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Uncanny aesthetics in medieval thought: the case of the *Dies irae*

Abstract
The role of the "uncanny" in medieval Christian aesthetics is explored through a focus on Dies Irae *sequence. While typically linked to modernity, the "uncanny" functioned as a persistent affective force in medieval liturgy and art, characterized by ambiguity, continuous tension, and resistance to resolution rather than transient emotions like fear. Gregorian chant is examined as a performative, embodied medium acting as a technology for emotional regulation and control. In this context, music serves not only as a representation of the divine, but as a tool for shaping the subject's emotional and physiological experience. Aesthetic practices thus become instruments of subjectivation, engaging the faithful in a transformative, embodied encounter with the sacred. The Church, as both the origin of this unsettling experience and the sole mediator of divine reconciliation, reinforces its authority, positioning itself as the guarantor of spiritual resolution amidst eschatological uncertainty.*

Keywords
Medieval aesthetics, *Uncanny*, Dies irae

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1. *Introduction: medieval aesthetics and power*

To fully understand medieval aesthetics, it is essential to examine it within the social, religious, and political contexts that contributed to its development. This perspective highlights the profound interconnection between medieval art, in all its forms – painting, architecture, sculpture, and music – and theological knowledge, ritual practices, and power structures. In a profoundly theocentric era, the sacred permeated every facet of daily life. Consequently, artistic expressions functioned as instruments of revelation, order, and control. Concurrently, the aesthetic experience was a spiritual, pedagogical, and political experience. By posing inquiries beyond the mere representation or performance of art, but also delving into the underlying reasons and methodologies through which art influenced its subjects, a reinterpretation of medieval aesthetic forms becomes possible. This reinterpretation departs from the conventional view of medieval aesthetic forms as mere conduits of aesthetic or religious content, instead recognizing them as instruments through which power was exercised in a networked and widespread manner.

Medieval liturgical music is a particularly compelling example of this aesthetic of power, serving as a technology of the body and spirit that was capable of structuring time, regulating behavior, and internalizing the symbolic order imposed by the Church. In his seminal work, Foucault (1977) profoundly challenged the conventional understanding of power as a resource held by a sovereign authority and wielded unilaterally over subordinate subjects. Instead, he proposes an alternative paradigm, which defines power as a fluid and diffuse network of relationships, a reticular system that is exercised from the bottom up, but also laterally and in a capillary manner, through daily practices, institutions, languages, and bodies. In this model, power is posited as an immanent force within the social body, acting to shape identities, behaviors, desires, and perceptions. Each individual becomes both a vehicle and a reproducer of power, since the relationships in which they are involved make them an active part of its perpetuation.

This perspective is particularly apt when applied to the analysis of medieval art, understood as one of the primary tools through which ecclesiastical and political power was exercised and legitimized. A prime example of this phenomenon can be observed in the design of Gothic cathedrals, where the harmonious integration of architecture, illumination, and sculptural and pictorial embellishments were meticulously orchestrated to create a multifaceted sensory experience. This experiential design guided the viewer towards a structured perspective of the world, underpinned by the

doctrine and authority of the Church. Sacred images were not merely aesthetic embellishments; rather, they served as instruments capable of influencing beliefs, emotions, and moral attitudes. Within this aesthetic-disciplinary system, liturgical music played a particularly significant role, as it acted on a cognitive and doctrinal level through an embedded emotional experience. Gregorian chant, which emerged as a standardized and universalized musical form in the 8th century as part of the Carolingian reform, serves as a prime example of how music functioned as a technology of reticular power.

The unification of the liturgical repertoire was a key component of the efforts to unify the religious practices of the Carolingian Empire under the authority of the Roman Church. This process entailed the elimination of local variations, such as the Ambrosian, Gallican, Old Roman, and Mozarabic traditions, and the imposition of a common normative model. This uniformity of sound engendered a homogeneous acoustic community, wherein the faithful were immersed in a sound and visual atmosphere that guided their gestures, thoughts, and moods (McKinnon 2000). The temporal organization of the day into canonical hours, punctuated by designated periods of vocalization, exemplifies a form of temporal discipline that aligns seamlessly with Foucault's conceptualization of surveillance and normalization. In this context, liturgical singing functions as a technology of subjectivity, exerting a profound influence on the formation of the Christian subject. This influence is manifested through the construction of a sensory experience in which the divine is rendered concretely perceptible through the controlled and repetitive sound of the ritual.

In essence, liturgical ceremonies can be regarded as sacred performances, with music playing a pivotal role in creating a comprehensive sensory experience. This sensory dimension was meticulously designed to reinforce symbolic order and foster social cohesion. When conceptualized in this manner, medieval Christian rituals had the capacity to evoke a wide spectrum of aesthetic and emotional experiences. These experiences were contingent upon the specific time of year and day, as well as the particular codified chants to which they corresponded. The spectrum of possible experiences encompassed a range from ecstatic contemplation to melancholy, inner peace, a sense of unease, and even utter terror. However, one of the most salient effects is arguably the uncanny, characterized by a sense of unease that, in contrast to fear (which has a distinct and identifiable object) or dread (which implies an imminent but still undefined danger), engenders a more ambiguous and subtle sense of disorientation that operates at a more profound level. The ambivalence be-

tween the sacred and the threatening serves to reinforce the Church's authority as the sole mediator between the earthly world and the divine. In this perspective, the uncanny becomes a more subtle form of control, as it induces submission through an aesthetic of ambiguity. The application of the concept of the uncanny to medieval thought may appear to be an anachronism, as it is a category that has been developed within a psychoanalytic and post-Enlightenment paradigm. However, critical and transhistorical reflection enables the identification of archetypal forms of the uncanny in Christian ritual and medieval culture in general. An exemplary case of such phenomenology is the *Dies irae* (Day of wrath), a medieval Latin sequence included in the Mass of the Dead until the liturgical reform of Vatican II. The text employs musical and lyrical elements to depict the Day of Judgment, incorporating evocative and dramatic imagery. Despite its exclusion from the customary sacred repertoire performed in ecclesiastical settings, the composition's uncanny effect remains so efficacious that it continues to be incorporated into the soundtracks of various cinematic productions, including *The shining*, *Star wars*, *The lord of the rings*, *The lion king*, and *The nightmare before christmas*, as well as video games such as *Final fantasy*, *Dark souls*, and *Castlevania*.

The aesthetic analysis of *Dies irae* through the lens of the uncanny is commensurate with the broader context of studies exploring music in Apocalyptic Mode (McAllister 2023). This category facilitates the analysis of eschatological themes, including Judgment, the end of the world, and catastrophe. These themes are examined as a cultural constant, the effectiveness of which stems from its ability to manipulate the tension between the present and the prophesied future. The *Dies irae* has functioned as an archetype of this Apocalyptic Mode since the Middle Ages, operating on two essential levels: The themes explored in this study are personal drama and temporal collusion, as well as aesthetic trans-historicity. The sequence employs liturgical music as an 'affective technology', thereby rendering the future and substantial event of Judgment an emotionally and spiritually present reality for the individual believer. The sequence stages a collusion between temporality and identity, in which the irruption of eternal destiny into the *hic et nunc* is the mechanism that generates the feeling of the uncanny. The event is not perceived as an abstract concept, but rather as a personal and imminent threat. Its pervasive presence in Western music, from the classical Requiems of Mozart and Verdi to its references in film music, demonstrates that the aesthetic and psychological impact of the *Dies irae* is not solely linked to its ritual function, but rather to its profound and enduring ability to evoke terror and indi-

vidual destiny. The melody has become a universally recognisable cultural code for catastrophe, thereby demonstrating the trans-historicity of its disturbing aesthetic power.

2. *The uncanny*

The German term *unheimlich*, which is generally translated into English as uncanny, first emerged in the context of German philosophical Romanticism. As early as 1856, Schelling had defined the *Unheimlich* as that which should have remained hidden but has surfaced to consciousness, thereby highlighting two fundamental coordinates: the idea of the return of the repressed and the tension between visible and invisible, conscious and unconscious. This approach will be fully articulated in Sigmund Freud's renowned essay, *Das Unheimliche* (1919), wherein the author undertakes a semiotic, linguistic, and psychoanalytic investigation of the uncanny. Freud's analysis is predicated on a linguistic observation: while the German term *heimlich* can mean *familiar*, *domestic*, *reassuring*, it can also, in a semantic shift, mean *hidden*, *secret*, and therefore *unfamiliar*. The concept of *unheimlich*, as proposed by Freud (1919), is derived from this semantic ambiguity. *Unheimlich* is defined as a category concerning that which is familiar and simultaneously foreign, that which has been familiar and has been removed (Freud 1919: 241).

The uncanny, therefore, is not the terror of the absolute unknown, but rather the return of the intimately known in a deformed, disturbing, unrecognizable form. In this sense, it is a disturbing emotional experience that, although not necessarily constituting an aesthetic category, can have effective manifestations through various art forms (Windsor 2019). In the case discussed in this paper, for example, it is a form of performance that, although starting from the musical element, actually involves the entire ritual performance constituted by the medieval Christian rite. Despite its recent theoretical formulation, this phenomenon has accompanied humanity since time immemorial, undergoing transformations in its manifestations while maintaining a constant intensity of visceral and concrete involvement. This is something that does not require extraordinary elements, but can be readily observed in everyday life: "The uncanny is not a matter of the supernatural. It is rather a disturbing, strange, surprising sense of things – an experience of strangeness in the everyday" (Royle 2003: 7). The emotional effect of the uncanny is anchored to the perception of the real and the possible. In the contemporary landscape

of aesthetic theories, the uncanny emerges as a critical device, a reflective mode that deconstructs perceptual, ontological, and symbolic certainties. This phenomenon, characterized by a sense of cognitive unease, is rooted in familiarity yet transcends the boundaries of reality, thereby leading to the destabilization of identity. This tension manifests itself in a rather broad way, encompassing Gothic literature (Poe, Hoffmann), visual surrealism and hyperrealism, and hybrid technologies such as robotics. Indeed, it is characterized by the convergence of hybrid figures, wherein the animate is rendered inanimate (and *vice versa*), repetition is depicted as a menacing force, the bodiless voice is employed, and the presence that unveils a lost origin is manifested. In all its manifestations, the uncanny can be conceptualized as a suspension of the obvious, an event that compels us to acknowledge the inherent porosity of the categories with which we construct the world.

In an effort to delineate a coherent phenomenology of the uncanny, a range of recurring motifs have been identified over the years that constitute its semantic and affective structure. Among these, one of the most recognizable features of the uncanny experience is the presence of the double (*Doppelgänger*), a figure that simultaneously evokes familiarity and otherness, like the altered and disturbing version of oneself offered to the subject by a broken mirror (Punter 2007). In this manner, the uncanny transcends the confines of the object, directly impacting subjectivity and eliciting mechanisms of anxiety and disintegration. Other central motifs include the attribution of life to the inanimate, as seen in dolls or puppets, and the perception of death in the living. This ontological shift engenders an ambiguity that destabilizes the binary logic of presence and absence, of the natural and the artificial (Jentsch 1906). Another characteristic element of the uncanny is the disembodied voice that speaks without a visible body, as in the case of echoes, apparitions, or ghostly phone calls. Royle (2003) underscores the notion that this "voiceless voice" serves as a hallmark of the contemporary uncanny, thereby subverting the conventional relationship between the body, speech, and subjectivity. In a similar vein, thematic and structural repetition can engender a sense of alienation through its excessive, repetitive, and obsessive nature. This repetition disrupts temporal linearity, inducing a sense of *déjà vu* and a compulsion to repeat. The uncanny thus manifests as a cognitive ambiguity, to wit, the subject is no longer able to discern what is real from what is not, what is present from what has already happened or is about to happen (Windsor 2019). The event itself does not inherently cause dis-

comfort; rather, it is the epistemic rupture it engenders that is the source of concern.

3. *The uncanny in medieval thought*

Medieval thinking was significantly influenced by a pervasive sense of unease and widespread existential insecurity. Extraordinary events, such as famines, epidemics, wars, and natural disasters, were perceived as manifestations of divine wrath or a breakdown in the cosmic order. Moreover, medieval society interpreted most everyday events through a symbolic-religious lens. Medieval chronicles, including those of Giovanni Villani and Gabriele de' Mussi, offer historical evidence that fear spread socially and amplified in the collective dimension, thereby becoming a driving force behind irrational mass behavior. In a mystical sense, fear can also serve as a portal to the divine, as evidenced in texts such as Giovanni Climaco's *Scala Paradisi*, the sermons of Bernardino da Siena, and the visions of Hildegard of Bingen. In these works, fear transforms into ecstasy, vertigo, and a state of openness to the unknown.

In *Consolatio philosophiae*, Boethius engages in a profound reflection on the intertwined themes of fortune, pain, and fear. The philosopher posits that fear emerges from a state of disorder and a lack of intrinsic wisdom. According to Boethius, true freedom is attained through the overcoming of the fear of death and chance (Boethius, *Consolatio*, IV, prose 6). According to Thomas Aquinas, there are three distinct types of fear: *timor servilis*, linked to the fear of punishment; *timor filialis*, based on love for God; and *timor initialis*, which paves the way for conversion. The fear of hell, therefore, can be an instrument of salvation, as Augustine of Hippo also argues in *Civitas Dei*. In this work, Augustine interprets passions as part of the postlapsarian human condition, whereby fear belongs to the earthly city but can be redeemed and transfigured in the heavenly city (Agostino, *De civitate Dei*, XIV, 9). It is evident that all forms of fear exert an influence on human behavior; however, it is *timor servilis* that predominates the collective imagination of the High and Late Middle Ages, particularly within the context of popular preaching, eschatological texts, and artistic representations of the Last Judgment. From the 12th century onward, medieval visual culture began to depict the torments of Hell and the separation between the elect and the damned in increasingly detailed and realistic ways. This development served to further amplify the original warning. The portals of Romanesque and Gothic churches, such as those in Autun,

Moissac, and Chartres, frequently depict the apocalyptic scene of judgment, in which the observer is invited to contemplate their own inevitable scrutiny and the consequent determination of their eternal fate.

In artistic expressions rooted in such terror, however, it is possible to observe outcomes that occasionally exhibit notable parallels with the uncanny, as discussed in section 2. This phenomenon does not appear to be a fleeting fear associated with a specific event; rather, it seems to be an element that permeates daily life, continuously issuing a cautionary signal through methods and manifestations that distort reality, rendering it unrecognizable. The concept of physical suffering and death is a recurrent theme in medieval daily life. However, the artistic medium, particularly architecture and sacred visual culture, serves to transform these themes into a form that offers solace and refuge within the confines of the church. This transformation of anguish and uncertainty into a place of comfort and sanctuary is a poignant example of the interplay between art and religion in medieval society. This phenomenon must be interpreted within the framework of religious and symbolic visual literacy (Camille 1992), wherein the sense of unease carries a distinct pedagogical and educational implication, along with an underlying intent to wield influence.

The notion of eternal damnation instills a profound sense of fear, which, in turn, fosters a reliance on the Church as the sole intermediary between humanity and the divine. This reliance is further solidified by the Church's role as a mediator in a context characterized by the pervasive fear of eternal damnation. When the beholder discerns the looming threat of divine judgment in depictions or other manifestations of art, the future becomes intertwined with the present, creating a sense of disorientation that compels individuals to seek solace in faith. However, this approach would not be as efficacious if it were confined to a theoretical narrative plane. The fundamental basis of this mechanism lies in the real and embodied perception of the suffering that one may encounter. The Church's warning to the faithful, therefore, does not lie solely in the message conveyed through the visual; rather, it is a profound and multisensory involvement orchestrated in a combination of experiential devices that induce the viewer to participate in the message itself in an embodied and visceral way. It would be a fallacy to conceptualize the Christian ritual exclusively in its external and formal dimensions; rather, it must be comprehended as an amalgamation of architecture, auditory elements, olfactory sensations, and finally, verbal components.

Participation in Christian worship was an immersive and engaging experience, characterized by a shared perception of the divine presence. In

an intrinsically theocentric worldview, the entirety of daily life is inextricably linked to the relationship with God and the prospect of eternal salvation. In this sense, the liturgical celebration manifested as a liminoid space (Schechner 2013): a suspended moment, separated from profane time, in which a collective transformation of consciousness and body was initiated.

The sensory experience during Mass encompassed the olfactory sensation of incense, the tactile sensation of marble, the auditory resonance of spoken word, and the solemnity of sacred choral monody. This approach ensures optimal message transmission, facilitating the comprehension of abstract concepts through sensory and perceptive experiences, which have been demonstrated to leave a more enduring impression than verbal communication. The employment of terror as a linguistic device in apocalyptic narratives persists through an uncanny experience in which elements that ought to be concealed (*e.g.*, death, suffering, sin, Hell) resurface and are presented through locations, forms, and means that also delineate the route to salvation.

The mass evolves into an all-encompassing performance, transcending the confines of a mere declamatory exercise. It metamorphoses into a dynamic entity, intricately interweaving the embodied perception and shared emotional resonance of the participants. Consequently, even abstract concepts, metaphysical phenomena, and transcendent ideas can be comprehended and assimilated through a process of sense-making that engages the organism in its entirety, encompassing its neural, thermoregulatory, metabolic, and social imperatives, as well as the sensorimotor skills cultivated to generate a meaningful experience. This process entails the attribution of meaning to phenomena, as meaning is not an inherent and pre-constitutive characteristic of the phenomenon itself but rather an emergent property (Di Paolo 2005, 2009).

This phenomenon can be interpreted as an uncanny aesthetic, wherein the viewer's discomfort serves as a pedagogical tool and a means of wielding power. In such a scenario, the significance of the musical element should not be disregarded. It is imperative to comprehend the musical component in its total dimension of form, sound, and text, as well as vibration. Sung liturgies and sacred images function synergistically as sensory vehicles of a religious experience that is neither entirely private nor public (Williamson 2013). The phenomenon of sound propagation is facilitated by the oscillatory movement of air molecules. However, it is noteworthy that the physical bodies of the vocal monks and the devout audience members also undergo vibrations, thereby contributing to the auditory experience. More-

over, the architectural framework, which metaphorically resembles a gestating womb, not only accommodates the performance but also engages in a symbiotic resonance through its reverberations.

The medieval Christian ritual system imposed stringent regulations on musical expression. Since its codification in the Carolingian era, the prevailing form of musical expression permitted was Gregorian chant, defined as a choral monody devoid of harmonization or instrumental accompaniment. The function of Gregorian chant was to vocalize the Scriptures, psalms, and sequences specific to the liturgical year. Choral singing was not merely an embellishment to the celebration; rather, it constituted its fundamental element. Through the medium of the voice, the sacred word was embodied, proclaimed, and internalized.

The cantor, a pivotal figure in monastic and cathedral liturgy, orchestrated the rite not solely through musical direction but also as the director of sacred ritual, meticulously coordinating gestures, auditory elements, and spatial configurations to render the invisible manifest (Beach 2017). Through the utilization of physical space and auditory elements, the Christian ritual effectively activated an all-encompassing dimension that engaged the body, mind, and memory. Gregorian choral monody functioned as a performative and somatic instrument, thereby fortifying the group's cohesion and providing a structured framework for the community's temporal and spatial dynamics[1].

The *Dies irae* occupies a prominent position in the medieval liturgical repertoire, distinguished by its poetic and theological depth. Its utilization was firmly entrenched in the Roman liturgy until the 20th-century liturgical reform, wielding a profound and enduring influence on modern musical culture. The apocalyptic invocation of the *Dies Irae* represents a significant peak in medieval culture, characterized by a profound sense of fear. However, when analyzed through the lens of the uncanny, it reveals a more complex and nuanced interpretation. This interpretation suggests that the *Dies irae* symbolizes a liminal experience, a return of the repressed, and a disintegration of established identities, temporal boundaries, and ontological oppositions. As a musical, poetic, and liturgical text, the *Dies irae*, engenders an uncanny effect through the visual and sonic evocation of ancestral elements (e.g., fire, trumpet, tomb) that produce a sense of disorientation in the subject, who experiences a sense of both guilt and powerlessness within a suspended and non-linear time.

[1] For a more in-depth discussion cf. Hiley 1993; Page 2010.

4. *The case of* Dies irae

The *Dies irae* is a prime example of medieval liturgical repertoire, characterized by its intensity and imaginative nature. It evokes a sense of the uncanny, which is a hallmark of medieval thought and art. Composed between the 13th and 14th centuries[2], the text was gradually integrated into the liturgy for the dead and remained there until the liturgical reform following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which sanctioned its exclusion from the Roman rite. The genesis of the *Dies Irae* occurred within a historical context characterized by profound anthropological and religious transformation, specifically the transition from the Middle Ages to the late Middle Ages. During this period, the conception of death underwent a radical transformation, gradually diverging from the collective and ritualized perspective that had prevailed in preceding centuries. Philippe Ariès's research (1983, 1974) shows that archaic medieval death was characterized by a shared rituality. The moment of passing occurred in a space that was open to the community, and both the dying person and those present were privy to the code of conduct that they were expected to follow. However, beginning in the 11th century, a gradual yet unrelenting shift occurred, whereby death began to be perceived with a heightened level of personal and dramatic significance. This shift is also evident in the iconographic repertoire of Romanesque churches, where novel representations of the Last Judgment emerge, including the separation of the virtuous from the condemned, the weighing of souls by the archangel Michael, and the eschatological vision of the afterlife.

The composition's prevailing tone, oscillating between terror and hope, is marked by the realistic potency of its imagery and the subjective significance of its language, elements that draw upon the religious and anthropological imagery characteristic of the 13th and 14th centuries. Although tradition attributes the authorship of the *Dies irae* to Tommaso da Celano, a Franciscan friar and biographer of Francis of Assisi, there is no conclusive documentary evidence to support this claim. However, the Franciscan origin of the text has been documented in the liturgy of the Minorite Order after 1357 (Vellekoop 1978). The Tridentine liturgical reform (1545-1563) and the promulgation of the Roman Missal in 1570 officially incorporated the *Dies irae* into the Mass for the Dead, thereby

[2] The text is already found in earlier manuscripts, where it appears as a prayer; only later, however, does it properly become a sequence.

affording it a central role in the funeral rite of the Latin Church until the 20th century.

The development of this phenomenon coincided with a significant period in European spiritual sensibility, marked by a transition from collective ritual practices ("tamed death") to a conception of death as a deeply personal event (Ariès 1974). In this framework, the community engaged in a ritualized and public expression of loss, a practice that Ariès contrasts with a progressive internalization of eschatological terror that emerged during the 11th-12th centuries. Romanesque art offers a response to this sense of disquiet through the introduction of new iconography, such as scenes depicting the Last Judgment, archangels engaged in the weighing of souls, and the delineation between the righteous and the damned: the *Dies Irae* mirrors this existential tension. It is, of course, not the only example of medieval uncanny aesthetics, but it stands out as one of the most effective. As already noted (see *supra,* section 1), elements of this aesthetic continue to be cited in contemporary contexts, used to evoke a similar emotional response to the original one. This makes it a particularly significant example, as its ability to elicit such a reaction remains comprehensible even in the present day

The text exhibits unmistakable indications of individual prayer, particularly from the seventh stanza onward, where the utilization of the first-person perspective introduces a subjective and dramatic dimension. The result is an eschatological language that blends fear and hope, in line with the religious and cultural experiences of the 13th and 14th centuries. The compelling and expressive potency of this medieval sequence is not confined to its initial reception within medieval society; it persists in its reuse and reinterpretation, extending its legacy to the present day as a musical archetype. Its incisive musical motif has become the most quoted in the history of music, used as a musical topos in secular contexts to evoke death, destiny, and horror. Monumental works such as Berlioz's *Grande messe des morts* and Verdi's *Requiem* devote extensive and intensely dramatic sections to the *Dies irae*.

5. *Music and words in the* Dies irae

The *Dies irae* is a sequence with a syllabic melody in the Dorian mode and a text composed of tercets that present a cataleptic trochaic pattern, with rhyming couplet (except for the last two stanzas). The identity of the composer of the melody remains uncertain, though it has been suggested that Adam Praecentor of Notre Dame, a prominent composer of *prosae* (sequences), might be credited with its creation. Structurally, the melody is divided into six main melodic lines. The first three of these are further subdivided into three phrases, and the text of the sequence fits into a precise pattern: the first melodic line is used for verses 1-2, 7-8, and 13-14, the second melody is used for verses 3-4, 9-10 and 15-16, the third melody is reserved for verses 5-6, 11-12, and 17, in the final three verses (18-20) the concluding melodies are employed (Chase 2004: 105-6).

There are references to the Vulgate from Sofronia (1, 15-16) (Haupt 1919) and from the *Libera me domine de morte aeterna*, as suggested by the apocalyptic reflection on the end of the world (stanzas 1-6), the reference to the Divine Judgment (stanzas 7-13), and the invocation of divine mercy (stanzas 14-18), further accentuated in the final doxology of the *Lacrimosa* (10-20). The tripartite pattern (AABBCC, AABBCC, AABBCDEF) is composed of the presentation of two musical phrases (A and B) followed by the repetition of phrases constructed by resorting to melodic elements already exposed in the previous phrases. On the basis of this, three basic melodic cores can be identified that refer to each other throughout the development of the composition: this gives a circular pattern that does not remain confined only to the musical form, but refers to a broader and deeper concept of a cosmic cyclicity.

Although exact parallels cannot be drawn with today's compositional structural scaffolding, the rhythmic structure suggests a division into 4 and is markedly declamatory, with an almost totally syllabic course that leaves very little room for melismas. The declamatory style responds to the need to emphasize the text and effectively convey its meanings through the music, which, with its descending progression in the Doric mode, lends additional solemnity to the message conveyed.

More specifically, the strophic organization is articulated as follows:

1-2	7-8	13-14	A
3-4	9-10	15-16	B
5-6	11-12	17	C

These are joined by three additional stanzas (18, 19 and 20), each with its own melodic line, which differs from the previous ones in both function and modal treatment.

The full effectiveness of the *Dies Irae* is rooted in its nature as a "text song" (*Textgesang*), in accordance with the aesthetic principles of Gregorian chant. Gregorian semiology asserts that, within the medieval repertoire, melody functions not as a mere embellishment, but as an expressive form that is inseparable from and functional to the liturgical text (Joppich 2000). Syllabic articulation and melodic progression (*e.g.*, descending figures on words such as *Ingemisco* or emphatic prolongations) act as amplifiers of eschatological content. The symbiosis between word and tone is instrumental in evoking the visceral experience of the medieval listener, facilitating an immersive engagement with the thematic content of the Apocalyptic Mode. In the stanzas the melodic patterns are repeated cyclically, generating a formal tension between musical repetition and semantic variation. This device helps create a liturgical-affective dynamic in which the listener is suspended between the fixity of divine judgment and the flow of eschatological imagery. The formal unity of the *Dies irae* plainsong is structurally achieved through the consistent use of identical cadences that terminate all musical sentences (represented in the A, B, C, D, and E pattern), with the sole exception of sentence C. This internal organization is further reinforced by the economical reuse of melodic segments. This network of melodic and structural relationships ultimately confers "the remarkable unity in diversity of this melody" (Gregory 1953: 134).

The composition centers on the theme of the Last Judgment, progressing from a cosmic declaration of the Day of Wrath to a personal plea from the sinner. The initial stanzas delineate the universal devastation and the advent of the Judge, invoking the imagery of the *tuba mirum spargens sonum* that rouses the deceased from their sepulchers. Rhetorical devices such as anaphora, alliteration (*solvet saeclum in favilla*), synecdoche (*saeclum* for the entire world), and the personification of *mors* and nature, which "wonder" before the resurrection of the creature called to answer before God, predominate in this section. Subsequent stanzas focus on the terror and inner anguish of the individual, expressed through rhetorical interrogatives (*Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?*) and semantic oppositions (*latet*/*apparebit*, *benedictis*/*maledictis*), which mark the tension between justice and mercy.

The term *Rex tremendae maiestatis* is invoked, as is *Iesu pie*, which recalls the evangelical paradigms of forgiveness (Mary Magdalene, the good thief) and draws on the pathos of the Passion (*Quaerens me, sedisti*

lassus). The employment of rhetorical devices such as simile (*cor contritum quasi cinis*), oxymoron (*Iuste iudex ultionis... donum fac remissionis*), and litotes (*nil inultum remanebit*) renders the text both dense and moving. These devices enable the articulation of the profound vulnerability of the human spirit before the enigmatic tribunal of justice with a formal rigidity that is noteworthy. The melodic progression frequently mirrors the gravity of the content. For instance, in *Ingemisco*, the melody descends, simulating a sigh, while in *Resurget*, it ascends, evoking the upward motion of resurrection. The sections of supplication are distinguished by a calmer and sweeter phrasing, particularly in *supplicanti parce, Deus o voca me cum benedictis*, while the more dramatic ones, such as *confutatis maledictis*, feature harsh alliterations.

The sequence culminates in the depiction of the tearful day, during which *Homo Reus* emerges from the ashes to face judgment. This is followed by a concluding prayer for eternal rest (*Dona eis requiem*), thereby resolving the tension between justice and grace, terror and hope, and guilt and redemption.

6. *Eschatological semiotics and uncanny*

The *Dies irae* is not merely a composition intended to evoke fear; rather, it is an aesthetic device of the uncanny. The concept under discussion here extends beyond the realm of mere fear to encompass a profound sense of disquietude, precipitated by the encounter with an enigmatic power that simultaneously serves as both a wellspring of destruction and a potential source of salvation. The transition from fear to hope is not a linear progression; rather, it is characterized by an inseparable and irreconcilable coexistence of terror and pity. This prevents a clear catharsis, thereby keeping the listener in a state of unresolved emotional tension (Ermini 1902).

Each stanza is replete with apocalyptic symbols (e.g., trumpet of judgment, book of life, divine throne) that refer to a system of signs shared by medieval Christian culture. The simultaneous reference to David and the Sibyl (a Jewish and pagan figure) reflects a semiotics of universal truth, suggesting that the end of time is also recognized by "extra-biblical" authorities. An initial salient characteristic of the uncanny evident in the *Dies Irae* is the reference to the realm of the dead, to resurrection, and consequently to an ambiguous vision in which the ontological planes of life and death intersect. It is imperative to contemplate the ritual performance in

its entirety, eschewing the limitations of textual analysis alone. In this particular instance, each individual engaged in the act of singing (or listening) fully embodies a liminal hybridization. They are in a state of simultaneity, being alive while simultaneously recognizing themselves as a *homo reus quasi cinis*, thereby participating in an otherworldly nature.

In order to comprehend the aesthetic effectiveness of the *Dies Irae* sequence, it is necessary to situate it within the context of evolving medieval sensibilities. The emergence of this practice coincided with a significant cultural transition, namely the individualisation of death in the 13th-14th centuries (Hoondert 2023). Conversely, the advent of the modern age witnessed the transition of death from a collective and ritualised event to a personal and existential experience, characterized by the individual's confrontation with the concept of the Last Judgment. This transition from a collective demise to a personal narrative is exemplified in the sequence. The melody and lyrics of the hymn delineate the anguish of the Apocalypse as an imminent and terrifying individual reality, thereby rendering the funeral rite a visceral and disturbing experience from which the believer cannot escape. The effectiveness of the uncanny is predicated on the sequence's ability to make the future event (the Judgment) an emotionally urgent presence in the liturgical present.

As previously indicated in Section 2, the uncanny is associated with an identity crisis and a disruption in intimacy. In *Dies irae*, this is manifested through the divide between the individual subject and the cosmic setting of judgment. The soul that speaks from the seventh stanza onwards (*Quid sum miser tunc dicturus*) is projected outside itself and finds itself radically alone, exposed to the totality of time and the divine, without stable coordinates. The tension between the familiar and the threatening is exaggerated in the representation of God as an almighty judge and potential redeemer, the *rex tremendae maiestatis* but also the *pie Iesu Domine*. Even the divine, which should be the source of law, protection, and cosmic order, becomes a source of ontological unease, splitting into an ambiguous and ambivalent nature, reminiscent of the Freudian *doppelgänger*. Concurrently, the faithful experience a schism between the guilty self and the devout self, akin to perceiving their distorted image in the mirror, wherein they concurrently observe the damned and are themselves part of the damned. The anguish experienced in this state does not resemble the traditional sentiments associated with mourning, such as a sense of loss or finality. Instead, it is characterized by a profound sense of horror, akin to witnessing one's own demise in the suspended temporal state of an ego contemplating itself from an external vantage point.

The eschatological judgment in *Dies Irae* portrays a future so absolute that its presence is already palpable. This is a narrative of an event that is recognized as inevitable, yet it is accompanied by a sense of profound dismay. This doctrine is comprehensible, yet it is emotionally unpalatable. Moreover, while the entire text is predicated precisely on the description of Judgment Day, it is not, in point of fact, a detailed descriptive rendering. The reference to angels, the divine, and souls does not translate into a real explanation of how the judgment will take place; rather, it remains alluded to, sometimes only referred to by an additional element, as in the case of the enallage *tuba spargens sonum*, in which the personification of the trumpet, emphasized by the ascending melody, refers to the angel who plays it without naming him. This suspended state imprisons us in an eternal question that remains unanswered. Precisely in this attitude of incessant questioning, the soul is disposed to a search that also translates into a state of amplified receptivity – as if to be ready to grasp the answer – even on an embodied level. Participation in the ritual, therefore, entailed the experiential manifestation of these sensations, as opposed to their mere imaginative simulation.

The musical aesthetics of the piece also contribute to the disturbing effect. The modal monotony and symmetrical structure of the verses, which are repeated with minimal variations, create a hypnotic and cyclical sound. The song could be argued to function as a ritual simulacrum of judgment, representing an acoustic threshold that foreshadows the actual experience, thereby placing the faithful in a liminal condition of a sonic elsewhere. The disturbing effect of the *Dies Irae* can also be found in the collusion between temporality and identity: the subject who sings or listens is involved in an inverted temporality, where the future (judgment) creeps into the present, and the past (sins) returns as an accusation.

Another pervasive factor in the composition is the sudden re-emergence of what has been repressed, in this case sins, which explicitly references the desire to hide them (*quidquid latet*). In this regard, the *liber* is evoked, a powerful image in which all aspects of life are recorded, including transgressions and elements that are concealed yet cannot be escaped. Additionally, the musical phrase is prolonged on the words *liber scripturus*, creating the impression of opening and leafing through the book. This element evidently alludes to the sudden re-emergence of the repressed, a phenomenon that emerges as both recognizable and disturbing when viewed from a novel perspective that metamorphoses it, rendering it unsettling. Moreover, the inscription of this text is not suscep-

tible to corruption, as is the case with memory, but rather, it is imprinted in an imperishable manner. This text constitutes a perfect and inexorable memory of a chronicle of the repressed, inscribed beyond the confines of human time. The Last Judgment is par excellence the moment when everything that was hidden is revealed: the disturbing anguish does not arise from something new, but from what belongs to the subject itself. The body itself is implicated in this process, as evidenced by the introduction of a material manifestation of guilt on the face, as depicted in *culpa rubet vultus meus*, which reveals what the conscience seeks to conceal.

7. *Embodiment of uncanny aesthetics*

Through the lens of contemporary studies, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of what medieval Christian ritual and music really meant to those who took part in it. Within the medieval theocentric worldview, the body was primarily conceived as a tool for redemption, rather than as an independent entity or sensory reality. It was viewed as a vessel for the soul (Prendergast, Trigg 2018), rather than an object to be explored autonomously, as is the case in modern 4E cognition theory, which regards the body as intrinsically linked to the mind and sensory experiences. In this context, emotions were predominantly interpreted as spiritual reactions aimed at salvation, rather than as psychological experiences. Medieval music, particularly liturgical music, did not explicitly seek to explore the relationship between body and mind as a psychological phenomenon. Rather, its purpose was to spiritually transform the individual, elevating them toward the divine. In this process, music functioned as a bridge connecting the body to the spiritual realm, serving as a means to transcend corporeality and access the sacred (Holsinger 2001).

However, a more nuanced analysis, informed by modern scholarship, paradoxically reveals that medieval liturgical practices were, in fact, intrinsically connected to an embodied experience. While the body was primarily conceived as a vehicle for the soul, destined for redemption, medieval liturgical and musical practices entailed not only substantial corporeal participation but also facilitated sensory communication, engaging all the senses in a collective and transcendent experience.

The theoretical dissociation between the physical and spiritual dimensions, though asserted, did not manifest in the practical rites of medieval liturgy. Rather, these rites embodied a form of embodied cognition, where the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions were inextricably

intertwined. Music, in this context, acted as a key catalyst for sensory transformation and emotional engagement. Through the experience of rhythm, melody, and ritual, the body became actively involved, leading to heightened sensory awareness and emotional response.

In this sense, the *Dies irae* can be conceptualized as an embodied liturgical performance, involving body, voice, space, imagination and community. This constitutes a spiritual device and an embodied performance through which to convey emotional synchronization via social bonding: in fact, "Voices are body-centred: when we listen to voices we are listening to bodies" (Moran 2017: 106). This assertion is corroborated by numerous contemporary studies, which demonstrate that choral singing exerts a substantial impact on both the visceral and neurological domains, fostering group cohesion and facilitating affective regulation. A substantial corpus of neuroscientific studies has repeatedly emphasized the physiological and social ramifications of music. These studies demonstrate that the act of collective singing can elicit a series of quantifiable physiological responses, including an augmentation of oxytocin (often referred to as the social hormone) and a diminution of cortisol (the stress hormone). This phenomenon has been shown to reinforce social bonds and the sense of belonging (Bowling *et al.* 2022; Good, Russo 2022). A meta-analysis by Nummenmaa *et al.* (2021) on the social dimension of music highlighted a correlation between the cortical areas of the brain involved in processing social signals and musical signals. This finding lends further credence to the proposition that emotional resonance and social bonding engendered by musical listening and production can serve as a conduit for the synchronization of emotions and cognitions, whether voluntary or involuntary. The performance of the monody was executed in unison, in a location that, in addition to evoking striking visual imagery, generated a distinctive auditory experience characterized by amplified and distorted sound, influenced by the resonant properties of the environment. This shared experience was further enriched by the participants' visceral synchronizations, which contributed to a profound level of embodiment and collective experience.

In order to comprehend the visceral dimension of medieval aesthetics more effectively, it is beneficial to adopt the theoretical framework of Embodied Music Interaction (Leman 2017). This approach posits that musical experience is a dynamic system in which listening and emotional response are inseparable from actions, gestures, and motor activation of the body.

The effectiveness of the *Dies irae* is predicated on its capacity to function as a performative and embodied medium. In this sense, liturgical performance can be regarded as a genuine affective technology. The incisive rhythm and specific melodic structures of the chant do not merely convey the meaning of the text, but trigger a sensorimotor coupling in the faithful. The music has been demonstrated to influence respiratory function, muscular tension, and posture, with somatic effects including feelings of anxiety and apprehension. The experience of the *Dies Irae* is one that is physically palpable even before it is fully conceptualized. The codification of the gestures of the choir and the celebrant in the context of the rite served to reinforce the communicative intention. The body of the liturgical performer functioned as an emotional catalyst, thereby projecting the eschatological drama onto the community. In this context, the aesthetics of the uncanny are the intentional result of a ritual practice that aims to manipulate and regulate the passions (from anxiety to repentance) in order to exercise spiritual control over the subject.

The effectiveness of this aesthetic experience is predicated not only on the semantic content of the text, but also on its aesthetic and performative manipulation. Liturgical chants function as a system of sound-textual exegesis, with melody serving as an emotional grammar, shaped for performance (Hornby 2009). The employment of emphatic melodic patterns constitutes an affective technology that elicits a specific somatic response. These techniques, performed by the body of singers and perceived by the sensory apparatus of the faithful, transform key theological words – such as the threat of Judgment in *Dies irae* – into a physical experience of tension. The emphasis thus structured channels the listener towards a specific inner meditation, which, through bodily engagement in performance and listening, shapes the perception of the sacred. This suggests how liturgical aesthetics aimed to shape the subject at a deeply embodied level. The analysis of liturgical singing as affective technology finds particular concrete expression in death rituals (Hild 2024; Ottosen 1993): through sung liturgy, somatic discipline was provided to the community, regulating its breathing and physical response. This process serves to complement the melodic emphasis previously mentioned, which highlighted specific theological keywords. Both of these functions demonstrate how singing created a religious soundscape that managed bodily responses and anxiety, thereby reaffirming the authority of the ecclesiastical institution over both the spiritual and somatic dimensions of the individual during a period of extreme vulnerability.

Within this liturgical-musical system, emotional ambiguity and uncanny tension are intricately woven together to form a structural and controlled mechanism that is integral to the Church's authority in reaffirming its role as the sole mediator of salvation.

The application of this perspective suggests that the terror generated by the *Dies Irae* was intrinsically kinetic and sensory, fully in line with the central role of bodily experience in medieval ritual. Furthermore, a profound affinity exists between the tripartite sequence of melodies (a a, b b, c c) and the visual organization of the great eschatological representations of the time, such as those that adorn the tympanums of Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals, as well as the mural cycles dedicated to the Last Judgment, the *Danse Macabre*, and the Triumph of Death. These iconographic devices exhibit a pattern analogous to that of music, characterized by the modulation of repetition of motifs, the symmetrical distribution of content, and, most notably, a binary and oppositional organization centred on the separation between the righteous and the damned, eternal life and damnation. This structure mirrors the strophic alternation of the sequence, which transitions between supplication and terror, personal prayer and universal proclamation.

The visual rhetoric of medieval imagery operates through a symbolic iteration, employing recurring figures, codified gestures, and narrative types that traverse the space of representation as "visual modules". A notable illustration of this phenomenon can be observed in the renowned depiction of the Last Judgment in the tympanum of Autun Cathedral (c. 1130), where the archangel Michael is depicted as meticulously weighing souls on a scale, while demonic entities endeavor to manipulate the plate in their favor. This scene evokes a rhetorical intensity reminiscent of the musical stanza in which the written book is evoked, with the image of faults being examined (*Liber scriptus proferetur / in quo totum continetur*). Both the visual and auditory elements convey a unified grammatical structure characterized by an apocalyptic theme, comprising a series of actions and unalterable assessments. The recurrent depiction of Christ in majesty at the core of the iconographic composition corresponds, at the musical level, to the focal point function of the stanzas that deviate from the norm. These stanzas often introduce ascending tensions in their melodic configuration, reaching a crescendo in moments of direct invocation (e.g., *Qui Mariam absolvisti*... and *Recordare Iesu pie*...). This creates an effect of acoustic verticality that alludes to the visual transcendence of the Christological figure. Within the figurative culture of the era, the relationship between text and image is not merely ancillary; rather, it is sub-

stantial. This is exemplified by mosaics such as those adorning the Baptistery in Florence, the fresco cycle of the Campo Santo in Pisa, and the Scrovegni Chapel, where biblical or liturgical eschatological texts directly accompany images, thereby reinforcing a synaesthetic system of fruition. The *Dies irae*, in this sense, presents itself as a sonic equivalent of such visual apparatus: a "musical fresco" in which modal sonorities act as expressive colors, and stanzas act as narrative scenes.

The insistence on melodic repetition can be compared to the visual principle of cyclical juxtaposition that characterizes the *Danse macabre*, another contemporary iconographic topos. In these, death appears repeatedly in a sequence of symmetrical encounters between skeletons and the living, in descending social order (from the pope to the beggar). As in the *Dies irae*, the same melody is reiterated with ever-changing lyrics. In the *Dance*, the figure of death remains constant while the characters are in constant flux. This serves to underscore the universality of the eschatological experience and the impossibility of evading it.

This structural relationship between sound and image is not merely decorative; rather, it responds to an epistemic unity of medieval culture, in which every symbolic language (verbal, visual, musical) contributes to constructing the same theological vision of the world.

8. *Conclusion*

The uncanny, conceptualized as an aesthetic and psychological category, has only been thoroughly theorized in the modern era. Nevertheless, it can be applied to the analysis of forms of expression in the Christian Middle Ages, revealing intriguing implications. A particularly salient example of this phenomenon can be found in medieval artistic and liturgical practices, which reveal that the disturbing dimension was not an external element to the sacred imagination; rather, it constituted a structural component of it. Music, architecture, and iconography can be conceptualized as aesthetic-political devices that exerted a profound influence on the subject's perceptual and affective experience.

This perspective invites a reinterpretation of medieval aesthetics, suggesting that its representation of the divine should not be the sole focus. Instead, it should be regarded as a technology of subjectivation, a term denoting a set of practices capable of shaping bodies and visceral responses, disciplining emotions, and orienting the collective imagination. This interpretation aligns with Foucault's conceptualization of power as a

pervasive and intricate network, manifested through various forms of knowledge and quotidian rituals that shape identities and behaviors. Gothic cathedrals, with their symbolic architecture and figurative decorations, offered the faithful an evocative and transcendent vision of the world, serving as instruments of emotional and cognitive internalization. In this context, liturgical music takes on a central role.

Gregorian chant, systematized with the Carolingian reform, served to unify worship practices throughout the Holy Roman Empire, thereby engendering a coherent and structured sharing capable of influencing the perception of time and the physical experience of the ritual. Despite the theocentric perspective prevalent in medieval thought, which regarded the body as merely a vessel for the soul, medieval liturgical practices were in fact profoundly embodied. These practices engaged all the senses in a collective experience, thereby intimately interweaving body, emotions and spirituality. The liturgy, therefore, manifested as a multisensory and embodied experience, wherein auditory, visual, olfactory, and gestural elements collaborated to establish an all-encompassing aesthetic space.

A notable example of this phenomenon is the sequence of the *Dies Irae*, which can be understood as a manifestation of theological uncanny, wherein the eschatological future of the Last Judgment becomes intertwined with the present moment of the ritual, resulting in an identity crisis for the faithful. They perceive themselves as both observers and subjects of judgment, simultaneously experiencing life and death. The anguish experienced is not a result of an external agent, but rather, it is intrinsic to the subject, stemming from the revelation of previously concealed sins.

The musical element serves to reinforce this effect, thereby establishing its structural and political foundation. The practice of liturgical chant can be defined as a form of affective technology, the purpose of which is to discipline the faithful somatically by providing a religious soundscape. The efficacy of the system is attributable to compositional intentionality, whereby the repertoire is selected for its rhetorical and dramatic potency, thereby channeling the anxiety of the Last Judgment into a structured format. The purpose of the piece is realized through the emotional grammar of the melody itself. The employment of emphatic melodic patterns results in visceral prominence being given to key theological words, thereby transforming the message into a profound somatic experience.

In this scenario, the performance of the *Dies irae* can be conceptualized as a form of sensory incarnation of the Judgment, experienced through the body, voice, and breath. Recent neuroscientific studies have confirmed the

physiological impact of choral singing. Vocal synchronization has been shown to generate effects of emotional regulation and social cohesion, promoting the production of oxytocin and reducing stress. This finding suggests that medieval liturgy may have operated on two levels, spiritual and neurobiological, unifying aesthetic and affective experience.

The formal structure of the *Dies irae* reveals striking parallels with visual representations of the Last Judgment, as exemplified by those carved into the tympanums of cathedrals or depicted in the *Danse macabre*. In these visual depictions, the repetition of visual motifs aligns with melodic reiteration, thereby underscoring the universality of the eschatological experience.

The uncanny is particularly effective as a tool of symbolic control, more so than explicit fear or other strong but transient emotions. The source of its potency lies in its inherently ambiguous, pervasive, and persistent structure. It does not deplete itself, but rather, it perpetually regenerates itself within the tension between the familiar and the foreign, between the promise of salvation and the threat of damnation. The Church, for its part, adopts a dual strategic role: it serves as both the origin of the uncanny and the sole mediator authorized between God and man, providing the only avenue for resolution. In this manner, the ecclesiastical institution fortifies its authority by effectively managing anxiety. According to this perspective, the faithful can only find solace and hope through the institution's rites, images, and music, which serve as conduits to healing the ontological fracture evoked by the uncanny and accessing divine grace.

In this context, the uncanny does not signify a deviation from the liturgical norm; rather, it constitutes an inherent and essential component of the norm. It is through crisis, tension, and disorientation that medieval aesthetics initiated a profound transformation of the subject and fortified the power of the institution that governed it.

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