The Powers of Sound

Whether noticed or not, sound is a powerful film technique for several reasons. For one thing, it engages a distinct sense mode. Even before recorded sound was introduced in 1926, silent films were accompanied by orchestras, organ, or piano. At a minimum, the music filled the silence and gave the spectator a more complete perceptual experience. More significantly, the engagement of hearing opens the possibility of what the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein called “Synchronization of senses”—making a single rhythm or expressive quality unify both image and sound.

Also, sound can actively shape how we perceive and interpret the image. In one sequence of *Letter from Siberia* (1957), Chris Marker demonstrates the power of sound to alter our understanding of images. Three times Marker shows the same footage—a shot of a bus passing a car on a city street, three shots of bakers baking loaves of bread. Yet each time the footage is accompanied by a completely different sound track. Compare the three versions tabulated alongside the sequence (Table 7.1)

The first one is heavily affirmative, the second is harshly critical, and the third neutral and matter-of-fact. The audience will construe the same images differently.

The *Letter from Siberia* sequence demonstrates another advantage of sound: film sound can direct our attention quite specifically within the image. When the commentator describes the “blood-colored buses,” we are likely to look at the bus and not at the car. When Ford Astaire and Ginger Rogers are executing an intricate step, chances are that we watch their bodies and not the idealized nightclub spectators looking on. In such ways, sound can guide us through the images, pointing to things to watch.

This possibility becomes even more fertile when you consider that the sound cues for some visual element may anticipate that element and relay our attention to it. Suppose we have a close-up of a man in a room and hear the breaking of a door opening. If the next shot shows the door, now open, our attention will probably shift to that door, the source of the offscreen sound. But if the second shot shows the picture still closed, we are likely to ponder our interpretation of the sound. (Maybe it was a door, after all?) Thus the sound track can clarify image events, contradict them, or render them ambiguous. In all cases, the sound track can enter into an active relation with the image track.

This example of the door opening suggests another advantage of sound. It cue us to form expectations. If we hear a door breaking, we anticipate that someone has entered a room and that we will see the person in the next shot. But if the film draws on conventions of the horror genre, the camera might stay on the area, staring fearfully. We would then be in suspense awaiting the appearance of something frightful offscreen. Horror and mystery films often use the power of sound from an unseen source to engage the audience’s interest, but all types of films can take advantage of this aspect of sound. During the town meeting in *Jaws*, the characters hear a moaning, a moaning sound that turns to look offscreen; cut reverse Karen’s hand scraping on a blackboard—creating a dramatic introduction to this character. We’ll see in several cases in which the use of sound can creatively shock or redirect the viewer’s expectations.

In addition, sound gives a new value to silence. A quiet passage in a film can create almost unbearable tension, forcing the viewer to concentrate on the screen and to wait in anticipation for whatever sound will emerge. Just as color film turns black and white into shades of color, so the use of sound in film will include all the possibilities of silence.

One more advantage: Sound bridges with as many creative possibilities as editing. Through editing, one may join shots of two or more soundtracks to create a meaningful sound. Similarly, the filmmaker can mix any sound phenomenon into a whole.

With the introduction of sound cinema, the infinity of visual possibilities was joined by the infinity of acoustic events.
Fundamentals of Film Sound

Perceptual Properties

Several aspects of sound as we perceive it are familiar to us from everyday experience and are central to film's use of sound.

Loudness The sound we hear results from vibrations in the air. The amplitude, or breadth, of the vibrations produces our sense of loudness, or volume. Film sound is accompanied by ambient traffic noises, and when two people meet and start to speak, the volume of the traffic drops. A dialogue between a soft-spoken character and a blustery one is characterized as much by the difference in volume as by the substance of the talk.

Loudness is also related to perceived distance: often, the louder the sound, the closer we take it to be. This sort of assumption seems to be at work in the street traffic example already mentioned: the couple's dialogue, being louder, seems as if in the foreground, while the traffic noise recedes to the background. In addition, a film may startle the viewer by exploiting abrupt and extreme shifts in volume (usually called changes in dynamics), as when a quiet scene is interrupted by a very loud noise.

Pitch The frequency of sound vibrations affects pitch, or the perceived highness or lowness of the sound. Certain instruments, such as the tuning fork, can produce pure tones, but most sounds, like those in film, are complex tones, bands of different frequencies. Nevertheless, pitch plays a useful role in helping us distinguish sounds in a film. It helps us distinguish music and speech from noises. It also serves to distinguish among objects. Thumps can suggest hollow objects, while higher-pitched sounds (like those of jingle bells) suggest another or harder surface and denser objects.

Pitch can also serve more specific purposes. When a young boy tries to speak in a man's deep voice and fails, as in How Green Was My Valley, the joke is based primarily on pitch. Marlene Dietrich's vocal delivery often depends on a long upward-gliming intonation that makes her statement sound like a question. In the coronation scene of Ivan the Terrible, Part I, a court singer with a deep bass voice begins a song of praise to Ivan, and each phrase rises dramatically in pitch (75-77). When Arnold Herrmann's obtained the effects of shrill, bawdy shrieking in Hitchcock's Psycho, even many classical composers could not recognize the source: violins played at extraordinarily high pitch.

When Jiliana Miret was planning her performance as the protagonist of Todd Haynes's Safe, she took pitch and other vocal qualities into account: My first key was her voice. Her vocal patterns. I started with a very typical Southern California speech pattern. It's almost a sing song rhythm, you know. When she's returned to the Valley valley" that traversed across the country and became the usual American vocal pattern. It was important to me that her voice would have that kind of melody to it. And then I would put question marks at the end of the sentence all the time—but she never makes a statement; it makes her very unsure and very vulnerable. I also want them to cry their own colors. Because I wanted the sensation of her voice not being connected at all to her body—that's why her voice is so high. It's someone who's completely disconnected from any kind of physically from any sense of being herself, from really knowing herself. In that sense, I guess the vocal choices are somewhat metaphoric.

Timbre The harmonic components of sound give it a certain color, or tone quality—what musicians call timbre. When we call someone's voice nasal or a certain musical tone mellow, we're referring to timbre. Timbre is actually a less
fundamental acoustic parameter than amplitude or frequency, but its indispensability is described by the texture of the "feel" of sound. In everyday life, the recognition of a familiar sound is largely a matter of various aspects of timbre.

Filmmakers manipulate timbre continually. Timbre can help articulate portions of the sound track, as when it differentiates musical instruments from one another. Timbre also comes forward on certain occasions, as in the eliciting of dissonous saxophone tones behind seductive scenes. More subtly, in the opening sequence of Robert Maiman's Love Me Tonight, people standing in the street cry a street preacher a sermon from an object, a carpet beater. The rueful person is hit by the number of the spring's in the very different timbres of the objects. In preparing the sound track for Peter Weir's Witness, the editor drew on sounds recorded 20 or more years before, so that he has more timber of the earlier recordings would evoke the music of Sean Connery and the Amish community.

Loudness, pitch, and timbre interact to define the overall sonic texture of a film. For example, these qualities enable us to recognize different characters' voices. Both John Wayne and James Stewart speak roughly, but Wayne's voice tends to be deeper and gruffer than Stewart's querulous drawl. This difference works to great advantage in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, where their characters are sharply contrasted. In The Wizard of Oz, the disparity between the public image of the Wizard and the ordinary charlatan who wields it is marked by the booming bass of the effigy and the old man's higher, softer, more warbling voice.

Loudness, pitch, and timbre also shape our experience of a film as a whole. Citizen Kane, for example, offers a wide range of sound manipulations. Echo chambers alter timbre and volume. A motif is formed by the inability of Kane's wife Susan to sing pitches accurately. Moreover, in Citizen Kane, the pin's shifts between times and places are covered by a simple sound and varying the basic acoustics. A shot of Kane addressing a group is a shot of a crowd applauding (a shift in volume and timbre). Leabard begins a sentence in the street cars to Kane finishing the sentence in an auditorium, his voice magnified by loudspeakers (a shift in volume, timbre, and pitch).

Recent noise reduction techniques, multi-track reproduction, and digital sound yield wider ranges of frequency and volume, as well as crisper timbres than were available to filmmakers in the studio years. Today sound editors can individualize voice or noise to a surprising degree. For The Thin Red Line, every character's distinctive breathing sounds were recorded for use as ambient noise. Randy Thomas, sound designer for Cast Away, sought to characterize different sorts of wind—breezes from the open sea, which is in the cave. Sound even alters a shift in wind direction crucial to one of the hero's plans. "We can use the wind in a very musical way." Thomas notes.

Selection, Alteration, and Combination

Sound in the cinema is of three types: speech, music, and noise (also called sound effects). Occasionally, a sound may cross categories—a scream or speech or noise is electronic music also sound?—and filmmakers have freely exploited these ambiguities. In Psycho, when a woman screams, we expect to hear a human voice and instead hear screaming violin. Nevertheless, in most cases, the distinction holds. Now that we have an idea of some basic acoustic properties, how are speech, music, and noise selected and combined for specific purposes?

Choosing and Manipulating Sounds

The creation of the sound track resembles the editing of the image track. Just as the filmmaker may pick the best image from several shots, so he or she may choose what exact bit of sound will best serve the purpose. Just as footage from disparate sources may be blended into a single visual track, so too sound that was not recorded during filming may be added freely. Moreover, a shot may be photographed or directed in color or black-and-white to composite image, and a bit of sound be processed to change its acoustic qualities. And just as the filmmaker may link or superimpose images, so too may he or she link any two sounds to end or place one over another. Though we aren't usually aware of these manipulations, the sound track demands as much choice and control as does the visual track.

Sometimes the sound track is conceived before the image track. Studio-made animated cartoons typically record music, dialogue, and sound effects before the frames. In many years, Carl Stalling created fantasticly paced jingles of familiar tunes, weird noises, and distinctive voices for the adventures of Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. Experimental films also frequently build their images around a preexisting sound track. Some filmmakers have even abstracted that music as a sort of "visual music" and have tried to create a synthesis of the two media.

As with other film techniques, sound guides the viewer's attention. Normally, this means clarifying and simplifying the sound track so that important material stands out. Dialogue, as a transmitter of story information, is usually recorded and reproduced for maximum clarity. Important lines should not be here to compete with music or background noise. Sound effects are usually less important. They supply an overall sense of a realistic environment and are seldom noticed; if they were ignored, however, the silence would be distracting. Music is usually subordinate to dialogue and music in keeping during pauses in conversation or effects.

Dialogue doesn't always rank highest in importance, though. Sound effects are usually central to action sequences, while music can dominate dance scenes, transitional sequences, or emotional-laden moments without dialogue. Some filmmakers have shifted the weight conventionally assigned to each type of sound. Charlie Chaplin's City Lights and Modern Times eliminate dialogue, letting sound effects and music come to the fore. The films of Jacques Tati and Jean-Marie Straub retain dialogue but still place great emphasis on sound effects. Later in this chapter, we will consider how music and noise in Robert Bresson's A Man Escaped fit into a sparse dialogue track by evoking off-screen space and creating thematic associations.

In creating a sound track, often, the filmmaker must select sounds that will fulfill a particular function. In order to do this, the filmmaker usually will provide a clearer, simpler sound world than that of everyday life. Normally, our perception filters out irrelevant stimuli and remains what is most useful at a particular moment. As you read this, you are attending to words on the page and to various degrees (sometimes) certain stimuli that rival those you hear. But if you close your eyes and listen attentively to the sounds around you, you will become aware of many previously unnoticed sounds—traffic, footsteps, distant voices. Any amateur recordist knows that if you set up a microphone and record in what seems to be a quiet environment, those normally sanitized sounds suddenly become obvious. The microphone is unselective, like the camera lens. It doesn't automatically filter out what is disturbing. Sound outside, camera brings to mind noise, directional and colored microphones, sound engineering and editing, and libraries of stock sounds all allow the filmmaker to choose exactly what the sound track requires. Unless a filmmaker actually warns the audience where a noise scene, simply holding out a microphone while filming will rarely be selective enough.

By choosing certain sounds, the filmmaker guides our perception of the image and the action. In one scene from Jacques Tati's Mr. Hulot's Holiday, on a beach at a resort hotel is relaxing (7.8). Early in the scene, the guests in the backyard are listening quietly, but Hulot's Ping-Pong game is loud; the sound cues us to watch Hulot. Later in the scene, however, the same Ping-Pong game makes no sound at all, and our attention is drawn to the mortifying predicaments in the foreground. The presence and absence of the sound of the Ping-Pong ball guides our expectations. If you start to notice how such selection of sound shapes our perception, you will also notice that filmmakers often use sound quite unrealistically, in order to shift our attention to what is narratively or visually important.
Our scene from Mr. Hobbit’s Holiday also points up the importance of how a choice sound may have its acoustic qualities transformed for a particular purpose. Thanks to a manipulation of volume and timing, the wing-fog game gains in vivacity and clarity. Similarly, a character speaking will usually sound as loud or soft as in close-up, even though this is a flagrant violation of realism. At the limits, wholly new sounds may be made of old ones. The noises emitted by the dogmatic possessed girl in The Exorcist blended screams, animal thrashings, and English spoken backward. To create the roar of a Tyrannosaurus Rex in Jurassic Park, sound engineers focused a tiger’s roar, a babbling elephant’s trumpeting at midrange frequencies, and an alligator’s growl for the lower tones. On film, even jet planes’ noises typically include cries of animals—not only lions and elephants but monkeys as well.

Nowadays, film sound is more often reprocessed to yield exactly the qualities desired. A sky recording of the sound of a forest foliage space will be manipulated electronically to yield the desired effect. For instance, the voice of someone on the telephone is typically treated with filters to make it more tinny and muffled. In Hollywood parlance, this is called “fuzzying” the sound. The almost unbeatable rock and roll music of American Gangfist used two recordings of the music. A dry one was prepared for moments when the music was to dominate the scene and had to be of high quality. A more ambient one for background noise was derived from a tape recorder simply playing the tune in a backyard.

Sound Mixing Guiding the viewer’s attention, then, depends on selecting and reworking particular sounds. It also depends on mixing, or combining them. It is useful to think of the sound track not as a set of discrete sound units but as an ongoing stream of auditory information, each sonic event takes its place in a specific pattern. This pattern both links events in time and layers them at any given moment. We can easily see how the sound track offers a stream of auditory information by considering a scene cut according to classical continuity principles. When film makers edit conversations in shot/reverse shot, they often use a dialogue overlap to smooth down the visual change of shot. In a dialogue overlap, the filmmaker continues a line of dialogue across a cut. During a conversation in John Mctiernan’s The Hunt for Red October, we get the following shots and dialogue:

1. (ms) Over the political officer’s shoulder, favoring Captain Ramius (7.9)
   - Officer: “Captain Tupalev’s boat.”
   - Ramius: “You know Tupalev?”
   - Officer: “I know he descends . . .”

2. (ms) Reverse angle over Ramius’ shoulder, favoring the officer (7.16)
   - Officer (continuing): “. . . from aristocracy, and that he was your student. It’s rumored he has a special . . .”

3. (ms) Reverse angle on Ramius (7.11)
   - Officer (continuing): “. . . place in his heart for you.”

This scene is more than simply linking one line of dialogue or bit of noise to another. We have already seen that in production, combining sounds is usually done after shooting, in the mixing process. For example, in Jurassic Park, Steven Spielberg manipulates volume unrealistically for purposes of narrative clarity. After a live cow has been lowered into the velociraptors pen, the South African hunter gives important information about the habits of these predators, and his voice comes through louder than those of characters closer to the camera (7.12). The mixer can precisely control the volume, duration, and tone quality of each sound. In modern filmmaking, a dozen or more separate tracks may be mixed in
At Panzai, although the scene is entirely abstract, the music is perfectly integrated with the visual elements. The movements of the characters are subtly echoed in the music, creating a seamless blend of sound and image.

As Michael sits opposite Sollazzo, the sudden silence and stillness of the moment create a sense of tension. The music becomes more sparse, with a slow, lingering melody that underscores the quiet intensity of the scene.

The sound of rain on the roof is suddenly magnified, creating a stark contrast with the quiet of the rest of the scene. The music responds with a gentle, almost tender melody, highlighting the poignant moment.

The music becomes more complex, with a series of overlapping themes that create a sense of depth and emotional resonance. The characters' internal dialogue is reflected in the music, with moments of quiet introspection and moments of shared understanding.

The final scene is a climax of emotional intensity, with the music rising to a crescendo as the characters come to a realization. The music is a powerful tool for conveying the characters' innermost feelings, creating a powerful emotional impact on the audience.

In conclusion, the sound design for this film is a masterful example of how music can be used to enhance and complement the visual elements of a film. The use of a minimalist approach allows the music to seamlessly integrate with the scene, creating a sense of harmony and cohesion. The music is not just background noise; it is an integral part of the storytelling, effectively conveying the characters' emotions and advancing the narrative.

The use of silence and a minimalist approach to the music is a testament to the skill of the composer. The music is not just a backdrop; it is a powerful tool for storytelling, capable of evoking strong emotions and creating a sense of intimacy with the viewer. This film is a shining example of how music and film can work together to create a truly immersive and emotionally resonant experience.
7.14 In *Julie and Jim*, an idyllic bicycle ride in the country introduces the main musical theme associated with the three characters’ relations.

7.15 Catherine discards the violin, which she has said is “for lying eyes.”

7.16 The camera slowly sets around the statue as a new musical motif is introduced.

7.17 The address of the ending is underscored by the lilting whirlwind waltz.

So, given this mood-altering potential of music, it becomes a great source of fun, as well as a chance to make a scene that works. Off set a white coat to the point of a scene that you haven’t captured in the shooting of it, to excite the audience, to create the impression that something is happening when something isn’t, and also to create little emotional cautions which you can draw upon as the story changes—so that the music that seemed to innocent and sweet earlier in new circumstances brings on a whole other set of feelings.”

—Jonathan Demme, director

discover that she has the statue’s face; a repetition of the musical motif confirms the connection. Throughout the film, this brief motif is associated with the enigmatic side of Catherine. In the film’s later scenes, this motif is developed in an intriguing way. The bass line played on the harpsichord or strings that softly accompanied the whirlwind tune now comes to the fore, creating a relentless, often harsh, pulsation. This “menace” waltz underscores Catherine’s flight with Albert and accompanies her final fang over Jim: driving her car, with him as passenger, into the river. Once musical motifs have been selected, they can be combined to evoke associations. During Jim and Catherine’s first intimate talk after the war, the bass-line-dominated version of the enigmatic waltz is followed by the love theme, as if the latter could draw on the menacing side of Catherine’s character. The love theme accompanies long tracking shots of Jim and Catherine strolling through the woods. But at the scene’s end, as Jim bids Catherine farewell, the original waltz version of her theme recalls her mystery and the risk he is running by falling in love with her. Similarly, when Jim and Catherine lie in bed, facing the end of their affair, the voice-over narrator says: “It was as if they were already dead” as the dangerous love theme plays. This sequence associates death with their romance and forebodes their fate at the film’s end.

A similar sort of blending can be found in the film’s final scene. Catherine and Jim have drowned, and Julie is overseeing the cremation of their bodies. As shots of the coffin dissolve into detailed shots of the cremation process, the enigmatic motif seeps into its sinister variant, the menace motif. But as Julie leaves the cemetery and the narrator comments that Catherine had wanted her ashes to be cast to the winds, the string instruments glide into a sweeping version of the whirlwind waltz (7.17). The film’s musical score thus concludes the three sides of Catherine that attracted the men to her: her mystery, her enigma, and her vivacious openness to experience. In such ways, a musical score can create, develop, and associate motifs that enter into the film’s overall form.

Dimensions of Film Sound

We’ve seen what sounds consist of and how the filmmaker can take advantage of the widely different kinds of sounds available. In addition, the way in which the sounds relate to other film elements gives them several other dimensions. First, because sound occupies a duration, it has a rhythm. Second, sound can relate to its perceived source with greater or lesser fidelity. Third, sound conveys a sense of the spatial conditions in which it occurs. And fourth, the sound relates to visual events that take place in a specific time, and this relationship gives sound a temporal dimension. These categories reveal that sound in film offers many creative possibilities to the filmmaker.

Rhythm

Rhythm is one of the most powerful aspects of sound, for it works on our bodies at deep levels. We have already considered it in relation to mise-en-scène (p. 150) and editing (p. 226). Rhythm involves, minimally, a beat, or pulse, a tempo, or pace; and a pattern of accents; or stronger and weaker beats. In the realm of sound, all of these features are naturally most recognizable in film music, since there beat, tempo, and accent are basic compositional features. In our examples from *Julie and*
The filmmaker may control the rhythm of sound and picture in more noticeable ways. For instance, if the source of sound is primarily outdoor, the filmmaker can utilize the behavior of certain animals to create an expressive counterpoint. Toward the end of Ford's *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, the aging cavalry captain, Nathan Brittles, watches his troopers ride out of the fort just after he has retired. He regrets leaving the service and drives off with the patrol. The sound of the scene consists of two elements: the cheerful little song sung by the departing riders, and the quick hoofbeats of their horses. Yet only a few of the shots show the horses and riders, who ride at a rhythm related to the sound. Instead, the scene concentrates our attention on Brittles, standing almost motionless by his own horse. The contrast of Brittles' steady movements and the restlessness of the soldiers serves to emphasize his regret at having to stay behind for the first time in years.

At times, accompanying music might even seem rhythmically inappropriate to the images. In* Four Nights of a Dreamer*, Robertresson presents shots of a large floating nightshade crossing the Seine. The boat's movement is slow and smooth; yet the sound track consists of lively calypso music. Yet until a later scene do we discover that the music comes from a band aboard the boat. This strange combination of fast sound tempo with the slow passage of the boat creates a languorous, mysterious effect.

Jacques Tati does something similar in* Fifty-Fifty*. In a scene outside a Parisian hotel, tourists climb aboard a bus to go to a nightclub. As they file slowly up the steps, rousing jazz music begins. The music starts us because it seems inappropriate to the movement. In fact, it primarily accompanies action in the next scene, in which some carpenters awkwardly carrying a large plate glass window seem to be dancing to the music. By starting the fast music over an earlier scene of slower visual rhythm, Tati creates a comic effect and prepares for a transition to a new locale.

In* The Last of the Mohicans*, a counterpoint between scene and sound rhythms dominates the entire film. *La Jetée* is made up almost entirely of still shots, except for a tiny gesture, all movement within the images is eliminated. Yet the film utilizes voice-over narration, music, and sound effects of a generally rapid, constantly accented rhythm. Despite the absence of movement, the film doesn't seem cinematically because it offers a dynamic interplay of audio-visual rhythms.

These examples suggest some of the ways in which rhythms may be combined. But, of course, most films also vary their rhythms from one scene to another. A change of rhythm may function to shift our expectations. In* The Great Race*, the famous battle on the ice in *Alexander Nevsky*, Sergei Eisenstein develops the sound from slow tempo to fast and back to slow. The first 12 shots of the scene show the Russian army anticipating the attack of the German knights. The shots are of moderate length and they contain very little movement. The music is comparably slow, consisting of soft, distinctly separated chords. Then, as the German army rides into sight over the horizon, both the visual movement and the tempo of the music increase quickly, and the battle begins. At the end of the battle, Eisenstein creates another contrast with a long passage of slow, haunting music and majestic tracking shots but little figure movement.
Fidelity

By fidelity, we don't mean the quality of recording. In our sense, fidelity refers to the extent to which the sound is faithful to the source as we conceive it. If a film shows us a burping dog and we hear a burping noise, that sound is faithful to its source; the sound maintains fidelity. But if the image of the burping dog is accompanied by the sound of a cat meowing, there is a disparity between sound and image—a lack of fidelity.

From our standpoint, fidelity has nothing to do with what originally made the sound in production. As we have seen, the film editor may manipulate sound independently of image. Accompanying the image of a dog with the meow is not necessarily less accurate than accompanying an image with a burp. If the viewer takes the sound to be coming from its source in the diegetical world of the film, then it is faithful, regardless of its actual source in production.

Fidelity is thus purely a matter of expectation. Even if our dog emits a burp on screen, perhaps in production the burp came from a different dog or was electronically synthesized. We do not know what the dog really was; we hear a burping sound, but we accept the whining which it may be Return of the Jedi is plausible in its production, their sound was made by humming gar saw that accompanied a radio tower.

When we do become aware that a sound is unfaithful to its source, that awareness is usually used for comic effect. In Jacques Tati's Mr. Hulot's Holiday, much humor arises from the opening and closing of a dinner room door. Instead of simply recording a real door, Tati inserts a twanging sound like a plucked cello string each time the door swings. Aside from being amusing in itself, this sound function is to emphasize the rhythmic pattern created by waiters and diners passing through the door. Because many of the jokes in Mr. Hulot's Holiday and other Tati films are based on unfaithful noises, his films are good specimen for the study of sound.

As with low- or high-angle framings, we have no recipe that will allow us to interpret every manipulation of fidelity as comic. Some unfaithful sounds have serious functions. In Alfred Hitchcock's The Thirty-Nine Steps, a landlady discovers a corpse in an apartment. A shot of her screaming face is accompanied by a train whistle; then the scene shifts to an actual train. Though the whistle is not a faithful sound for an image of a screaming person, it provides a dramatic transition. In some cases, fidelity may be manipulated by a change in volume. A sound may seem unacceptably loud or soft by comparison to another sound in the film. Curtis Bernhardt's Possessed alters volume in ways that are not faithful to the sources. The central character is gradually falling deeper into sexual illness. In one scene she is alone, high-strung, in her room on a rainy night, and the narration restricts us to her range of knowledge. But sound devices enable the narrative to achieve subliminal depth as well. We begin to hear things as the doors a ticking clock and dripping raindrops gradually magnify in volume. Here the shift in fidelity functions to suggest a psychological state, a movement from the character's heightened perception into sheer hallucination.

Space

Sound has a spatial dimension because it comes from a source. Our beliefs about sound have a powerful effect on how we understand the sound.

Diegetic Versus Nondiegetic Sound

For purposes of analyzing narrative form, we described events taking place in the story world as diegetic (p. 76). For this reason, diegetic sound is that which has a source in the story world. The words spoken by the characters, sounds made by objects in the story, and music represented as coming from instruments in the story space are all diegetic sound.

Diegetic sound is often hard to notice as such. It may seem to come naturally from the world of the film. But as we saw in the sequence of the Ping Pong game in Mr. Hulot's Holiday, when the game becomes abruptly quiet to allow us to hear action in the foreground, the filmmaker may manipulate diegetic sound in ways that aren't all realistic.

Alternatively, there is nondiegetic sound, which is represented as coming from outside the story world. Music added to enhance the film's action is the most common type of nondiegetic sound. When Roger Thornhill is climbing Mount Rushmore in North by Northwest and tense music comes up, we don't expect to see as orchestra perched on the side of the mountain. Viewers understand that music is aesthetic and does not exist from within the story world. The music holds true for the so-called omniscient narrator, the disembodied voice that gives us information about the world that does not belong to any of the characters in the film. An example is The Magnificent Ambersons, in which the director, Orson Welles, speaks the nondiegetic narration.

Nondiegetic sound effects are also possible. In Le Million, various characters all pursue an old coin with a winning lottery ticket in the pocket. The chase converges back at the opera, where the character race and dodge around one another, tossing the coin to their accomplishments. But instead of putting in the sounds coming from the actual space of the chase, director René Clair fades in the sounds of a football game. Because the spectators of the chase do look like a scrimmage, with the coin serving as a ball, this enhances the comedy of the sequence (7.18). Although we hear a crowd cheering and a referee's whistle, we don't assume that the characters present are watching these sounds.

Entire films may be made with completely nondiegetic sound tracks. Coen's A Movie, Kenneth Anger's Scorpio Rising, and Derek Jarman's War Requiem use only nondiegetic music. Similarly, many compilation documentaries include no diegetic sound; instead, contemporaneous voice-over commentary and orchestral music guide our response to the images.

As with fidelity, the distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic sound doesn't depend on the real source of the sound in the filmmaking process. Rather, it depends on our understanding of the conventions of film viewing. We know that certain sounds are represented as coming from the story world, while others are represented as coming from outside the space of the story events. Such viewing conventions are so common that we usually do not have to think about which type of sound we are hearing at any moment.

At many times, however, a film's narration deliberately blurs boundaries between different spatial categories. Such a play with convention can be used to puzzle the audience, to create humor or ambiguity, or to achieve other purposes.

Resources of Diegetic Sound

We know that the space of the narrative action isn't limited to what we can see on the screen at any one moment. The same thing holds true for sound. In the last shot of our The Hunt for Red October scene, we hear the officer speaking while we see a shot of just Captain Ramis listening (7.11). Early in the attack on the village in The Seven Samurai, we, along with the samurai, hear the hoots of the bandits' horses before we see a shot of them. These instances remind us that diegetic sound can be either on-screen or off-screen, depending on whether its source is inside the frame or outside the frame.

Offscreen sound is crucial to our experience of a film, and filmmakers know that it can save time and money. A shot may show only a couple sitting together in movie seats, but if we hear a throbbing engine, other passengers chatting, and the crack of a beverage can, we'll conjure up a plane in flight. Offscreen sound can create the illusion of a bigger space than we will ever actually see. It can also shape our expectations about how a scene will develop (7.19–7.21). Used with optical print, offscreen sound can create restricted narration, guiding us to become aware of what characters are saying. (See "A Closer Look")
OFFSCREEN SOUND AND OPTICAL POINT OF VIEW: The Money Exchange in Jackie Brown

Optical point-of-view cutting can be very powerful, as we saw in examining "Shadow of a Doubt" at the beginning of this book (pp. 1-7). Now we'll be in a position to see—and hear—how it can be coordinated with onscreen and offscreen sound. Quentin Tarantino's Jackie Brown offers an illuminating example because, somewhat in the spirit of our sequence from Letter from Sileion (pp. 265-266), it runs the same sequence of actions three times, with varying sound tracks. Unlike Citizen Kane's film, however, Jackie Brown shows the scene as different characters experience it.

Jackie is supposed to deliver over half a million dollars in cash to the dangerous arms dealer Ordell. Ordell has sent his girlfriend, Melanie, and his partner, Louis, to pick up the money from a fitting room in a dress shop. Jackie, however, is playing her own game. She's agreed to help the federal agents arrest Ordell, but she's also recruited the bail bondsman Max Cherry to help her switch shopping bags and leave Ordell with a few bills and plenty of trouble. This story action is presented three times in the plot, each time adding a layer to our understanding of what's really happening. It would be worthwhile to study the careful auditory touches in these three sequences, such as the replay of the shop's music and the delicate work on footsteps, fabric, and other noises. Here we'll concentrate on optical subjectivity and offscreen sound, because these techniques are crucial in making the triple play clear to the audience. They also serve to contrast the squabbles, inept go-betweens who think Ordell is relying on and the self-possessed Jackie and Max. The first run-through confirms us to Jackie's range of knowledge. She tries on a pant suit, and the saleswoman says, "Wow, you look really cool!" (7.23). Jackie goes back to the fitting room and waits for Melanie. When Melanie arrives offscreen, and Tarantino shows us her shoes from Jackie's viewpoint, after Melanie has left, Jackie replaces the money in the shopping bag she leaves in the cubicle and hurries out. She hastily pays the sales clerk, who calls after her, "Wait, your change!" and waves her bills (7.23). Jackie rushes out to the mall and summons the federal agents, shutting that Melanie stole the bag from her.

Tarantino flashes back to an earlier phase of the action, with Louis and Melanie arriving at the shop. As the scene unfolds (7.24, 7.25), we hear the saleswoman say from offscreen, "Wow, you look really cool!" The camera zooms in on Jackie and the clerk (7.25). The offscreen sound has motivated showing this dialogue again, and its unusual loudness assures that we understand that we're entering the scene at a point we've already witnessed. Louis and Melanie try to look inconspicuous, with Melanie distracted by Jackie's intriguing outfit. When Melanie teases Louis about his nervousness, he twists her arm, and she blurts out, "Hey, would you let go?" (7.27).

Tarantino now uses offscreen sound to toss Louis' dull wits. Louis looks down at the shirt he's lifting through the fitting room (7.28), and we hear an offscreen phone ringing. Louis doesn't look up, and we are given a shot of the clerk answering (7.29). What does get Louis' attention is Melanie, who abruptly strides into the fitting room. Looking unluckily this way and that, Louis sees Max, whom he clearly recognizes, and the two men exchange glances in shot/reverse shot. Then Melanie hustles out of the fitting room, and Louis catches up with her. They leave quarreling about who should carry the bag.

The scene runs again, this time attaching to Max's range of knowledge. The second version hinged on his presence in the shop, when the tracking shot following Melanie and Louis grazed past him in the foreground (7.24). We see him enter and browse, waiting calmly for the scan to begin. Once more Jackie comes out wearing the outfit, and the sales clerk says, "Wow, you look really cool!" but now the exchange is observed from Max's point of view (7.30, 7.31). The sound track fades out as the dialogue between the clerk and Jackie fades up again. Between Melanie and Louis, Max turns his attention to them, and then back to Jackie and the clerk. Here the sound mixing is quite subjective, conveying Max's shifting attention between the two conversations.

While Max is watching the action at the counter, we hear Louis and Melanie quarreling, and this motivates another switch in Max's attention; in time for him to observe her exclaiming, "Hey, would you let go?" (7.32, 7.33). The ringing phone drives his eyes back to the clerk (7.34, 7.35), but he keeps Melanie in mind, too. A little before Louis notices Max, he sees Melanie set off on her mission. Louis clumsily scans the shop, but Max is calm and purposeful. Each offscreen sound snaps his attention to what is crucial to the plan. After Melanie and Louis leave, it's through Max's eyes that we see Jackie's departure with the shopgirl calling, "Wait, your change!" (7.34). Max causes then heads for the fitting room to retrieve the shopping bag and the fortune. By repeating key actions, noises, and lines of dialogue, the replay lays out the mechanics of the exchange cogently. The variations between the second and third sequences allow Tarantino to characterize the thieves. Max is more alert than Louis and Melanie, and offscreen sounds prompt him to shift his attention precisely. Moreover, each version of story events is nested neatly inside the next one. Jackie and the clerk, then Jackie and the clerk watched by Melanie and Louis, then all the others watched by Max, who completes the money exchange. Sound and image work together to keep track of each layer and expand our appreciation of Jackie's intricate double-cross.
7.26 The camera pans to pick up Jackie and the clerk, as Jackie says she'll buy the outfit. Now the dialogue is louder and clearer, emphasizing that this is a repetition of the scene we've just witnessed. Compare 7.22.

7.27 Quivering at the greengrocer's stand, Louis groans, "Melanise's gone!" The clerk's tone and the words, "Hey, would you let go?" help set the scene.

7.28 Louis becomes even more agitated. At the end of the shot, a telephone rings offscreen.

7.29 The clerk answers the phone, but his face is Louis's point of view; it's close to what he might have seen if he had looked up.

7.30 Third take: in this take, the clerk answers the phone, "Hello?" and Louis's face becomes more agitated. The framing from Louis's point of view varies what we see in 7.22 and 7.26.

7.31 "Hey, would you let go?" The repeated line adds to the tension. Louis looks to the left as if to respond. This shot helps set the scene, as his point of view.

7.32 After Jackie leaves for the changing room, Max shifts his attention to Melanise and Louis, in time to hear her say, "Hey, would you let go?"

7.33 His switch in attention is conveyed through a point-of-view shot. Compare 7.27.

7.34 Max has been studying the couple, but the sound of a ringing phone offscreen makes him shift his glance.

7.35 The clerk answers the phone. (Compare 7.29). This shot shifts to Melanise noticing the moment and entering into the changing room, watched by Max and eventually, Louis.

7.36 After the brief pause, Max has been left alone. Jackie comes out and identifies the moment. Max watches the transaction, and from his point of view we see Jackie rush off, with the clerk calling after her, "Well, your change!" Compare 7.23: Now Max walks to the counter. His approach will be prevented, in keeping with the rest of the sequence, as his optical point of view.
Sometimes offshore sound can make the film's narration less restricted. In John Ford's Stagecoach, the stagecoach is desperately fleeing from a band of Indians. The narration is running out, and all seems lost until a troop of cavalry suddenly arrives. Yet Ford does not present the situation this baldly. He shows a medium close-up of one of the passengers, Hafield, who has just discovered that he is down to his last bullet (7.37). He hangs off right and raises his gun (7.38). The camera pans right to a woman, Lucy, praying. During all this, orchestral music, including bugles, plays tellingly. Unseen by Lucy, the gun comes into the frame from the left as Hafield prepares to shoot her to prevent her from being captured by the Indians (7.39). But before he shoots, an offshore gunshot is heard, and Hafield's hand and gun drop down out of the frame (7.40). Thus bugle music becomes somewhat more prominent. Lucy's expression changes as she says, "Can you hear it? Can you hear it? It's a bugle. They're blowing the charge" (7.41). Only then does Ford cut to the cavalry itself racing toward the coach.

Rather than showing the cavalry riding to the rescue, the film's narration uses offshore sound to restrict our awareness to the initial despair of the passengers and their growing hope as they hear the distant sound. The sound of the bugle also suggests irreversibly out of the non-diegetic music. Only Lucy's line tells us that this is a diegetic sound that signals their rescue, at which point the narration becomes far less restricted.

Diegetic sound harbors other possibilities. Often a filmmaker uses sound to represent what a character is thinking. We hear the character's voice speaking his or her thoughts even though that character's lips do not move, presumably, other characters cannot hear these thoughts. Here the narration is used to achieve subjective, giving us information about the mental state of the character. Such spoken thoughts are commensurate with visual images on the visual track. A character may also remember words, snatches of music, or events as represented by sound effects. In this case, the technique is comparable to a visual flashback.

The use of sound to enter a character's mind is so common that we need to distinguish between internal and external diegetic sound. External diegetic sound is that which we as spectators take to have a physical source in the scene. Internal diegetic sound is that which comes from inside the mind of a character; it is subjective. Non-diegetic and internal diegetic sounds are often called sound over because they do not come from the real space of the scene. Internal diegetic sound can't be heard by other characters.

In the Laurence Olivier version of Hamlet, for example, the filmmaker presents Hamlet's famous soliloquies as internal monologues. Hamlet is the source of the thoughts he hears represented as speech, but the words are not only in his mind, not in his objective surroundings. David Lynch makes interior monologue a central device in Blue Velvet, in which nearly every major character is given passages of internal diegetic observations. These aren't lengthy soliloquies but rather brief phrases stepped into pauses in normal conversation scenes. The result is an omniscient narration that unexpectedly plunges into mental subjectivity. The characters' voices thought sometimes interfere with the external dialogue so tightly that they create a running commentary on a scene's action.

Recent films have reshaped the conventions of internal diegetic sound even more. Now an inner monologue may not be signaled by close shots of a character who's thinking, as in Hamlet or The Thin Red Line. In The Thin Red Line, characters are heard muttering during lengthy montage sequences in which they don't even appear. These floating monologues come to resemble a more traditional voice-over narration. This impression is reinforced when the inner monologue uses the past tense, as if the action we're seeing occurred in the first time.

A different sort of internal diegetic sound occurs in Wim Wenders' Wings of Desire. Dozens of people are reading in a large public library (7.42). Incidentally, this sequence also constitutes an interesting exception to the general rule that one character cannot hear another's internal diegetic sound. The film's premise is that Berlin is populated by invisible angels who can tune into humans' thoughts. This is a good example of how the conventions of one genre (here, the fantasy film) and the film's specific narrative context can modify a traditional device.

To summarize: sound may be diegetic (in the story world) or non-diegetic (outside the story world). If it is diegetic, it may be onscreen or offscreen, and internal (subjective) or external (objective).

Playing with the Diegetic/Non-diegetic Distinction. In most sequences, the sources of the sounds are clearly diegetic or non-diegetic. But some films blur the distinction between both diegetic and non-diegetic sound, as we saw in the cavalry rescue scene from Stagecoach. Since we're used to identifying a sound's source easily, a film may try to blur our expectations.

At the beginning of Mel Brooks' Blazing Saddles, we hear what we think is non-diegetic musical accompaniment for a cowboy's ride across the prairie—until he rides past Count Basie and his orchestra. This joke depends on a reversal of our expectations about the conventions of non-diegetic music. A more elaborate example is the 1965 musical version of Little Shop of Horrors. There a trio of female singers walks through many scenes, providing musical commentary on the action without any of the characters noticing them. To complicate matters, the three singers also appear in minor diegetic roles, and they do interact with the main characters.

More complicated is a moment in The Magnificent Ambersons when Welles creates an unusual interplay between the diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. A prologue on the film outlines the background of the Amberson family and the birth of
the son, George. We see a group of townspeople gossiping about the marriage of Isabel Amberson, and one predicts that she will "have the worst spoiled lot of children this town will ever see." (7.43). This scene presents diatonic dialogue. After this conversation ends, the nondiatomic narrator resumes his description of the family's journey. Over a shot of the street, he says, "The prophetic proved to be mistaken in a single detail merely; Willim and Isabel did not have children. They had only one!" But at this point, still over the street shot, we hear the narrator's voice again: "Only one!" But I'd like to know if I'll find enough for a whole cast!" (7.44). After her, the narrator goes on, "And, again, she found none to challenge her. George Amberson Minster, the Major's one grandchild, was a passionless terror." During this description, a new cut comes up the street, and we see the Major for the first time. (7.45). In this exchange, the woman seems to reply to the narrator, even though we must assume that she can't hear what he says. After all, she's a character in the story and he isn't! Here Welles playfully departs from conventional usage to emphasize the arrival of the story's main character and the hostility of the townspeople to him.

This passage from *The Magnificent Ambersons* juxtaposes diatonic and nondiatomic sounds in a disconcerting way. In other films, a single sound may be nondiatomic because it could fall into either category. In the opening of *Apocalypse Now*, the throb of the ceiling fan and the helicopter blade are clearly diatonic, but Francis Ford Coppola accompanies these with The Doors' song "The End." This might be taken either as a subjective part of the character's Vietnam fantasy or as nondiatomic-an external commentary on the sound of the American music.

Similarly, at a major point in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia*, several characters are shown in different locations, each singing softly along with an Aimée Mann song, "Wise Up." When the sequence begins in Chaidez's apartment, the sound might be taken as diatomic and offscreen, since she has been listening to Aimée Mann music in an earlier scene. But then Anderson cuts to other characters elsewhere singing along, even though they cannot be hearing the music in Chaidez's apartment. It would seem that the sound is now nondiatomic, with the characters accompanying it as they might do in a musical. The sequence underlines the parallels among several suffering characters and creates an eerie sense of disparate people for once on the same wavelength. The sound also works with the crosscutting to pull the characters together before the climax, when their lives will converge more directly.

A more disturbing uncertainty about whether a sound is diatomic often crops up in the films of Jean-Luc Godard. He narrates some of his films in nondiatomic voiceover, but in other films, such as *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, he seems also in the story space, whispering questions or comments whose sound perspective makes them seem closer to the camera. Godard does not claim to be a character in the action, yet the characters on the screen sometimes behave as though they hear him. This uncertainty as to diatomic or nondiatomic sound sources enables Godard to stress the conventionalization of traditional sound usage.

**Sound and Perspective** One characteristic of diatonic sound is the possibility of suggesting the sound perspective. This is a sense of spatial distance and location analogous to the cues for visual depth and volume that we get with visual perspective. "I like to think," remarks sound designer Walter Murch, "that I've only recorded a sound but the space between me and the sound. The subject that generates the sound is merely what causes the surrounding space to resonate." Sound perspective can be suggested by volume. A loud sound tends to seem near; a soft one, more distant. The heroes' boozing in the *Seven Samurai* battle and the bagpipe call from *Siegfried* exemplify how rising volume suggests greater distance. Sound perspective is also created by echo. The combination of directly recorded sounds and sounds reflected from the environment creates a timbre specific to a given distance. Timing effects are most noticeable with echoes. In *The Magnificent Ambersons*, the conversation that takes place on the balcony suffices have a distinct echo, giving the impression of huge, empty spaces around the characters.

Multichannel recording and reproduction tremendously increase the filmmaker's ability to suggest a sound perspective. In most 35mm theaters equipped with multitrack sound systems, three speakers are located behind the screen. The center speaker transmits most of the conversational dialogue, as well as the most important effects: music. The left and right speakers are stereophonic, carrying not only important dialogue but also sound effects, music, and minor dialogue. These channels can suggest a region of sound within the frame or just effervescence. Surround channels principally carry minor sound effects and some music, and are divided among sound effects arranged along the sides and in the back of the theater.

By using stereophonic and surround tracks, a film can more strongly imply a sound's distance and placement. In factual comedies such as *The Naked Gun* and *Mr. Mom*, stereophonic sound can suggest collisions and falls outside the frame. Without the greater localization offered by the stereophonic channels, we might place the frame for sources of the sound. Even the center channel can be used to localize an offscreen object. In the climactic scene of *The Fugitive*, Richard Kimble is sneaking up on the man who has betrayed him, and he reaches down past the lower frame line. As he slides his arm to the right, a creaking slack in the center track tells us that there is an iron bar at his feet.

In addition, stereo reproduction can specify a moving sound's direction. In David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*, for instance, the approach of planes to bomb a camp is first suggested through a rumble occurring only on the right side of the screen. Lawrence and an officer look off right, and their dialogue identifies the source of the sound. Then, as the plane flies past the besieged camp itself, the sound slides from channel to channel, suggesting the planes swooping overhead.

With stereophonic and surround channels, a remarkably convincing three-dimensional sound environment may be created inside the theater. Sound sources can alter in position as the camera pans or tracks through a locale. The *Star Wars* series uses multiple-channel sound to suggest space vehicles whizzing not only across the screen but also above and behind the spectators.

With other techniques, sound location in the theater needn't be used for realistic purposes. *Apocalypse Now* divides its six-track sound among three channels in the rear of the theater and two in the front. In the film's first sequence, mentioned above, the protagonist Ben Willard is seen lying on his bed. Shots of his feverish face are superimposed on views of U.S. helicopters dropping napalm on the Vietnamese jungle. The sound oscillates between internal and external status, as Willard's mind turns the whine of a ceiling fan into the whir of helicopter blades. These subjective sounds issue from both the front and back of the theater, engulfing the audience.

Abruptly, a POV and tracking toward the window suggests that Willard has gotten to his feet and is walking. As the camera moves, the noises fade from all rear speakers and become concentrated in the front as screen left, right, and center. Then, as Willard's head opens the window blinds to reveal his view of the street outside, the sound fades out of the left and right front speakers and comes only from the center channel. Our attention has been narrowed; as we leave Willard's mind, the sounds are superimposed on views of U.S. helicopters dropping napalm on the Vietnamese jungle. This effect is used to create a sense of reality. In addition, the disparity in acoustic dimensions suggests that the protagonist's warped memory of jungle destruction is more powerful than the real environment of Saigon.

**Time**

Sound also permits the filmmaker to represent time in various ways. This is because the time represented on the sound track may or may not be the same as that represented in the image.
The most straightforward audio-visual relations involve sound-image synchronization. The matching of sound with image in projection creates synchronous sound. In that case, we hear the sound at the same time as we see the source produce the sound. Dialogue between characters is normally synchronized so that the lips of the actors move at the same time that we hear the appropriate words.

When the sound does go out of synchronization during a viewing (often through an error in projection or lab work), the result is quite jarring. But some filmmakers have obtained imaginative effects by putting asynchronous, or off-sync, sound into the film itself. One such effect occurs in a scene in the musical by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, Singin' in the Rain. In the early days of Hollywood sound filming, a pair of silent screen actors have just made their first talking picture. The Dueling Cavalier. Their film company prevails the film for an audience as a theater. In the earliest talkies, sound was often recorded on a phonograph disc to be played along with the film, and the sound usually fell out of synchronization with the picture. This is what happens in the preview of The Dueling Cavalier. As the film is projected, it slows down momentarily, but the record keeps running. From this point, all the sounds come several seconds before their sources are seen in the image. A line of dialogue begins, then the actor’s lips move. A woman’s voice is heard when a man covers his lips, and vice versa. The humor of this disconcerting provocation in Singin’ in the Rain depends on our realization that the synchronization of sound and image is an illusion produced by mechanical means.

A longer play with our expectations about synchronization comes in Woody Allen’s What’s Up, Tiger Lily? Allen has taken an Asian spy film and dubbed a new sound track on, but the English-language dialogue is not a translation of the original. Instead, it creates a new story in comic juxtaposition with the original images. Much of the humor results from our constant awareness that the words are not perfectly synchronized with the actors’ lips. Allen has turned the usual problems of the dubbing of foreign films into the basis of his comedy.

Synchronization refers to screen duration, or viewing time. As we have seen in Chapter 5, narrative films can present complex narrative plots and timelines to the audience. To recall the distinction: story time consists of the order, duration, and frequency of all the events pertinent to the narrative, whether they are shown to us or not. Plot time consists of the order, duration, and frequency of the events actually represented in the film. Plot time shows us selected story events but skips over or only suggests others.

Story and plot time can be manipulated by sound in two principal ways. If the sound takes place at the same time as the image in terms of the story events, it is synchronous sound. This is the most common example of the sonic flashback. For instance, we might see a character’s face from an earlier scene, and hear the character’s voice from an earlier scene. By means of synchronous sound, the film can give us information about story events without presenting them visually. And synchronous sound may have external or internal sources—that is, a source in the objective world of film or the subjective realms of the character’s mind.

So temporal relationships in the cinema can get complicated. To help distinguish them, Table 7.2 sums up the possible temporal and spatial relationships that image and sound can display.

### Diegetic Sound
Because the first and third of these possibilities are rare, we start by commenting on the second, most common, option.

1. **Sound synchronous in story with image.** This is by far the most common temporal relation that sound has in fiction films. Noise, music, or speech that comes from the space of the story almost invariably occurs at the same time as the image. Like any other sort of diegetic sound, synchronous sound can be either external (objective) or internal (subjective).

    1. **Sound early in story than image.** Here the sound comes from an earlier point in the story than the action currently visible on screen.

        a. **Sound marked as later put over image (e.g., sound of John Kennedy speech put over images of United States today).**

        b. **Sound marked as earlier put over image (e.g., narrator describing events in present tense).**

    2. **Sound simultaneous in story with image.**

        a. **Sound marked as simultaneous with images put over images (e.g., narrator describing events in present tense).**

    3. **Sound asynchronous sound from later in story than image.**

        a. **Sound of flashback sound flashback with sound continuing in the present, character refers earlier events sound bridge.**

        b. **Sound marked as later put over image (e.g., narrator describing events in The Magnificent Ambersons).**

    4. **Sound marked as later put over image (e.g., sound of John Kennedy speech put over images of United States today).**

2. **Sound asynchronous sound from later in story than image.** This is by far the most common temporal relation that sound has in fiction films. Noise, music, or speech that
we hear, with a different sound, "If you brought us . . ." Then there is a cut to a shot of the three youths walking through the woods by the river, at the same time as the scene of the rape. The testimony of a witness in the present is heard on the sound track, while the image presents a flashback to an earlier event. The same effect occurs when the film employs a reminiscence narro...
Functions of Film Sound: A Man Escaped

Robert Bresson's *A Man Escaped* (Un condamné à mort s'est échappé) illustrates how a variety of sound techniques can function throughout an entire film. The story takes place in France in 1942. Fontaine, a Resistance fighter arrested by the Germans, has been put in prison and condemned to die. But while awaiting his execution, he works at an escape plan, loosening the boards of his cell door and making a hole. Just as he is ready to put his plan in action, a boy named Jean is put into his cell. Deciding to trust that Jean is not a spy, Fontaine reveals his plan to him, and they are both able to escape.

Throughout the film, sound has many important functions. As in all of his films, Bresson emphasizes the sound track, rightly believing that sound may be just as cinematic as images. At certain points in *A Man Escaped*, Bresson even sets his own sound technique to dominate the image throughout the film. We are compelled to follow the sound track and image.

Fontaine's Commentary

A key factor in guiding our perception of the action is the commentary spoken over by Fontaine himself. The voice-over is inimitable for Bresson, since it appears at a time later than the images. But it could be either internal or external sound, since we never learn whether Fontaine is thinking back over these events or recollecting them to someone.

Fontaine's narration has several functions. The commentary helps clarify the action, since certain temporal cues suggest how long Fontaine spends in prison. At other points, he gives us additional indications of time. His commentary is particularly important in the final escape scene, where hours of action condense into only 15 minutes of viewing time and the narration is narrowed down to what Fontaine could know. Fontaine's voice calmly tells us of his and Jean's patient, cautious progress toward freedom.

We receive other vital information through the commentary. Sometimes the narration simply states facts: that the plan Fontaine obtained came from the women's wing of the prison, or that certain prison officials' quarters were at various places in the building. More strikingly, Fontaine often tells us what he thought had been. After being beaten and put in his first cell, he wipes the blood from his face and lies down. On the track, we hear his voice say, "I'd prefer a quick death." Often the actor does not register such thoughts visually.

At some points, the voice-over commentary even corrects an impression given by the images. After Fontaine's first cell (7.53), and his voice tells us, "I tried to clean up," again and again in the film, Bresson describes his actions as we are trying to perform them. But this use of sound is not redundant in the voice-over commentary. Indeed, certain times the commentary points to the events as having already happened, and the actual scene as yet to come. Instead of simply covering a series of events in the present, the commentary places the events in the past.

Yet at the end of the commentary, it may seem unnecessary, since it often tells us something that we can also see in the image. In one scene, Fontaine wipes the blood from his face (7.53), and his voice tells us, "I tried to clean up." Again and again in the film, Bresson describes his actions as we are trying to perform them. But this use of sound is not redundant. Instead of simply covering a series of events, the commentary places the events in the past.
Sound Effects and Narration

The interplay between the sounds and images in *A Man Escaped* doesn't pertain solely to the commentary. Fontaine's effort to focus our attention on details works with sound effects as well, where each object gains a specific status. In the middle stretch of the film, in which Fontaine works on breaking through his door and making the implements of escape, detail becomes particularly prominent. A close-up shows Fontaine's handily splaying a spanner handle in a chest: the tool scraping evokes the very feel of the metal (7.54). We hear distinctly the rasping of the spanner across the boards of the door, the creaking of the hinges, the swish of shower against the floor as Fontaine sweeps up shreds of wood. We're intensely aware that such sounds could alert the guards to Fontaine's activities.

The concentration on details follows a general pattern in the narration of *A Man Escaped*. The narration is remarkably vivid. We learn nothing that Fontaine doesn't know. As Fontaine looks around his cell for the first time, his voice-over names the items he contains: a wiper, a sheet, a window. After he mentions each, the camera moves to give us a glimpse of it. At another point, Fontaine hears a strange sound outside his cell. He moves to the door, and we get a point-of-view shot through the peephole in his door: a guard is winding the crank of a spotlight in the hall. For the first time, Fontaine becomes aware of the spotlight, which eventually becomes his escape route.

At times, we know less than Fontaine does. When he attempts to escape from the car in the opening scene, the camera holds on his empty seat and the other car's door rather than moving to follow him and show his recapture (7.58). Later, in Brussels, Fontaine's neighbor Blanchet falls asleep during their daily walk to empty their little buckets. We first hear the sound of his fall as the camera remains on a medium shot of Fontaine reacting in surprise. Then there is a cut to Blanchet as Fontaine recovers to help him up. While the image restricts our knowledge, the sound anticipates and guides our expectations.

At times, sound in *A Man Escaped* goes beyond controlling the image; sometimes it partially replaces it. Several of the film's scenes are so dark that sound must play a large part in conveying information about the action. After Fontaine falls asleep in prison for the first time, there is a fade-out. While the screen is still dark, we hear his voice-over saying, "I slept so soundly, my guards had to awaken me." This is followed by the loud rasp of a bolt and hinges. The light in the door allows us to see a faint image of a guard's hand shaking Fontaine, and we hear a second guard's voice tell him to get up. In general, the film contains many fade-outs in which the sound of the next scene begins before the image does. By putting sound over a black screen or dark image, Bresson allows the sound track an unusually prominent place in his film.

The reliance on sound culminates in the final escape scene. During much of the last sequence, the action takes place outdoors at night. There are many establishing shots to give us a sense of the space of the roof and walls that Fontaine and Just must scale. We get glimpses of gestures and settings, but often sound is our main guide to what is happening. The effect of intensifying our attention greatly.

We must strain to understand the action from what we can glimpse and hear. We judge the pair's progress from the church bells heard tolling the hour. The train outside the walls helps cover the noise the fugitives make. Each strange noise suggests an unseen threat.

In one remarkable shot, Fontaine stands in darkness by a wall, silhouetted to the bootsteps of a guard walking up and down outside. Fontaine knows that he must kill this man if his escape is to succeed. We hear his voice-over explaining where the guard is moving and mentioning how he can sense the man's very breath. We are aware of Fontaine's own nervousness and a tiny reflection of light in his eye (7.56). Again, throughout this scene, the sound concentrates our attention on the characters' most minute reactions and gestures.

Sound Motifs

We've discussed how a filmmaker controls not only what we hear but also the qualities of that sound. In *A Man Escaped*, every object is assigned a distinct pitch. The volume of sounds ranges from very loud to almost inaudible, as the opening scene illustrates. The first few shots of Fontaine's ride to prison in a car are accompanied only by the soft hum of the motor. But as a streetcar blocks the road, Fontaine suddenly turns the streetcar's upper to conceal his dash from the car. The moment Fontaine leaps from the car, Bresson eliminates the streetcar noise, and we hear running feet and gunshots offscreen. Later, in the final escape, the film alternates sounds offscreen (trains, bells, bicycle, and so on) with stretches of silence. The film's sparse sound mix effectively isolates specific sounds for our attention.

Certain sounds not only are very significant, but also have an echo effect added to give them a distinctive timbre. The voices of the German guards as they give Fontaine orders are reverberant and harsh compared to the voices of the Frenchers. Similarly, the noise of the handcart and the cell door's bolts are magnified for the same echo effect. These manipulations suggest Fontaine's own symbolic subjectivity. Thus, our reactions to Fontaine's imprisonment are intensified through the manipulation of timbre.

These devices all help focus our attention on the details of Fontaine's penal life. But there are other devices that help unify the film and sustain its narrative and thematic development. These are the sound motifs, which come back at significant moments of the action.

One set of auditory motifs emphasizes the space outside Fontaine's cell. We see a streetcar in the opening scene, and the bell and motor of a streetcar are heard offscreen every time Fontaine speaks to someone through his cell window (7.57). The noise reminds us of his goal of reaching the streets beyond the walls. During the second half of the film, the sounds of trains also become important. When Fontaine is first able to leave his cell and walk in the hall unshaven, we hear a train whistle. It returns at other moments when he leaves his cell clandestinely until the train provides the noise to cover the sounds Fontaine and Just make during their escape.
Since the prisoners depend on one another, certain sound motifs call attention to Fontaine's interactions with the other men. For example, the daily gathering of the men to wash in a common sink becomes associated with running water. At first, the faucet is seen open, but later Bresson presents the scratching of the prisoners in closer shots, with the sound of the water ebbing (7.54).

Some motifs become associated with defiance of the prison rules. Fontaine uses his handcuffs to tap on the wall to signal his neighbors. He coughs to cover the sound of scraping, and coughs among the prisoners become signals. Fontaine ignores the guards' orders and continues to talk to the other men. There are other sound motifs in the film (bells, guns, whistles, children's voices) that share certain functions already noted: dramatizing Fontaine's escape, calling our attention to details, and giving us what we notice.

Music
Yet another auditory motif involves the only nondiegetic sound in the film—passages from a Mozart mass. The music is motivated clearly enough, since the film's plot action refers continually to religious faith. Fontaine talks to another prisoner that he prays but doesn't expect God to help him if he doesn't work for his own liberty.

At first, we may be unable to form any consistent expectations about the music, and its occurrences are likely to take us by surprise. Later it is heard over the credits, and the music does not cease for some time. In fact, the theme over the action occurs during the initial escape Fontaine takes with the man to empty their slop buckets. As the music plays, Fontaine's commentary explains the routine: "Empty your buckets and wash, back to your cell for the day!" Hearing ceremonial church music while prisoners empty slop buckets is a little startling, but the contrast isn't ironic (7.60). Not only are these moments of movement important to Fontaine's life in the prison, but they also provide his main means of direct contact with other prisoners.

The music, which comes back seven more times, emphasizes the narrative development. Fontaine meets the other man, wins their support, and finally plans to share his escape. The music reappears whenever Fontaine makes contact with another prisoner (Blanchet, Orlini) who will help his escape. Later washing scenes have no music, whereas those in which Fontaine's contact is cut off because Orlini decides not to go along, the music returns as Orlini attempts his own escape plan. He calls but is able to give Fontaine vital information he will need in his own attempt. The music reappears when Blanchet, once opposed to Fontaine's plan, contributes his blanket to the rope making.

Eventually, the music becomes associated with the boy, Jost. It plays again as Fontaine realizes that he must either kill Jost or take him along. The final use of music occurs over the very end of the film, as the two escape from the prison and disappear into the night. The nondiegetic music has traced Fontaine's developing trust in the other men on whom his endeavor depends.

The recurring musical passages suggest a general implicit meaning beyond what Fontaine tells us explicitly. If we follow the pattern of the music's occurrences, we might interpret the motif as suggesting the importance of trust and interdependence among the people of the prison. Here we have the conventional moral music that accompanies the action of many films. The very incongruity of a Mozart mass as an accompaniment to mundane action should lead us to seek an implicit meaning of this type.

A Sample Sequence
A brief scene from A Man Escaped shows how our experience of the film's story can be shaped by silence and shift between sounds that are internal and external, simultaneous and nonsimultaneous. The eleven shots (7.68-7.78) in Table 7.3 constitute the scene in which the boy Jost is put into Fontaine's cell.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shot</th>
<th>Voice</th>
<th>Effects</th>
<th>Action/Camera</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T709</td>
<td>4.0 sec.</td>
<td>F. turns his back...</td>
<td>Footsteps off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>760</td>
<td>... I thought I was lost.</td>
<td>Footsteps off</td>
<td>F. turns head left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>761</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Winding off left.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>762</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Turning head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>763</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Moves left and slightly backward</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 7.3  Sound and Silence in A Man Escaped (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shot</th>
<th>Voice</th>
<th>Effects</th>
<th>Action/Camera</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.64</td>
<td>F (voice) 1st he you German?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.65</td>
<td>French: What is your name?</td>
<td>1st hits head, looks off right</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.66</td>
<td>Just yes. Freshly just. F (voice) Had they planted a spy?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.67</td>
<td>F (voice) Did they think i was ready to talk? F lowers eyes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Moments of silence and oscillation between Fontaine’s internal and external speech dominate the scene.** We have seen Jost before and don’t know what is happening as the scene begins. Fontaine’s internal commentary tells us that a new threat has appeared. Offscreen footsteps and Fontaine’s gaze indicate that someone has entered his room, but the camera lingers on Fontaine. Bresson delays the cut to the newscast for a surprisingly long time. (This first shot is as long as the other three shots combined.) The delay creates special effects. It restricts the narration considerably; since we do not know what Fontaine is reacting to. Our access to his mental state through the commentary only hints at the threat; the “he” referred to could be either a guard or another prisoner. This is one of the many small moments of suspense the narration creates.


The Power of Sound


**Recommended DVD Supplements**

For a survey of the work of film composers, see Jan Svendsen and Mary Carroll, *Subtitling* (Svenskfilmen, Sweden: Transfilm, 1996).

**Recommended Websites**

- **www.filmsound.org** The most comprehensive and detailed online source on sound in cinema, with many interviews and links to other sites.
- **www.miraculous.com** The site for *Mix Magazine,* devoted to all aspects of film and video sound production. Offers wide range of articles and original content.
- **www.filmsound.org** A review of the history of sound systems, illustrated with original documents.
- **www.filmsound.org** News of current releases, along with interviews with composers and a music crew.
- **www.soundsmonthly.com** A magazine site with some fine articles.
- **www.geocities.com/hollywood/Academy/4394/Align.htm** A site with links to film sound and production sound.
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