

Favourite Moments of Film Sound

The Wilhelm Scream

By Benjamin Wright

Let me set the scene. A stormtrooper falls to his death aboard the Death Star; a Nazi henchman is thrown off a speeding truck driven by our hero; a wild gunfighter is shot in the face during an opening battle; and a space-age toy is tossed out a window by a swiveling desk lamp. These fleeting cinematic moments of desperation and distress share something so sonically elemental that an untrained ear would miss it entirely. Among the dense layers of sound effects, music, and dialogue of these films is a stock vocal effect that has transcended its status as a bygone relic of Old Hollywood to become a fixture in contemporary cinema. That is, a fixture in the world of sound editors and movie geeks. I am, of course, talking about the Wilhelm Scream. To Hollywood sound editors the ubiquity of this nimble scream has become an iconic symbol of professional craft and humor.

You might think that one male scream is like any other, particularly if the shriek lasts less than two seconds. Indeed, the sound department at Warner Bros. in the 1950s had the same very thought when a stock scream effect was added to the studio library after its initial use in the 1951 western, *Distant Drums*, starring

Gary Cooper. As a group of soldiers wade through a Florida swamp, attempting to evade a slew of Seminole Indians, one unlucky private is dragged under the water and consumed by an alligator. As with most other sound elements, the vocal effects for this scene were added in post-production and performed by an actor other than the one portrayed on screen. The precise name given to the scream was “man getting bit by an alligator, and he screams.” Six recordings were made of varying pitch, intensity, and duration; the fifth take was ultimately used for the poor private’s dying cry.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the scream and its six variants were used in a number of Warner Bros. productions, including *The Charge at Feather River* (1953), *Them!* (1954) and *The Wild Bunch* (1968). In the 1970s, legend has it that budding sound editor and USC film student Ben Burtt recognized the stock scream and later sought out its origins at the Warner effects library when researching sounds for George Lucas’ *Star Wars* (1977). Nicknaming it the “Wilhelm scream” after Private Wilhelm from *The Charge at Feather River*, Burtt continued to use the takes throughout the 1980s in films such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Willow* (1988), and each and every *Star Wars* sequel and prequel. Soon, a group of other sound editors including Richard Anderson, Gary Rydstrom, and Randy Thom began using the Wilhelm scream in features as disparate as *Poltergeist* (1982), *Toy Story* (1995), and *Monster House* (2006).

Having caught my ear only a few years ago, the most iconic of the Wilhelm screams is actually take four, which is best explained as the sound that

Weequay makes when he falls into the Sarlacc pit in *Return of the Jedi* (1983). After discovering the long history of Wilhelm's journey from stock effect to popular icon, the search for new uses of the scream has become a novel pastime.

As a sonic signature, the Wilhelm shriek binds together decades of film sound history, even if its effect is smirk inducing. While the scream is not memorable for its intensity, drama, or timbre, it has resonated with sound practitioners who continue to breathe new life into what should be a stale and clichéd sound effect. Not quite homage or even parody, Wilhelm is both a paean to the studio era and a testament to the art of sound effects editing. It may qualify as esoteric Hollywood trivia, but it more aptly describes the continuities in film sound practices over the last eighty or so years.

In the end, then, a scream by any other name is still a scream. Along with the Universal wind and rain effects of the 1930s, the Wilhelm scream offers an aesthetic sensibility that is equally at home on the scratchy analog soundtracks of the studio era and on the Dolbyized soundtracks of the post-classical era. To be sure, whenever a villain is thrown from a car or a hapless character tumbles to his unfortunate death, Wilhelm can't be too far behind.

Bio:

Benjamin Wright is a PhD Candidate at the Institute for Comparative Studies in Literature, Art and Culture at Carleton University. His dissertation addresses the aesthetic and cultural implications of sound technology in contemporary Hollywood cinema.