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“You’re never coming back you goddamn bastard!”: Sound, Safety, and Bereavement in *Phantasm*

Jamie Lewis

Don Coscarelli’s 1979 sci-fi horror film *Phantasm* essentially depicts Mikey and his older brother Jody’s battle against, and eventual defeat of, an extraterrestrial undertaker: the Tall Man. Ultimately, it is revealed that Jody is in fact recently deceased and the entire plot was Mikey’s fantastical nightmare, the product of his grieving imagination. One scene’s use of sound is analysed here for its effectiveness in concisely tying together the disparate strands of Mikey’s subjective experience. Through the use of hushed dialogue, relational silences—particularly in relation to music—and the strategic repetition of doors being slammed, the soundtrack of this extract functions to elaborate upon the subthemes of sibling affection, abandonment, and ultimately profound terror. The audience is thus led through numerous stages of Mikey’s emotionally unstable psyche: from comforting relief, to deep distress, and finally fear.

For the large majority of its run time *Phantasm* ostensibly depicts 13-year-old Mikey and his older brother Jody’s battle with the Tall Man, an alien undertaker who reanimates then shrinks corpses—including those of the siblings’ recently deceased parents—to use as dwarf slaves on his home planet. After destroying the mausoleum that housed the intergalactic portal used to transport undead captives, Mikey is informed he has just awoken and the entire experience was a grief-fuelled nightmare caused by both his parents’ and Jody’s recent deaths. The audience is then forced to reconsider everything that they have seen as the film’s narrative incoherency is re-contextualised as the product of a child’s subconsciousness struggling to overcome multiple bereavements. Due to its open ending, the question of whether or not the Tall Man exists outside of Mikey’s dreams has provoked countless online debates. This essay will assume he does not.

The scene to be analysed here takes place before that revelation and shows Mikey returning home having escaped from a violent encounter with the Tall Man’s minions. Jody greets him and the two share a brief moment of familial affection before Mikey’s older brother locks him in his bedroom and leaves to attempt to kill the film’s villain. The youngster quickly escapes only to find the Tall Man waiting at the front door. A combination of dialogue, sound effects and music within the scene gives aural representation to three distinct aspects of Mikey’s subjective experience of the narrative. Firstly, his sense of safety within his home and with his subconscious’s representation of his deceased brother. Secondly the young boy’s profound fear of abandonment and ultimately the danger represented by the

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Tall Man and its sonic presentation through the film’s progressive rock score. While addressing these points, this analysis will pay special attention to the use of the sound of doors closing and opening to imply both physical and psychological barriers, and to what Paul Thebérge has termed “relational silences” between the soundtrack elements.¹

The opening of the scene is notable for its relative calm, reflected through the soundtrack’s lack of music and the dialogue’s hushed tones. Opening with a medium close-up of Jody staring off-screen, the score—carried over from the previous scene—fades out and with it the last vestige of the chaos and violence that has just occurred. A door slams and the camera cuts to a longer shot, with Mikey having just entered the room. (Figure 1):



Figure 1: We hear the door slam shut, then cut to Mikey.

Crucially, he is heard before he is seen, introducing a key aspect of his subjective experience while at home: doors as barriers to both protect and imprison.² He is now safely inside with a blockade between him and the danger outside. The soundtrack expresses this through the use of “relational silences”, understood by Thebérge as the muting of one or more elements of the soundtrack to create “crude juxtapositions of sound components as a kind of special effect” that produce “relationships of presence and absence”.³ The assertion that these “contrasts thus produced are a powerful tool for creating meaning” is applicable to *Phantasm*, as the music’s absence in this scene is immediately noticeable and deeply significant.⁴ The film’s progressive rock score—as will be discussed in greater detail later—represents the danger of the Tall Man, and as Mikey is rarely far from that peril, ominous keyboards, synthesizers and electronic beats are practically omnipresent.

Yet now with aural calm around them, the two brothers have the opportunity to talk, and do so

¹ Paul Thebérge, “Almost Silent: The Interplay of Sound and Silence in Contemporary Cinema and Television,” in *Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound*, ed. by Tony Grajeda & Jay Beck (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 56.

² Examples of the significance of doors elsewhere in the film include frequent references to the door to the room housing the Tall Man’s portal: “There’s this door down here...”, “This is the door to their planet.”

³ Thebérge, “Almost Silent”, 56.

⁴ *Ibid.*

in hushed tones, with Mikey sat on Jody's knee. The younger of the two updates his sibling on the fate of their friends so quietly as to be close to a whisper, squeezing words out between heavy breathes and a hint of sobbing. The audience hears his every sound as he struggles to both control his breathing and process the violence he has just experienced. The foregrounding of the human voice and Mikey's panting recall Karen Lury's analysis of sound in *CSI*, in which she claims the performance of conversations "in a low-pitched, breathy and intimate manner" represents "the register of secrets and caresses".⁵ While her argument is that such dialogue can consequently be erotic in nature and there is no indication of any incestuous relationship in *Phantasm*, the point of intimacy is pertinent as the two are sharing a sibling concern and affection. Mikey and Jody sit with their arms around each other and the soundtrack expresses the younger boy's subjective experience of feeling safe at home with his older brother. Through the muting of the film's score, the scene allows the audience to appreciate that its protagonist is finally able to relax, blissfully ignorant that this reunion is a deception of his subconscious.



Figure 2: Jody secures the screwdriver.

Mikey's emotional condition quickly changes from a feeling of safety to deep distress. As Jody forces him into his room he realises his older brother intends to go to the mausoleum to fight the Tall Man alone, triggering his intense fear of abandonment. This phobia is later explained through the revelation that Jody's death was the result of a car accident while on a road trip. Mikey's choice of words at this juncture is crucial: "You're never coming back you goddamn bastard!" He is evidently not truly worried that the Tall Man will kill Jody and prevent his return or his response would be one more of concern, not exclusively of anger. Rather, his subconscious is aware that Jody has already left and never returned from his travels. Mikey's voice cracks. He screeches rather than yells. Having been near silent seconds before, the scene is now a cacophony of pushing and punching with increasing volume as Jody carries his young brother upstairs, and yet the music track remains silent. Again this relational silence indicates that Mikey believes he is not in danger as the Tall Man is, to his mind, far away. He might be angry, but he is safe.

⁵ Karen Lury, "CSI and Sound," in *Reading CSI: Crime TV Under the Microscope*, ed. by Michael Allen (New York: IB Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), 113.

After literally throwing his little brother into the bedroom, Jody pulls the door shut. He then wedges a screwdriver in the gap between the door and the wall and secures it with three strong pushes of the flat of his palm (Figure 2).

The sound is an obvious mismatch; his hand inexplicably causes a louder, deeper noise than the audience would expect, closer in timbre to a hammer. These sound effects reinforce the motif of doors as barriers, though this time to imprison Mikey in his room. He is left powerless to prevent his older brother leaving and potentially dying in his dream, just as in waking life. His subjective experience is now one of bitter anger and sadness, the brief respite of his subconscious intimate moment with his brother brought to an end with the crashing thud of a door, a barrier raised between him and what he wants: to be free of the nightmare of the Tall Man and of the reality of Jody's passing.

The bedroom door/barrier does not last long though; as its structural integrity, the relational silence of the scene, and Mikey's safety within the home quickly come to an abrupt and loud end. Barely has Jody left the house when the young boy fashions a homemade explosive out of a hammer, sticky tape, a thumbtack, and a shotgun shell, then proceeds to blast a hole through the door, dislodge the screwdriver, and escape his bedroom. His improvised weapon makes an obviously disproportionately loud noise, more akin to what audiences might expect from a car exploding. Instantaneously, the film's score returns, shattering the musical silence that had previously expressed safety and intimacy. The dramatic sound of the door being removed as a barrier and the return of a keyboard riff that has been developed throughout the film as a leitmotif clearly indicate what Mikey is thinking of: defeating the Tall Man.

The association of this snippet of music with the film's villain has been well established by this point, as has its use to express the connection between him and the boy whose dream he exists within. Earlier for instance, it had soundtracked a scene in which Mikey sees his nemesis in a photo he uncovers in an antique store. The photograph then begins to move as the Tall Man turns to look straight at the boy. As the film progresses towards its climax this leitmotif is used repeatedly, although with increasingly intense accompanying instruments. The melodies however remain incomplete, consistently interrupted and never allowed to continue to a logical conclusion. Richard Dyer has identified a similar effect in the score of David Fincher's *Se7en* and argues that it gives the illusion of a movement towards an ending and a potential wedding of disparate narrative strands.⁶ That promise is a lie in both films. Dyer's argument is applicable to *Phantasm*, particularly when he asserts that such repetition represents a "tonal progression that endlessly promises melody and completion but never really delivers it, drawing one endlessly onwards through the darkness".⁷ This quote can be taken as an explanation for the film score's expression of the subjective experience of Mikey's dream state. He seemingly moves towards a resolution by discovering more and more about the Tall Man, while only truly regressing further into his subconscious and becoming lost in the darkness of his grief-fuelled fantasy world. The scene analysed here is a primary example of this as the soundtrack lulls Mikey into a sense of safety before encouraging his re-entry in to the most fantastical aspect of his nightmare: the quest to defeat the Tall Man. The keyboard leitmotif draws him further and further through the darkness.

To comment on the score as a whole, it is significant that it relies so heavily on the generic conventions of progressive rock—prog—such as the use of more "technological" sounds and longer form instrumentals.⁸ Through its commitment to "improvement and upwards development through experimentation", Paul Hegarty asserts "progressive rock aims to change society, or suggest alternat-

⁶ Richard Dyer, *Se7en* (London: bfi Publishing, 1999), 54.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Allan F. Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (London: Routledge, 2016), 201–202; Edward Macan, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 22.

ives.”⁹ *Phantasm*'s prog soundtrack functions as the aural manifestation of Mikey's subconscious attempts to suggest an alternative to his waking reality, one in which his brother is still alive. However, that dream is not often a pleasant one, and the score's reappearance warns the audience that danger is nearby, a fear confirmed when Mikey opens the front door to leave and the Tall Man is waiting. (Figure 3)

As the door opens, the music is drowned out and then muted with a large cymbal crash, an aural expression of the destruction of another barrier and of the young boy's subjective experience in that moment: a sudden, overwhelming sense of shock and fear. The Tall Man tells him, "I've been waiting for you" in deep, well-articulated, aged tones, reminiscent of Christopher Lee's performances as Dracula; confirming this is a character to be feared. He grabs his young nemesis by the shoulder; an action that immediately triggers the resumption of the aforementioned keyboard riff. The Tall Man throws the boy into the back of a hearse and slams the door behind him, providing the aural effect that draws the scene to an end. Mikey is again entrapped.



Figure 3: The Tall Man's presence has been foreshadowed by the keyboard leitmotif.

Through the use of relational silences, the scene analysed here establishes the brothers' home as a place of safety and aids the dialogue in highlighting the sibling affection between them. Sound effects are employed to emphasise the motif of doors as barriers, particularly when invoking Mikey's profound fear of abandonment. These two thematic strands are superseded when the film's progressive rock score recycles the keyboard riff it has developed into a leitmotif for the danger represented by the Tall Man. Throughout, the scene thus uses sound to express the intense psychological components of Mikey's subjective experience from comfort to anger and ultimately, fear. ■

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