

11 The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic

ROBYNN J. STILWELL

It is one of the most basic distinctions in film music: diegetic or nondiegetic? It is a simple, technical matter—is the music part of the film’s story world or an element of the cinematic apparatus that represents that world? It is one of the easiest things to teach students about film music—to comprehend, if not to spell (it’s getting to the point where I see “diegetic” so often, it’s starting to seem right to me). Even on the first night of a film music course, college students can recognize moments that challenge their sense of that boundary even before they have a name for it. Yet recently the issue has been the subject of a great deal of discussion, formal and informal, in film music circles. It is repeatedly pointed out that there are quite a lot of cases that do not seem so easy to label as diegetic or nondiegetic.

The attitude toward these cases ranges from curiosity to dissatisfaction; the response has largely been at the extremes. Some have responded with a taxonomic approach, breaking down various stages or states between diegetic and nondiegetic, while others have responded with dismissal—if this border is being crossed so often, then the distinction doesn’t mean anything. One thing both of these reactions have in common is a need to “freeze” the border crossing at a point: either, like a specimen for an old-fashioned electron microscope, it has to be killed in order to be examined; or the border itself evaporates so the point becomes invisible.

These reactions seem unsatisfactory for some basic experiential reasons. My objection to the latter is simple: because the border between diegetic and nondiegetic is crossed so often does not invalidate the separation. If anything, it calls attention to the act of crossing and therefore reinforces difference. My problem with the former is more the stop-motion aspect: the border crossing is not so much an event as a process, not simply a crossing, or even passing through distinct intermediary states, but a trajectory, a vec-

tor, a gesture. It unfolds through time, like film, like music. Even when the transition is acknowledged, it is often suspiciously cast as “transgression”—which it can be, but isn’t always.

Why are we coming to this questioning of a basic concept just as the relatively new field of film music studies is beginning to reach a coherent and critical mass? I suspect that the state of film music studies is, in fact, the reason for the investigation. Foundations have been laid, basic parameters mapped. We have a sense of where we are, and now we are moving into an area of greater refinement, more focused inquiry. We are also moving beyond a repertoire of classical Hollywood films, European avant-gardes, and documentaries with scores by famous concert hall composers. The terrain is shifting, and productive analysis will move with it.

In Noël Carroll’s terms, it is a move from Theory, a proper noun with a capital T, an overarching construct into which a text is fitted, to theorizing, an activity that engages with the text on much more limited, specific terms in order to understand better how the film or films work.¹ We might consider it a shift from casting to sculpture. Although Carroll was speaking specifically about the field of *film* studies, his wariness about the effectiveness of a single Theory that presumes to explain everything is salutary to any field (even physics, the field of inquiry in which the unified field theory is still the holy grail and which has struggled for nigh on a century with a full reconciliation of Newtonian, Einsteinian, and quantum principles); theorizing breaks this massive undertaking into bite-sized chunks, not only easily digestible but nourishing:

Film theorizing . . . should be piecemeal. But it should also be diversified. Insofar as theorists approach film from many different angles, from different levels of abstraction and generality, they will have to avail themselves of multidisciplinary frameworks. Some questions about film may send the researcher toward economics, while others require a look into perceptual psychology. In other instances, sociology, political science, anthropology, communications theory, linguistics, artificial intelligence, biology, or narrative theory may provide the initial research tools which the film theorist requires in order to begin to evolve theories of this or that aspect of film.²

Carroll does not specifically mention music as a source of enlightenment (demonstrating yet again the dominance of the visual/verbal in film studies), but music is perhaps particularly well placed to throw new light from its outsider position—something that Carroll unintentionally suggests:

In opposition to the essentialist theorist who might disparage explorations in other disciplines as fatally alloyed, it is my claim that anxieties about theoretical purity are impediments to theoretical discovery. Film theorizing

should be interdisciplinary. It should be pursued without the expectation of discovering a unified theory, cinematic or otherwise. That is, it should be catholic about the methodological frameworks it explores.

Perhaps at this historical juncture it seems strange to urge that film theory be multidisciplinary, since it might be asserted that the Theory—that assemblage of Althusser, Lacan, Barthes, et al.—is patently interdisciplinary, given that Althusser was a philosopher, Lacan a psychoanalyst, and Barthes a literary critic. And yet, I wonder about the interdisciplinary pretensions of Theory since Theory, as it is practiced in film departments—and neighboring literature departments—is really a body of canonical texts or authors, which body of authors serves rather like the paradigm of a *single discipline* in the making.³

In the past couple of decades, musicology has been converging with this “unified field” itself, but it still has a unique language and analytical practice that allows that outside perspective, a different angle of approach, and other models of understanding. The specific shapes, structures, and dynamics of music and of film are individually challenging—and the element of unfolding over time is perhaps too often “frozen” into a spatial metaphor for ease of analysis, or sliced into discrete moments; the combination of film and music merely complicates matters.

The trajectory of music between diegetic and nondiegetic highlights a gap in our understanding, a place of destabilization and ambiguity. The diegetic and nondiegetic are conceived as separate realms, almost like two adjacent bubbles, and there seems to be little possibility of moving from one to the other without piercing the skin that explodes the two “universes,” which certainly is one reason for the reliance on the language of “transgression.” But perhaps it is a failure of metaphor. It seems a perfect candidate for theorizing.

When that boundary between diegetic and nondiegetic is traversed, it does always *mean*. It is also hardly ever a single moment—one moment we’re in the diegetic realm and in the blink of an eye, like walking through Alice’s mirror, we are in the nondiegetic looking-glass world. The thickness of the glass, as it were, like any liminal space, is a space of power and transformation, of inversion and the uncanny, of making strange in order to make sense.⁴ That these transitions are *sometimes* transgressions only heightens that liminality.

On a film music roundtable for *The Velvet Light Trap*,⁵ this ambiguity of diegetic and nondiegetic came up, and between us, Jim Buhler and I built up the term “fantastical gap.”

JIM: Likewise, a film such as *King Kong* plays with the distinction to productive effect. The music on the island, for instance, is neither diegetic nor nondiegetic. I would locate the fantastic in fact in the gap between what we hear and what we see. But without some sort of distinction between D/ND sound, such a gap isn’t even really audible.

ROBYNN: re Jim & *King-Kong*, yes, that “fantastical gap” is exactly what I was pointing to. . . . I think the “geography of the soundscape” is far more complex and flexible than we have begun to chart.

The phrase “fantastical gap” seemed particularly apt for this liminal space because it captured both its magic and its danger, the sense of unreality that always obtains as we leap from one solid edge toward another at some unknown distance and some uncertain stability—and sometimes we’re in the air before we know we’ve left the ground. “Fantastical” can literally mean fantasy (cinematically, a musical number, dream, or flashback), and in fact this is one implication of the change of state that has begun to be explored by scholars like Rick Altman⁶ and David Neumeyer;⁷ but it can also mean, musically, an improvisation, the free play of possibility.

The Heisenberg principle of physics tells us that observing a particle or wave⁸ alters its state, causing it to change from a superposition of all possibilities to a singular position. The observer may hypothesize but not predict the final position, and the ambiguity of that superposition is analogous to the destabilization and multiplicity of possibility that occurs during the transition between one diegetic/nondiegetic state to the other. In the spirit of theorizing, we will look at several examples of transition, not in order to reduce the process to a single trajectory, but to start to map the geography of the soundscape and contemplate some of the axes⁹ along which we can negotiate that gap.

GEOGRAPHY OF THE SOUNDSCAPE

Although cinema is normally assumed to be a distinct medium, it has an obvious historical antecedent in theater. The frame of the screen becomes the proscenium arch; the incidental music rises from the orchestra in the pit below and in front of the stage—the musicians are heard but not seen by the audience. The conductor can see the stage and respond to the action and mood, but the characters on the stage do not acknowledge the presence of the musicians at their feet, even if they perform with them during a musi-

cal number (only the actors may do so at the end of the play, or by breaking the fourth wall and interrupting the illusion on stage). The term “underscore” has several interlocking meanings, including the delineation of emotional or narrative content by musical accompaniment, or the more literal meaning of score running *under* the dialogue and/or action. This last meaning also shades over into a geographical meaning, of music emanating from a physical space underneath the stage.

Cinema changes almost none of this construct, musically. It is the “stage” itself that is collapsed into two dimensions. However, it also throws into relief the difference between diegetic and nondiegetic; silent cinema in particular highlights the divergent existence of black-and-white two-dimensional images, and living, breathing, blowing, bowing musicians in the theater. The two may converge, for instance, in a ballroom scene, where the live music is pretending to be that of the musicians seen or presumed on screen, but the physical separation is plain to anyone in the audience.¹⁰

The arrival of sound caused a crisis of conceptualization. Some film makers, notably René Clair in France and the Soviets, found novel solutions, but the ways in which the music related to the diegesis were often explicitly artificial—the unsynched dialogue in *Sous les Toits de Paris*, for example, or the more abstract composition of Eisensteinian montage. The Hollywood model from the beginning strove toward a putative “realism” (in quotes, heavy irony)—not reality as lived experience, but rather reality as based on theater, leading to the well-known early proliferation of backstage musicals and nightclub-centered gangster films to allow the quasi-realistic insertion of music. In fact, one could argue that the visuals of your basic Busby Berkeley extravaganza are far more “nondiegetic” than the music: the extraordinary rail yard through which Dick Powell carries Ruby Keeler at the end of “I Only Have Eyes for You” in *Dames* (1934) is an example of a space that could never exist in a theater as depicted, while the numerous optical transformations of objects into formations of women and vice versa are manipulations beyond physical reality. The nondiegetic becomes a space of fantasy, at least in part because of anxiety over its “impossibility.”

As late as 1944, Hitchcock famously still asked, “But where is the orchestra?” about a proposed underscore for *Lifeboat*. Apocryphal or not, the question is illuminating. It wasn’t the *function* that concerned Hitchcock in *Lifeboat*, but the extra-diegetic location of the musicians.¹¹ Perhaps the question never was the *absence* of the musicians, but the *uncertainty* of where they might be. Unidentifiable, unlocatable sound is disturbing because we (potential prey) are alerted to potential threat; it makes us uneasy; we look around for visual grounding.

Max Steiner exploited this anxiety—which had suppressed nondiegetic scores in other films—when he created the score to *King Kong* in 1933. The film is both fantasy and horror, so Steiner could take advantage of what may have been in other contexts disadvantages, or at least distractions. After the pit-orchestra overture and a watery dissolve into the diegesis, the scenes in gritty, realistic New York are unscored, as are the initial scenes on the ship. Music rolls in with the fog, a visual metaphor for the fantastical gap. It is not yet the elsewhere of Skull Island, but an amorphous border that extends around it, blurring its edges. If we watch the sequence carefully, it is not very difficult to classify the various elements: the comments of those on board the ship pin down the drums as diegetic; the harp-arpeggio music of the sea (a music already established by the opening scenes of the New York harbor) is retrospectively confirmed as nondiegetic because no one is talking about it. Yet there are moments of slippage. More intriguing and more complex is the elision between the water music and the drums; those on board the ship are speaking about the drums over the nondiegetic water music before we can clearly hear them, and then when the scene changes to Skull Island, the drums remain heard but not seen for several minutes, creating an acousmatic underscore for the film crew’s search for the source.¹² There is a play here not only between diegetic and nondiegetic, but also between foreground and background. While these may seem to be synonymous at first blush, they are not: diegetic and nondiegetic are a matter of technical placement; foreground and background are a matter of perception, conditioned by a complex of factors, including dialogue, postures of attentiveness from the actors, and aural perspective. The fairly primitive sound production of 1933 results in a flat aural perspective; we must rely more heavily on the visual and verbal cues to help us locate the music.

We can also be misled by this same constellation of factors. A moment complementary to the approach to Skull Island occurs at the end of *The Winter Guest*, a story that takes place at the edge of the frozen Scottish sea, in a tiny clutch of houses, shrouded in fog. As the intertwining stories of generational transition resolve, the reconciled mother and daughter walk toward home, arm in arm. The daughter, Frances, speaks of plans for her house for the spring, and her mother realizes that Frances’s plans to move away to Australia have been shelved. Frances looks into the distance, tilts her head, and smiles. At first her gesture seems to be inspired by her recognition that the decision has been made and the pleasure she takes in it, but then she utters a quiet, astonishing observation: “Listen. That’s a boy playing that.” Although our recognition of that fact occurs almost instantaneously when Frances says these words, the realization then unfurls back-

ward for the entire length of the film, recontextualizing all the solo piano underscore we have heard to this point as diegetic, as the two little boys who had contemplated oncoming adolescence by the shore race hopefully out onto the ice, into the fog, to almost certain death.

We can certainly make the argument that the music was always diegetic. But the ability to retroactively classify the entire score of *The Winter Guest* as diegetic—or, similarly, when we are able, in hindsight, to differentiate the diegetic and nondiegetic on the approach to Skull Island—does not defuse the destabilizing effect of *experiencing* the shift of perception. The fullness and pervasiveness of the music in the soundscape of *The Winter Guest* leads us to understand it as nondiegetic. Of course, careful consideration would suggest that it is impossible for the piano in one house to sound equally loud in a neighboring house, the high street, and down on the beach, but the acknowledgment by a character of the music is so powerful that it can override the immediate rational response, particularly as the music seems to rise in a warm, concluding gesture as a benediction on all the stories that have come to peaceful resolutions. Frances's invocation of the acousmatic piano takes the foreground as we are returned to one boy on the ice, a kitten tucked into his jacket, turning in a circle, searching for the way to go. The beach or the open sea? All is obscured by the fog, but finally he turns away from the camera, and, underneath the music, we hear his call to his friend, "Tom! Wait for me!" as he disappears into the fog. The conflict between the hopeful music and the impending disaster for these children—perhaps Tom is already drowned—is almost subsumed by the startling shift from nondiegetic to diegetic.¹³ The disjunction of that shift vaults the music from background to foreground, and from empathetic underscore to anempathetic source music.

THE EMOTIONAL TERRAIN

The alliance of empathy with the underscore and anempathy with source music is certainly prevalent in the classical Hollywood aesthetic, and it is still a dominant mode of scoring. Still, it is only an alliance, not an unbreakable bond. One has only to think of Rick wallowing in diegetic nostalgia in *Casablanca* to realize that just as diegetic and nondiegetic, foreground and background are neighboring but not parallel axes, so are empathy and anempathy and their close neighbors, subjectivity and objectivity.

It is true that nondiegetic scores tend toward subjectivity and source

music to a kind of realistic "objectivity," which would seem to make them synonymous with empathy and anempathy, but they diverge from a single point, the point-of-view/audition/feeling of a character in the diegesis. Empathy/anempathy is the relationship that the audience,¹⁴ presumably conditioned by the gestures in the music, has with the character: they recognize and identify with the feelings that the character is experiencing, and may feel them, though in an attenuated form. When we talk about subjectivity in film and film music, the connection between character and audience is more intense and more enveloping. Anempathy can be "objective," an observation and even understanding of a character's feeling, but it can also be a rejection or abjection of those feelings—neither closer to nor further from the character's feelings (on the objective/subjective axis), but rather perpendicular to them.

In an infamous scene from *The Silence of the Lambs*, we are presented with an unusually stratified, and thus clarifying, projection of objectivity, subjectivity, empathy, and an anempathy that at least invites abjection. The murderous cannibal Hannibal Lecter is confined to an iron-barred cage. Overhead lighting does not dispel the gothic shadows of the formal room in which the cage is located. The framing is essentially objective, if somewhat voyeuristic, the camera moving slowly over the tape recorder chained to the table and Lecter's sketch of Clarice with a lamb, finally coming to rest on Lecter, half hidden behind a semisheer curtain, apparently on a toilet. The cassette is playing Bach's "Goldberg" Variations. Medium-close-up and full-body shots of the guards bringing him his requested second dinner of rare lamb chops, and of Lecter through the bars, alternate with close-ups of Lecter's face. His impassivity, not to mention his well-established malevolence, do not invite empathy, although at one point, he is seen humming along with the Bach, seemingly enveloped in the music even as he is clearly plotting his escape. We may glimpse his subjectivity, but only in an objective fashion. Despite his calm demeanor, Lecter unleashes a vicious attack on the guards, violence we see in a flurry of medium close shots, many of them half-obscured and accompanied by low, fairly generic nondiegetic horror music that swamps the Bach, filling the foreground of the soundscape as the sequence ends with a point-of-view shot, from the perspective of the guard being bludgeoned by a nightstick. In the aftermath, we are given an overhead shot, echoing the opening shot,¹⁵ looking over the carnage as the nondiegetic music fades and the Bach reasserts itself. The camera pulls back and up as we see a blood-spattered Lecter standing over the tape recorder conducting the Bach, the steadiness of his hand highlighting his lack of concern.

The basic structure is not complicated: source music is continuous

throughout the sequence (although the real time elapsed during the attack is elided by a gap in the Variations), while a nondiegetic score is layered over it (a somewhat unusual inversion). But questions of objectivity and subjectivity, empathy and anempathy are complicated. The Bach is objectively playing and is anempathetic to the violence Lecter perpetrates. Lecter's involvement with the music, however, is framed by intimate close-ups and his physical interaction with the music, which are techniques of creating empathy and identification. We can observe his deeply subjective communion with the music, and, if we are so inclined, even join in his reveling in the music. The nondiegetic underscore loosely mickey-mouses the violence (is the underscore "objective," a rhythmic approximation of the onscreen action?), but with its low, rumbling orchestral booms and mid-range brass blasts, we are likely to perceive it primarily as "powerful." This could make it empathetic with Lecter, as it matches the measured pace of his swift but unhurried attack, his utter control of the situation. The combination of the powerful music and the sudden, violent images might, however, be read as "scary" because the audience finds itself in a position submissive to Lecter. Is the music empathetic with the guards, or does it in fact act directly on the viewer, who becomes one with the beating victim because of the POV camera? The subjectivity of the guard is an understood term in the identity equation, but the music, like the shrieking violins in *Psycho* or the heart-pounding bass semitones in *Jaws*, mimics a kinesiological response in the audience. And then the horror music fades, like an adrenaline rush, and the near-POV shot of Lecter serenely communing with Bach returns.

Does it matter at which position exactly the audience perceives itself at any one instant during this scene? Not really. The point is that the position is constantly shifting, that we are sliding along these various axes at different speeds and in different directions, and in our disorientation we are more susceptible to the effects along the way. Is it worse to be sharing the subjectivity of the guard being beaten or of the madman who can kill so suddenly and remorselessly? This latter possibility invites abjection—a recognition, even an identification with, a character's emotional state, but a rejection of those feelings out of revulsion. The dizzying shifts may, in the end, hold us at a distance by centrifugal force.

This is an extreme, and rare, example. Filmmakers rarely aim for rejection of their characters—and indeed, the paradoxical appeal of Hannibal Lecter and other charismatic villains is in part achieved by a push-pull of empathy and abjection. The more common strategy is the drawing of the audience to a character by using a trajectory through the fantastical gap between diegetic

and nondiegetic, along multiple axes including empathy/anempathy, objectivity/subjectivity, and aural perspective (there/here).

Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *I Know Where I'm Going!* is a disquisition on border crossing: from working class to upper class, whether via money or marriage; from England to Scotland; and from reality to fantasy (although which is which is up for debate), symbolized by that final border that Joan is unable to cross, from highland to island, a fantastical gap on whose beach she is stranded. As she waits, she is taken to visit an old woman who is a friend of the industrialist Joan is about to marry, even as she begins to fall in love with Torquil, who is the impoverished hereditary laird of the island that Joan's fiancé rents.

Old Rebecca Crozier hosts a tea for Joan, Torquil, and a nouveau riche family. She mentions that her gardener, Campbell, is going to be holding a ceilidh to celebrate his sixtieth wedding anniversary, and she begins to reminisce about balls from her own youth. Highland pipes sound softly, distantly, as she recounts the details to Joan, and, as the music gradually increases in volume and fullness, creating a sense of drawing closer, the image dissolves from the dining room to the croft, where the ceilidh is in full swing—and where Torquil and Joan watch from a ladder outside, becoming an audience within the frame.

This scene is especially dense with crossings—the working-class dance underscores the memory of an aristocratic one; the impoverished aristocracy graciously acts as servant and landlord to the obnoxious nouveau riche; Joan's social-climbing marriage is juxtaposed with the Campbell's lifelong bond—and soon we will get to know to the teenaged lovers Kenny and Bridey, who provide the model for true love for Joan and Torquil. The unstable placement of the music opens up the fantastical gap in which these crossings can play.

This is a simple moment in terms of cinematic technique, but ambiguous in its meaning. The music could, after all, be simply diegetic; we have been told that the ceilidh is eminent, but this narrative cue and the musical cue are set far enough apart that the audience is more likely to connect the music with Rebecca Crozier's description of a highland dance, particularly because it sounds "distant." After the fact, we can recast this distance as geographical, but only because of its diegetic status; as long as we assume that it is nondiegetic, that faraway sound tends to suggest that the distance is temporal. It is a technique that often leads to a flashback, though here it is a moment that flows both backward and forward in time—literally forward as we jump to Torquil and Joan at the ceilidh, but backward not only in memory but to a utopian simpler time, where love wins out over money.

Although there is no completely rational way to understand the placement of the music (if we take it as purely diegetic, the uninterrupted musical phrasing is untenable), in the experience of this moment we are most likely to hear the distant pipes as an underscore to Rebecca Crozier's memory, and therefore what Claudia Gorbman has called "metadiegetic" ("pertaining to narration by a secondary narrator").¹⁶ Her example of metadiegetic music seems to have been written with this scene in mind: "the scene's conversation seems to trigger X's memory of the romance and the song that went with it; wordlessly, he 'takes over' part of the film's narration and we are privileged to read his musical thoughts."¹⁷ Putting this a slightly different way, the nondiegetic music places us inside a character's head, within that character's subjectivity.

The trajectory between diegetic music and nondiegetic music that might more precisely be called metadiegetic is not an uncommon trope in modern movies, and is often used as a way of drawing the audience into the subjectivity of a character. It happens twice in *The Killing Fields*, for instance, the first time as Sydney Schanberg puts "Nessun dorma" on his stereo as a backdrop for news footage from Cambodia. As he fast-forwards through the videotape, the atrocities are intercut with Schanberg's increasingly horrified expression. The accelerating tempo of the images is a visual analog to the swelling of the music that comes to envelop the soundtrack and the audience, wrapping them up in a sonic embrace that empathetically mimics Schanberg's feelings, though the interposition of the television between him and us may block a full entry into his subjectivity (figure 11.1). At the end of the film, John Lennon's "Imagine" plays on the loudspeaker as Schanberg and Dith Pran are reunited, and the music expands from tinny and realistic to the all-encompassing sound we normally hear as nondiegetic as the two men embrace. The utopian promise of the song is realized for just a moment in their reunion, yet is also deeply ironic given where and when they are.

This technique is employed more subtly in *The Insider*. If the division between diegetic and nondiegetic still has a kind of experiential reality derived from theater, the difference between nondiegetic and metadiegetic is much more subtle, often measured by the distance between "empathetic" and "subjective." In the scene in which tobacco company whistle-blower Jeffrey Wigand decides to testify against his former employers, a minimalist mandolin underscore emphasizes his jitteriness with its repetitive fluttering. His decision made, he is bundled into a car for the trip to the courthouse in a motorcade. The line of cars, the flashing patrol car lights, and the motorcycle escort would normally elicit a resolute, decisive action cue, reflecting the import and busyness of the moment. Instead, all diegetic sound fades and the



Figure 11.1 Entering Schanberg's subjectivity, in *The Killing Fields*.

delicate mandolin cue rises in volume and fullness to encompass the soundscape, underscoring camera shots from Wigand's point of view as one lawyer looks at him with concern, and an over-the-shoulder shot as Wigand gazes out the car window at rows of gravestones flashing by. The combination of visual and aural puts us in Wigand's emotional shoes, concerned not about the moment but about its consequences. As the cemetery motorcade passes symbolizes, he has chosen a dangerous path. What makes this scene unusual is that the music is *always* nondiegetic, but it has clearly also traversed a gap into interiority with the suppression of the diegetic and the foregrounding of an instrument as soft as a mandolin, an aural perspective of great intimacy. When Wigand steps outside the car, the music drops out as the diegetic sound of the reporters crowding around the car door overwhelms both Wigand and the audience.

The difference between the memory of Rebecca Crozier and the meditation of Jeffrey Wigand might prompt us to refine our conception of "metadiegetic," to consider making new distinctions between a literal form, which is probably best exemplified by the composition scenes in *Amadeus*, where we hear the notes as Mozart conceives them, and the more common forms, exemplified by Rebecca Crozier's memory of the dances of her youth (quite often, such a sound advance leads into a flashback, carrying the music across the gap between nondiegetic and diegetic) or a foregrounded nondiegetic pop song, the lyrics of which express feelings that we can identify as those of the character onscreen. The mandolin score in this scene

in *The Insider* could be perceived as an even more abstracted form of metadiegetic sound, the subjective/empathetic underscore to unarticulated emotions, leaving the audience to traverse yet another gap. We could consider this as either closer to a traditional nondiegetic underscore or as even further removed into the metadiegetic, depending upon our views of the literal and the subjective.

Although fine distinctions may be fascinating to explore, they also risk recapitulating the stratifying or branching taxonomic approach. To preserve the sensation of motion through a field rather than create more discrete boundaries between states (and attendant terminology), we might refine the concept of the metadiegetic as a kind of represented subjectivity, music clearly (through framing, dialogue, acting, lighting, sound design, or other cinematic process) situated in a character who forms a particularly strong point of identification/location for the audience. The character becomes the bridging mechanism between the audience and the diegesis as we enter into his or her subjectivity. This is a space beyond empathy; its location with regard to the diegesis does, however, reach out and engage us in a way that starts to tear at the fabric of the usual conception of diegetic/nondiegetic—or, it acknowledges a relationship between audience and film that diegetic/nondiegetic has displaced by concentrating on the construction of the text within its own boundaries.

Diegetic/nondiegetic is a distinction that takes place “behind” the screen. The diegetic is firmly rooted in the depicted world; that is, of course, its very definition. The diegesis can become sound-permeable at its boundaries, and music may osmose through that boundary,¹⁸ but the nondiegetic is usually conceived as a space behind/beneath the diegetic (our background music or underscore / pit orchestra). There is, however, another nondiegetic space, usually reserved for the voice, and that is “over.” “Over” is a foregrounded space, under the control of a character/narrator who is usually to some degree controlling our responses, through omniscience, knowledge gained through time, or language. It might be possible to think of the metadiegetic as music existing in or around “over,” rising up into the foreground and into the expression of a particular point of view. But within that space, we can also range along the axis of objectivity/subjectivity. Captain Kirk narrating a series of events into his log or Mozart composing is fairly objective. Rebecca Crozier’s memories of dances past or the adult Scout recalling the events of her youth in *To Kill a Mockingbird* are more gently subjective. Ardent feelings can produce a subjective overlap or fusion of the over/metadiegetic space: one could suggest that in *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy’s singing is not

strictly diegetic, but that her voice meets the nondiegetic orchestra in a metadiegetic space of longing for a happy place far away, “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”).¹⁹ In intense emotional subjectivity, the metadiegetic can even carry us to a place beyond verbal articulation—Mildred Pierce’s contemplation of suicide, or Jeffrey Wigand’s anguish over his decision to blow the whistle. If we were to follow the Romantic idealistic line of philosophy, music could surpass the voice/verbal into a sort of metadiegetic sublime soaring above the diegesis.

This theoretical positioning might seem tenuous, subjective, but then that would also resonate with the emotional impact produced by that positioning. When the music takes the foreground, it can, literally and metaphorically, seem to spill out over/from behind the screen and envelop the audience, creating a particularly intense connection. Although film studies may still be debating the precise psychological effect of “subjectivity,” and whether it creates a real form of identification between a character and the individual audience members, whether empathy is assumed or genuinely felt, we do not generally debate those fine distinctions while experiencing a film. We are more likely to feel that the connection is weak or strong, and music is one of the most powerful forces forging that connection. The metadiegetic might be conceived as a kind of musical “direct address,” threatening to breach the fourth wall that is the screen.

DIEGETIC MUSIC, SUBJECTIVE SPACE

A simple, extended sound advance, a transition from nondiegetic to diegetic, over the opening credits of Jane Campion’s *Holy Smoke* is technically unexceptional. Many films begin with credit music that is full sounding and apparently nondiegetic but “shrinks” to the diegetic space of the first post-credit scene. A closer look, however, reveals that, contrary to most practice, we move from relative objectivity in the nondiegetic to relative subjectivity in the diegetic.

A young Australian woman, Ruth, is visiting India with a friend. It is established with diegetic sound overlaying the apparently nondiegetic music that the blonde, fair-skinned Ruth initially feels somewhat exotic and out of place; but while her friend is happy to do touristy things, Ruth is looking for a more authentic experience. Her attention is caught by a happy group of young, mostly European women in Indian dress, and she follows them to a multistoried building that houses the cult into which Ruth will be drawn.

Neil Diamond’s “Holly Holy” is, on one level, a fairly obvious choice, in

part because of its cryptic lyrics, because whatever it means, it is clearly about a search for meaning and redemption, reflecting Ruth's search for "the real stuff" in India. The music has a strong, steady ostinato (piano bass octaves sound out a tonic on the downbeat of a slow 4-beat measure, with the fourth and the fifth on beats 3 and 4), and the texture is very spare, with a strummed guitar over the piano. The voice begins calmly and gradually increases in intensity and volume and rises in range throughout the song. The effect is vaguely non-Western. Rather unusual for a preexisting pop song in a film, the recording is not the album version but a live version, which lends an urgency and immediacy to the music and further widens the fantastical gap as the sequence ends in performance.

The combination of the camera technique and the hypnotically building music draws Ruth, and us, into this liminal space where she will become transformed. As she enters the house where the Baba's followers reside, there is a vertiginous, spinning quasi-point-of-view shot up the atrium as the music shifts to the incantatory bridge, which builds and rises (shifting from strong beats on 1 and 3 to steady eighth notes, the voice moving higher and creating extended syncopations)²⁰ as Ruth rises into this new state.

Although the sound quality never really changes, the transition from nondiegetic to diegetic takes place slowly, in an almost dreamlike fashion, with different camera speeds, as Ruth emerges onto the roof where the Baba's followers are eating, conversing, and dancing. We lose a sense of time, though we are clearly experiencing a time dilation, moving from afternoon to evening.

It is only at the peak of the music, the drive to the recapitulation of the chorus from the bridge, that the visuals—people dancing and singing—and the music coincide, confirming that it is indeed, or has become, diegetic. This creates a sense of arrival, of the completion that Ruth will find here. The music creates the through-line—even the story takes a little hitch backward as we see Ruth leaving her friend and entering the building alone at the end of the song. It is as if the music overrides diegetic time, and the visuals become the nondiegetic accompaniment to the real narrative in the music.

A final example, from Michael Mann's 1986 thriller *Manhunter*, takes this inversion of expectation to an extreme. The music is explicitly diegetic the entire way, yet the overwhelming effect is that of being drawn into subjectivity—doubly so, as the central character, FBI investigator Will Graham, is drawn into the disturbed mind of the man he is profiling. The music is a way of claiming space and power; it is an assault from the moment the serial killer Francis Dollarhyde slips the eight-track into the player. The vol-

ume and power of the music flatten his prospective victim against the windows of his house, isolated in a misty Florida swamp.

Dollarhyde's control is only amplified by Mann's choice of "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" by Iron Butterfly, a notoriously dark, proto-heavy metal anthem that was the obsession of a real-life serial killer whom Mann had studied. The twelve-minute climax sequence of the film uses a trimmed version of the seventeen-minute original, but nonetheless seems to play out in real time. Its diegetic nature is emphasized by the cross-cutting between the investigators closing in and Dollarhyde's intended murder. The music belongs *only* to the killer's space, and its representation of his subjectivity is increased by the gradually ever more dancelike quality of his actions, responding to the rhythm and line of the music.

But this movie is about Will Graham and the process by which he gets into the mind of the killer, almost losing himself, and this psychological dynamic is played out in this sequence. As he draws closer to the killer's house (like Skull Island, it is surrounded by a fantastical gap filled with fog and music), the song has reached the solo section, with its agonizingly extended prolongation at the end of the bridge/development section. Despite its undeniably diegetic state, complete with quasi-realistic aural perspective, the music is symbolically metadiegetic, forming a miasmatic connection between Dollarhyde and Graham, while musically it is functioning like nondiegetic underscore, building tension toward the long-delayed return to the tonic bass riff, the exact moment when Graham literally bursts through the glass wall between nondiegetic and diegetic, into the red dragon's metadiegetic lair (figure 11.2).

Mann shot the final confrontation in real time with multiple cameras at different speeds, building the scene in the edit bay, so—as with *Holy Smoke* or an old Busby Berkeley number—the putatively diegetic music holds together a fantasia of fragmented images. This figure-ground reversal is appropriate to another one in which the physical violence is an outward manifestation of a psychological battle: Will Graham is submerged into Dollarhyde's subjectivity as he is physically overwhelmed by the loud music.

The distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic seems to easy to make, but often the most basic aspects of an issue are rarely explored because they simply seem to be a given, even when they are in fact part of the construct. The background radio noise that interferes with detailed galactic mapping turns out to be the distant echo of the Big Bang; but it is the close examination of how matter forms strings and clumps that gives us deeper insight

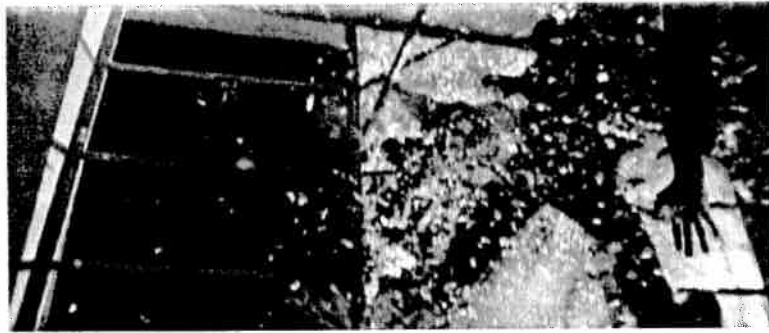


Figure 11.2 Bursting the barrier into the metadiegetic, in *Manhunter*.

into how the universe works—in movement, in action. It is a natural instinct to want to control unruly information, to put it in order and give it a name, but taxonomy also has the unpleasant side effect of mumifying that which is observed. After all, the Greek root *taxis*, to arrange, is shared by both taxonomy and taxidermy.

Diegetic or nondiegetic may be a simple distinction, but it need not be a simplistic one. The fact that the boundary is crossed so often should not invalidate the integrity of the distinction; indeed, the manner in which the meaning in the distinction multiplies and magnifies in the crossing is indicative of its power. The border region—the fantastical gap—is a transformative space, a superposition, a transition between stable states. Although that geography may be abstract and even sterile when we are talking about photons, when we are talking about movement through the gap between diegetic and nondiegetic, that trajectory takes on great narrative and experiential import. These moments do not take place randomly; they are important moments of revelation, of symbolism, and of emotional engagement within the film and without. The movies have taught us how to construct our phenomenological geography, and when we are set adrift, we are not only uneasy, we are open to being guided in any number of directions. It is the multiplicity of possibilities that make the gap both observable and fantastical—fantastical because it changes the state, not only of the filmic moment, but also of the observer's relationship to it.

We have looked at only a few axes that traverse the fantastical gap. They are perhaps the most basic ones, but they are certainly not the only ones—and maybe not even the most important ones—just the ones most closely adjacent to our current models. The distinctions sometimes cut very fine, but then so do our perceptions, and subtle fluctuations can *mean* so much.

It is doubtful that any single taxonomy or Theory with a capital T would be able to neatly encompass the examples discussed here without leaving out what makes them unique, what makes them work. By exploring the nuance of individual instances, however, we do gain insight into how film and films work, and we also become more alert and agile analysts. It behooves us, in more ways than one, to mind the gap.

NOTES

1. Carroll is not completely resistant to the idea of overarching theory, but simply suggests that we are not there yet: "As compelling answers are developed to small-scale, delimited questions, we may be in a position to think about whether these answers can be unified in a more comprehensive theoretical framework." "Prospects for Film Theory: A Personal Assessment," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), p. 58.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
3. *Ibid.*
4. For a discussion of liminality and transformational ritual, see particularly Victor Witter Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journals, 1982).
5. James Buhler, Anahid Kassabian, David Neumeyer, and Robynn Stilwell, "Roundtable on Film Music," *Velvet Light Trap* 51 (Spring 2003), pp. 73–91.
6. See, for instance, Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
7. David Neumeyer, "Source Music, Background Music, Fantasy and Reality in Early Sound Film," *College Music Symposium* 37 (1997), pp. 13–20.
8. I will, for the moment at least, refrain from commenting on quantum packets or string theory.
9. I am using axes rather than vectors in this discussion because the transition can occur in multiple directions.
10. Ironically, perhaps, it is not Al Jolson's musical performance in *The Jazz Singer* (1927) that creates the sensation of sound film—there had been synchronized music and sound effects before—but the breaking of the fourth wall, the suddenly improvised speaking to the diegetic audience, which extends and blends with the real audience in the cinema. The "there" of the cinema screen becomes "here," a potentially disconcerting, and exciting, change of space and engagement.
11. Composer David Raksin's response, "Where's the camera?" or, alternatively, "Behind the camera," depending upon the version of the tale you hear, highlights both the greater willingness to suspend disbelief in the visual realm and the positioning of the "background" music. The placement of music "behind" the screen is an option that cinema presents, although it is still an inferior and "covered" position, so in that sense, not far removed from "underscore."

12. We are never given, however, a visual anchor for the horns, though we may accept them without much questioning as part of the general aural ethos of the scene.

13. The film's ending is more ambiguous than that of the stage version, which clearly sends the boys out onto the ice, but the implication remains that they are headed toward the ice and nearly certain death, in part because of the movement away from the camera. The same sorts of perceptual assumptions that lead us to understand the music throughout as nondiegetic will tend to lead us to think that the camera is placed on the beach.

14. The implications of the terminology for those on the receiving end of a film are tendentious. The typical film studies terms "spectator" and "viewer" demonstrate an obvious visual bias. "Audience" has lost most much of its original connotation of hearing, but because the trace remains and the term also tends to suggest the plural, I prefer using it.

15. It is distinctly possible to misread this as a point-of-view shot from Lecter's position at the beginning, increasing the sense of subjectivity.

16. Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 22.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 23. This "wordless narration" brings us close to another crossing that can happen within the nondiegetic: the moment a human voice is introduced, even in a wordless vocalise, the music pops from its inferior position (geographically speaking) position of "underscore" or "background" to the superior position of "voice-over" and "foreground." As Michel Chion has noted, "Il y a les voix, et tout le reste . . . la présence d'une voix humaine hiérarchise la perception autour d'elle" (*Le Voix au Cinéma* [Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1982], p. 18).

18. A sound effect would probably, without a great deal of cinematic encouragement, register as "off" rather than nondiegetic.

19. This would bring us into the realm of Rick Altman's description of "audio-dissolve" in the musical number, in *The American Film Musical* (Indiana University Press, 1987). Since musical numbers often function to signal time dilation and narrate a particular emotional state (Don Lockwood's celebration of being in love in "Singin' in the Rain," for instance), the leap of the diegetic into the metadiegetic would also be crossing a gap from the everyday into the fantastic. See also Heather Laing's "Emotion by the Numbers," in *The Musical: Hollywood and Beyond*, eds. Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell (Exeter, UK: Intellect Press, 2000), pp. 5–13.

20. A verse of the song before the bridge in which the bass ostinato is absorbed into fuller orchestration is excised, disturbing the slow, pyramidal building of volume, pitch, and texture, as a sensitive musical listener will feel. At the presentation of this paper at the Beyond the Soundtrack conference at the University of Minnesota in April 2004, Martin Scherzinger asked me during a break what had happened to the bass line in that sequence; he felt something was wrong, even though he did not know the song.

PART III

Musical Identity