

the narrative; the fact that Eve is female and African American makes the film's emphasis on untold stories even more urgent [Figure 5.32].

Ever since "the talkies" were introduced, the human voice has organized systems of meaning in various types of film: narrative films are frequently driven by dialogue, documentaries by voiceover, and experimental films often turn voice into an aesthetic element. As noted earlier in this chapter, some writers suggest that a theory of "voice" can open up cinema analysis to more meanings than a model devoted to the image alone. Although we have stressed how frequently film sound is subordinated to the image, certainly the realm of the voice shows us how central sound is to cinema's intelligibility. In fact, the prevalence of the human voice is a measure of just how focused the universe of classical cinema is on depicting human experience. From recording to mixing to reproduction, sound practices privilege the human subject. Contrasting a Hollywood drama with a film whose dialogue is



Figure 5.32 *Eve's Bayou* (1997). A little girl's version of events is given credence by the voiceover device.

dubbed demonstrates how sound mixing favors the human voice. The flatness of the postsynchronized sound used in dubbed films confirms our belief in a more "natural" way of synching up voices and bodies. Ironically, the Hollywood soundtrack is likely to have used postsynchronized dialogue in the form of ADR, a technology that strives for an illusion more perfect than the original sound it replaces.

### Music in Film

Music is a crucial element in the film experience; among a range of other effects, it provides rhythm and deepens emotional response. Music has rarely been absent from film programs and many of the venues for early film had been musical ones first. The piano, an important element of public and private amusements at the turn of the twentieth century, quickly became a cornerstone of film exhibition [Figure 5.33]. Throughout the silent-film period, scoring for films steadily developed from the distribution of collections of music cues that accompanists and ensembles could play to correspond with appropriate moments in films to full-length compositions for specific films. When D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* premiered in 1915, a full orchestra, playing Joseph Carl Breil's score in which the Ku Klux Klan rallied to Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries," was a major audience attraction. The architecture of the large movie palaces constructed during this period was acoustically geared to audiences familiar with listening to orchestral music in a concert setting. *The Jazz Singer* and other early sound films were conceived to show off the musical performances of their stars. As we mentioned previously, speech made it to the screen as an afterthought—and thus the introduction of dialogue presented problems of scale and volume in the movie palaces.

Although the term *talkies* for the new sound films soon took over, movies of every genre—westerns, disaster films, science fiction films—relied on music from the beginning. Often this music contributes to categorizing



Figure 5.33 So-called silent films were almost always accompanied by musicians.

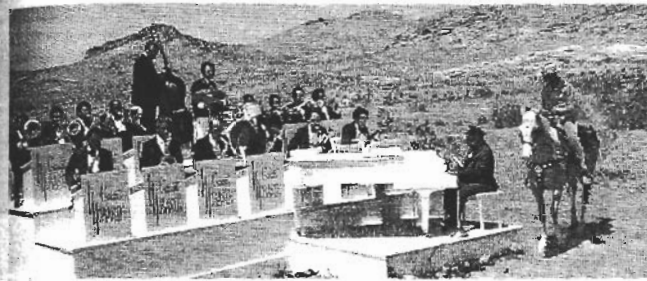


Figure 5.34 *Blazing Saddles* (1974). Soundtrack music finds its onscreen source in Count Basie's orchestra playing in a desert in Mel Brooks's spoof.

such films as genre films. Vangelis's music for *Blade Runner* (1982), for example, distinctly marks it as a science fiction film. In contrast, Max Steiner's score for *Gone with the Wind* (1939) sets its nostalgic, romantic tone.

**Narrative Music** When we think about the conventions of film sound, background music comes most immediately to mind. Music is the only element of cinematic discourse besides credits that is primarily nondiegetic. It can also move easily back and forth from the level of the story world to the nondiegetic level on which that world can be commented upon. In the back of our minds, we are aware that the practice of scoring films with music that has no source in the story violates verisimilitude, and yet we readily accept this convention. The gag in Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974), in which the musical soundtrack turns out to be coming from Count Basie's jazz orchestra playing in the middle of the desert, is entertaining because it shows the absurdity of the convention [Figure 5.34]. Occasionally we are jolted out of absorption in a film because the music is simply too overblown, its commentary on the action too obvious. Nevertheless, normally we value the musical score as a crucial element of our affective, or emotional, response to a film. The scoring for narrative films thus presents a notable paradox: much of what is valued in classical cinema—verisimilitude, cause-and-effect relationships—is completely ignored in even the most admired examples of film music.

The conventions of musical scoring, composition, orchestration, and mixing contribute to a particular kind of experience at the movies. Film music encourages us to be receptive to the information being conveyed by the visual as well as by the other acoustic dimensions of the film. It opens us to experience the movie as immediate and enveloping. It encourages us to let our barriers down. Many commentators speculate that these effects are psychologically related to the fact that the earliest human sensory experience is auditory. Because music is nonrepresentational—it is not a copy of something specific in the world the way an image is—it can be more suggestive. Set apart from the diegesis and taking place right there in the theater, music eases our transition into the fictional world.

Because many of the practices of musical scoring were developed in tandem with the dominant form of narrative film, we shall focus this discussion on narrative film music. In Hollywood and related mainstream film practices, the musical score has a direct connection to the story. However complex or lush it may be, it serves a dramatic purpose. The term **background music**, also referred to as **underscoring** (in contrast to source music, which is diegetic), already emphasizes this status. Music quite literally underscores what is happening dramatically. A piece of music composed for a

particular place in a film is referred to as a **cue**. When recording the score, the conductor watches the film for the “cue” to begin playing that particular piece of music. Often music reinforces story information through recognizable conventions. Action sequences in the *Indiana Jones* series are introduced by the inescapable “dum da-dum dum” as a parody of and a tribute to these recognizable themes. Through the use of **motives**, themes assigned to particular figures, music also participates in characterization. We know when the main character has entered the scene not only visually but also aurally, because principal characters usually have a musical motif. The presence of “bad girl” Marylee Hadley in *Written on the Wind* (1956) is signaled by a distinctive sultry theme. Most notably, music is subordinate to that part of the narrative which competes in the realm of sound, the dialogue. A music cue will usually be audible during sequences in which there is no dialogue, often helping to smooth a spatial or temporal transition. When dialogue predominates, however, it will fade, its volume will drop, or it will change to be less “competitive.”

Composers for classical cinema, such as Erich Korngold, Dimitri Tiomkin, and Max Steiner, generated their own set of musical styles to suit the accepted function of film music, and many of these principles are still dominant in contemporary practice. In Steiner's more than three hundred scores, including those for *King Kong*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Now, Voyager* (1942), and *Mildred Pierce*, musical accompaniment was notable for being almost continuous. He composed using a **click track**—holes punched in the film to keep the beat of the action—and his style was highly illustrative, emphasizing what happens on the screen through music.

Much of Hollywood film music composition is derived from nineteenth-century, late romantic orchestral music. Here the term *classical* is undoubtedly appropriate for studio-era Hollywood style, for popular music was rejected in favor of classical music. The work of such composers as Wagner and Strauss was rich in its ability to convey narrative information; reliant on compositional principles such as motives assigned to different characters, settings, or actions; and lushly emotive, tonal, and euphonic. As such, it was perfectly suited to the musical experience that Hollywood was striving for with the integration of sound. This type of music was compatible with Hollywood storytelling not only because of its purely musical qualities, but also because of the associations and values this music carried for audiences. These associations ranged from the high cultural status conferred on symphonic music of European origin (as opposed to the status of American jazz or pop) to the recognizable connotations of a particular instrumentation, such as somber horns for a funereal mood, violins for romance, and a harp for an ethereal or heavenly mood.

In her book *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, Claudia Gorbman lists the “principles of composition, mixing, and editing” that classical film music follows. The first is **invisibility**, which refers to the predominance of nondiegetic music (over the actual depiction of musicians) and to the fact that the technical apparatus that produces film music, like the camera and the projector responsible for the image we see, is never seen. The boom mikes visible in a film like *Red Rock West* (1992) violate this principle and are clearly accidental. The principle of **inaudibility** is analogous to the “invisible” editing style of the continuity system. This principle dictates that conscious attention should not be paid to the score. Volume does not interfere with dialogue, the mood and rhythm of the music do not contradict that of the action, and compositions are matched to narrative flow rather than allowed to follow their own progression. Ironically, screen music is at its best if we do not “hear” it.

Gorbman next stresses film music's function as a **signifier of emotion**. Dialogue and action fall short in their capacity to convey not only particular feelings but also the experience of feeling itself. Music is subjective, whereas the image is perceived as objective. A close-up of the heroine's face matched with a great swell of music in *Now, Voyager*, a convention readily seen today in the soap opera, provides a good example of how music supplements visuals when emotions are at stake. Gorbman isolates three common ways music's connotation of emotion are used. First, music conveys the irrational. In Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), for example, the mental state of the hero is conveyed by the sound of the theremin, an unusual electronic instrument whose spooky sound is also used in science fiction films [Figure 5.35]. Second, music is associated with women, who are already culturally associated with emotion. Our pejorative idea of sappy music is derived from the sound of women's genres, where tears and musical notes fall with the same abundance. The music accompanying a brief scene in an empty bedroom in Gillian Armstrong's *Little Women* (1994) gives the viewer time to cry after Beth's death. Third, lush orchestration ennobles the ordinary and makes the specific timeless. In *The Cider House Rules* (1999), the milestones of one young man's coming of age are made grand by Rachel Portman's score.

The next principle Gorbman discusses, **narrative cueing**, refers to how music tells us what is happening in the plot. It is heavily relied on in classical scores. Cues may be denotative: a return of the main theme signifies that *Gone with the Wind* is about to conclude; a western song over the credits of *Rancho Notorious* (1952) signifies the setting of a film of that genre. Narrative cueing is also connotative: violins on the soundtrack may indicate that the characters are falling in love; a few notes of “Deutschland über alles” in the score of *Casablanca* (1942) signifies the looming Nazi threat. Music's role in relation to narrative may be to point something out or emphasize its significance; the most noticeable examples are called **stingers**, sounds that force us to notice the significance of something onscreen, such as the ominous chord struck when the villain's presence is made known. The highly effective soundtrack of *The Shining* (1980) includes a stinger when a mirror held up to letters written backwards on the wall reveals the word *murder*. Scores can also musically imitate what happens on the screen—a soufflé falls, a doorbell rings. Over-illustrating the action through the score, such as accompanying a character walking on tip-toe with plucked strings, is referred to as **mickey-mousing**. (This term is a reference to the way cartoons often use the musical score to follow or mimic every action in synchronization, narrating through music rather than language.) Max Steiner is particularly noted for his habit of pointing out everything in his soundtracks in this manner.

We have already indicated how important the soundtrack as a whole is to a film's **continuity**, another principle of film music. Continuity is also valued in the music itself. Discontinuities in visual information represented by cuts and scene changes are frequently bridged by the durational aspect of sound, and this function is most easily served by music. Various arrangements of the theme song of *High Noon* (1952) carry characters across space and help bridge transitions between scene changes. Critics of studio-style film music complain that the composer's job is nothing more than filling up any gaps in the film with the soundtrack.



Figure 5.35 *Spellbound* (1945). The use of the theremin in Miklós Rózsa's score connotes psychological distortion in Alfred Hitchcock's film about psychoanalysis.

Gorbman notes that musical scores follow the principle of **unity**, which is also a basic tenet of classical film style. Composing a score around themes provides built-in unity through its structure of repetition and variation. Often critics attribute the classical film score's stress on unity to the influence of composer Richard Wagner's notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or "total work of art." Finally, Gorbman concludes her list of principles for narrative film scores with the acknowledgment that any one of these rules may be violated, but only, she emphasizes, in the service of another rule. Her list of points is extremely helpful in identifying what makes narrative film scores, despite considerable range, so consistent and recognizable.

Although musical scoring conventions have evolved and changed since the classical era of studio filmmaking, we can hear in the orchestral scores of John Williams, the most well-known composer of films of the 1980s and 1990s, an homage to the romantic styles of the studio composers of earlier decades. Williams composes heroic, nostalgic scores that support and sometimes inflate the narrative's significance in films from *Star Wars* to *Home Alone* (1990). His five Academy Awards and more than forty nominations suggest that the film industry recognizes his style's consistency with Hollywood studio practice.

In Hollywood cinema of the studio era, nonclassical musical styles, such as jazz, popular, and dance music, might be used as source music and featured in musicals, but their incorporation into background music was gradual. One of the effects of the neglect of American musical idioms in favor of European influences was that African American artists and performers were rendered almost as inaudible as they were invisible in mainstream movies. African American performers were frequently featured in musicals, but they were there to provide entertainment and were rarely integrated into the narrative. Lena Horne's talent, for example, was shamefully underutilized because there were almost no leading roles for African American women at the time [Figure 5.36].



Figure 5.36 Most of Lena Horne's appearances in mainstream films were restricted to cameo numbers.

As jazz music became more popular, jazz themes began to appear in urban-based film noirs of the 1940s. Henry Mancini's music for Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958) effectively connotes themes of crime, violence, and sexuality in the exaggerated border-town setting. Occasionally, dissonance appeared in studio scores, but usually only when diegetically motivated—for example, to signify a psychological disturbance. In keeping with this connotation, the first atonal score was composed by Leonard Rosenman for *The Cobweb* (1955), a movie set in a home for the mentally ill. With other changes in the U.S. film industry in the postwar period, musical conventions shifted as well. Modernist and jazz-influenced scores, such as Leonard Bernstein's score for *On the Waterfront* (1954), became more common as different audiences were targeted through more individualized filmmaking practices. At the end of the studio era, the great tradition of the Hollywood musical also began to wane, but a closer look at the genre will underscore how central music is to the narrative film experience, even at the cost of verisimilitude.

**The Hollywood Musical** It was fitting that the last effort of the studios to dominate movie screens was the big-budget, spectacular musical, because in many ways the musical epitomizes Hollywood entertainment. Despite the phenomenal success of *The Sound of Music* in 1965, however, further attempts at studio-produced blockbuster

musicals, such as *Doctor Dolittle* (1967) and Francis Ford Coppola's *Finian's Rainbow* (1968), were box-office disappointments, their failures indicative of a change in movie culture.

The musical had been a perennial favorite, from the early sound era's backstage musicals featuring elaborate Busby Berkeley numbers [Figure 5.37] to later musicals that integrated songs and narrative, such as *An American in Paris* (1951) and Rogers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1955), forming abiding myths of the U.S. character. The musical genre often followed the principles of classical narrative film scoring with the addition of production numbers that positively revealed in film music's audibility. The opening tune of Rouben Mamoulian's early sound film *Love Me Tonight* (1932) is picked up by character after character, as if they can all actually hear the background music. The manner in which music connotes emotion or "spirit" in Hollywood films is perhaps best illustrated by the musical genre, in which this feeling erupts in a story world where song and dance are expected.

Even as the studios tried to prolong their dominance with spectacular musicals, Richard Lester's films with the Beatles, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965), successfully revised the genre for an era geared toward youth and dominated by popular music. At the end of the twentieth century, films from directors notable for their stylization, such as Todd Haynes's *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), the Coen brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), and Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), updated the genre. But by this time, songs had found their way onto soundtracks through means that often did not require the suspension of disbelief demanded by the often utopian world of the musical.

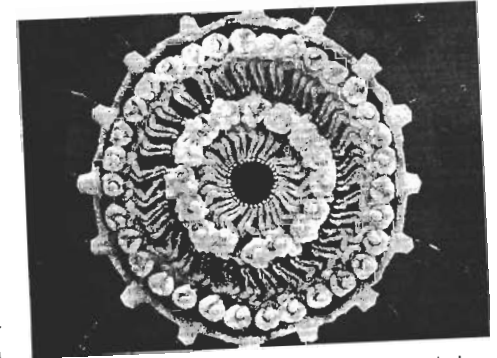


Figure 5.37 *42nd Street* (1933). Busby Berkeley choreographed outrageous musical numbers designed for the unique perspective afforded by the movie camera.

**Prerecorded Music** Popular songs have long had a place in the movies, promoting audience participation and identification by appealing to tastes shared by age or ethnic groups. Sheet music and recordings sales were profitable tie-ins even before sound cinema. In the 1980s, however, the practice of tying the affective (and commercial) response of the audience to popular music on a film's soundtrack was so well established that the pop score began to rival originally composed music. *American Graffiti* (1973) helped inaugurate this trend with its soundtrack of nostalgic 1960s tunes, and *The Big Chill* (1983) captures the zeitgeist of its characters' and viewers' generation through popular music. The centrality of prerecorded music is reflected in the increasing importance of the **music supervisor**, who selects and secures the rights for songs to be used in films. In these youth-oriented, MTV-influenced films with pop music scores, such as *Flashdance* (1983), the promotion of the soundtrack is as important as that of the film. In the 1990s, the proliferation of the pop soundtrack drew the film experience outside the theater to the record store, and music videos began to include scenes from upcoming films. Although theme songs have been composed for and promoted with films for decades, as in *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955) to name one hit, the contemporary movie and recording industries have such close business relationships that even films without pop soundtracks often feature a tie-in song in their end-credits sequences. The extremely successful film careers of musicians like rapper-actor Will Smith demonstrate the increasing symbiosis of these entertainment media.

## Sound Effects in Film

Although the movies can represent the world in many ways, their capacity for successful mimesis, or imitation, has always fascinated audiences. Much of the mimetic impression in cinema comes from the use of sound effects, although like other aspects of the soundtrack they may not be consciously noticed by viewers. Dialogue in film is deliberate; it tells a story and gives information. Background music is a clear enhancement, “unrealistic” if we pay attention to it. But sound effects appear unmanufactured, even accidental. This sense of the naturalness of effects is ironic because the sound texture of a film is so deliberately crafted and because in daily life we hardly notice such ubiquitous sounds as fluorescent lights humming, crickets chirping, and traffic going by, sounds that might appear to be added to achieve a “realistic” sound mix.

In most films, every noise that we hear is selected and these effects generally conform to our expectations of movie sounds. Virtually nothing appears onscreen that does not make its corresponding noise: dogs bark, babies cry. A spaceship that blows up in outer space will usually produce a colossal bang even though there is no sound in space. If a recording of a .38 revolver sounds like a cap gun on film, it will be dubbed with a louder bang. These expectations vary according to film genre. Traffic noise will be loud in an action film, in which we remain alive to the possibilities of the environment. In a romance, the sound of cars will likely fade away unless traffic is keeping the lovers apart. Furthermore, our sense of the role of sound effects in films has changed over time. In an interview with film scholar Elisabeth Weis, soundman Michael Kirchberger comments that an “older film like *Casablanca* has an empty soundtrack compared with what we do today. Tracks are fuller and more of a selling point.” The extraordinary density of contemporary soundtracks does not necessarily mean that they are more “realistic”; they simply make more extensive use of the particular properties of sound to convey a visceral experience of the cinema. The change in the texture of contemporary soundtracks is based in new technological capabilities, but, as in other instances of “improved” technologies, this progress is not inevitable but rather a development that follows particular ideas and goals, although these are likely to remain unstated.

Sound effects are one of the most useful ways of giving an impression of depth to the two-dimensional image when they are reproduced in the three-dimensional space of the theater. Although the screen is itself only an illusory space of action, film presentation makes use of the directional properties of sound—a gunshot may come from the lefthand side of the screen, for example. In the mix, additional diegetic sounds such as thunderclaps can be added that were not present on set at all, adding significantly to a film’s illusionism. Asynchronous sound effects, such as the hoot of an owl in a dark-woods setting, both expand the sense of space and contribute to mood, often in very codified, even clichéd ways. Adding the clank of utensils and snatches of offscreen conversation to the soundtrack when two characters are shown at a table conjures a restaurant setting without having to shoot the scene in one.

The very manner in which noises are produced for a soundtrack illustrates their function in constructing, rather than reproducing, a particular experience. As we detailed earlier, incidental sounds—footsteps, the rustle of clothing, a punch in the stomach—are not even recorded at the same time as the film’s dialogue. Rather, they are added later by the foley artist by walking on gravel, rubbing different pieces of fabric, hitting a rolled-up telephone book, and so on. Our acceptance of these simulated synchronous sounds testifies to the strength of our impulse to perceive effects realistically.

## IN FOCUS

## Subjectivity through Sound in *The Piano* (1993)

The fact that Jane Campion’s film about a nineteenth-century woman who travels from Scotland to New Zealand with her young daughter to marry a man she’s never met takes its title not from the central character but from an object, a musical instrument, cues us into the importance of sound in this film. The heroine Ada McGrath’s grand piano, which she transports on her long journey, is a central element in the film’s plot and *mise-en-scène*. Not surprisingly, piano music on the soundtrack echoes this importance, carrying a great deal of the film’s emotion, sensuality, and drama. Because Ada is mute, our understanding of voice as a medium of subjectivity extends to the metaphor of music as voice, powerfully conveying the story of a headstrong woman shaping her own experience. In addition, sound effects are used expressively to make Ada’s psychological experience accessible to us.

Although Ada cannot speak, the film paradoxically begins with her voiceover: “the voice you hear is not my speaking voice; it is my mind’s voice.” This innovative use of the voiceover device allows us access to Ada’s inner world even before we have seen her, powerfully connecting us to her subjectivity. The voiceover will not return until the very end of the film, when she speaks of the silence of her piano, lying at the bottom of the sea, as a “weird lullaby” [Figure 5.38]. In the interim, Ada’s “voice” makes itself heard through written notes and sign language, which her daughter, Flora, translates so that others can understand. Flora also uses her own voice to express a will as strong as her mother’s. She makes up stories to shock the women in their new town and she eventually reveals to her stepfather, Stewart, that her mother is having an illicit affair. Ada’s lover, George Baines, the overseer on her husband’s plantation, indicates another level of the film’s use of voice by speaking with the Maori in their own language.

Ada’s voiceover declares, “I don’t think of myself as silent because of my piano.” She speaks most directly and expressively through her music. When Ada and Flora first arrive in New Zealand, they are stranded on the beach overnight. Ada breaks open the piano’s wooden crate just enough to reach in to play with one hand. The music fills the soundtrack, although we hear the sound effects of a key plunking and of waves lapping at the shore in the mix. The piano is associated with Ada’s desire and individuality and with the freedom of the seascape. As she is led away by her husband the next day, the piano is temporarily abandoned on the beach. Ada looks back at the instrument, and her visual point of view is accompanied by nondiegetic music, which then provides continuity during the shots of



Figure 5.38 *The Piano* (1993). The mute heroine’s voiceover describes the piano’s underwater grave.