



# Film Sound Cliches

## *Film Sound Stereotypes and Common Logic Flaws*

(from film sound.org)

### ANIMALS

- Animals are never ever silent - dogs whine/bark/yip, cats meow or purr, cows moo, even in cases where most animals wouldn't be making a sound.
- Rats, mice, squirrels and other vermin always make the tiny little squeaky noises constantly while they are on screen.
- Dolphins always make that same "dolphin chatter" sound when spinning, jumping, etc.
- Snakes are always rattling
- Crickets in winter and peepers in the fall
- Dogs always know who's bad, and bark at them.
- Insects always sound wet
- It's the same Cat scream over & over.
- Sound effects editor Peter Steinbach once tried to record his own cat scream by stepping on it's tail. His advice: - You only have one take. Step hard! (and dont wear shorts)

### BIRDS

- Red-tailed hawk screeching - [[Listen to and read about Red-tailed hawks!](#)]
  - Whenever we see a hawk or a bald eagle, the sound is always that same red-tailed hawk screeching sound that's been around since the 50's!
  - Always just before/or after some dramatic part of an adventure flick, you will here the screeching of a red-tailed hawk.
  - Whenever a cliff or mountain is shown, especially if it's high, the Red-tailed hawk will screech.
  - The Red-Tailed Hawk scree signifies outdoors and a big, lonely place
- Owls sound like Great Horned Owl. (a bird, that for the most part seems invisible) [[Listen to and read about Great Horned Owls!](#)]
- In a horror film when there is a full moon there is either an owl or a wolf howling in the distance. [[Listen to Wolves!](#)]

- The Loon is mostly found in lakes in North America. In the movies it seems to be just about anywhere in the world.  
[\[Listen to Loons\]](#)
- Kookaburras (a type of large Australian kingfisher) are inhabitants of African/South American jungles, not Australian open forest. (laughing bird sound, see most Tarzan films). [\[read about and listen to Laughing Kookaburra!\]](#) **[A Field Guide to Hollywood Bird Songs](#)**  
Unnatural acts on movie soundtracks by Robert Winkler

## BICYCLES

- All bicycles have bells (that sounds)

## BOMBS & EXPLOSIONS

- Bombs always have big, blinking, beeping timer displays.
- If something explodes, it takes about a minute for the explosions to stop
- Explosions always happen in slow motion. When an explosion occurs, make certain you are running away from the point of detonation so the blast can send you flying, in slow motion, toward the camera.
- Bombs "whistle" when falling from a plane

## CARS

- Car tires "always" screech on dirt roads.
- Car breaks must always squeak
- Car tires must always squeal when the car turns, pulls away or stops
- On big budget films- whenever a car does any maneuver It must accelerate - ideally to the point of peeling out! even if it is going under 20mph
- In a route we hear a large truck and a horn with Doppler effect

## COMPUTERS

- Every button you press on a computer makes some kind of beep
- Text being spelled out on screen (whether computer or lower third) MUST make some sort of typing and/or dot-matrix-printer type of sound.
- in foreign language versions of u.s. movies computers show their messages in english, but they all can speak!

## ENVIRONMENT

- Castle Thunder  
Until around the late '80s, whenever you heard a thunderclap in a movie, it was probably "Castle Thunder".  
[Listen to and read about "Castle Thunder"](#)
- Storms start instantaneously: there's a crack of thunder and lightning, then heavy rain starts falling.
- Thunder is always in sync with the lightning, and the explosion sounds are always in sync with the stuff blowing up, no matter how far away. Same for fireworks
- Whistling types of wind are always used

- Non-stop bubbles underwater
- Doors always squeek
- Enviromental sound to a shoot with the window open, are always next to a schoolyard or a construction-site.
- When in San Francisco, no matter where you are, you always hear a cable car and or a fog horn.
- The Universal Telephone Ring  
Endlessly used on television (especially in TV shows produced at Universal Studios during the '70s and '80s) and in many films as well - is the sound of a telephone ringing.  
[Read about and listen to "The Universal Telephone Ring"](#)
- Exterior Ambiences: No matter where you are outside, if it's not in the city, you hear a lonely cricket chirping
- Trains: we always hear the same old classic distant trainhorn over and over again.
- in U.S. films playing in big cities there's always a police horn in the background - in films from other countries... never!!!!
- When a light bulb gets broken, there's always a kind of electric sound
- Whenever there is a fight or commotion going on in the upstairs of a house, the person downstairs won't hear a thing because the noise of gunshots, chairs falling over, screams etc will be totally masked by the following sounds; the phone ringing, the washing machine beginning its spin cycle, the dog barking, a drink is being whizzed up in the liquidiser or the maid beginning the vacuum cleaning. .

## **HELICOPTERS & AIRPLANES**

- Helicopters always fly from surround to front-speakers.
- People standing outside a running helicopter can always talk in normal or just slightly louder than normal voices
- Every helicopter shutting down emits the chirp-chirp-chirp sound of the rubber drive belts disengaging, in spite of the fact that only the famous Bell 47G (the Mash chopper) actually makes this sound.
- Piston helicopters always start up with screaming turbine engine sounds.
- An approaching airplane or helicopter will make no noise until it is directly over the characters, at which point it will suddenly become thunderingly loud.
- Characters will never hear an approaching airplane or helicopter, even though in real life you would hear them approaching for at least a minute before they were close enough to see. This also holds true for approaching armies on horseback and tank battallions.
- The tires of any jet screech upon landing
- Any airplane in a dive will make a whining noise that will get louder and higher-pitched the longer the dive lasts.

## **KNIFE**

- When a character pulls out a knife, even from his pants, you hear a sound of metal brushing metal

## LANGUAGE & VOICE

- **The WILHELM Scream**



**Charge at Feather River**

- A series of short painful screams performed by an actor were recorded in 1951 for the Warner Brother's film "Distant Drums." They were used for a scene where a man is bitten and dragged underwater by an alligator. The recording was archived into the studio's sound effects library -- and it was used in many of their films since. "Star Wars" Sound Designer Ben Burtt tracked down the scream recording - which he named "Wilhelm" from a character who let out the same scream in "Charge at Feather River (1953)." Ben has adopted the scream as sort of a personal sound signature, and has worked it into as many films as he can.
  - Steve Lee's website about the Wilhelm scream
  - NPR Wilhelm Scream feature tells much of the story of the Wilhelm Scream. (includes link to RealAudio file)
  - The scream de la scream (Guardian Unlimited)
  - The Wilhelm Scream - in WAV format, 170 KB
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- Even when depicted as foreigners (including aliens from outer space) all actors speak and understand a common language (usually English) unless the film's plot depends on a language barrier.
- The same woman's recorded voice is heard in every spaceship, space-station, government building, etc. announcing something to the effect of the main computer has been shut down, this ship will self destruct in one minute.
- Baby crying and bad news
  - The Godfather: when Don Corleone is shot, Sonny barges in to his house and announces this. Followed by baby crying.
- - Snow Falling on Cedars: the sheriff announces to a woman that her fisherman husband is dead. Followed by baby crying
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- Kids can always whisper even if their two inches away from a villain - he won't hear. If they step on a branch however, the villains will immediately know it's not some animal, and catch them.

## SCREAM

- Whenever someone falls off of a cliff or building, no matter how much damage they take beforehand, they scream, even if they were shot through the lungs twenty or thirty times, or were apparently unconscious.
- When villains fall to their deaths, you can hear their screams gradually fade out, even if they only fall ten feet or so.
- When there's a police car standing, there are always hundreds of voices in it's radio.
- People's voices on telephones (and answering machines) always sound just like their normal voice, except a little bit more nasal. Their voices are never distorted by things like holding the mouthpiece too close to their face or breathing through their mouth.
- Character Acting: A Cockney accent is always as per Dick van Dyke from Mary Poppins.

### **MARTIAL ART**

- Arm and legs of karate-actors always make a funny "swish" sound when they kick, hit or jump, they also tend to scream in a funny way prior to any fighting-action.

### **MICROPHONES**

- Anytime a person speaks into a microphone, their first words will cause the mic to feed back.
- The first spoken words must be either 'Testing, Testing' or 'One Two, One Two'

### **MOTORCYCLES**

- Motorcycle engines in movies can inexplicably change from 4-stroke Otto cycle to 2-stroke cycle operation.
- Motorcycles usually change from Harley Davidson choppers when engaged in highway operations to Yamaha Dirt bikes when operated off-road (as in "Then Came Bronson").
- Police Harleys will morph into Triumph Bonneville's when operating in tight quarters (on the ship in "Magnum Force").

### **MOVING GRAPHIC**

- Any moving graphic on a sports broadcast (esp. NBC) has to use the same "fireball" sound effect.

### **MUSIC**

- When the star travels to...
  - London, we see a shot of Big Ben and hear Rule, Britannia.
  - Hong Kong: a Chinese junk and wooden xylophone music (or a deep gong).
  - New York: a traffic jam on Broadway and frenetic xylophone music.
  - Paris: the Eiffel Tower and accordion music.
- Radio
  - When listening to music on the radio in the car, the song on the radio never changes during a single scene. The scene rarely outlasts the song...if it does, one of the characters will turn the radio off before the end of the song.
  - There are never any commercials on the radio.
  - It's always easy to find romantic makeout music on the radio right when you need it.

### **PEOPLE**

- The DJ always turns the music down when actors talk in disco and club-scenes
- Those tiny people far, far away in that long shot on the beach should always sound like they're talking directly into your ear - no matter how far away they are, even though they're whispering
- . . .
- People in a wide open field or dense forest can make their voice echo if they yell loud enough.
- When you get punched in the face, it sounds like you broke a salami over the back of a chair
- All kisses need to sound sloppy and wet.
- Blood will always squish when oozing from a wound.
- Dreams are always drenched in a lot of reverb.
- People never answer the door until the doorbell or knocking has sounded at least three times

## SPACE

- It is now the modern era, and thus, sound has been installed in space by the elimination of that nasty vacuum problem.
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- [ [Read about "Dramatic emotional approach"](#) ]
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- Explosions in space make noise
- There's a deep humming in space, no doubt about it
- Sounds in space must have some element of a flanger involved

## SPEED OF SOUND

- Applies to absolutely every movie: Some noisy event (crash, shot, explosion) occurs at quite a distance from the camera. Nevertheless, the sound is heard at the same instant. The speed of sound - usually 300 meters per second - here always is the same as the speed of light. (But not everyone - Titanic has a long shot as the boat starts sinking where a signal flare is set off. The sound follows a good 2 seconds behind)

## SURROUND

- Almost any huge surround sound explosion. In fact generally the use of surround in any action or action-drama film. Everything is everywhere, with a crystal-clear glistening 20Hz - 20KHz bandwidth.

## WEAPONS & GUNS

- A fired gun never recoils.
- Guns (handguns, rifles, machineguns etc) have a really deep "BOOOOMM!!!" sound not a "CRACK!". Also, there's old cliché about the number of rounds the average magazine holds, the good guys almost never run out of ammo, and they seem to be able to use a handgun accurately to over a 100 meter range (accuracy of weapons over distance is pretty much a factor of barrel length - handguns are for CLOSE distances).
- All sub machine guns sound alike and have the same rate of fire  
Machine guns and their rate of fire ... most users of these weapons can manage to sustain over 10 second continuous rate of fire (in actuality, you are supposed to fire the things in short bursts -- after a long burst the barrel will heat up so much the weapon will jam). Also I have never ever seen any protagonist change a MGs \*barrel\* no matter how long he has used the MG. (the barrels overheat, and also sustain incredible wear requiring these to be changed -- often in battle, the gunner's mate will carry spare barrels as well as the inexhaustible ammo supply which weighs next-to-nothing). Esp. WW2 era weapons.

- Bullets always ricochet, and they must travel pretty slow because the "rico" is 1/2 second later after it moves 50 feet  
All bullets make a distinct riccoche sound and when flying past you they make a zip noise when in fact they are moving faster than the speed of sound and in real life would produce a whip lash or bang sound
- Handguns: All handguns make a frightening clicking sound when handled as though to suggest that the parts are loose. The more advanced the gun (Men in Black) the louder, and more varied, the clicking. In real life any gun making noises like that would probably explode in your hand with the first discharge. Note: All energy type weapons will power up with a loud hum.

## **MISC**

- In the M&E-Mix you always have to hear footsteps (and cloth rubbing) that were never heard on the original sound track. [M&E (Music & Effects) is a special mix which is done to prepare for foreign language (dubbed) versions of a film]
- Approaching Sherman tanks at a range of fifty yards, roaring at a level that loosens teeth and sphincters alike, are never so loud as to obscure that "Foleyed" woollen sweater the officer is moving as he raises his binoculars. >> [Read about Foley](#)