

# A symphonic apologia for horror: music, sound and narration in *Who Can Kill a Child?* (1976)

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**ABSTRACT**

*Who can kill a child?* (Narciso Ibáñez Serrador, 1976) has long held a prominent position among Spanish horror films in large part due to the dialogue it established with the context of the time it was made and an ongoing comparative reassessment between it and contemporary productions of the genre. Critical attention bestowed on the film has dealt with historical and interpretative issues but has excluded its music and sound as a tool for analysis. This article takes a look at the film through its soundtrack, beginning with its general characteristics and finally examining the specific details of the two main musical themes. The analysis in this paper allows new aesthetic and historiographical information to be incorporated, in addition to emphasising the essential elements of the narrative coordination and the characterisation of the central factions in the film, the children and the adults.

### ***Who can kill a child?* in the context it was received**

Comparisons between Narciso Ibáñez Serrador's second film, *Who can kill a child?* (1976) and the rest of his short filmography and his television work are inevitable. Similarly to his first film, *The house that screamed* (1969), the film expressly aims to achieve the necessary production standards to make it easy to sell abroad by using foreign actors in the main roles and filming it in English. Moreover, he once again chooses to adapt a work of literature – in this case Juan José Plans's novel *El juego de los niños* (1976) – and to make a child the architect at the centre of the tragedy; an aspect noted as a recurring theme in Ibáñez Serrador's work (Mendíbil, 2001).

Discussion surrounding the film has identified different precedents both regarding the apparent tragic pessimism of the plot and its resolution (Torres, 1999; Sala, 2010) as well as a child being the central character driving it forward (García, 2002a; Cordero, 2007; Lázaro-Reboll, 2012). However, despite these prior connections, the theme of violence against children and the questions raised by the title of the film alone, judging by the reaction when it was released, were a new and striking element in Spanish film making at the time. As with his debut film, Ibáñez Serrador's new cinematic venture provoked real controversy. At a time when Spain found itself transitioning towards democracy, intellectual and moral questions about the present and the future being built for the youngest in society seemed utterly relevant from any standpoint. Nevertheless, the only intentional position taken by the film is to expressly condemn the violence that armed conflicts inflict on children, in which adults are their executioners (Torres, 1999). Although this is expressed simply in the film, the timeless paradigm of this idea has kept the plot line relevant throughout the years, and possibly contributed to it becoming a cult film. In 2012, the republication of Plans's novel and a new Mexican film adaptation – *Come out and play* (Makinov, 2012), produced the same year – appear to confirm the enduring validity of the issues raised in this work.

*Who can kill a child?* was released on 21 April 1976 in the *Proyecciones* cinema in Madrid. Total box office sales amounted to 868,396 tickets totalling 63,319,411 pesetas (380,557.32 euros), making Ibáñez Serrador's renewed foray into cinema one of the most-watched Spanish fantasy films (García, 2002). All the same, the figures achieved for *Who can kill a child?* were less than a third of those for *The house that screamed*, and the film received a similarly indifferent reaction from the industry to any potential innovations it offered; suggesting there may have been a lost opportunity to rejuvenate the genre in Spain. Sala says that: "Ibáñez Serrador's film had a tremendous impact for the horror genre, which unfortunately was not followed up by the directors and producers of the time"<sup>1</sup> (Sala, 2010, p. 163). Contemporary criticism was less hostile to the film than *The house that screamed*, although negative references to the film were still plentiful. This relative failure has been blamed on the fact that the film was released at a time when the genre was at the point of saturation and

1 [Translated from the original.]

burnout in Spain, with audiences and critics eager for a new kind of film (Agudo, 2009; Cordero, 2007). Lázaro-Reboll notes the words of critic Diego Galán, for whom, looking back, the lack of success was due to the film being removed from the political tensions of the time and its lack of aesthetic propriety in the treatment of childhood (Lázaro-Reboll, 2012). According to critic and historian Miguel Ángel Barroso, far from attributing this to factors outside the film, it is clear that the film did not succeed because “it was mutilated during filming due to the lack of comprehension of a producer who was not versed in the art of film making”<sup>2</sup>, directly citing this as what ultimately caused Ibáñez Serrador to move away from film (Barroso, 2009, p. 12).

Regardless of the circumstances suggested to explain the limited recognition received by *Who can kill a child?*, growing interest following its release made it clear that in time the film would go on to re-establish a dialogue with audiences, and ensured its position as a benchmark within the paradigm of contemporary horror productions. Today, it is considered a cult film in Spain and abroad, praised as one of the unique masterpieces of the genre and recognised as one of the many Spanish films that still deserves extensive critical attention.

### **The musical soundtrack by Waldo de los Ríos**

Ibáñez Serrador entrusted his regular collaborator and the composer on his previous film, Argentine Waldo de los Ríos, with the creation of the soundtrack for *Who can kill a child?* De los Ríos’s work for *The house that screamed*, despite being completely overshadowed by the criticism focusing on the film’s pretensions, was undoubtedly in line with the innovative ambition the director wished to convey to his first film as part of the New Spanish Cinema (Sapró, 2013). It perfectly matched the oppressive nature of the film’s setting and enriched the plot by creating sound identities rarely used in horror films in Spain, positioning the film closer to the European avant-garde films of the time. The resulting score in *Who can kill a child?* preserves these qualities and once again manages to be a comparatively notable point of reference; one which contemporary criticism once again chose to ignore. The precision with which the music integrates and works with the images to develop the narration is clear. Although such an intense level of characterisation is perhaps not achieved on this occasion, nor is there such a significant influence on the structure of the filmic unit itself, the quality and complexity of the musical structure could be said to exceed that heard in *The house that screamed*.

Unlike the soundtrack for *The house that screamed*, *Who can kill a child?* was released as an LP on the Hispavox label, for which De los Ríos had an exclusive contract. Nevertheless, the record was largely the initiative of the composer, who used the work for the film to create a record that, despite being intrinsically linked to the film, could be listened to in its own

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2 [Translated from the original.]

right (Benítez, 2009). The way the musical themes unfold therefore lend the record a certain narrative quality, the sound even being interspersed with the children's recurring laugh to add a heightened sense of drama to the listening experience. The musical soundtrack includes orchestral fragments around a recognisable key interspersed with long atonal passages, as well as specific music and electronic resources showing the composer's extensive interest in this area and reflecting his time in Cologne's famous *Studio für elektronische Musik*. The record also contains a vocal version of one of the film's central themes, with lyrics written and sung by Raúl Rafecas, but this did not appear in the final edit. Producing a record around the time of the film's release was a common practice in the record industry with direct links to film, not with the aim of fulfilling any dramatic or narrative criteria, but simply to profit from sales of the record (Benítez, 2009; Larson, 1996).

The LP was sold under the subtitle *Apología sinfónica del horror* [a symphonic apologia for horror], declaring the record's intent independently of the film and at the same time stressing the composer's intention to offer a personal recording showing his understanding of horror music and allowing him to use his extensive composition skills. This unusual subtitle cannot avoid evoking F.W. Murnau's original choice for his film *Nosferatu* (*Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*, 1922). In the same way that the subtitle *eine Symphonie des Grauens* [a symphony of horror] seems to allude to the director's conscious desire to show how horror characterisation can be achieved in film (Prawer, 1988), De los Ríos's composition could be considered from a similar point of view thanks to the musicalization of this cinematographic mood. As mentioned, *Who can kill a child?* was released at the end of a period during which Spanish horror films had flooded the market following a boom from 1971 to 1973 (Aguilar, 1999). Audiences now wanted new ideas and as a consequence, film makers wishing to preserve their prestige or to continue being successful during these times had to offer something different and innovative (Sala, 2010). This paradigm may also have something to do with Ibáñez Serrador's decision to return to film making by adapting Plans's unusual story, but, importantly, this also gave De los Ríos the chance to make his own mark in the world of horror music composition. Considering the assessment of the end product today, we could say that De los Ríos achieved his aim. The soundtrack for *Who can kill a child?* became "one of the undisputed masterpieces of Spanish film music"<sup>3</sup> (García, 2002b, p. 149).

### **The sound in *Who can kill a child?***

One of the aspects that most stands out when listening to *Who can kill a child?* is the distribution of its soundtrack. After the opening musical block, the first part of the film is scored with distinct sobriety in its use of incidental music. This leaves a special space for the ambient sound, which is full of the hustle and bustle of local festivities in the fictitious town of Benavís and preserves the bangs of rockets, fireworks, the original sound of the festival

3 [Translated from the original.]

music, and other sounds which become more significant as the plot progresses; the sounds of the children's games and shouts of joy. This excess of diegetic sound becomes a key contrast with the foreboding silence the main characters find when they arrive on the island of Almanzora, and which they draw attention to through the dialogue. Likewise, given the film's anti-war slant, the level of agitation reached paradoxically manages to emphasise how local festivals in Spain often involve recreating the sights and sounds of a battle, including the image of children running about with imaginary weapons.

In contrast to these sounds, the soundscapes of Almanzora are initially dominated by a silence befitting the sense of solitude and isolation they were intended to convey. The combination of this absence of expression together with José Luis Alcaine's cinematography and the decision for the action to always occur in broad daylight, together with the obvious heat the actors are enduring, only intensifies their exposure and their deliberate vulnerability when faced with the elements and the humans who stalk them. During this first part they are accompanied by ominous, albeit still day-to-day, noises: white noise from an un-tuned television, the slow creak of a spit roast, or the slight sound of a blind being closed suddenly. Only after this last incident and the resulting suspicion it arouses in the male character – Tom – does the score start to provide clues about the threat on the island. The film's main theme, with its association with the children and their 'innocent' homicidal games, plays at once, and the musical soundtrack starts to be distributed in the normal way of a horror film.

It could be said that the music takes as long to actively participate in the horror as the characters themselves take to accept the real threat presented by the children, demonstrating its particular coordination with the narrative. Yet silence is never absent from the film's scenes. It can be heard gliding relentlessly over the body that Tom fails to notice in the grocery store, or ending an incipient musical crescendo when he approaches the confessional in the church only to discover that it contains nothing more than a smiling child, presenting the viewer with the flip side to seeing them as a threat and adding weight to the moral dilemma posed by the film. Silence also accompanies the surviving father and his daughter on the slow journey towards what will surely be the adult's inevitable death, it abruptly halts the children's attack on the customs office when the first of them is killed and it also marks Tom's death after his last, desperate attempt to flee. Removing the music that usually guides the viewer's feelings has an immediate effect of emotional suspension that prolongs the prevailing feeling of anguish until it is resolved by the viewer or the elements of the film themselves.

The soundtrack by De los Ríos also abounds with electronic elements combined with orchestral passages, although they are occasionally heard alone to give specific meaning to some key sound structures. It is commonly noted that there is a natural tendency to associate interstitiality with perceiving something monstrous. This also applies to music, which

has traditionally favoured resources such as dissonant intervals, atonality or electronic elements for the musicalization of horror (Link, 2010). Including elements such as these allows De los Ríos to employ a simple reference to show anguish and the sinister as and when those moments appear as part of the orchestral landscape. But his parallel allusion to the supernatural – understood as something outside of or unknown in nature – is also useful to now and then introduce important narrative elements through the sound. In this way, the extrasensory communication between the children, which borders on telepathy, is acoustically constructed using a set of electronic frequencies and a sound echoing a human heart beat. When put together, it brings to mind a complete system of transmission and reception. This system is essential to understanding and giving credibility to the situation that results in the death of the female character – Evelyn – and its persistence at some moments when the children act together, and makes their oneness, their determination and their sense of a shared will plain to see, in contrast to the uncertain, uncoordinated and individualistic picture painted of the adults.

### **The children's theme. The breakdown of innocence**

The combination of the opening musical block and the images during the credits is a simple but compelling part of the production design. Against a black background, a child's voice hums the first few bars of the film's main theme. At the end, the notes blend with children's laughter whilst an old black and white photograph takes shape; it is of a child with arms raised, in the stance of a prisoner of war in what is obviously an armed conflict. The second part of the musical theme follows in exactly the same way with the opening credits presenting the title of the film over the photograph. From thereon, clips narrated in a documentary style begin to play, in a format that has been said to recall the old Spanish *No-Do* newsreels (Steinberg, 2006). These clips show a selection of recent atrocities one after the other, such as the horrors discovered during the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp, the wars in India and Pakistan, Vietnam, Korea, and Nigeria; with a particular focus on the child victims of these conflicts. With each new clip, there is a pause broken by the voices and laughter of the children together with the main theme repeating over still images of these horrors. For this theme, De los Ríos composed a melody similar to a lullaby (Figure 1) with a simple triple-metre waltz, exactly as he had for *The house that screamed*, which easily evoked the innocence, simplicity and carefree nature of childhood.



Figure 1. *Who can kill a child?* The children's theme.

The immediate result of this audiovisual design for the opening block is a clear contrast between horror and innocence, between the atrocities deriving from the savage behaviour of the adults and the consequences for the children trapped in these terrible 'games'. This establishes the core precepts of the plot and the suggestion of the children's motivation for rebelling and coming up with their own 'games' is reinforced. Despite the fact that Ibáñez Serrador would later label this opening sequence "an error"<sup>4</sup> (Torres, 1999, p. 252) – and in fact it did become the focus of much contemporary criticism – he did achieve a unique and effective characterisation of the children, which is subsequently borne out throughout the rest of the film. He coherently places them in the context of the adult world, which the main characters – just like everyone else as yet unaware of the events on the island of Almanzora – take for granted and even help to reinforce by turning a blind eye to its horrors. A tangible example of this approach is revealed later on in the photography shop, when the very serious conversation between the main characters and the shopkeeper about the hardships children have to endure at the hands of adults ends with him cheerfully exclaiming "a good day for photos, eh?"<sup>5</sup>. Reinforcing this idea during the opening sequence of the film by alternating horrific images with children's voices impassively humming their innocent songs whilst the adults turn them into the victims of their dispute creates a striking anempathetic effect. This correlates with the children's indifference in the film, as they show no desire for revenge or signs of evil even when they are enacting the most violent crimes. As stated by Chion, in this way the suggested emotion is reinforced in the viewer, accentuating the horror of what they are seeing (Chion, 1993).

De los Ríos also composed an interesting and unsettling piece of music to use with the images taken from the documentary clips by using the technique mentioned above of combining orchestral music and electronic sounds. In the final edit, however, it was decided to replace this with pre-existing music by Beethoven and Wagner, although the reason for this is not known. Perhaps, if we believe there was an intended purpose behind the opening

4 [Translated from the original.]

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block, it may have been felt that the Argentine composer's score would quash the feeling of realism provided by the images and introduce a patina of fiction that would have reduced their impact. Pre-existing music was commonly used on the *No-Do* documentaries and using it here therefore differentiated the images from fiction, separating the creativity of a horror film from what are ultimately real events. Or perhaps, as suggested by Benítez, "this hybrid of orchestral sound and fascinating electronic music was too daring for Chicho [Ibáñez Serrador]"<sup>6</sup> (Benítez, 2009, p. 8). In any event, De los Ríos's original version did survive in full-length editions of the soundtrack produced in Spain; a rare example of film music heritage being preserved.

The children's theme becomes the central core around which the rest of the film's soundtrack is built. Its simplicity makes it perfectly malleable for film composition, whilst its metre and timbre are unmistakably reminiscent of the mixture of candour and suspicion of childhood. This had already been done in the similar and compelling lullaby in *Rosemary's baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968). With these underlying properties, from the first time it appears in the storyline and throughout the film thereafter, the theme moves between registers that reflect the extremes of that first innocence and the distortion of this idea by employing different harmonic alterations. This introduces a touch of the sinister and shows valuable versatility. With the exception of the opening musical block, the theme is not played at all during the first part of the film, which is consistent with the absence of the characters associated with it. Only when there is an inkling that the children are a unit with a shared and perverse will – first of all hidden in a wardrobe in the bedroom and later making the fatal contact with Evelyn's unborn child – does the main theme emerge to establish this unambiguous and ongoing link. The next time the theme appears it is for the musicalization of the first murder. Here, the theme's malleability, De los Ríos's versatile treatment of it and the careful coordination with the images and narration are perfectly illustrated, as this article will attempt to show.

The appearance of a girl playfully running through the village streets, glancing in different directions as if participating in a game of hide and seek, is accompanied by the music mentioned above in a carnivalesque, festive style which aligns with the visual impression of the scene. The discovery of an elderly man, the struggle between them, and finally, the fatal blows she inflicts on him with his own stick steer the tune's harmonisation off course and begin the progressive accentuation of dissonant intervals that signal a crossover from the equilibrium of innocence into the disturbing. The culmination of this progression coincides with Tom's intervention; he snatches the stick from the girl, who looks at him, amused and impervious to his anger, before running away laughing. The children's theme returns with the image of the bloodied old man, this time with a certain lyricism seeming to reflect Tom's incomprehension of the horror resulting from a child's game. In this way the music com-

6 [Translated from the original.]

municates the character's moral duality as he struggles for the first time with the horror of the event and the culpability of a child who was just playing, up to a point justifying his next act and his decision to hide the episode from Evelyn. Right after leaving the body in a nearby barn, Tom witnesses the children stringing it up to play with it as if it were a human piñata. The theme is heard once again with its unnatural carnivalesque sound, the first four bars repeating over and over before reducing to two in an *ostinato*. Unable to stand the denouement, Tom tries to get away but cannot escape the laughs and cries of the children, and the viewer the frenetic repetition and crescendo of the musical theme, until the children's outburst of jubilation signals the end of their game and the macabre episode. Here, the soundtrack has a dual effect. On the one hand, the minimalist and repetitive musicalization heightens the perception of the image, bringing it closer to the mind-set of the traumatic event itself. According to King, just as our mental state is affected by an unresolved conflict, the audience is immobilised by continuous repetition of the same event, generating a potential state of anxiety that may be prolonged as long as the sound is present (King, 2010). Besides this, the progression of the children's voices acts as an ellipse that allows us to imagine the graphic denouement of the scene, despite not actually seeing it. Minutes beforehand, both the characters and the audience have seen what the piñata game in Benavís is all about, taking in the children's outburst of jubilation when it bursts open, scattering its contents on the ground; the children hurling themselves upon it to collect their prize. The perfectly-judged sound that accompanies this episode in the barn in Almanzora allows both Tom and the audience to imagine any similarly horrific outcome of the scene. The theme reappears at other times in the film to represent the identity of the children, and occasionally with variations that add specific meaning to the narration, as in the scene described above. It appears during the local survivor's account of the children's rebellion, with the same air of compelling lyricism that hung around the image of the old man's corpse. It is not surprising that the character continues to repeat that the children "looked like they were playing", echoing the lie Tom tells Evelyn when she asks him what happened before: "the girl was playing with the old man", he tells her. In this situation, with the aggressors' status of being children still counterbalancing the facts, the last interval of the entire theme (G C) imbues the melody with an innocent, luminous brilliance, whereas at more serious moments the interval is noticeably reduced (F C) for a more sombre resolution. Variations in instrumental register can also be heard in addition to the melodic variation. Once Tom has decided that he is prepared to hurt the children in order to ensure their escape, he crosses the island by car with Evelyn to return to the village, only to immediately be met by the children in the middle of the road. The extremely low brass rendition of the theme that accompanies this meeting – and which is unique on the soundtrack – attests to his fierce determination. Lastly, just as the film opens with the theme, the way it closes should be noted; this time with a full orchestral version that is openly optimistic and completely differ-



cumbing to the sounds of normality and abstraction provided by the noises of the local festival, with the main characters rounding up the conversation by joking about Fellini and the idiosyncrasies of Italians. The delay in introducing the musical theme draws special attention to these intimacies and offers an interpretation as to why the couple seek out solitude on their trip; possibly to overcome the conflict brought about by differing reactions to the forthcoming birth of what will be their third child. This interpretation would also introduce an additional layer to the plot, as in addition to completing the characters' psychological characterisation and their motivations in the film, a heavy dose of macabre irony is added when the horrific events on Almanzora begin and we witness what fate ultimately has in store for the unborn child. The musical motif reappears a few minutes later when Tom and Evelyn set off for the island in a rented boat. The build-up of the theme is then complete. Now in the foreground and fully orchestral, together with the light-hearted, animated conversation between the characters it encourages us to believe they are now free from the apprehensions expressed in the room at the guest house and that these are the first steps back to normal life.

By comparison, this musical theme appears much less than the children's theme. It plays during the two events just described, after which it leaves the starring role to those who at the end of the day are central to the title of the film and most of the moral issues presented. It vanishes from the scene just as Tom and Evelyn's earlier worries that it alluded to, which now seem trivial and have been replaced by new and more pressing fears about the inhabitants of the island. It does not appear again until the last sequence in the film, when it accompanies Tom from the moment he kneels to kiss his wife's body and during his grief-stricken walk until he once again confronts the image of the children gathered in the village streets. Resigned, the character raises his gun, ready to face down the moral issue at the centre of the film, while the camera moves over the smiling faces of the children, their expressions as innocent as ever. The sound of gunshots brings a swift end to the theme and marks the start of the frenetic musicalization of the final escape. The languid, melancholic nature of this last time it appears is in sharp contrast to the version during the boat trip, both in terms of the viewer's perception and in the character's eyes, which gently flow with tears. The music allows us to guess at the thoughts running through the mind of the main character; his memories of Evelyn, the now distant hopes of returning to their life together and the still challenging conflict between his principles and the angelic image of those responsible for her death. The title of the track on the musical soundtrack LP produced at that time – "Sunrise without Evelyn" – appears to confirm this was the intention of the design.

## Conclusion

*Who can kill a child?* is without a doubt a masterpiece of film making that stands out among contemporary horror film production in Spain. Different film history sources have taken it upon themselves to emphasise this position, trying to place it appropriately according to its role in the development of the genre, and some have even decided to undertake a deeper critical approach to its unusual content. The status the film has achieved both in Spain and abroad and the recent academic attention it has drawn have taken account of its visual impact, plot line and historical issues, confirming the attributes that make it unique and helping to gradually unravel the details that explain the real reasons behind the special reception it has enjoyed. As this article has tried to show through the preceding paragraphs, the soundtrack of *Who can kill a child?* can be an invaluable complement to these interpretations. It can help it break free of the usual and straightforward aural and atmospheric perceptions in order to build structures of meaning that are hard to achieve using other media, increasing the textual richness of the film and its inquiry into its surroundings.

Considering the admirable audiovisual structure it supports, the music has not gone completely unnoticed in the different critical accounts of the film, although no more than a brief admiring mention of the work by Waldo de los Ríos has been made, perhaps pointing to prejudice towards horror music composition in Spain. This being one of the composer's last compositions for film, it seems fair to recognise his obvious contribution to its success when evaluating it nowadays, and to reclaim the portion he was responsible for back from the visual domain. If, like Lázaro-Reboll (2012) we identify the real start of *Who can kill a child?* as the fleeting image of the child prisoner of war, then the first bars of the main theme sadly go unnoticed, and with them the extraordinary contrast between what the audience might imagine upon hearing the sweet, childish melody on its own and the subsequent rawness of the image. If any of these prejudices are to be overcome, it should be possible to recognise the score by De los Ríos as a valuable compilation of compositional resources for the musicalization of the disturbing, which is as notable among contemporary productions in Spain as the position of the film itself, and that perhaps, within its very bars, there resides a true symphonic apologia for horror.

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