15 White Face, Black Noise

Miles Davis and the Soundtrack

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Although Miles Davis died at the age of sixty-five in 1991, he is more prominent then ever in American culture. Like Oprah Winfrey, James Earl Jones, and very few other black Americans, Davis no longer raises associations with African American culture in the minds of most white Americans. *Kind of Blue,* his album from 1959, is the best-selling jazz record in history and is itself the subject of two books. Numerous movies have put Davis's music on the soundtrack, both before and after his death and with and without his cooperation. At least two novels, a fiction film, and several television documentaries have been devoted to him, not to mention at least five biographies.

As the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first, Davis's image as well as the sound of his trumpet took on a life of their own. He is, for example, a startling presence in a television commercial for Mercedes-Benz that received wide distribution in the summer of 2001. An announcer asks, "If you were loading the Ark today, what would you bring?" After animals walk up the gangplank two by two, a line of people follow them carrying van Gogh's *Sunflowers,* Michelangelo's *David,* piano scores of Bach and Mozart, and a grand piano. They also carry artifacts that do not belong to high culture such as an Apple computer and a small refrigerator full of expensive ice cream. As the camera cuts quickly from one item to another, we see a pair of hands carrying a stack of LPs with Miles Davis's *Birth of the Cool* prominently displayed on top. The commercial ends as two silver E-Class Mercedes drive up the gangplank and the rain begins.

This commercial reflects a trend that was especially prominent just before and after the year 2000. It may have culminated with Ken Burns's eighteen-hour celebration of jazz on public television in 2001. Jazz (or at least older jazz—the *Birth of the Cool* sessions were recorded more than fifty years ago) has become the peer of high art. Perhaps the man in the

commercial with his stack of old jazz LPs is meant to be associated with the ice cream and the computer, but I doubt it. The camera deliberately focuses tightly on the LPs, *not* on the person carrying them, just as the camera had focused on the names of Bach and Mozart on the books of scores. Jazz, especially when it's packaged with the iconic image of the ultra-cool Miles Davis on the cover, can symbolize affluence and elegance in the same way as Michelangelo's *David*, van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, and the music of Mozart. And it is significant that the old photograph of Miles Davis makes him the only black person whose work is being carried onto the Ark. In a commercial for a product aimed squarely at upper-middle-class Americans, the blackness and "jazzness" of Miles Davis have made him a valuable icon for a company trying to sell status symbols.

While Mercedes-Benz has made Davis the peer of Mozart, van Gogh, and Michelangelo, the cable channel VH1 has placed him in the august company of the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and the Beach Boys. In the early 1990s, the pop culture specialists at VH1 made up their list of the "100 Greatest Artists of Rock 'n' Roll." In that list, Miles Davis is ranked No. 39, between Elvis Costello (38) and Michael Jackson (40). Then, in another of VH1's blandly provocative lists, the "100 Greatest Albums of Rock 'n' Roll," Miles Davis is represented by not one but two items: *Bitches Brew* comes in at No. 64, and *Kind of Blue* is 66.

No other figure from popular culture is represented in the Mercedes-Benz ad, and unless we wish to argue that Steely Dan, Stevie Wonder, and Joni Mitchell play jazz, no other jazz artist appears in either of VH1's rock and roll lists. Just as Davis becomes the peer of Mozart, Michelangelo, and van Gogh in the Mercedes-Benz ad, he is in the same league with Janis Joplin, Kurt Cobain, and Crosby Stills and Nash, all of whom he outranks in the VH1 list of the Greatest Artists of Rock 'n' Roll. The image of no other artist is as omnipresent in the popular imagination. This may be at least in part because Davis worked very hard at managing how people saw him. Thanks in part to the interventions of Debbie Ishlom, a resourceful publicist at Columbia who helped construct an image for Davis in the 1950s, the trumpeter was as much involved with controlling his own visual identity as he was with controlling his music.

Toward the end of his life, however, Davis was less concerned about his image, even if he complained loudly about the photograph on the back cover of his autobiography—he said that he was smiling too broadly. But Davis also began appearing in television commercials (in Japan), and took acting jobs in an episode of the television program *Miami Vice* and in *Dingo*, an Australian movie that appeared in theaters in 1992, a year after his death.

He also appeared in the 1988 film *Scrooged,* briefly joining several other musicians in a delicately hip version of "We Three Kings of Orient Are." The song was appropriate for a film that takes place on Christmas Eve, but Davis seems out of place performing on a street corner in Manhattan. As the soon-to-be-transformed miser based on Charles Dickens's Scrooge, Bill Murray ridicules the musicians, even shouting, "Great! Rip off the hicks, why dontcha? Did you learn that song yesterday?" With Davis are David Sanborn, Paul Shaffer, and Larry Carlton. The camera reveals a hand-lettered sign in Davis's trumpet case: "Help the starving musicians."

Since almost everyone recognizes Davis and his trumpet and probably the three other musicians as well, few are likely to misunderstand the scene in *Scrooged.* The joke is on the self-involved philistine played by Bill Murray as well as on the extremely successful musicians who, unlike many jazz artists, are certainly not starving. But meanings are not always so clear in the other films in which the trumpet of Miles Davis can be heard. There are major differences among (1) films in which Davis was in control of the music, (2) films for which he recorded music without knowing how the music would function, and (3) films in which someone else put an old recording by Davis on the soundtrack. It makes a great deal of difference, for example, when black musicians invisibly provide background for a film about white people, especially when the film may conceal a racial agenda of its own. Many American films have appropriated the music of the African American Davis while sidestepping any overt engagement with the racial issues that are essential to understanding Davis's history. Although it is possible to accept or even celebrate the film industry's lack of concern about the color of the musicians playing on movie soundtracks, the constant use of black music in films about whites needs to be questioned if only because it is so seldom mentioned by film critics and others from the American film industry.

A touchstone film for assessing Davis's movie music, however, comes from France: *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud,* usually translated as *Elevator to the Gallows* (British title: *Lift to the Scaffold;* alternate American title: *Frantic*). When the young French director Louis Malle invited Davis to improvise music for the film, the trumpeter went into a Paris studio with three French musicians (René Urtreger, piano; Barney Wilen, tenor saxophone; and Pierre Michelot, bass), as well as the American expatriate drummer Kenny Clarke. This group, with which Davis had been touring Europe for several months, was afforded the same privileges as almost every film composer in

mainstream movies since the 1930s: they were given a complete copy of the film and allowed to put their own music where they thought it worked best. The musicians actually improvised as they watched the film. The CD of the music for *Elevator to the Gallows,* reissued in 1988 with several alternate takes, reveals how many times Davis and his sidepeople went through the exercise until they knew they had it right. And in many ways they succeeded. Thanks largely to the music, the film won the prestigious Prix Louis Delluc in 1957.

Elevator to the Gallows, however, contains a stern lesson for anyone seeking the perfect marriage of jazz and cinema. In only one scene does the music really transform the images on the screen, specifically the moment when the film's female protagonist, Florence (Jeanne Moreau), slowly walks through the Paris night while Davis and his quintet read her mind with their improvisations. Florence has conspired with her lover Julien (Maurice Ronet) to kill her husband, a wealthy industrialist. After Julien has carried out the carefully planned murder in the victim's own office, he prepares to drive away to meet Florence. But once he has arrived at his car, he looks up at the office building where the dead body remains undiscovered and sees that the rope he used for surreptitious entry can still be seen from the street. Leaving the motor of his car running, he reenters the building and is immediately trapped in the elevator when the custodian shuts down the power as the workday comes to an end. The young florist who works across the street and her petty thief boyfriend take the car for a joyride while Julien is desperately looking for a way out of the elevator. A few blocks down the street, Florence sees the pair driving off in Julien's car, but she sees only the young woman in the passenger seat. She suspects that the driver is Julien, but she cannot be certain.

The director has written a scene for Florence that perfectly accommodates the improvisations of a jazz group. (Louis Malle did not know that Davis would consent to provide the music until after the film was almost finished.) There is no dialogue while the camera follows Florence for several minutes through the streets of Paris, only a series of shots of the face and body of Florence. As she wonders if her husband is dead, if Julien has betrayed her, and if she will ever see her lover again, Davis solos on his trumpet. Many critics have pointed out how jazz instrumentalists—especially African American jazz instrumentalists—make their instruments sound like the human voice. At one point as Davis plays for Florence, Davis's trumpet sounds almost as if it's singing in French. We could argue that Davis is engaging in a dialogue with the character, trying to find a musical means for expressing what she is feeling. Florence utters only one word of

dialogue in this scene, when she sees a car that looks like Julien's. She calls out his name, only to see that the car is being driven by a man she does not know. At this point Davis lays low, holding a long note as the man gets out of the car and the audience has a moment to sort out whether or not Florence has found her lover. Davis returns to his agitated but soulful improvisation when the heroine realizes that the driver is not Julien and continues her slow walk through the city. Davis obviously knew that music must not get in the way when the audience expects a crucial plot point.

But this is the problem with jazz in the cinema. If it's too good—if we actually find ourselves listening to the music—it's no good. Film theorists know this as well as the composers of movie music. Since the early days of cinema, film scores have been carefully relegated to the background, only swelling up for a moment or two when the audience is meant to feel what the characters are feeling. But even on these occasions, composers have prevented the music from calling attention to itself by making it sound like other movie music. The codes for film music were established early in the 1930s by a small group of composers, almost all of them schooled in the European music of the late romantic period. Max Steiner, Miklós Rózsa, and Erich Korngold transformed Mahler, Wagner, Richard Strauss, and Borodin for the cinema.[1] A large part of the film audience already knew this music from radio and from the piano in the parlor—they knew when the music was telling then to be sad, to feel happy, or to fear the worst. With these codes in place, audiences did not need to think long about what they were hearing, especially when the codes were completely consistent with what was happening on the screen. Claudia Gorbman has described the standard film score as invisible and "inaudible."[2] In other words, the music is meant to be felt and not really listened to.

Many who went to *Elevator to the Gallows* expecting to see a suspense story about two attractive people hoping to get away with murder may have sat through Jeanne Moreau's night walk without paying attention to the music. On one level, the music that Davis created for the film gestures toward the codes that were already well established in the history of film music. Few in the audience were likely baffled, wondering what the music was doing there behind the action. On the other hand, the music is completely faithful to a jazz idiom. Those who know the music can hear the improvised solos and the group interactions that only Miles Davis could create. But the sequence with Florence on the streets of Paris is the only scene in the film in which the band plays for more than a few minutes. It is practically an anomaly. Virtually every other musical moment in *Ascenseur* is brief and unremarkable. We can celebrate a few nearly perfect minutes

when jazz and the cinema elegantly complement each other, but we cannot expect it to work for more than those few minutes.

Ashley Kahn has suggested that the music for *Elevator to the Gallows* has the modal feel that Davis used again two years later in recordings such as "Flamenco Sketches" on the *Kind of Blue* album.[3] I would argue that the practice of supplying music for specific moments in a film teaches the artist to avoid conventional gestures of beginning, middle, and end that go with the standard chord structure of a popular song. Working in films may have been partially responsible for Davis's idea of creating improvisations free of conventional song structures at the *Kind of Blue* session. I would also argue, contra the standard wisdom of the jazz purist, that the music for *Elevator to the Gallows* is best understood as part of a movie and not as stand-alone music. Davis was creating specific sounds to go with specific images. As an African American jazz artist, he is somewhat stereotypically associated with urban nightlife in the French film, but the filmmakers granted a great deal of control to Miles Davis, and the result is something much more than a racial stereotype. It is the unique statement of a black artist working well outside the boundaries that usually contain African American jazz musicians.

Thirty years after *Elevator to the Gallows*, Davis was again making music for a movie, but with much less involvement in the process. Working with keyboardist Robert Irving III on *Street Smart*, directed by Jerry Schatzberg in 1987, Davis simply laid down a number of tracks in the studio and left it to Irving and the music supervisor to put the music into the film. As a result, the music often seems extraneous, entirely unlike what is heard in *Elevator to the Gallows*. In one scene, Davis's music simply stops and gives way to a familiar recording by Aretha Franklin. Christopher Reeve, playing a newspaper reporter, is interviewing a prostitute played by Kathy Baker. Although it is not the reporter's intention, he ends up having sex with her as Franklin's "You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman" swells on the soundtrack, overwhelming the dialogue and Davis's doodling, which was already very much in the background.

The introduction of the Franklin song at a crucial romantic moment in *Street Smart* is an excellent example of how the music of black Americans is recruited to sexualize the lives of white Americans in Hollywood films. Think of the voice of Johnny Hartman enhancing the love scenes between Clint Eastwood and Meryl Streep in *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995) or Ray Charles and choir performing "You Don't Know Me" while Bill

Murray and Andie McDowell fall in love in *Groundhog Day* (1993). (See my book *Black Magic* for many other examples.) Although it would not be the case a few years later, in *Street Smart* a recording by Davis is considered inadequate for a love scene. Davis's work was therefore replaced by the more accessible music of Aretha Franklin when Kathy Baker begins making love to Christopher Reeve.

In 1990, working with composer Jack Nitzsche, Davis provided music for Dennis Hopper's *The Hot Spot*. Dennis Hopper met Jack Nitzsche in 1969 when Hopper directed *Easy Rider,* with its brief appearance by Phil Spector. Nitzsche and Spector were producing rock and roll artists at the time, but Nitzsche went on to provide some of the most compelling music ever created for American films. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Blue Collar, Cutter's Way, Cannery Row, The Indian Runner,* and many others, Nitzsche found unusual ways to transform the action through music. A few months before he died in 2000, Nitzsche spoke to Philip Brophy about working with Davis. He recalled Davis with genuine affection. At one point he exclaimed, "I loved Miles. God, I miss him."

In the liner notes for the soundtrack CD of *The Hot Spot,* Dennis Hopper claims that Davis had once punched out Hopper's heroin dealer and then told Hopper that he would kill him if he ever did drugs again. It was Hopper's idea to create music for *The Hot Spot* by matching Davis's trumpet with the blues guitar and vocals of John Lee Hooker. Eventually Hopper and Nitzsche brought in another blues singer and guitarist, Taj Mahal. Although Nitzsche did not think that Davis would agree to work on Hopper's film, let alone with straight blues artists, Nitzsche dutifully asked Davis if he wanted the job. To his surprise, Davis said yes. John Lee Hooker showed up a day ahead of Davis, and when he was laying down some tracks in the studio with Nitzsche, it became clear that John Lee Hooker, like many blues musicians, could only play three chords. In his conversation with Philip Brophy, Nitzsche said that he then called Davis in despair, saying, "Miles, John Lee Hooker only knows three chords. What are we going to do?" Nitzsche said that Davis replied, "Am I in your movie? How can that be bad?"[4]

For *The Hot Spot,* Davis was once again uninterested in watching the film while he made music as he had with *Elevator to the Gallows,* but he was working with Jack Nitzsche, who had a print of the film and knew exactly what should go where. One of the moments when the music is most noticeable is comparable to the scene when Jeanne Moreau wanders through the night in the earlier film. Don Johnson plays Harry, a drifter who has arrived in a small Texas town for reasons that the film never bothers to establish. Although he has become involved with two women, one pure and in-

nocent, the other a femme fatale, Harry still has time left over to rob the local bank. His plan is to set fire to a building across the street in order to create a distraction while he empties the cash drawers. As in *Elevator to the Gallows,* Davis and the other musicians jam demurely during a long, dialogue-free sequence while Harry carries out the bank job. Thanks to Nitzsche's editing, Davis's piquant solo suddenly stops when an elderly blind African American man wanders into the bank. Taj Mahal croons a cappella while we wonder what the blind man is going to do. After Johnson tiptoes around the man and out of the bank with the stolen money, Davis's trumpet and Hooker's guitar kick in again. It is especially intriguing that the blind man is black. In fact, he's the only black person in the entire film. I associate his blindness with the invisibility of black musicians in so many American films about white people. The blindness of the audience toward blacks on the soundtrack is displaced onto the black man.

The Talented Mr. Ripley (1999) finds complex strains of eroticism in Davis's music. Directed by Anthony Minghella, the film absents black people almost completely even as it borrows liberally from African American culture. In the 1950s, Tom Ripley (Matt Damon) meets the wealthy parents of Dickie Greenleaf (Jude Law) at a party on a terrace overlooking New York's Central Park. Although he is employed as an attendant in a washroom and never attended college, Tom is an accomplished classical pianist. To accompany a singer at the party, he has borrowed a blazer with the insignia of Princeton University. When the Greenleafs ask him if he knew their son while he was at Princeton, Tom leaps at the opportunity to pose as an aristocrat. He soon accepts a thousand dollars from Greenleaf Senior to bring his son back from Italy, where Dickie lives in a seaside village with his girlfriend Marge (Gwyneth Paltrow). Instead of participating in his father's shipping business, Dickie enjoys playing jazz on his saxophone as well as sailing, swimming, and dallying with at least one of the attractive local women.

In order to enter Dickie's affluent world, Tom must, paradoxically, put aside his passion for classical music and learn jazz, the music that Dickie loves but that the elder Greenleaf calls "insolent noise." In early scenes Tom clings to conventional 1950s hierarchies of taste, practically holding his nose as he learns to recognize the playing styles of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Chet Baker, and others. In a comment that resonates with the homoerotic role that Baker's music plays later in the film, Tom says, "I can't tell if it's a man or a woman," as he listens to Baker singing "My Funny Valen-

tine." Indeed, throughout much of the film, jazz marks Tom and Dickie almost as strongly in terms of race as in terms of sexuality. The play with race and sexuality is immediately apparent when Tom first encounters Dickie and Marge on the beach near their house. When he approaches them in his bathing suit as they lounge in their beach chairs, the contrast between the perfectly tanned flesh of Dickie and Marge and the pale skin of Tom is so obvious that Dickie says, "You're so white!" Then to Marge, "Did you ever see a guy so white?" Tom makes the most of the situation, smilingly insisting that his color is just "primer" and an "undercoat," as if his whiteness were only temporary.

But like the pale-skinned protagonists in African American passing novels such as *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,*[5] *Plum Bun,*[6] and *Passing,*[7] as well as films such as *Pinky* (1949), *Show Boat* (1936 and 1951), and *Imitation of Life* (1934 and 1959), Tom does not change color so easily. Later he is suspected of being an imposter by Freddie Miles (Philip Seymour Hoffman), who senses immediately that Tom is not a member of the moneyed classes and certainly not someone with the contempt for upper-class decorum that Dickie exhibits in his bohemian passion for jazz. If *The Talented Mr. Ripley* borrows the passing narrative from African American culture, it relies even more heavily on black music to develop the character of Dickie. On several occasions Dickie plays boppish solos on his saxophone, and after the local woman with whom he had been having an affair becomes pregnant and drowns herself, he consoles himself by playing "You Don't Know What Love Is," a favored song among African American vocalists and musicians. The film endows Dickie with natural grace and a talent for expressing himself through music, qualities that many Americans associate with black people.

As the film progresses it becomes clear that Tom is not just an aspiring aristocrat posing as a white Negro in order to get close to Dickie Greenleaf; he is also a gay man passing as a heterosexual. *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is based on Patricia Highsmith's novel of the same title. Published in 1955, the novel includes a brief suggestion that Tom's interest in Dickie might be more than friendly when Marge asks Dickie if he thinks Tom is gay. Highsmith herself was a lesbian, and several of her novels directly addressed the homosexuality of her characters.

Minghella has enlarged the novel's gay subtext in subtle as well as obvious ways. Among the less overt references to gayness is the film's fascination with jazz trumpeter/vocalist Chet Baker and the Richard Rodgers / Lorenz Hart song, "My Funny Valentine," that Baker recorded and performed throughout his career. In the 1950s Baker won the hearts and minds of an au-

dience that was large even by non-jazz standards. Some responded to his youthful beauty (he was regularly compared to James Dean); some heard depths of emotion and sensitivity in his understated singing and trumpet playing (his music epitomized the West Coast or "cool" school of postwar jazz); and, sadly, some cast him as jazz's Great White Hope, the anointed heir of Bix Beiderbecke and a paragon of the more sedate, less threatening strains of the jazz trumpet that have always coexisted alongside the more intense music associated with African Americans.

A charming sociopath who was accustomed to having everything his own way, Baker suggests a comparison with Jude Law's Dickie Greenleaf in the film version of *The Talented Mr. Ripley.* Like Baker, Dickie possesses youthful beauty and natural grace and unself-consciously carries great appeal for men as well as for women. Also like Baker, Dickie is accustomed to being adored and does little to repay the love he receives. In order to make an early, positive impression on Dickie, Tom pretends that several jazz LPs, including a copy of *Chet Baker Sings,* have accidentally dropped out of his briefcase. When Dickie picks up the Chet Baker LP, he says, "This is the best." Minghella may or may not have known Baker's biography well enough to see how much he shares with the Dickie of his film. Regardless, "My Funny Valentine" is an especially appropriate choice for Minghella's version of *The Talented Mr. Ripley,* if only because the lyrics are by Lorenz "Larry" Hart, a gay man who is clearly suggesting that heterosexual romance is a joke. When Tom uses his prodigious abilities as a mimic and sings in a Bakeresque voice ("You can't tell if it's a man or a woman") while Dickie and a group of male musicians accompany him, he enjoys the homoerotic thrill of sharing an intense moment with Dickie.

Although Tom reaches a pinnacle of sorts when Dickie's saxophone embroiders his appropriately androgynous performance of "My Funny Valentine," Miles Davis helps provide an even more significant jazz moment in the sexual tension between the two men. In a deeply homoerotic scene, full of tight close-ups and pregnant pauses, Tom and Dickie play chess while Dickie sits nude in the bathtub. The music is "Nature Boy," recorded by Charles Mingus in 1955 for his own Debut label and featuring the trumpet of Miles Davis. Still in his shirt and trousers, Tom runs his fingers through the warm bath water and says, "I'm cold, can I get in?" Slightly uncertain but not afraid to let a note of teasing into his response, Dickie says no. He then gets out of the tub, exposing his nude body to Tom as he walks away to pick up a towel. He looks over his shoulder to see that Tom is watching him in the mirror. Tom quickly turns away.

This is the turning point in Tom's erotic fortunes. For Dickie, Tom has be-

come a burden, as much because of his emotional vulnerability as because of his need to keep Dickie on his own timetable. Moments after the scene with the bathtub and "Nature Boy," Tom is shut out of Dickie's life when Freddie Miles arrives and almost completely steals Dickie's attentions. When Freddie pulls up at the outdoor café in Rome where Dickie sits chatting with Tom, the music of a jazz saxophone seems to be coming out of his car radio. The music, however, continues uninterrupted into the next scene at a record store where Freddie seals himself into a listening booth with Dickie so that they can share a set of headphones. Tom is on the outside looking in, devastated that Dickie is much more in his element with Freddie. The music is "Tenor Madness," featuring the tenor saxophones of Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane, both African Americans. Freddie adopts an almost ghoulish posture as he slowly gyrates to the music and fixes his gaze on Tom, clearly aware that he is looking at a parvenu upstart. At this point, Dickie only wants to lose himself in the music and cares little about his schedule for the rest of the day. Nevertheless, Tom taps on the window of the listening booth to announce the departure time of the train they had planned to take back to Mongibello, clearly hoping that Dickie will join him. Freddie shakes his head and snorts with derisive laughter at Tom's joyless, compulsive behavior.

The switch from Davis's "Nature Boy" to "Tenor Madness" is as striking as the arrival of Freddie, played with immense confidence by Hoffman. Minghella has exploited all of the eroticism, yearning, and tension in the slow version of "Nature Boy" as well as the more boisterous, agonistic spirit of "Tenor Madness." In Mingus's "Nature Boy," Davis's trumpet, elegantly softened by the stemless harmon mute that was so often in its bell, plays over the delicate chimes of Teddy Charles's vibraphone, the subtle brush work of drummer Elvin Jones, and the steady heartbeat of Charles Mingus's bass. At this stage in his career, Davis was developing an intimate, even introverted approach to improvisation that was completely unlike the style of the extroverts who preceded him in the roster of great jazz trumpeters. And like Chet Baker at this same time, Davis was learning not to leave a song's melody behind for the sake of elaborate improvisation. Both trumpeters took the melodies seriously, as if they were singing rather than playing the songs. The album on which Mingus and Davis perform "Nature Boy" was released as *Blue Moods.* Listening to their collaboration today, one does not hear much tension between the bassist/leader and the trumpeter, but according to John Szwed, Davis would not walk the two blocks to the *Blue Moods* recording session because he had been promised a ride. "And once he

got the ride, he told the driver, 'I hope I won't have to hit Mingus in the mouth.' "[8] The choice of the recording of "Nature Boy" from the *Blue Moods* session, with its looming tension between two men sharing a moment charged with musical eroticism, was especially appropriate for the scene in which Tom approaches Dickie in the bathtub. It even anticipates the additional tension of Freddie's arrival.

The unheard lyrics to "Nature Boy" contain the phrase, "The greatest thing you'll ever know, is just to love and be loved." Although Davis and Mingus were at odds when they recorded "Nature Boy," the song and its words have little in common with "Tenor Madness," taped one year later. "Tenor Madness" is the happy result of John Coltrane's decision to tag along with the rhythm section that Sonny Rollins took into the studio for a recording date on May 24, 1956. "Tenor Madness" consists of muscular, up-tempo blowing by Rollins and Coltrane, two larger-than-life tenor saxophonists who only recorded together on this one occasion and only on this one cut on the LP. If "Nature Boy" features one hornman speaking clearly about love while Tom tries to move closer to Dickie, "Tenor Madness" is the hot-blooded confrontation between two masters of the horn while Freddie barges in and snatches Dickie away from Tom. In each case, African American musicians are as essential to the film's meanings as are the passions for jazz exhibited by Dickie and Freddie.

In spite of his low tolerance of jazz, and despite the later scene in which Tom sheds tears at a performance of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* after he has killed Dickie, the recording of "Nature Boy" seems to be entirely consistent with Tom's emotional yearnings. And yet the film never acknowledges the extent to which it allows music by Davis and other African American artists to work its magic on the characters. Even with all their passion for jazz, Dickie and Freddie have only the most superficial interactions with black people, a truth about two bohemian rich kids that the film also neglects to acknowledge.

An even more perversely color-blind use of Davis's music is in Gary Ross's *Pleasantville* (1998). The film has no African American actors whatsoever, and yet the white inhabitants of a 1950s TV sitcom are allowed to have a civil rights revolution of sorts. The premise of *Pleasantville* is that two teenagers from the present (Tobey Maguire and Reese Witherspoon) are magically transported into the black-and-white world of an old TV sitcom, "Pleasantville," clearly based on "Father Knows Best," which had successful runs on three different television networks between 1954 and 1963. While the nerdy David (Maguire) is out of place among his peers, Jennifer

(Witherspoon) leads a group of postmodern teenage girls and has no trouble attracting boys. Jennifer is appalled to be "stuck in Nerdville" when she and her brother arrive in Pleasantville, but when she sees the blandly attractive Skip drive by in his car, she quickly begins to find the town more interesting. To David's horror, she starts bringing color to the lives of the black-and-white people, at first by introducing them to sex. According to the logic of Ross's film, the people in Pleasantville only know as much about life as was shown on TV in the 1950s. Since they do not have sex, for example, they have never seen a double bed. And since no one ever reads a novel in the TV show, the books in the library have blank pages, and so on. As Ross is at pains to point out in his commentary on the DVD release of the film, the residents of Pleasantville turn colorful whenever they have some kind of transformative experience. Since young people are most open to change, and since sexuality makes for fast and fundamental transformations, the town's teenagers are the first to earn their colors. Later on, characters change color because they have become angry or highly emotional. After Jennifer hustles Skip off to Lover's Lane for his first sexual encounter, he sees a vivid red rose on a bush as he drives home. As Jennifer the sexual adventuress begins to influence behavior throughout the high school, color suddenly appears as a pink bubble of gum emerging from a girl's mouth and as a red taillight on a car from which hang the suggestively swaying limbs of young lovers. Everything else in these early scenes remains in black and white.

The film sets up a musical hierarchy as it works its way toward the most profound transformative moment. When Jennifer first begins seducing Skip exclusively in black and white, the audiences hears the "wholesome" voice of the white Pat Boone singing the pop ballad "Mr. Blue." Later, when the first traces of color begin to appear, audiences hear Gene Vincent, who might be called a "white black singer," hiccuping his way through "Be-Bop-a-Lula." As more people turn colorful, we hear the African American Lloyd Price shouting a grittier example of rock and roll, "Lawdy Miss Clawdy." Later on, as the young people in Pleasantville begin to realize that David knows much more about life than they do, they congregate in the soda shop where he works. Previously a brightly lit diner where teens listened to a jukebox and consumed ice cream sodas, the shop has become darker, with light filtered through Venetian blinds, giving the scene a film noir effect. As Ross points out, the place has been made to resemble a coffee shop where beatniks would have assembled back when the sitcom was first shown on television. Consistent with the soda shop's new ambience, the audience hears the Dave Brubeck Quartet playing "Take Five" as David arrives for work.

As Brubeck's quirky anthem of white hipness continues to play in the background, the young people in the shop ask David questions about what is outside Pleasantville. While the pop rock of Gene Vincent and Lloyd Price played behind scenes of sexual discovery, the film now associates jazz with thinking rather than with feeling. David soon discovers that one of the teens in the shop has been reading *Huckleberry Finn,* thanks to a halting attempt by Jennifer to tell the boy what ought to be inside a book with blank pages. Since she only read up until "the part about the raft," only the first pages of the book have, according to the film's logic, filled themselves in. David, however, has been more conscientious about his homework. The wide-eyed congregation of teenagers is suddenly obsessed with what happens to Huck and Jim.

The camera closes in on the face of the perky blonde cheerleader, Margaret (Marley Shelton), as she asks David to tell them what happens in the novel. As David begins to talk about Huck Finn and watches while all the remaining pages in the book are dutifully filled in, Brubeck's music gives way to a new recording. We then hear what is surely the most elegant music in the film and unquestionably one of the most important recordings in the history of American music, the Miles Davis Sextet's 1959 recording of "So What." *Pleasantville* disposes of the introductory duet between bassist Paul Chambers and pianist Bill Evans, the only white member of Davis's group at the time. The music starts abruptly with the second statement of the tune's sketchy melody as the three black hornmen (Davis, John Coltrane, and Cannonball Adderley on alto sax) answer the questions posed musically by the bassist with the two-note phrase that suggests the title, "So What." Ultimately, the audience only hears the solo of Davis, and even that has been edited down to roughly half its length, but Davis's solo occupies almost a full minute of *Pleasantville*'s soundtrack while a great deal happens on the screen. The elegant but vernacular sounds of Davis's trumpet accompany the discovery by the town's young people of a literature that is about as radical as the timid liberalism of the film is prepared to endorse. Even though David's interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn* is basically a conservative one, the film uses Davis's music to impart a sense of wonder and experimentation as David tells the town's teenagers about Huck.

In laying out the plot of the novel, David refers to Nigger Jim simply as "the slave." As the innocents sitting in the soda shop listen in wide-eyed anticipation, David explains that as Huck and Jim try "to get free, they see that they're free already." The film is telling us that freedom is internal and not about the daily conditions in which people actually live their lives. In his commentary, Ross says that *Huckleberry Finn* is a "picaresque adventure"

about getting knowledge, an important theme he claims for his film. He also mentions the many times that the book has been banned, but he neglects to mention that the book is banned not because of politics or scatology but because of its repeated use of the word "nigger." In the 1950s there were no national movements to ban the book. Only after black students began making demands in the 1960s did the book begin to disappear from libraries and reading lists. The other book that David introduces to the curious young people, *Catcher in the Rye,* was in fact banned from school libraries in the 1950s, specifically for the explicit language used by the teenaged narrator. For Ross, however, the two controversial books are an appropriate pair to drive home his theme that knowledge—especially knowledge that is controversial or threatening—has the power to change people.

As the youthful residents of Pleasantville rapidly acquire color and line up at the library, the black-and-white city fathers attempt to control the transformations, even putting a "No Colored" sign in a shop window. Ultimately, David is arrested and put on trial in a courtroom scene that is clearly designed to recall a moment in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) when the townspeople are strictly segregated: "colored" people sit in the courthouse balcony while white people—or, in the case of *Pleasantville,* black-and-white people—sit below on the ground floor. Taking the stand, David successfully provokes all the black-and-white characters into experiencing some strong emotion, thus turning all of them colored.

Pleasantville works hard at connecting political oppression and the anxieties about sex and race that have always been a part of American culture. At one point the black-and-white citizens of the town declare that the only permissible music is Johnny Mathis, Perry Como, Jack Jones, John Philip Sousa, and the "Star Spangled Banner." In the logic of the film, civil rights is about popular entertainment rather than the fundamental restructuring of American society. And in terms of the white appropriation of blackness, that's as far as it has to go. When David brings color to the town's more conservative citizens, he says, "It's in you, and you can't stop something that's inside you." Just as David suggested that the freedom sought by Nigger Jim was always already there inside him, he now reveals that everyone in Pleasantville was already colored. All strife ends when everyone discovers this truth. But *Pleasantville* disingenuously sidesteps any substantive issues by presenting everyone as *also* the same on the outside. Thanks to the magic of the movies, we're all colored. The allusions to civil rights, an unstated part of the film's dynamic from the outset, no longer matter. *Pleasantville* suggests the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and '60s has become so much a part of the American story that it belongs to all of us and can be just as

valid when everyone is white. And as long as Miles Davis and his sidepeople remain invisible throughout the film, audience members can respond to their own feelings about the music rather than to the music itself.

There are several ways of thinking about these films. With *Elevator to the Gallows*, *Street Smart*, and *The Hot Spot*, we could recapitulate the familiar narrative of Davis's decline: he takes great pains making the music for *Elevator to the Gallows*, but thirty years later, he is simply providing generic doodling for films like *Street Smart* and *The Hot Spot*. I'd rather not buy into that narrative completely. Although jazz purists will tell you that Davis sold out in the late 1960s and continued to record conventional, throwaway pop music for the rest of his career, there are many other ways of responding to the music he made in those final decades. For one thing, Davis did not wish to repeat himself. He makes the definitive jazz soundtrack for a film in 1957, and then moves on. Been there, done that. Later he tries other approaches to the art form, for example taking the unique opportunity to record with folk blues musicians like John Lee Hooker and Taj Mahal in *The Hot Spot*. We could even argue that Davis's flamboyant concert appearances of the 1970s and '80s were his own dramas with music and that he was less interested in Hollywood's dramas with music. By playing with blues musicians for a film score, or in concert with musicians from India, Africa, and Latin America, Davis was continuing what Gary Tomlinson has called his "cultural dialogics."[9] These dialogues with people from other cultures first became vital when he worked with French filmmakers and French musicians in creating music for *Elevator to the Gallows*.

We can also make different cases about the role that Davis's music plays in the white Hollywood cinema of today. On the one hand, films like *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *Pleasantville* deny personhood to African Americans and keep them off screen at the same time that the films use black music to give depth and romance to their white characters. White filmmakers have claimed the great achievements of black Americans—including jazz and the civil rights movement—for their white characters without acknowledging any obligation to African American people. On the other hand, in the case of Miles Davis, we have a music that long ago transcended its historical and personal moment and has provided a universe of compelling musical signification for filmmakers as well as for the rest of us.

NOTES

1. Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

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3. Ashley Kahn, *Kind of Blue: The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000).

4. Philip Brophy, "Revolutionizing the Cinema: Or, How I Put Rock 'n' Roll in the Movies. Jack Nitzsche in conversation with Philip Brophy," in *Cinesonic: Experiencing the Soundtrack* (North Ryde, Australia: Australian Film Television and Radio School, 2001), p. 10.

5. James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* [1912] (New York: Penguin, 1990).

6. Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun* [1928] (Boston: Beacon, 1990).

7. Nella Larsen, *Passing* [1929] (New York: Penguin, 1997).

8. John Szwed, *So What: The Life of Miles Davis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), p. 117.

9. Gary Tomlinson, "Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies," *Black Music Research Journal* 11.2 (1991), pp. 229–64.

16 Men at the Keyboard

Liminal Spaces and the Heterotopian Function of Music

GARY C. THOMAS

Multimedia spectacle, as Richard Wagner presciently theorized, would be the mass theater of the future. Films especially, whether projected on public screens or on home computers (and one should include here the entire spectrum of post-celluloid media technology) remain one of the few and dwindling sites of public pedagogy. People read less and less—we stand, in any case, at the end of the era of the book—and few engage in public debate, attend lectures, visit avant-garde film houses, or participate in the uncommodified music scenes. And despite its productive pleasures, most perform very little in the way of political reflection and cultural analysis. But we *all* go to the movies. And, thus, what we see and hear on those screens—and how we see and hear it—matters more than ever. My interest here is twofold: first, in a perhaps unlikely conjunction of images, sounds, and narrative found on the commercial screen—storylines featuring men playing music on a keyboard—and, second, in another, rather more overarching conjunction, that of oedipal-capital, my shorthand for the cultural processes of psychic subjection in the service of political-economic exploitation, the analysis of which constitutes one of the urgent projects of critical cultural studies.[1]

If most of my materials are historical (older film, older music, even some older theory), this is deliberate, as they are part of an effort to counter what I see as a danger in the ahistorical strain of some of our current theorizing—let me call it uncommitted postmodernist presentism. It is dangerous in the sense that it is inadequate to address, among other things, the massive regression attending the current neo-con political turn in the United States with its concomitant cultural recidivism, neocolonialism, and homophobia. One might say that history, including key moments in critical theory of the past, now matters more than ever as well.