear jump-cut editing makes the film become a jolting, revolting ride into the obscene, as Thoret has already shown.²³ In this scene, the confusion is such that it becomes futile to try and guess what is about to happen. The rules of continuity are violated both aurally and visually, and the spectators can no longer safely experience the film; their own ontological certainties are thus shaken by this surge of violence.
- 25 But the sensation of utter chaos is instilled long before the film's final act. In the opening credits, the sense of hearing is indeed seized by the multi-layering of the soundtrack. Roche has shown that, in the film's introduction, Hooper fuses a naturalistic soundtrack with an experimental score in "formal strategies" that are "consistently inconsistent" (192). Thus, the sonorous magma of the initial atonal outburst is but the aural counterpart of the solar flares that explode on the screen. This piece of deafening "hard-core" bruitism not only echoes the visual blinding flashes in the prologue; it also announces the world of brutes the spectators are entering.²⁴ Having experienced discomfort throughout the unfolding of the film, the viewers must face one last sonorous ordeal before exiting that nightmarish world: the closing scene and its score.

Chaos and the Sound of Silence in the Closing Scene

- 26 The closing scene is composed of three distinct moments: first, the ending of the diegesis (Sally hysterically laughing in the pick-up truck while Leatherface swings his chainsaw over his head) [1:21:50]; this is followed by four seconds of total silence during which the screen remains black and empty [1:22:15]; finally, the end credits roll, accompanied by a loud atonal score reminiscent of the opening credits.

- 27 The end of the diegesis does not allay the spectators' unease in the least. Indeed, the abrupt absence of closure fails to provide a foothold in a stable world. Sharrett convincingly differentiates *Psycho*'s ending from that of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (309). Even if both films are loosely based on the life of murderer/body snatcher Ed Gein, they differ notably in their conclusion: Hitchcock gives us an instructive epilogue on split personalities, while Hooper does not explain anything. In so doing, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* subverts the sense of an ending as defined by Frank Kermode, i.e., "the impulse to bring history under control through the mediation of art"²⁵ (310). Nothing of the sort happens in Hooper's film in which words are defunct, and immediacy prevails over mediation. Sally's final burst of hysterical laughter is by no means the sign of a sane return to civilization, and the last diegetic sound that can be heard (the roaring of the chainsaw when Leatherface starts his mad dance) only shatters any hope for better days once and for all [1:22:10] (Fig. 3 and Fig.4).

Figure 3



Figure 4



Sally and Leatherface engulfed by the sounds of chaos during the film's closing scene

- 28 The diegetic racket that assaults the audience's sense of hearing in the last scene insists on the meaninglessness of the horror that has been witnessed. The film does not provide regeneration of any kind, and the abrupt cut from the dance and the roaring chainsaw to the soundless black screen only stresses the absurdity of humanity's lot. The inclusion of four seconds of silence might seem curious at first, but it is a clever decision. In horror films, silence is often a way to both increase suspense and create a contrast with a noisily violent scene. Such is the case in *Psycho* with the shower scene and "the ominous silence" that precedes the murder (Clover 204).²⁶ *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* functions differently, however. Indeed, the silence comes *after* a frightening scene, not before. The aim is, therefore, not to build up some more tension; rather, silence is a way to underline the previously chaotic nature of the soundtrack and also to emphasize the sheer absurdity of the human lot. Chion notes that it is only thanks to sound films that silence has been truly felt.²⁷ *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* seems to go against this idea, since it is silence which reveals a posteriori how incredibly noisy the film has been. The film's conclusion puts an end to the uproar caused by Leatherface, and with that deadly silence, the spectators may have the eerie feeling that chaos has been absorbed by nothingness, and that they have also been engulfed in it. The feeling only lasts four seconds, but these seconds feel like an eternity since time has stopped passing (as is symbolically shown outside Leatherface's house with the watch perforated by a nail).
- 29 Time then restarts with a jolt, and the end credits appear on screen, with a somewhat shaky image and an atonal and unfriendly score [1:22:19]. In keeping with the director's will to suppress smooth transitions, both the opening and end credits convey the impression that time is dysfunctional. At the outset of the film, the opening score does not allow the radio reporter to finish his sentence [3:54], while the transition between the end of the diegesis and the beginning of the end credits is astonishingly long. Time, like reason, cannot be controlled in the nightmarish world of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. When the closing score suddenly clanks into motion, the spectators immediately think that they are embarked on a chaotic world once again. Nevertheless,

when comparing the dissonant scores of the opening and ending credits, one may hear some variations in these chaotic pieces.

- 30 Horror films are often compared to roller-coaster rides, yet the image of the “free-fall ride” (or the “drop tower”) seems more fitting to describe the end of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, with its auditory structure based on a noise/silence/noise pattern that reproduces the discontinuous free fall experienced by funfair lovers (free fall/brutal stop/free fall again). A close analysis of the final score shows how the spectators tend to react to that last part of the “free-fall.” The final score has much to do with the opening score. Both are based on the same atonal music. Both are produced thanks to different types of percussions which create a variety of sounds of clanking and rattling. The sound of explosions can be heard, too. A lot of reverberation is added to both musical pieces. Both scores last the same length of time (1’25”). Nevertheless, the opening score puts more stress on explosions and crashing cymbals than the closing score, which, although still chaotic, uses fewer detonations that are not as loud. On the whole, it seems that percussions like cowbells have been preferred to the more powerful cymbals. Moreover, the closing score also sounds somewhat less disruptive as there is no track for the diegetic world anymore (unlike the opening score, in which the voice of the radio presenter can still be heard as solar flares appear on screen). It might also be worth adding that the end of the film does not display apocalyptic shots. The credits appear on a mere black screen while the final score is played—visually speaking, the effect is less striking than with the initial sun storms.
- 31 But these remarks obviously do not imply that the ending of the film verges on serenity. Chaos still prevails, and even if there is no deafening explosion that initiates and ends the closing score (as was the case with the opening score), one last shrill “zinging sound” can still be heard, and it brings a traumatic conclusion to the spectators’ experience of the film. Following Thoret’s theory on the excess of energy that needed to be spent in the 1970s in the USA (62-64), I would suggest that the relative weakening of intensity in the chaos then felt by the spectators is due to the fact that some of this deadly energy has been consumed with the murders of the youths. Thus, the absence of a diegetic soundtrack in the final score could indicate that chaos has started consuming humanity’s voice and lifeforce.²⁸ The atonal final score’s annihilation of diegetic sounds brings to mind Chion’s thoughts on what he calls “fundamental sounds” (*L’Audio-vision* 214, my translation). The latter, he argues, have no musical pitch, and are continuous and undifferentiated (and thus are likely to be featured in atonal scores). For Chion, these sounds “symbolically threaten to engulf or dissolve all the other sounds in a film” (2013, 214, my translation) and it is therefore quite tempting to assimilate the final score to such sounds whose corrosive power cannot be denied, and which deprive the film’s finale of any healing features.

Conclusion

- 32 In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, chaos is everywhere on the soundtrack, from beginning to end. And the final piece of music wholly conveys the impression that vital energy has turned sour, owing to the entropic dynamic that is at work on both the diegetic and nondiegetic levels. The porosity between the different levels of sounds (diegetic and nondiegetic) thus leads to an abysmal experimentation of an utter loss of the world’s composition. In such a bleak context, it is then quite difficult to follow Chion’s next

assertion regarding fundamental sounds, as he indeed nicely compares them to the noise in a projection room and to the “background noise of life” (Chion 2013, 214). The metaphor seems indeed quite irrelevant here as the film ends on the dawning of a new era in which Man has lost his ability to speak and make sense: the only sounds that remain to be heard then only bring chaos to the foreground . . . chaos and an intense feeling of discomfort that thwart the film and its soundtrack from any regenerative power.

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The Texas Chain Saw Massacre. With Marilyn Burns (Sally Hardesty), Allen Danziger (Jerry), Gunnar Hasen (Leatherface), Tei McMinn (Pam), Ediwan Neal (Hitchhiker), Paul Partain (Franklin Hardesty), Jim Siedow (Cook), and William Vail (Kirk). Director Tobe Hooper. Writers and producers: Kim Henkel and Tobe Hooper. Cinematographer: Daniel Pearl. Editors: Larry Carroll and Sallye Richardson. Music: Wayne Bell and Tobe Hooper. Art Direction: Robert A. Burns. Vortex, 1974. DVD. Studio Canal, 2002.

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NOTES

1. Later, the viewers will also share Pam's disgust in Leatherface's workshop, as she cannot help vomiting when seeing and smelling the killer's grisly form of art.
2. See Florent Christol's article "Saturne en rétrograde: survivances et dégénérescences carnavalesques dans les films de Tobe Hooper."
3. If one follows Chion's theory, that sound prop should not be used since the generator has no real narrative function in the plot (Chion, *L'Audio-vision* 50). However, this sound does create some more displeasure for the audience, and it also echoes the trauma of the 1973 oil crisis in the USA.
4. We can barely hear Kirk tentatively saying "OK?" to Franklin as he gives him the can.
5. In his typology of off-screen sounds, Michel Chion calls "passive off-screen sounds" the sounds whose origin we cannot see but know already. For him, this kind of sound enables the director to create a stable atmosphere since no suspense is triggered (*Audio-vision* 77). We might think that this is not quite the case in Hooper's film, when Sally is filmed and we can only hear the distressing sound of the chainsaw, somewhere in the woods.
6. Chion then uses Pierre Schaeffer's theory on sounds presented in *À la recherche d'une musique concrète*.
7. Unlike David Roche, I do not think that these sounds all come from the encaged hen.
8. These are some of the easiest bits to catch: "a building collapsed... / ... police are unable to identify the bodies... their features carved away... the man's genitals have been removed... / ... Beyond the Amazon today ... erupted into violence... three South American governments have been involved.../ police arrested a young couple... eighteen month-old girl chained in the attic of a dilapidated home..."
9. To echo Christopher Sharrett's idea of an apocalypse, we might even say that the arrhythmic clashes of cymbals coupled with these dreadful news items evoke the end of the world announced by astronomer / mad prophet Philippulus, in Tintin's adventures, *The Shooting Star*.
10. To this could be added the presence of handheld shots, and some noises in the underscore that enhance the verisimilitude. A telling example would be the thumping of the generator, which is not that different from the noise made by a super-8 camera when filming an amateur documentary or a snuff movie.

11. One may speak of “double-tracking” when two or more sound pieces are added for some dramatic reason (Litwin 121).
12. We can also add that when Sally rushes in for help into the gas station, another of Arkey Blue’s songs can be heard – “Misty Hours of Daylight” (1974). At that point, since the song abruptly replaces the roar of the chainsaw, we might still believe it is for Sally’s best, but we soon realize that we are wrong.
13. Robin Wood then refers to Schubert’s music, and his thoughts are mentioned in Neil Lerner’s preface of *Music in the Horror Film* (X).
14. These are Hooper’s very words. See the bonus interview on the French DVD.
15. Atonal music mainly developed in the early 20th century with composers like Arnold Schonberg, Bela Bartok or Igor Stravinsky. It can also be referred to as “modern music”, or “bruitism”, or more pejoratively as “noise music”.
16. Note that when referring to atonal music, Adorno speaks of “modern music.”
17. The Lewton Bus effect is when some tension is suddenly deflated by a loud noise coming from a harmless source. The phrase refers to an offscreen bus that scares Alice when it noisily brakes as it enters the image, in *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1941).
18. In the bonus interview on the French DVD.
19. This information mainly comes from David Gregory’s documentary, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: the Shocking Truth*, made in 2000, and produced by A Blue Underground Production.
20. David Roche rightly remarks that the backdrop of the film echoes the emotional lives of both victims and killers (201).
21. Roche tells us that there are no longer any nondiegetic elements in the soundtrack during the final chase (201), when in fact rumbling of cymbals can be heard just before the pick-up truck tries to start again [81:25].
22. I therefore do not quite agree with Roche’s idea that “diegetic [...] and non-diegetic elements vie for dominion over the soundtrack” (201, my italics). Rather, I think both kinds of elements cooperate so as to render the soundtrack even more perplexing.
23. Using Jean Baudrillard’s thoughts, Thoret shows that Hooper’s film stages the obscenity of the visible. For him, the obscene is the immediate proximity (*promiscuité*) of the eye and its aim, the insanity of seeing everything (82).
24. This very brutal opening sequence questions Mario Litwin’s assertion according to which opening credits are meant to gradually introduce the mood of the film (104).
25. Sharrett quotes page 22 of Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending*.
26. It can be added that Hitchcock enjoyed resorting to suspenseful silence in his films, in *The Birds* (1963), *Torn Curtain* (1966) and *Frenzy* (1972) among others.
27. Chion then explicitly refers to an aphorism by Robert Bresson (*Audio-vision* 52).
28. After all, Hooper would later direct *Lifeforce*, in 1985, a film in which a gorgeous extra-terrestrial entity destroys human beings by kissing them on the mouth.

ABSTRACTS

The article analyzes the role played by both the diegetic sounds and the music in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974). Resorting to some atonal score made of jarring notes coupled with diegetic sounds of the most bizarre sort (from the rattling of chainsaws to the cackling of

encaged hens, without forgetting the screaming of the unyielding heroine), Tobe Hooper means to literally set the viewers' teeth on edge. By counting on the sense of hearing more than on special effects, the director creates some kind of prolonged sticky red scream that still unsettles the most blasé spectators of today's horror films.

Cet article analyse le rôle que jouent les sons diégétiques et la musique dans *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974). En ayant recours à une partition atonale faite de notes discordantes et de sons diégétiques des plus étranges (allant du vrombissement d'une tronçonneuse au caquètement d'une poule en cage, sans oublier les hurlements de l'héroïne récalcitrante), Tobe Hooper a pour intention d'éprouver les nerfs des spectateurs. Le réalisateur s'appuie alors plus sur le sens de l'ouïe que sur les effets spéciaux, et il parvient ainsi à créer une sorte de hurlement poisseux et rougeâtre qui déstabilise encore aujourd'hui les spectateurs les plus blasés des films d'horreur contemporains.

INDEX

Keywords: discomfort, fear, senses, physicality, (non) diegetic sounds, soundtrack, film score, country music, atonal music, bruitism, romantic grotesque

Mots-clés: inconfort, peur, sens, physicalité, sons (non) diégétiques, bande sonore, musique de film, musique country, musique atonale, bruitisme, grotesque romantique

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