

17-18 July 2025

The INEFF Conference

Scream on the Screen

Conference paper

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Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of the scream in cinema and its transformation into a structuring force within experimental fiction. Focusing on *El grito* (Philippe Grandrieux, 2019), *Rubber Johnny* (Chris Cunningham, 2005), and *Come to Daddy* (Chris Cunningham, 1997), I argue that the scream operates not as reaction, but as audiovisual method — a disruptive force that dislocates narrative and generates new sensory forms.

In *El grito*, Grandrieux constructs a multiscreen composition where a woman's screaming body is replayed with temporal shifts, creating immersive repetition rather than progression. *Rubber Johnny* presents the scream as spasm and glitch — bodily expression fractured by digital compression. *Come to Daddy* renders the scream contagious, multiplying across mutated children, transforming social anxiety into sonic violence.

Drawing on corporeal cinema, musique concrète, and the writings of Deleuze, Hainge, and Chion, I propose the scream as an agent of cinematic thinking: a gesture that breaks linguistic form and activates the body as a site of transmission. Rather than representing fear or trauma, it becomes a structural vibration — something to be seen, felt, and inhabited. In doing so, the scream opens a liminal field where image, sound, and affect collide beyond interpretation.

Introducción:

“Every person carries hope, fear, melancholy; every person, in their scream, expels despair: some pray to a particular god, others scream into the void”

Dobrotvorskiy. (2023)

The scream is an archaic and chthonic phenomenon, existing beyond language and articulation, maintaining a direct connection to the body and emotion. However, any attempt to “name” the scream and fix it within language inevitably leads to the loss of its true essence — its polysemy and transcendence. What remains is a distorted shell, where language limits the phenomenon, stripping it of depth, spectrality, and interiority. As Losev (1929) wrote, “The separation of names and things is a sad product of the terrifying darkness and spiritual emptiness that characterizes bourgeois Europe, which has produced one of the most insensitive cultures ever to exist.” These words aptly reflect what has happened to the scream. The modern European worldview is born in language, but our lexicon is narrow and constrained. The analysis of the scream leads us into a linguistic and literary impasse: how do we describe something that lies beyond language? Even when words are found, their use inevitably distorts the essence, exposing the limitations of the method itself.

Contemporary sensory analysis of the scream urges us to study it through audiovisual media - through all “open” and “restricted,” “liberated” and “directed” forms of cinema. It is precisely in film that the scream escapes its sonic boundaries and becomes a structural element of visual and narrative space. What is a scream on screen? A symbol? A performative gesture? A genre device? Or something more? This phenomenon transcends conventional categories, defying rigid definition. In classical cinema, the scream has often functioned as a genre marker — from horror’s iconic “scream queens” to melodrama’s climactic outbursts of suffering. In experimental cinema, the scream becomes something else: a self-sufficient and autonomous object of existence and analysis. It dismantles narrative structures, creates new perceptual forms, and transforms the very idea of the cinematic image.

Contemporary experimental cinema, in its quest to dismantle fixed forms and develop new audiovisual languages, frequently turns to the scream as a key medial and structural element. In the works of Philippe Grandrieux, a major figure in the New French Extremity movement, the scream appears not merely as emotional expression but as a tool for exploring ecstatic and liminal states of the body and mind. His films operate at the edge of corporeal perception, disrupting conventional regimes of audiovisual engagement. Grandrieux deploys an aesthetic aligned with the principles of *musique concrète*, a tradition that emphasizes the materiality of sound and its severance from referential meaning. Like this method, he blurs the boundaries between body and frame, voice and image, generating a dense field of sensation where the film’s form becomes a continuation of bodily vibration.

A similar approach is visible in the video works of Chris Cunningham, such as *Come to Daddy* (1997) and *Rubber Johnny* (2005), created in collaboration with Aphex Twin. Here, the scream emerges as a medial glitch - a sharp and disruptive gesture that structures narrative and deforms screen space, pushing the image beyond the symbolic order. This effect breaks the distance between screen and spectator, transforming the scream into a physical intervention within the perceptual field.

I. Differentiating the Scream in Cinema: A Historical and Chronological Guide

a. Silent Cinema

The absence of sound in silent cinema, which at the time was closely tied to theatrical traditions, demanded new methods for conveying emotion. Exaggerated facial expressions, borrowed from *commedia dell'arte*, became a crucial part of cinema's gestural language. Wide shots required actors to perform clearly and expressively. Acting aesthetics were based on exaggeration, often bordering on farce. Silent cinema relied heavily on text, but intertitles limited expressive capacity. Depicting a scream through "AAAA!" would have been absurd, so visual techniques became essential. In Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), we observe a direct visual impact: a silent scream reaches peak expressiveness in the iconic Odessa Steps scene. A woman, overtaken by horror, opens her mouth in a voiceless scream — becoming a canonical cinematic symbol of despair, helplessness, and terror (see Lessing's *Laocoön*).

b. The Scream Queens

With the advent of sound in cinema, a new archetype emerged: the scream queen — typically a female character in horror films who becomes central to the narrative through her direct encounter with danger. Her scream symbolizes fear and vulnerability, often marking the film's climax and becoming one of its most recognizable elements. One of the first iconic scream queens was Fay Wray in the classic film *King Kong* (1933). Her scream embodied extreme fear and helplessness in the face of an overwhelming threat, amplifying the audience's perception and emotional investment.

During this period, the scream served a dual function: it heightened the sense of horror while underscoring the female character's vulnerability. This was an audible scream, fully subordinated to the director's vision, embedded into the narrative, and designed to generate an empathic response from the viewer.

c. The 1970s: A Feminist Metamorphosis of the Scream

In the 1970s, the scream in horror cinema evolved from an expression of fear into a tool of resistance and personal transformation. During this time, scream queens ceased to be purely vulnerable figures and became active participants in the narrative, with the scream symbolizing their struggle. In *Carrie* (1976, dir. Brian De Palma), the climactic scene features an experimental use of the silent scream. The protagonist, drenched in blood and subjected to cruel ridicule, screams in silence - a cry that, like a chain reaction, reverberates across the gymnasium. The absence of sound creates a sense of suspended time, allowing the viewer to fully absorb the tension of the moment and its profound narrative transformation. Carrie's scream becomes a cathartic act, literally exploding the surrounding reality.

Thus, in the 1970s, the scream shed its former passive role and became a powerful instrument of resistance. Where it once underscored female vulnerability, it now signaled defiance - marking the evolution of women characters in horror cinema.

d. From Mass Culture to Experimental Film: The Scream as an Autonomous Space

With the rise of the internet, the scream became a significant element of mass culture, radically changing in meaning and application. The emergence and proliferation of "screamers" — short videos that frighten viewers with sudden sounds or imagery — and their integration into meme culture transformed the scream

into an independent tool of emotional and interactive impact. Screamers became a core part of “creepy-dark” aesthetics, particularly resonant with millennials and Gen Z. These short clips demonstrate a mechanism of visual reinforcement: sharp, emotionally charged content stimulates the brain’s dopamine system, producing a kind of visual dependency. This fast dopamine cycle, paired with the culture of instant image consumption, demanded increasingly extreme content. As a result, the aesthetics of anxiety spread like a rhizome, infiltrating all areas of visual culture.

II. Experimental Cinema

a. Chris Cunningham

Contemporary experimental cinema transcends the boundaries of traditional cinematic experience, transforming into a medial and plastic phenomenon. It detaches from the cinematic screen as a closed system and becomes part of a broader audiovisual flow that includes music videos, digital internet artifacts, and other media ecosystems. In this sense, music, video art, and cinema merge into new hybrid forms where radical visual and sonic strategies operate beyond conventional limits. As Leggott notes, “At some point, music videos replaced avant-garde and surrealist cinema: you were more likely to see something like that in a video than in a film»).

In its radical form, the scream manifests in Chris Cunningham’s *Rubber Johnny* (2005), set to the Aphex Twin track “AFX237 v.7”. Here, the scream becomes not merely part of the narrative but the basis of a tactile and bodily interaction with the viewer. *Rubber Johnny* is an experimental body horror short that constructs a voyeuristic gaze over a deformed, hyperactive teenage mutant with a disproportionately large head and a twisted body, confined to a wheelchair. The main character is performed by Cunningham himself, and his body - both as character and director - exceeds its own boundaries, mutating and losing stable form. It dissolves, becomes fluid, ceasing to be a coherent physical entity and instead transforms into something mobile, transgressive, and screen-penetrating.

Gilles Deleuze, analyzing the painting of Francis Bacon, describes bodily deformation as a desire of the body to slip away, to change, to escape from itself. He writes about the “hysterical scene” as a series of spasms, in which the body attempts to exit through one of its organs and merge with the background - with the material structure of the image. This occurs through both texture and monochromatic tones, as well as low contrast (a hallmark of Cunningham’s style). Deleuze formulates this in *The Logic of Sensation*: “Bacon’s scream is the operation through which the entire body slips through the mouth.”

In *Rubber Johnny*, Cunningham visually reproduces this mechanism: his body, caught in a convulsive, spasmodic scream, strives to break through the physical shell, to merge with space, to dissolve into the world. Through blurred boundaries, aggressive flashes of light, jerky movements, and extreme distortions, Cunningham creates an effect of bodily instability, where the very process of mutation becomes an act of escape.

At the beginning of the short film (which aligns more with short cinema than with a traditional music video), a doctor or overseer tries to establish contact with Johnny, but he behaves restlessly: moving agitatedly,

making inarticulate sounds, rejecting the camera. Then, a surreal scene begins: under the aggressive rhythms of Aphex Twin, his body enters a trance, and his face undergoes extreme distortions. The action becomes increasingly disorienting: space breaks down, boundaries of reality blur. The very space of the clip (or short film) becomes a space of the scream - the scream here is not just a sound; it materializes, deforms the image, and destabilizes the screen. It ceases to be a voice and becomes a rupture of perception, the core and structure of the narrative itself.

Cunningham represents the scream as a convulsion, a spasm, taking it beyond the acoustic and socio-cultural phenomenon, turning it into a medial, bodily, destabilized field. He imbues the scream with the emotional lack, despair, and helplessness of his characters, weaving into its spasm their desires, fears, and a sense of injustice within contemporary reality. Despite his visual radicalism, Cunningham often raises social themes: bodies on the edge, loneliness, rejection, otherness. Thus, the scream becomes an expression of liveness, trapped within a body confined to a wheelchair — a cry that destroys the very possibility of meaning, layered upon visual chaos, industrial noise, and bodily deformation.

A radically different type of scream emerges in Chris Cunningham's short film (or music video) *Come to Daddy* (1997). Here, the scream functions as a sonic, visual, and structural explosion—not as a reaction to emotion, but as its generating force. The video begins with an elderly woman holding a shopping bag—a mundane, everyday scene that is suddenly interrupted by a group of mutated children wearing schoolgirl dresses and terrifying masks of Richard D. James '(Aphex Twin) face. These beings shriek, charge, and pursue the woman, creating an atmosphere of horror and absurdity. Despite their grotesque abnormality, they retain the status of children—simultaneously vulnerable and aggressive bodies. This image functions as a critical commentary on British youth gangs of the 1990s—groups associated with destructive subcultures. Particularly grotesque and contradictory is Cunningham's decision to place them in the bodies of young girls, merging fear with infantilization and breaking conventional gender and behavioral codes. The figure of the old woman in the video becomes an allegory of a conditional "Old England"—a bearer of conservative values, order, and morality—suddenly confronted with the chaotic, media-saturated reality of a new generation.

The climax comes when a demonic creature—distorted, screaming, with the face of Richard James—emerges from a television set. The creature and the elderly woman scream at each other. This moment is both an act of communication and rupture: the scream becomes a gesture in which fear, aggression, and confusion collide. Through the creature's face, the scream is transmitted to all the children, transforming them into a mediated chorus of "scream," repeating the same grimacing pattern. This is not a scream as a symptom of fear—it is a scream as structure, as an energetic discharge that ejects both characters and viewers beyond narrative, beyond corporeal existence.

As James Leggott notes, *Come to Daddy* "engages with associative ideas around delinquency and 'media effects' within the British popular imagination." The demon birthed from the television embodies the image of a digital scream—a sound that no longer belongs to the body but can still distort it. It layers over industrial noise, ruptures space, and erases the boundary between source and resonance. The scream here becomes a screen event, a media-based rupture, a "renaming of the world" through pure sonic aggression. It does not seek interpretation—it demands physical engagement.

Thus, *Come to Daddy* transforms the scream into a field of collective affect (Brian Massumi) and a channel of intergenerational communication. It becomes not merely a symptom of fear but a way of experiencing alterity, an act of existence and transformation. The scream destabilizes the usual roles of victim and aggressor, subject and object. As Massumi describes, *El afecto es una forma de experiencia que surge antes de que una persona logre reconocer, nombrar o explicar lo que siente. No es una emoción en el sentido habitual: una emoción ya tiene nombre, forma, causa y, por lo general, una estructura cultural.* The scream is thus inscribed into the very structure of the medium, becoming a form-generating visual and sonic force, detached from any direct connotation—be it victimhood, aggression, fear, or threat. It becomes an agent of multiple processes: from emotional release to social articulation, from individual pain to a collective sense of anxiety. It is not only a sign of inner tension but also a possibility for contact—between bodies, generations, and cultural layers.

b. Philippe Grandrieux

Philippe Grandrieux is a French filmmaker, philosopher, and visual artist, known for his radically corporeal, sensual, and perceptually destructive films. While often associated with the New French Extremity movement, Grandrieux works beyond any genre constraints. For the purpose of this study, it is notable that the visual and sensorial approach Grandrieux develops in *El grito* (2019) finds a sort of proto-form in the films of Stephen Dwoskin—a British director whose own body was also a central element of his cinematic language. Dwoskin, who had polio, filmed slowed-down, often static scenes of women's bodies, either nude (*Girl*) or clothed (*Take Me*), but always subjected to an intense, almost clinical gaze of the camera. These films begin to resemble medical footage: the woman often stands in full-frame, motionless, until something begins to occur. This visual stillness, the slow build-up of tension, and the hyper-exposure of the female body as both object and subject of perception form a bridge to the aesthetics of *El grito*. It is in Dwoskin's work that one finds the first appearance of what will become Grandrieux's cinematic method—bodily isolation as a form (of the scream?).

In this sense, Stephen Dwoskin can be seen as a precursor to the aesthetic of *El grito*. In films like *Girl* and *Take Me*, he constructs a visual logic that resonates with Grandrieux's aesthetic: the woman in the frame is presented almost as a visual object, a kind of «postcard”—either naked or dressed, but in any case isolated and exposed to slow, near-clinical observation. These images, situated between experimental and medical cinema, evoke a sense of bodily vulnerability and hyper-saturated visual exposure. The woman might simply stand in the frame, filling it entirely, until something happens a transition from visual stillness to an anxious bodily event. This method both “allows” the body to exist and simultaneously places it in a zone of intense exposure and control—an inner tension that aligns closely with *El grito*'s aesthetics.

In *El grito* (2019), Grandrieux turns the scream into more than a theme or formal element, it becomes a full protagonist, structuring the entire narrative. It is not a character in the traditional sense, but a medium through which the boundaries of bodily perception, subjectivity, and audiovisual experience are explored. The scream here is not a reaction but a driving force; not a consequence, but a point of origin—both material and method of cinematic thought. The film's structure is based on four vignettes, each of which uses a woman's voice and body as a site for the scream to emerge as a primordial, prelinguistic act, forming a new, deformed state of sensation and feeling. These vocal impulses, arising from the depths of the body, do not become abstract or symbolic, but retain a material, bodily-anchored sonic quality. Grandrieux

portrays the scream as bodily pulsation-spasm, orgasm, convulsion, nervous breakdown, not as a result of emotion, but as its form and content, and simultaneously its “non-content.”

Using vocal polyphony and triple projection, he creates an audiovisual space in which the film’s structure mimics the scream: fluid, broken, vibrating, corporeal. Each screen projects the same image with a delay: the initial image of the screaming nude girl appears on the left screen, then with a delay on the center one, and with further delay on the right. This generates a rewatch effect, a slowed-down immersion into the bodily texture of the scream, allowing for a deeper analysis of its plasticity and rhythm. The viewer sees the same action repeatedly, enabling not just interpretation but a near-corporeal merging with the image, experiencing it as one’s own.

Each episode in *El grito* expresses the scream both sonically and plastically: women’s fully naked bodies, isolated from context, exist outside of specific time or space. They are dimly lit, nearly abstract. Their movements are non-performative, primal, drawn from deep within. The bodies literally scream-twisting, contracting, as if trying to pull something animalistic, inhuman, out of themselves. One of the women appears to drag the scream out of her chest with her hands. This is a direct materialization of the scream.

Such an approach directly corresponds with the concept of *musique concrète*, where sound loses its attachment to a referent and becomes pure materiality. As Greg Hainge explains in *Le Corps concret*, Grandrieux’s cinema can be seen as “concrete cinema,” where “the body is everything, and the story is nothing.” These two maxims, he argues, express the filmmaker’s fundamental approach: a refusal of narrative hierarchy in favor of a material, sensuous contact with the viewer. Grandrieux disarticulates the screen space, removes conventional causal links, and, as in *musique concrète*, separates sound from source. Instead of representing, the scream becomes the very fabric of the image—a corporeal noise that shapes perception.

The term *musique concrète*, introduced by Pierre Schaeffer, refers to working with “sound objects”—real-world sounds stripped of their original context. Sound in this approach ceases to be illustration and becomes material in itself. Grandrieux works in a similar way: he detaches the corporeal sound from its narrative cause, creating cinema where the scream is not an expression of feeling, but the cinematographic matter itself. In *Le Corps concret*, Hainge emphasizes that for Grandrieux, the frame is the place of bodily materialization, and cinema becomes a zone of interaction between body, image, and perception. Such cinema dismantles semiotic conventions, replacing them with direct sensory impact, where both sound and body do not represent but are present.

As Hainge writes: “the bodily spaces of these films are ‘no places’, spaces in which there are no pre-givens, no ruling transcendent structures, where everything is created anew at every turn and experienced as if for the first time in a quest for corporeal sensation.” This idea is closely linked to Grandrieux’s core aesthetic principle, formulated by Hainge in two simple axioms: i) the body is everything, and ii) the story is nothing. Through this radical prioritization of corporeality, cinema becomes not representation, but a form of touch—of sensation, of voice, of the scream as material. It is a structure in which all elements: light, sound, frame, breath; participate in a plastic movement, a deformed articulation, bringing us closer to the pre-linguistic, the sensuously concrete, the very act of existence itself.

III. Conclusion: The Scream as a Universal Mediator

The scream is an act that disrupts the boundaries between the internal and the external, the physical and the emotional, creating a transitional state that transcends ordinary perception and grants access to the transcendent. Throughout history, the scream has been a key element of artistic expression, reflected in diverse forms of art: from medieval depictions of infernal torment to the sculpture of Laocoön; from ritual cries to ecstatic singing; from “silent” scenes to digital audio ruptures. In the course of this study, we have traced how the scream, moving through the history of cinema, has transformed its functions, from emotion to strategy, from sound to form and affect.

Experimental cinema shows that the scream can not only express but also structure, not only erupt but shape the screen, blur its boundaries, and transform perception. It becomes a mediator between the body, the viewer, and the screen- a transcendent impulse passing through flesh and image. Its study opens new horizons for understanding cinema as a medium that is not only visual, but bodily, acoustic, and sensuous in the deepest sense.

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Bio

Aleksandra Ershova is a filmmaker, researcher, and MA student based in Barcelona. Her academic and creative work explores the intersection of corporeality, affect, and experimental cinema, with a particular focus on scream as a cinematic structure. She is currently completing her final research project on the materiality of scream in film and virtual environments, integrating audiovisual analysis and practice-based methodologies.