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Diegetic Ambiguity of Film Music

ABSTRACT. One of the earliest classifications of film music is its division into the so-called diegetic and non-diegetic. This article explores the question of diegetic ambiguity and its relation with conceptions of cinematic diegesis. The lack of a plausible music source, its shifting between or simultaneous presence on several narrative levels, and diegetic control of non-diegetic music are presented as the main types of the diegetic ambiguity. At the same time, the issue of an appropriate understanding of cinema diegesis is raised.

KEYWORDS:

film music, diegetic,
non-diegetic, ambiguity.

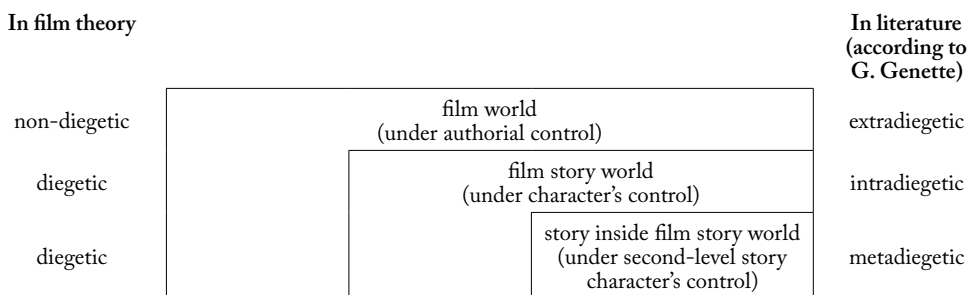
One of the main ways to classify film music is to break it into categories of so-called “on-screen” and “off-screen” music, that in film terminology are also called diegetic and non-diegetic. Although the question of film diegesis has been discussed many times and many new issues are being raised at the forefront of the contemporary film sound discourse, the question of diegetic music remains relevant. The conception of “diegesis” has been transformed many times and has arrived into the field of film theory from literature: “the career of ‘diegetic’ and ‘nondiegetic’ (or ‘extradiegetic’) music in film musicology goes back to Claudia Gorbman’s adoption of the terms from Gérard Genette” (Heldt 2013: 48). In turn, Genette adopted the French structuralism tradition and some ideas from Russian formalists from the beginning of the 20th century. Finally, the term diegesis was borrowed from works by Ancient Greek philosophers, namely Plato and Aristotle, where diegesis refers to a certain type of narrative, based on the separation of the narrator from the narrative.

Although most filmmakers agree on the statements that “any voice, musical passage, or sound effect presented as originating from a source within the film’s world is diegetic [...] It happens on the scene, and the characters can hear it” (Bordwell, Thompson 2008: 478) or sound which originates outside of that narrative and is meant to be heard only by the viewer (any background music enhancing the picture, a narrator’s voice etc.) is non-diegetic, film musicologists continue to explore the accuracy of those definitions.

Some scholars question the usage of the term “non-diegetic”, claiming that such music is also diegetic, it only relates to a more general level, whereas non-diegesis is not possible at all. That which is called non-diegetic in film theory and traditionally

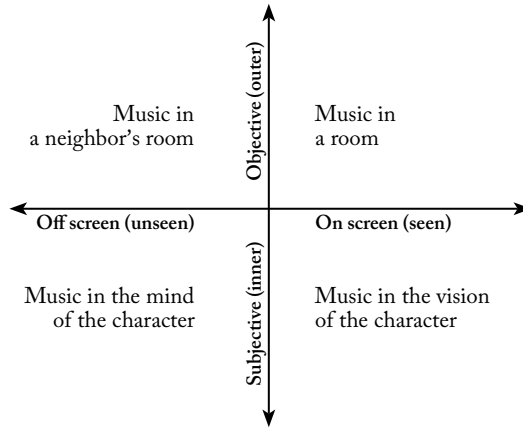
refers to a hierarchically higher level, i.e., that of the author of the work, is known as the extradiegetic level in Genette terminology. While music occurring within another story (e.g., a concert watched by film characters on TV) is, according to Genette, called metadiegetic (see Diagram 1).

Diagram 1. Classification of diegetic levels



At first, I will take a more detailed look at the existing classification of diegetic music (or intradiegetic, according to Genette). Perhaps the most detailed classification can be found in Richard Raskin's typology (Raskin 1992), which puts many earlier classifications into perspective, whereas when classifying diegetic music into smaller sub-categories, the main criterion is the nature of the source of music. As Daniel Percheron points out in his article "Sound in Cinema and its Relationship to Image and Diegesis" (Percheron 1980), the source of diegetic music can be seen or unseen. Additionally, the source of music may be totally invisible (for example, music that is coming out through an open window or from a neighbouring room), temporarily invisible (for example, the sound of an approaching train), or partially visible, when it's seen or only heard by one or several characters (it is music which sounds in the character's head, the "inner voice", or the thoughts of characters uttered aloud). This is where we encounter the inner (subjective) music. Different authors use different terms to describe this: Gorbmann, referring to Genette's terminology, calls it metadiegetic (Gorbman 1987), Edward R. Branigan – intradiegetic (Branigan 1984), where Raymond Spottiswoode, Bordwell and Thompson call it unrealistic (Spottiswoode 1969; Bordwell, Thompson 2008). The subjective or inner diegetic music can be juxtaposed to the oppositional one, which is external, objective and actual. So all subtypes of diegetic music can be systemised using two axes of visibility and objectivity (see Diagram 2): on screen – objective (outer), off screen objective (outer), on screen – subjective (inner), off screen – subjective (inner):

Diagram 2. Typology of diegetic situations



The separation of two realities – the film story and narrator’s – is the cornerstone of the diegesis concept, but at the same time it is also an Achilles heel. The assumption that the film story world could actually exist somewhere (and is thus more real than a narration about it) and that the narrator stays and acts outside of it appears quite confusing. Can the world of the film story be considered as the “more real world”? Is it possible to credibly separate the elements of reality and fiction in film? Is it possible to draw a clear line between a narrator and a narrative so that we can determine where reality starts and fiction ends? These questions become especially acute when diegetic levels overlap, and music travels in-between. Then the belief that the so-called diegetic characters really exist somewhere, as well as a meta-narrator, who exists above them and knows more than them, starts to fade.

In this context, one of the main criteria of classifying diegetic music – the relationship of music to the narrative level – does not always work precisely and music in such cases often has to be defined as diegetically ambiguous. Firstly, it exists when there is no plausible source, although it sounds as it is in the diegesis. As it is in the opening scene of Otar Iosseliani’s film *Giorgobistve* (1966), which contains traditional Georgian music singing in the background. This music can be understood as diegetic (we can see a feast on screen), but because we can’t see the singers, and since no characters react to the music in the *mise-en-scenes*, this music starts to get further from the events depicted and the viewer starts to perceive it as a sound comment on the narrator’s level. Interestingly, this example can be understood in reverse. Why couldn’t the soundtrack belong to the diegetic story world, while an image could work as a non-diegetic comment on it?

Or maybe both components belong to the narrator level, or to neither of them? All versions seem to be possible:

Diagram 3. Diegetic ambiguity in Otar Iosseliani's *Giorgobistve* (1966)

	<i>Version I</i>	<i>Version II</i>	<i>Version III</i>	<i>Version IV</i>
Video: (a feast)	diegetic	non-diegetic	diegetic	non-diegetic
Music: (Georgian singing)	non-diegetic	diegetic	diegetic	non-diegetic

Diegetic sound ambiguity always exists in the cases of parallel editing when the video track story shifts to the other (parallel) story, and the soundtrack continues with the first one. A famous example of this can be found in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), where there is a sequence of scenes of baptism in a church and homicide in the city, yet in both scenes, only the church music can be heard (Fig. 1). The constant shift of music from diegetic (organ music in the church scene) to non-diegetic (organ music over the homicide in the city) and vice versa means music is not held down in any one position.



Figure 1. *The Godfather* (1972), Francis Ford Coppola

Diagram 4. Diegetic shifts in the introductory scene of *The Godfather* (1972), Francis Ford Coppola

Video:	in the church	homicide I	in the church	homicide II, etc.
Music:	church organ (diegetic)	church organ (non-diegetic)	church organ (diegetic)	church organ, etc. (non-diegetic)

It is more common that diegetic music shifts from the diegetic point to the non-diegetic, for example, a character's song continues into the next scene as non-diegetic

background music. A shift in opposition is less frequent and can bring about an unpleasantly confusing effect. Director Michael Haneke was glad to apply this diegetic shock effect. For example, in his film *Amour* (2012), there are several scenes where divinely sounding classical music in the background suddenly breaks off; as it turns out later, it was just a CD player being turned off by one of the film characters. At that point, the spectator unexpectedly understands that the symbolic non-diegetic music of the divine or sacredness (as it could be understood in the first case) was in fact a pure realistic sound and nothing more.

Diagram 5. Diegetic shifts in Michael Haneke's film *Amour* (2012)

Video:	interior	close up of CD player
Music:	classical (non-diegetic)	classical (diegetic)

This kind of shift can also be used for the opposite purpose to make a so-called diegetic joke. Many examples of this exist in Mel Brooks' comedies, when, suddenly, it turns out that the background music is not actually what it seems to be. For example, in the parody *Blazing Saddles* (1974) by Mel Brooks, the main hero Bart rides as the sheriff on his horse, accompanied by non-diegetic music played by the Count Basie Orchestra. When the higher level of the camera reaches the real Count Basie and his orchestra, who appear on the screen next to Bart, the music shifts to diegetic (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. *Blazing Saddles* (1974), Mel Brooks

Another case is the overlap of narrative levels in music itself, when one music parameter acts as diegetic, and the others as non-diegetic. There are a lot of examples

from old classical films when a diegetic song has non-diegetic orchestra accompaniment (*Casablanca*, 1942, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, 1961, Fig. 3) to more modern films, for example, Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2003), where the nonchalant whistling tune of Bernard Hermann is underscored by more dramatic and dissonant orchestra chords. In these cases, music belongs to several diegetic levels at the same time.



Figure 3. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), Blake Edwards

Diagram 6. Overlap of narrative levels in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), Blake Edwards

voice + guitar accompaniment	diegetic
orchestra score	non-diegetic

Speaking more generally, we can see that a separate musical cue rarely belongs to one diegetic type and usually changes its addition. In the previously mentioned *Breakfast at Tiffany's* episode, the music at the beginning sounds like a diegetic background – Paul is working with the printing machine and hears a song coming of the closed window (diegetic unseen music). Later, he opens the window and sees Holly singing (the music changes to diegetic seen, but the sound level is still not reacting to the opening of the window and does not increase, i.e., it is not absolutely subordinate to diegetic world laws). After some more time, an orchestral accompaniment joins in and the soundtrack becomes diegetically ambiguous (Holly's guitar belongs to the diegetic world, while the orchestra accompaniment – to the non-diegetic world). Finally, when the dialogue between the characters begins, music continues to sound only as a non-diegetic background.

Even underscored non-diegetic music, if it is composed using the so-called Mickey Mousing style, has some level of diegetic ambiguity. Although it is obvious that the score belongs to the non-diegetic world, the diegetic control over non-diegetic music is still very noticeable. Music starts and stops in precise synchronisation with an action on the screen, pedantically reacts to the changes in the plot, and so on. We can take almost all Walt Disney animation as an example of such a case, as can early Hollywood cinema scores by Max Steiner, Erik Korngold and many others. It is especially obvious when music tries to replace or imitate the sounds of nature and sound effects. It has to be said that this mimetic type of storytelling is more and directly connected with the diegetic world, and is neither partly mimetic (music created to indicate someone's emotion) or reflective (a voice-over or musical comment), when the different viewpoint towards a scene is demonstrated.

To sum up, the main types of diegetic ambiguity that can be distinguished are these:

- ◆ it does not have a plausible music source;
- ◆ there is no stable music source (diegetic shift);
- ◆ it does simultaneously belong to different editing scenes or narrative levels;
- ◆ there is diegetic control over non-diegetic music.

It can also be stated that the diegetic ambiguity of film music is not an exception, but rather a rule. This naturally raises the question: is the appropriate concept of diegesis being used in the cinema? Perhaps most of the examples would not seem so confusing if we did not understand film music just as one way of narrating voices, as in Genette's sense, but more as the product of narration, the same as the characters, plot, etc., as Ben Winters suggests (Winters 2010). Or if the recognition of the inherent fictionality of the film's nature would reduce the binary opposition between diegetic and non-diegetic music, what would not let us consider any of them more or less realistic (i.e. diegetic)? By agreeing with the standpoint that "diegesis is a mental construct: there are only words on the page, frames of film, there is only music coming out of the loudspeakers in the cinema; the rest happens in our minds" (Heldt 2012: 54), the Klein bottle or a Möbius strip as an image of the interconnectedness of narration and diegesis could be more appropriate, as Nick Davis suggests (Davis 2012). Therefore, looking for a more specific conception of cinematic diegesis, liberated from literature and without putting emphasis on the realistic necessity of diegetic world, seems to be the way to unlock the question of diegetic ambiguity of film music.

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Diegetinis kino muzikos dviprasmiškumas

REIKŠMINIAI
ŽODŽIAI:
diegetinė kino
muzika, nediegetinė
kino muzika,
dviprasmiškumas.

SANTRAUKA. Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas diegetinis kino muzikos dviprasmiškumas ir jo ryšys su kino diegezės sampratomis. Viena anksčiausių kino muzikos klasifikacijų yra pagrįsta jos suskirstymu į vadinamąją diegetinę, kai muzikos šaltinis priklauso pasakojamai istorijai, ir nediegetinę, kai muzikos šaltinis priklauso pasakotojo erdvei. Nors kino muzikos tyrėjai iš principo pritaria šiam teiginiui, keletas aspektų lieka atvirų diskusijai. Ar kine įmanoma įtikinamai atskirti pasakotoją nuo paties pasakojimo arba fikcijos bei tikrovės sudedamąsias dalis? Ar tai, ką mes laikome diegetiniu pasakojamos istorijos pasauliu, gali būti laikoma kažkur iš tikrųjų egzistuojančia realybe ir kiek? Šie klausimai ypač užaštrėja, kai diegetiniai lygmenys susipina, o muzika migruoja tarp jų. Aiškiai išreikšto muzikos šaltinio nebuvimas, jo poslinkiai iš vieno pasakojimo lygmens į kitą ar vienalaikis priklausymas keliems, nediegetinės muzikos diegetinė kontrolė pateikiami kaip pagrindiniai diegetinio dviprasmiškumo atvejai. Straipsnyje atkreipiamas dėmesys į literatūrinės ir kino diegezės sampratų skirtumus, kurie, autoriaus nuomone, didele dalimi lemia šio dviprasmiškumo priežastis.