



Jennifer Salt in *Sisters* (1972) and John Travolta in *Blow-Out* (1981), two films by Brian de Palma.

FIVE THE SCREAMING POINT

A woman is taking a shower. Someone rips open the shower curtain, waving a knife. Dramatic pause, then the woman screams her head off. We can easily recognize Hitchcock's *Psycho*, de Palma's *Blow-Out*, and countless other horror films. Since the cinema first discovered women screaming, it has shown great skill in producing screams and stockpiling them for immediate and frequent deployment.

This is why we can say that the plot of de Palma's *Blow-Out* is clearly rigged. It gives the viewer the mistaken impression that you can't find a good scream when you need one for a movie sequence like the one I've just described.

At the beginning of *Blow-Out* we are in effect watching the classic scene, shot with a subjective camera, showing the stalker who enters a bathroom, pulls a knife, throws open the shower curtain to reveal the woman . . . But the action stops there, for the scream that comes from the actress's mouth is a pathetic yelp. The lights go up in the screening room. It was a sex-and-violence movie, for which hero Jack (John Travolta) is supposed to provide the sound effects. The scream heard was what the actress herself produced during the take, and she wasn't cast for her terrific voice. It falls to Jack somehow to obtain a convincing scream to synch to the image. Meanwhile, the film in progress seems to stop at this point of suspense, before the knife's entry. That's how the plot of *Blow-Out* begins.

Actually Jack promptly forgets about the problem as he leaves work. He walks into the park at night with his Nagra, to augment his sound library with some nature sounds, especially wind—not to find a scream. An accident he witnesses and whose sound he happens to record draws him into a politics-gangsters intrigue. Getting involved despite some good advice to the contrary gives him the excuse to remain deaf to the appeals of his boss: "So when are you going to get me the scream?"

What is the flamboyant finale of *Blow-Out* leading up to, cleverly

arranged so that everything—the Liberty Bell celebration, the great peal of church bells, a magnificent fireworks display, and the characters themselves—converges on the moment the killer slits the throat of Jack's girlfriend Sally? What is this prodigious narrative machine directed toward—where the entire sky is afire—if not the scream of the woman stabbed? Jack gets a recording of this scream, since he had wired Sally, supposedly for protection, with a micro-transmitter that allowed him to monitor and follow her.

This isn't Jack's first horrible mistake. In the past an investigator whom he had equipped similarly died because of him. Jack's unconscious has arranged once again for him to place Sally into a perilous position. The sole result is that he is enabled to record remotely from her mouth the scream he's been after (and which he "missed" with the investigator's death because of a technical difficulty). In a conventionally right-thinking film, the author would "hold on" to the scream in order to feed the emotion of his own story, as opposed to the story of the film-within-the-film. The honesty of de Palma's film lies in the notion that on the contrary, Jack will take this scream to his satisfied mixer ("now, that's a scream!"). This allows the film-within-the-film to be completed, after which *Blow-Out* itself just ends too, as if this whole intrigue were only a monstrous parasitic outgrowth around a professional anecdote, a duty the hero is endlessly trying to discharge.

In truth this scream, about whose credibility the characters make such a fuss, is less important as an object. What's more important is the *point* where it is placed in the story: it becomes a sort of ineffable black hole toward which there converges an entire fantastic, preposterous, extravagant mechanism—the celebration, the political crime, the sexual murder, and the whole film—all this made in order to be consumed and dissipated, in the unthinkableness and instantaneity of this scream.

So let us define the *screaming point* in a cinematic narrative as something that generally gushes forth from the mouth of a woman, which by the way does not have to be heard, but which above all

must fall at an appointed spot, explode at a precise moment, at the crossroads of converging plot lines, at the end of an often convoluted trajectory, but calculated to give this point a maximum impact.¹ The film functions like a Rube Goldberg cartoon mechanism full of gears, pistons, chains and belts—a machine built to give birth to a scream.

I use the expression *screaming point* to emphasize that it's not so much the sound quality of the scream that's important, but its placement. And this place could be occupied by nothing, a blank, an absence. The screaming point is a point of the unthinkable inside the thought, of the indeterminate inside the spoken, of unrepresentability inside representation. It occupies a point in time, but has no duration within. It suspends the time of its possible duration; it's a rip in the fabric of time. This scream embodies a fantasy of the auditory absolute, it is seen to saturate the soundtrack and deafen the listener. It might even be unheard by the screamer.

In films like *Psycho*, the original *King Kong*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *Blow-Out*, and part of *The Towering Inferno*, it's amazing to consider the extravagant luxury of the means devoted to the screenplay and production mobilized in order for everything to be lost and spent in a woman's scream. Nothing is spared in order to reach the screaming point. Twenty-story gorillas are invented, a thousand-foot-tall building is set ablaze, deluges of fireworks, symphony orchestras, the most ingenious and sophisticated details of production . . . For, in these films, at a certain moment, all disparate plot lines converge and break at this moment that quickly dissipates and passes, this moment of the woman's scream. As in the monstrous social rite of potlatch, nothing is too elaborate or far out if it will lead to a successful scream.

Why a woman's scream? Is this a phenomenon endemic to a cinema of sadists, who get off on the spectacle of a woman as prey to terror? Yes, but: we might also speculate that for men, the woman's scream poses the question of the "black hole" of the female orgasm, which cannot be spoken nor thought. In the very films that are

constructed upon this scream as the absolute in terror and pleasure, the scream is not strongly eroticized, despite the frequently sadistic nature of the situation; this would tend to thwart the male climax. What it embodies, rather, is an absolute, outside of language, time, the conscious subject.

Why can't a man's scream give expression to this absolute just as well? This is what Skolimowski's aptly-named film *The Shout* tries to do. The film prepares us for quite a while to hear an awe-ful magic shout, the secret weapon of a sorcerer (or pseudo-sorcerer) played by Alan Bates. This shout occurs finally toward the end of the film. The director yelled it himself and then subjected it to electronic manipulation.

It is impressive, all right, but simply in a different league than the screaming point. The gender emphasis is already built in to the two terms in English for these wordless cries—we tend to call the woman's cry a scream, and the man's cry a shout. Skolimowski/Bates's cry is a shout of power, exercising a will, marking a territory, a structuring shout, *anticipated*. If the shout has something bestial to it, it's like the identification of the male with the totemic animal. The most famous example of this is Tarzan's call, fabricated in the 1930s from multiple animal cries; a phallic cry which the male uses to exhibit himself and proclaim his virility.

The woman's cry is rather more like the shout of a human subject of language in the face of death. The screaming point is of a properly human order. Perhaps Marguerite Duras has created the only exception, in having a man emit a scream that's neither a Tarzan's, nor a Beast's, nor a sorcerer's cry—the scream of the Vice-Consul in *India Song* and in *Son Nom de Venise*.

The screaming point, in a male-directed film, immediately poses the question of *mastery*, of the mastery of this scream.

The question of the means and power used to obtain the scream is posed outright in a famous scene in *King Kong* (1933). On a ship making its way toward Skull Island where the gorilla resides, a sadistic film director makes heroine Fay Wray try out some screams in a

screen test, prepping her by describing the horror of the monstrous beast. Usually where a filmmaker constructs a good story full of complications in order to draw things out to a screaming point, he makes sure to show how the screaming point can escape the very person orchestrating it in the story; the character can only give himself the illusion of being Master. With Hitchcock, de Palma, or in *King Kong*, it is clear that the man is but the organizer of the spectacle, the producer of this extravaganza, but that the screaming point ultimately is beyond him, just as it is beyond the woman who issues it as the medium.

The man's shout delimits a territory, the woman's scream has to do with limitlessness. The scream gobbles up everything into itself—it is centripetal and fascinating—while the man's cry is centrifugal and structuring. The screaming point is where speech is suddenly extinct, a black hole, the exit of being.

All of cinema, this omnivorous and diverse art, is thrown into the operation of this mechanism, this strategy of obtaining a screaming point in which the insane mobilization of resources justifies and even loses itself.

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