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## The non-diegetic fallacy: film, music, and narrative space

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## The Nondiegetic Fallacy: Film, Music, and Narrative Space

In a documentary to accompany the DVD presentation of *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (Steven Spielberg, 2008), the director asserts: “Indiana Jones cannot exist without [his musical] theme. And, of course, that theme would be nothing without Indiana Jones.”<sup>1</sup> It is a statement that few would disagree with, and yet it highlights a potentially troubling issue for film musicology. For this musical theme is part of what would be called the film’s nondiegetic music: in other words, it is considered an instance of sound, “whose supposed source is not only absent from the image but is also external to the story world [the diegesis].”<sup>2</sup> How do we deal with this puzzling theoretical distinction when film theory locates other elements that might be considered quintessentially ‘Indy-esque’ (the hat, the bullwhip, the smart one-liners for example) within the diegesis? Is it a distinction that is at all useful for explaining our experience of this film character, or cinema in general? Or, to invoke another iconic example, does it make sense to distinguish the ‘nondiegetic’ zither music we hear in *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949) from the rest of the narrative: is it not just as essential to the fictional world of post-war Vienna presented in the film as the image of the Ferris Wheel in the Prater, or the characters of Harry Lime and Holly Martins? In this article I want to explore the distinction between what lies inside and outside the diegesis; and to suggest that branding music with the label ‘nondiegetic’ threatens to separate it from the space of the narrative, denying it an

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in the “Adventures in Post-Production” featurette 8:03. *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* Region 2 DVD PHE 9431. The music is by John Williams.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1994), 73.

active role in shaping the course of onscreen events, and unduly restricting our readings of film. After outlining various approaches to the concept of diegesis—and arguing that music’s description in film as ‘nondiegetic’ is both overly reliant on the concept’s narratological meaning, and representative of an unwillingness to recognise film’s inherent ‘unreality’—I will suggest a provocative approach that, drawing in part on Daniel Frampton’s concept of the ‘filmind,’<sup>3</sup> suggests a greater role for music in constructing cinematic diegesis. Finally, I will explore some of the applications of the model I offer in a brief reading of *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998).

Evidently, by suggesting that the terminology ‘diegetic’ and ‘nondiegetic’ is problematic I am covering well-worn ground. Ever since Claudia Gorbman’s seminal 1987 study of film music, *Unheard Melodies*,<sup>4</sup> standardized the terms to describe music’s narrative sources, film music scholars have been debating the appropriateness of these concepts and periodically discussing the ambiguous cases that problematise this simple binary distinction.<sup>5</sup> The apparent opposition between the two concepts has been the site for numerous theoretical explorations, and although David Neumeier

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<sup>3</sup> See Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). Gorbman first engaged with the terminology in the article “Narrative Film Music,” *Yale French Studies* No. 60 (1980): 183–203.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Jeff Smith, “Bridging the Gap: Reconsidering the Border between Diegetic and Nondiegetic Music,” *Music and the Moving Image* Vol. 2 No. 1 (Spring 2009)

<http://www.press.uillinois.edu/journals/mmi.html>, accessed 24/06/09; Robynn Stilwell, “The Fantastical Gap Between Diegetic and Nondiegetic,” 184–202 in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, edited by Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); and Alexander Binns, “Desiring the Diegesis: Music and Self-Seduction in the Films of Wong Kar-Wai,” 127–140 in *Cinemusic? Constructing the Film Score* edited by David Cooper, Christopher Fox, and Ian Sapiro (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

has recently argued for the retention of the terminology,<sup>6</sup> scholars' continued unease with the concepts is clear.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, as Anahid Kassabian has recognised, "The distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic music...obscures music's role in producing the diegesis itself."<sup>8</sup> Yet, it may be that the problem lies not so much with the concept of diegesis (at least as it has been used differently in the spheres of narratology and film studies), but rather with the way in which it has been applied to film music. To assume that music functions primarily as a narrating voice in a narratological sense, rather than as an indicator and occupier of narrative space, is perhaps to misunderstand the broader nature of cinematic diegesis.

### **Defining the Diegesis**

Gorbman's pithy definitions of diegesis as the "narratively implied spatiotemporal world of the action and characters" and diegetic music as "music that (apparently) issues from a source within the narrative" seem straightforward enough.<sup>9</sup> But cinematic diegesis as a concept has a long and rather complex history, and when attempting to apply the term to film music, film musicology has tended to invoke the

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<sup>6</sup> See David Neumeyer, "Diegetic/Nondiegetic: A Theoretical Model" *Music and the Moving Image* Vol. 2 No. 1 (Spring 2009) <http://www.press.uillinois.edu/journals/mmi.html>, accessed 24/06/09.

<sup>7</sup> Binns remarks of a scene in *Fallen Angels* (Wong Kar-Wai, 1995) that "the terms diegetic and non-diegetic themselves do a disservice to the operation of music and...it is in instances such as these that their inadequacies become apparent." See Binns, "Desiring the Diegesis," 133.

<sup>8</sup> Anahid Kassabian, *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music* (London: Routledge, 2001), 42.

<sup>9</sup> Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 21, 22.

concept's narratological meaning at the expense of its original use in film studies.<sup>10</sup> Gorbman's definition after all, although referencing the work of the French aesthete Étienne Souriau, is largely based on Gérard Genette's system of narratology, in which different narrative voices are characterised as operating at various levels of literary diegesis (extradiegetic, diegetic, metadiegetic) in order to explain the nested narrative devices encountered in the novel.<sup>11</sup> The idea of assigning different music to different narrative levels clearly results from a tendency to see cinema in overtly literary narrative terms. Thus, Gorbman references Genette's levels in her discussion of music, with the term extradiegetic (used in her early work to

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<sup>10</sup> The word 'diegesis' has its origins in Aristotle and Plato, where it distinguished a type of narration that 'tells' from one that 'shows' (mimesis). Giorgio Biancorosso, David Neumeyer, and others have pointed out, however, that the meaning of the term in Genette's system (diégèse in French) differs from Plato's concept (diégésis). Rather confusingly, though, Christian Metz mentions the Greek origin of the word when explaining the concept (*Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* trans. Michael Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 98). See Giorgio Biancorosso, "Beginning Credits and Beyond: Music and the Cinematic Imagination," *Echo* Vol. 3 No. 1 (Spring 2001) <http://www.echo.ucla.edu/Volume3-Issue1/biancorosso/biancorosso1.html>, n8, and Neumeyer's "Diegetic/Nondiegetic: A Theoretical Model."

<sup>11</sup> In Genette's formulation, extradiegetic refers to the level of narration below the diegetic or intradiegetic (the 2<sup>nd</sup> level), which in turn is the level below the metadiegetic (the 3<sup>rd</sup> level). He claims "any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing the narrative is placed (228)." Thus, metadiegetic refers to secondary narration by a character at the level of the diegesis, such as the events recounted in Des Grieux's narrative in Prévost's *Manon Lescaut*. Genette acknowledges that his terminology is somewhat in opposition to its common usage in logic and linguistics, and most film theorists would think of the terms nested in the opposite direction (extradiegetic as a level above or beyond the diegesis, with metadiegetic at a level below or contained within the diegesis). See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* trans. by Jane E. Lewin Foreword by Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 227-243.

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mean the same as nondiegetic) pertaining to some kind of narrative intrusion into the diegesis. Yet while Genette's description of these discrete levels is entirely convincing when we are faced with the epistolary narrative of a novel, it is far less obviously applicable to most narrative cinema; and while one could feasibly argue for the existence of a narrator figure in film (whether or not we hear voice-over narration),<sup>12</sup> Gorbman did not seem to consider the possibility that her extra- or nondiegetic music might be part of the narrative as it unfolds (in the same way as other parts of the *mise-en-scène*), not an intrusion that signals an external level of narration.

The first scholar to use the term diegetic in the modern sense—and in connection with film no less—suggests little of this idea of narrative levels, and offers instead a concept more appropriate for cinema. Étienne Souriau used the word to describe one of seven levels of 'filmic reality' by which the spectator engages with film.<sup>13</sup> In that sense, diegesis indicates the existence of a unique filmic universe, peculiar to each movie. As Edward Lowry describes it, Souriau conceived of this unique universe as containing 'its own rules, systems of belief, characters, settings etc. This is just as true of a Neorealist film like *Bicycle Thief* as it is of a fantasy film like René Clair's *I Married a Witch*. Souriau refers to this unique realm specific to

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<sup>12</sup> The logic being that everything we see and hear in film is guided by the choices of a narrator.

<sup>13</sup> First outlined in a 1950 lecture and published as Étienne Souriau, "La structure de l'univers filmique et le vocabulaire de la filmologie," *Revue Internationale de Filmologie* Vol. 7 No. 8 (1951), 231-40. Whether it was Étienne Souriau or his daughter, Anne, who first used the term, is a matter of some contention. Although Genette, Metz, Burch and other theorists reference Souriau's essay in *RIF*, Henry M. Taylor notes that Anne Souriau claimed in the *Vocabulaire d'esthétique* to have coined the term herself in 1950. See Henry M. Taylor, "The Success Story of a Misnomer," *Offscreen* Vol. 11 Nos. 8-9 (Aug/Sept 2007) [http://www.offscreen.com/Sound\\_Issue/taylor\\_diegesis.pdf](http://www.offscreen.com/Sound_Issue/taylor_diegesis.pdf) (accessed 21/01/2010)

each film as its diegesis.’<sup>14</sup> This, evidently, has little to do with the idea of narrative levels encountered in literary fiction, and instead emphasises diegesis as a narrative space more suited to the distinct realm of the cinema (Souriau’s comparative aesthetics, after all, saw each of the nine arts occupying their own individual universe). More importantly still, nothing in this description justifies the automatic exclusion of music from the diegesis, since the presence of music in the space of the filmic universe might be considered an aspect specific to a particular film, whether realist or fantastic in its aesthetic. This idea of a unique non-realistic filmic universe that may operate according to laws different from our own, where music does not underscore our actions or erupt from us spontaneously, is an important one to which I will return.

Like Souriau before him, the semiotician Christian Metz used the term diegetic to indicate the ‘reality’ of the fictional world, “a reality that comes only from within us, from the projections and identifications that are mixed in with our perception of the film.”<sup>15</sup> However, building on Souriau’s statement that diegesis encompassed “everything which concerns the film *to the extent that it represents something*”,<sup>16</sup> Metz defined diegesis in typically semiological terms as “the sum of a film’s denotation: the narration itself, but also the fictional space and time dimensions implied in and by the narrative, and consequently the characters, the landscapes, the events, and other narrative elements, in so far as they are considered in their denoted aspect.”<sup>17</sup> According to Metz’s definition, then, whether music

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<sup>14</sup> Edward Lowry, *The Filmology Movement and Film Study in France* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 84.

<sup>15</sup> Metz, *Film Language*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Lowry, *The Filmology Movement*, 85.

<sup>17</sup> Metz, *Film Language*, 98.

belongs rightfully in the diegesis depends on whether it is understood as denotative. Although 'nondiegetic' music is widely assumed to be connotative, and to have little to do with denoting objects in narrative space, one of Adorno and Eisler's chief criticisms of Hollywood scoring was precisely music's redundant, almost denotative character—in short, its implied role within the diegesis:

There is no place for [the leitmotif] in the motion picture, which seeks to depict reality. Here the function of the leitmotif has been reduced to the level of a musical lackey, who announces his master with an important air even though the eminent personage is clearly recognizable to everyone. The effective technique of the past thus becomes a mere duplication, ineffective and uneconomical.<sup>18</sup>

There is a favourite Hollywood gibe: "Birdie sings, music sings." Music must follow visual incidents and illustrate them either by directly initiating them or by using clichés that are associated with the mood and content of the picture...Illustrative use of music today results in unfortunate duplication....in the cinema, both picture and dialogue are hyperexplicit. Conventional music can add nothing to the explicitness<sup>19</sup>

Nothing about the concept of diegesis, as defined by Souriau and Metz, precludes the presence of music. However, although Gorbman references Souriau, her

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<sup>18</sup> Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler, *Composing for the Films* (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), 5-6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



application of the concepts diegesis and nondiegesis to film music—and the path followed by subsequent film music theorists—has more in common with Genette’s system of narrative levels. Music not attributable to a source in the narrative is assigned to an intrusive layer of narration (the nondiegetic), though admittedly Gorbman’s 1980 article talks of music functioning as “connecting tissue...among all levels of narration.”<sup>20</sup> Yet, I would question whether most films that feature musical underscoring have more than one level of narration in quite the way that Genette identifies in literary fiction.<sup>21</sup> Diegetic music certainly has the *potential* to operate on a different, nested, narrative level (when characters engage with the narratives encountered upon visiting the opera or attending a concert, for example), while the music of certain films that feature large periods of imagined narrative punctuated by frequent returns to the narrating situation—such as *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1994)—may usefully be interpreted in such terms. Yet in films that do not feature complex narrative devices, much of the music we encounter might be perceived as operating on the same level as the rest of the narrative—whether it seems to be produced by the physical actions of the characters (as with mickey-mousing) or to express their emotions. If the presence of a separate level of narrative is not required for comprehension (as might be the case with literary fiction), is there a good reason why the presence of so-called ‘nondiegetic’ music should be thought of as an *automatic* indicator of a higher narrative level within which the diegesis is nested? Might we better understand such music not as a narrating voice but as the product of

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<sup>20</sup> Claudia Gorbman, “Narrative Film Music,” 202.

<sup>21</sup> Where voice-over narration is present, music may indeed be part of the process by which these levels are distinguished. See Knut Holsträter, “Musik als Mittel der Persektivierung im narrativen Film A *Clockwork Orange* von Stanley Kubrick,” 103-120 in Victoria Piel, Knut Holsträter and Oliver Huck (eds), *Filmmusik: Beiträge zu ihrer Theorie und Vermittlung* (Zurich: Georg Olms, 2008).

narration, belonging to the same narrative space as the characters and their world? That is not to say, of course, that music *cannot* be construed as operating at a higher level of narration. I am rather asserting that within existing theories of cinematic diegesis the presence of music in underscoring need not be, in itself, an automatic indicator of a narrative act. In this sense, I am in sympathy with Noël Burch's identification of a relative autonomy of diegetic and narrative principles in cinema, in which the diegetic effect is associated with a sense of 'being there' that is entirely independent of narrative process.<sup>22</sup> In the same way that the gameplay of video games (as opposed to narrative inserts) suggests that diegetic effect is independent of narrative, the manner in which music functions in these situations is comparable to its place in 'narrative' cinema: that is, its role may often have less to do with 'narrating' as such, and be seen more as an indicator of narrative space.

Evidently, film musicology has been reluctant to consider the possibility of music functioning in this way,<sup>23</sup> and one reason for this may be the general acceptance of Eisler and Adorno's assertion that film "seeks to depict reality." If the characters do not appear to hear it, the argument goes, music cannot be part of their world. Yet Eisler and Adorno's claim is rooted in Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the 'Culture Industry,' which supposedly denied its audience "any dimension in

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<sup>22</sup> Noël Burch, "Narrative/Diegesis – Thresholds, Limits," *Screen* Vol. 23 No. 2 (1982): 16-33.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Long, though, has also questioned recently film music's reliance on language-based models, and argues for an approach based on the sociolinguistic concept of 'register'. As he states "Understanding film music as a parallel narrative tracking a novelistic text seems to be mainly based on the popularity in the last quarter of the twentieth century of the notion that all music narrates (or might narrate), a position that is hardly central to most understandings of cinema's image track." See Michael Long, *Beautiful Monsters: Imagining the Classic in Musical Media* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 20.

which they might roam freely in imagination,” and trained “those exposed to it to identify film directly with reality.”<sup>24</sup> Breaking the link with reality was therefore an aim of Adorno and Eisler’s prescriptive study of film music.<sup>25</sup> By aiming for a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* that would highlight the unreality of the filmic world, though, Adorno and Eisler seem to have underestimated the willingness of an audience to participate in a game of make-believe, and overestimated their propensity to be fooled into a state of illusory belief by film. To assume that music the characters do not seem to hear does not belong in their narrative space, and must therefore be the indicator of an external narrative level, is perhaps to make the same mistake: to deal with cinema as an overly realistic medium. This is, in part, how Neumeyer appears to characterise diegesis, which he sees in terms of a process that differentiates and sorts sound registers experienced in the cinema.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, so important is the referencing concept of reality to his construction of film’s narrative space that he even uses the term ‘diegetic’ to refer to noises within the movie theatre, such as the sound of someone eating popcorn or shouting “Fire!”.

But might this not be a rather narrow interpretation of that unique filmic universe described by Souriau, one that more neatly aligns with everyday reality but which ultimately has little to do with the nature of film? We all recognise that film, is, in the final analysis, often far from a realistic medium, and though we may classify our initial listening registers according to the rules of everyday reality (that is, in identifying what sounds belong in the theatre, and which emanate from the

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<sup>24</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, transl. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 100.

<sup>25</sup> Eisler and Adorno, *Composing for the Films*, 36.

<sup>26</sup> Neumeyer, “Diegetic/Nondiegetic: A Theoretical Model.”

loudspeakers), we surely do so with the knowledge that film operates according to different rules.<sup>27</sup> With filmed musicals, the point is obvious, and we have little difficulty in believing that music occupies the same narrative space as the characters, whether or not a source is visible. Yet even in such a ‘realistic’ film as *Apollo 13* (Ron Howard, 1996)—which stays close to historical events, bases large parts of its dialogue on NASA mission control transcripts, and uses its fair share of NASA-speak acronyms—Ed Harris (as flight director Gene Kranz) still feels the need to explain the crucial term ‘free-return trajectory’ to a group of Apollo flight controllers. He is, of course, explaining it for the benefit of the audience (“We use the moon’s gravity to slingshot them around”); we recognise that in the real world, the explanatory dialogue is redundant among a group of techno-savvy NASA scientists with an emergency to deal with (and where every second counts). Might not the music, therefore, also be part of this unrealistic narrative space? Certainly the sound of the film is: as *Apollo 13* sweeps past the camera, we hear the (impossible) sound of its thrusters in the vacuum of space. Clearly, we accept the filmic universe as operating according to different rules of reality. It seems perfectly natural, for instance, for the French characters in *The Day of the Jackal* (Fred Zinnemann, 1973) to speak in English and with an English accent, though in no way could one describe it as ‘realistic.’ Similarly, in films that use deliberately unrealistic representations—the marionettes of *Team America: World Police* (Trey Parker, 2004) or *The Dark Crystal* (Jim Henson/Frank Oz/Gary Kurtz, 1982)—we accept the ‘reality’ of these filmic universes rather than imagining real people, of whom these puppets are stylized representations. Likewise,

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<sup>27</sup> Even documentary film plays fast and loose with concepts of reality, though it reveals that film’s relationship with realism is perhaps best thought of as a continuum. See Jeffrey Ruoff, “Conventions of Sound in Documentary,” *Cinema Journal* Vol. 32 No. 3 (Spring 1993): 24-40.

in live action film we do not necessarily think of characters occupying our real world (where the presence of underscore would be impossible, and music would indeed be an automatic indicator of a nondiegetic presence), but instead construct them within the boundaries of their unique filmic universe.

We may accept the presence of music in the narrative space of the film, then, partly as a sign of the fictional state of the world created on screen.<sup>28</sup> It is an indicator that the universe in which the events we are watching takes place is not real; and having accepted that, music's presence seems entirely natural, rather than a troubling element that needs to be assigned to a separate level of narrative. This is certainly something that filmmakers themselves recognise and seek to exploit when attempting to shatter the sense of fiction and create a feeling of verisimilitude. For Gary Rydstrom, the sound designer of *Saving Private Ryan*, music's implicit role as an indicator of fiction was essential to his conception of the D-Day sequence that occurs early in the film:

The other choice he [Steven Spielberg, the film's director] made that was really important to me was to leave the music out and have no John Williams' [sic] score until the battle was over. In fact, none of the battle scenes in that movie had traditional score. The score was always used to react to something horrific that we had just been through, as a lightning rod for our emotions[...]it would be something that you could grab on to and your emotions could drain

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<sup>28</sup> This may be a reassuring thought. In *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006), the presence of John Powell's music may be something of a relief, a way of convincing us (erroneously, to some extent) that what we are watching is 'fiction.'

into it as a reaction. Spielberg was very smart to know that having the score, any kind of score, the greatest score in the world, over those battle scenes would take away the subjective feeling of it; you would no longer feel like you were there, *you would feel like you were watching a movie.*<sup>29</sup>

Clearly the search for a kind of verisimilitude has motivated the very strict division of music and sound in the opening scenes of this film, since music, for Rydstrom, connotes the ‘unreal’. While the space of the film’s diegesis might have been deliberately constructed as a music-free slice of reality (at least in these scenes of battle), Rydstrom’s comments seem to suggest that filmmakers and spectators alike recognise (at one level) that the presence of music indicates a self-consciously fictional world. With this in mind, then, we surely do not assess and categorise the presence of music solely according to the rules of everyday life any more than we judge the other components of a film on the basis of their realism. Instead, one of the chief ways in which a film’s diegesis is differentiated from our experience of everyday life is through the recognition of music’s presence.

### **Music in Narrative Space: towards a new model**

I proceed, then, from the position that so-called ‘nondiegetic’ music is often just as essential to the identity of the fictional narrative space presented in film as it is in a far less ‘realistic’ fictional genre such as opera, or even in the world of a video game. It follows that I cannot adequately recreate the substance of that world in my

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Rydstrom in Gianluca Sergi, *The Dolby Era: Film Sound in Contemporary Hollywood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 178. My emphasis.

imagination without the presence of music, just as I cannot recreate the ‘world’ of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* without acknowledging that the characters express themselves musically (whether or not they are aware of it). A simple thought experiment illustrates my point: let’s say we are told a story by a friend; later, when recalling the world narrated to us, we generally tend to imagine the characters and the situations themselves, not the words via which they were conjured into existence, or even the person in the act of narrating—elements we might legitimately regard as nondiegetic. As Gregory Currie notes when positing a fictional character narrating a fictional story, “imagining that someone imagines P tend[s] to collapse into imagining P.”<sup>30</sup> This suggests that what we might recall as ‘the narrative’ tends to exclude the frame of the person supposedly narrating it. Yet if, after leaving the cinema, we re-imagine the filmic world to which we have just been introduced (without necessarily re-creating the film’s editing), do we not also often tend to imagine the film’s music? Whether or not we recall it accurately, we are aware that it should be there, and this seems to suggest that music normally belongs (in our imagination) to the same diegetic realm as the characters: it is part of the story’s world, not an invisible means by which the story is narrated. Nor does it seem to me to be normally “situated in another time and another place than the events directly represented,” as Michel Chion describes the nondiegetic.<sup>31</sup> Quite the opposite: it seems to occupy the same space, at least on a perceptual level. Trying to imagine the opening idol-stealing scenes of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981) without John Williams’s music is, I would suggest, an unnerving experience: we feel the lack in a way that has prompted

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<sup>30</sup> Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 159.

<sup>31</sup> Chion, *Audio-Vision*, 217n9.

many film directors to refer to the music in their films as “an extra character” or, as with Spielberg, to acknowledge music’s constitutive role in defining a character. Moreover, it would be almost as bizarre as trying to imagine an operatic scene or a scene in a filmed musical without its orchestral music.

Within the context of existing narrative film theory, my point might be understood with reference to the distinction made by David Bordwell (invoking the Russian neoformalists) between *syuzhet* and *fabula*, in which the *syuzhet* comprises all the sounds and images presented in a film, and the *fabula* the abstracted narrative constructed by the spectator.<sup>32</sup> Jeff Smith articulates the different types of relations between music and narrative space by suggesting that ‘nondiegetic’ music corresponds with a film’s *syuzhet* (a “welcome reminder” as he puts it);<sup>33</sup> the musical performance of ‘source music’ exists in both the *syuzhet* and the *fabula*; while referenced or inferred pieces are found solely in the *fabula*. Thus in *Amadeus* (Milos Forman, 1984), Mozart’s *Idomeneo* as a piece of music is part of the *fabula* and not the *syuzhet*, since it is never ‘heard’ in the film. This implies, then, that the *fabula*—that abstracted narrative world wherein all the non-linearity of classical narrative is smoothed out—exists *sans* music, or at least without the film’s underscoring. Reconstructing (consciously) the *fabula* of cinematic memories, however, is frequently impossible to do without the music (particularly if it is prominent, as with many John Williams scores): does *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), for example, make sense without the shark’s infamous musical motif, which frequently stands in for the presence of the animal? While it may be possible to construct a *fabula* that is independent of the music, it does not feel like it is taking place in the same world: one might be able to detach the editing or cinematography from one’s construction of the

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<sup>32</sup> See David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Methuen, 1985), particularly 49-57.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, “Bridging the Gap.”



*fabula* relatively easily (allowing the imagining of alternative camera angles, for instance), but removing the music in this way appears far more problematic. Again this suggests that music is not simply narrating the fiction and merely part of the *syuzhet*, but exists in the film's narrative space, and therefore belongs to the *fabula*.

As we have seen, this point of view is not entirely without underpinning in Souriau's conception of cinematic diegesis. Further support can be found, however, in later French theory. Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, and Marc Vernet, for example, acknowledge various meanings of 'diegesis.' Although their first two descriptions are conventional enough—"the story understood as a pseudo-world, as the fictional universe whose elements fit together to form a global unity" and, on a larger scale, a diegetic universe that incorporates "the series of narrative events, and their assumed frame (geographic, historical, or social), as well as the emotional atmosphere and motivations surrounding those events"<sup>34</sup>—their third definition hints at a further element that argues for the locating of musical underscore within the diegesis:

Finally, we may understand diegesis as the story caught up in the dynamics of reading the narrative, which is to say that it is elaborated within the spectator's mind from the impression left by the film's unfolding....the story as my own current fantasies and the memory of preceding film elements *allow me to imagine it*.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, Marc Vernet, *Aesthetics of Film* trans. and revised by Richard Neupert (Austin: UT Press 1992), 89–90.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 90. My emphasis.

This may well accord in part with the Russian neoformalist idea of *fabula*, but one word stands out in this definition: ‘imagine.’ Imagination was emphasized by several philosophers of cinema whose work on more cognitive-based understandings of film theory in the 1990s took the discipline further away from the psychoanalytical illusion-based approaches that characterized 1980s discourse (and, indeed, Gorbman’s approach to music).<sup>36</sup> For Gregory Currie and Kendall Walton (and for me) the ability to imagine the world of the story is a cognitive act: rather than being sold an illusion that what I am witnessing on screen and hearing is reality, I am engaging in the ‘game’ of watching a film. Whereas David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson believe that viewers “understand that movie music is a convention and does not issue from the world of the story,”<sup>37</sup> I am more inclined to ‘imagine’ that it does issue from that world; why else would I recall it along with the other elements of a story? Nor do I need to look for its visual ‘source’ to regard it as such. Similarly, when discussing what they refer to as the problematic term ‘extradiegetic’ (sometimes used instead of ‘nondiegetic’), Aumont, Bergala, Marie, and Vernet invoke the example of music, and describe a Western during which violins seem to erupt when the hero is “about to join the heroine out by the corral at night. During this scene the music plays a role within the diegesis by signifying love, yet without really being part of the diegesis in the same way that the night, the moon, and the sound of the wind in the trees would be.”<sup>38</sup> Though recognizing that music’s function is somewhat different to those other naturalistic parts of the world, they nevertheless seem to hint at a musical agency

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Currie, *Image and Mind*; and Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>37</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* 8<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 278.

<sup>38</sup> Aumont et al., *Aesthetics of Film*, 91.

within the diegesis. Likewise, Giorgio Biancorosso, discussing the appearance of the monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), notes that it “remains unclear whether the music is internal or external to the diegesis and whether the primitive creatures first react to the sight or to the *sound* of the monolith.”<sup>39</sup> While the monolith is a decidedly ‘non-realistic’ artefact in *2001*, this is a far cry from suggesting that music is ‘non’-diegetic, closed off from the cinematic world; indeed the term ‘extradiegetic’ may be more suitable if it is understood as something added, rather than something external to the world, as Daniel Percheron has suggested.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, if we jettison the idea that music that the characters do not seem able to hear is an automatic indicator of an extra- or nondiegetic narrator, need we also lose the accompanying concept of a musical voice or agency? The idea of a composer’s voice, after all, implies a nondiegetic presence, since ‘John Williams’ exists externally to the world of *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) or *Saving Private Ryan*. Might there be another way of thinking about film, though, that allows for the presence of a musical voice that is not that of a figure external to the created world? Daniel Frampton’s idea of a ‘filmind’ provides just that. Frampton’s *Filmosophy*, unconsciously echoing Souriau perhaps, argues that film is “its own world with its own rules” and proceeds from the position that the filmgoer would be “impoverished by understanding cinema only in relation to the reality it records.”<sup>41</sup> As a result, he posits the existence of a ‘filmind’ as the originator of the images and sounds we

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<sup>39</sup> Biancorosso, “Beginning Credits and Beyond,” n32.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Percheron, “Sound in Cinema and its Relationship to Image and Diegesis,” *Yale French Studies* No. 60 (1980): 16–23; 18.

<sup>41</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, 5.

experience, and of the film's actions and events. This 'filmind', though, exists *within* the film. As Frampton puts it:

Filmosophy conceptualises film as an organic intelligence: a 'film being' thinking about the characters and subjects in the film....The filmind is not an 'external' force, nor is it a mystical being or invisible other, it is 'in' the film itself, it is *the film* that is steering its own (dis)course. The filmind is 'the film itself'.<sup>42</sup>

Frampton's filmind expresses itself through film-world creation and film-thinking. The former accounts for the objects contained in a filmic world: thus the filmind "creates everything we see and hear in a film, conjuring it all up."<sup>43</sup> As Frampton takes pains to point out, however, the basic film-world is not a copy of reality (though it may be based on a camera's recording of the real world), meaning that as spectators "we are *ready* (conceptually) to accept whatever 'kind' of image-reality the film decides to give us."<sup>44</sup> Applying this to a film's audio-reality, the idea that a filmind creates a film-world in which music exists 'in the air,' as it were, would not be problematic. In *Star Wars*, for instance, the film-world created allows for the 'unrealistic' (at least in our world) propagation of sound in the vacuum of space—explosions and the scream of TIE fighters, for instance, are intrinsic to the created world. It would not be unreasonable to assume, therefore, that the music is propagated

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

in the same way. As I have suggested in passing elsewhere,<sup>45</sup> music functions in much the same way in these films as the mystical force described by Obi-wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness): as an energy field that surrounds all living things and binds the galaxy together. Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) later questions the nature of the force, when told that a Jedi can feel it flowing through him, by asking: “You mean it controls your actions?” Kenobi answers: “Partially. But it also obeys your commands.” I cannot think of a better explanation of how music seems to respond to and shape characters’ actions in these films—something it shares in part, incidentally, with Matt Baileyshea’s conception of the Wagnerian orchestra.<sup>46</sup> To imagine the film-world of *Star Wars* created by the filmind as one saturated with the ‘sound’ of music (whether or not the characters hear it as ‘sound’) seems perfectly acceptable to me as a filmgoer. It even seems possible that Luke’s engagement with the force allows him to ‘hear’ and manipulate the film’s music—though clearly it is a different kind of listening from that employed in the film’s cantina scene, for instance, which would be labelled ‘diegetic’ by film music theorists.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ben Winters, “Corporeality, Musical Heartbeats, and Cinematic Emotion,” *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 2008), 8.

<sup>46</sup> Matt Baileyshea, ‘The Struggle for Orchestral Control: Power, Dialogue, and the Role of the Orchestra in Wagner’s *Ring*’, *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music* Vol. 31 No. 1 (2007): 3-27. Baileyshea conceives of Wagner’s music dramas from a ‘fully diegetic’ perspective that is most useful “where characters appear to exhibit distinct control over the orchestra (8).”

<sup>47</sup> Yoda, after all, acknowledges to Luke in *The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980) that “through the force, things you will see. Other places. The future, the past, old friends long gone.” Music, too, is able to achieve this through the use of quasi-Wagnerian leitmotivic structures (see James Buhler, “*Star Wars*, Music, and Myth” 33-57 in James Buhler, David Neumeyer and Caryl Flinn (eds.), *Music and Cinema* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000).

Frampton provides a way, then, to conceptualise music as part of the diegesis, even in a more ‘realistic’ film world than the fantasy universe encountered in *Star Wars*. He posits that the objects in a film exist totally within the filmind, that strictly speaking the film and the filmind are one and the same thing, and that these ‘objects’ are subject to the filmind’s ‘film-thinking.’ As he defines it, film-thinking “is (most often) realised, correctly, as an *intention towards recognisable objects* (characters, sunsets, guns);”<sup>48</sup> as a result, it normally accords with our experience of everyday life. Yet Frampton also allows for fluid film-thinking that can “alter the time and space of objects as we normally experience them,”<sup>49</sup> as with *Amélie* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001) in which the heroine is allowed to turn into water. Thus he posits three kinds of film-thinking, basic, formal, and fluid:

Basic film-thinking is...the default *attitude* the filmind has about its world and characters...the coherent design of the base film-world. The colour tone of the image is thought; the fact that the film takes place in a wide image is a decision, an intention of the filmind. [\(p. 82\)](#)

Most film-thinking is formally layered over recognisably normal-looking characters and settings...While usually plain and realistic...this formal film-thinking is exactly that which ‘surrounds’ recognisable people and objects. [\(p. 90\)](#)

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<sup>48</sup> Frampton, *Filmosophy*, 78. [Further references are given in text.](#)

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

[F]luid film-thinking is that which alters the basic film-world from the inside out; it is re-creative film-thinking. Fluid film-thinking gouges the film-world – it tears and rips into it, morphing it from within. We are thus confronted with a film-being that can imagine anything, can re-create the recognisable world at will. [\(p. 88\)](#)

Frampton is largely silent on the issue of music, but as with visual elements, the sound of the film is clearly steered by the filmind. In this context, music is similarly the product of film-thinking (and thus ‘in’ the film), and can be used to suggest character subjectivity, for instance. Thus, Frampton argues that in *Damage* (Louis Malle, 1992) “the film feels the man’s romantic concentration on the young woman, this time by drowning-out others’ words with music.”<sup>50</sup> He also argues that films can use music to undercut or counteract the visual element; what he refers to as films thinking “against the image.”<sup>51</sup> What this concept offers in our present context, then, is a way to justify the presence of music as part of the created world, with all the potential fluidity that film-thinking allows.

The music we hear in film can be attributed to a musical agent in the same way as the rest of the diegesis. As Frampton puts it, “we cannot see [or hear] what is ‘in’ the film without seeing it [or hearing it] the way the film thinks it.”<sup>52</sup> As a spectator, I believe that music often belongs to the diegesis just as surely as the characters; and, furthermore, it may respond to them, or be shaped by them (in the way that the filmind dictates). Music appears to permeate the world and (as a product

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Frampton, *Philosophy*, 114.

of the filmind's thinking) appears usually to believe in the reality of the fiction; that is, music rarely calls into question the believability of the fictive world.<sup>53</sup> While this may seem to offer tacit support for Eisler and Adorno's critique of film music, and its nefarious role within the Culture Industry, the presence of music in a film's fictive world is, as we have seen, one of the means by which film's link with reality is arguably broken. In other words, by recognizing that the diegesis I am watching seems saturated with music in a way that everyday life is not (unless we are permanently plugged into an iPod), I am constantly reminded of the differences between a fictionalized world and reality. This issue is thematised in self-reflexive films such as *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), which in its satire of media omnipotence and its anticipation of the advent of reality TV plays with notions of cinematic reality and music's role in constructing it. Music assumed to be functioning 'nondiegetically' for us, the audience, is sometimes revealed to be functioning in the same way for the film's internal audience (the audience of the TV broadcast 'The Truman Show').<sup>54</sup> For Truman (Jim Carrey), though, 'reality' is something entirely constructed by the TV show's enigmatic god-like creator, Christoff (Ed Harris), for whom even the weather is controllable. Indeed, who is to say that the atmospheric music we hear in the film is not piped into the scene for Truman himself to hear,

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<sup>53</sup> Phil Ford has recently written of Cold War films that depict characters struggling to escape from a construct of false images (such as the mind-controlled reality of *The Manchurian Candidate* (John Frankenheimer, 1962)). Each of these films must suggest for its characters that everything is normal, yet reveal the construct to the audience: for Ford, music is something that can define the edge of this construct. See Phil Ford, "Music at the Edge of the Construct," *The Journal of Musicology* Vol. 26 Issue 2 (2009): 240-273.

<sup>54</sup> We even see the composer, Philip Glass, sat at a keyboard providing the music live, almost like a silent-era organist.



experience, and react to in the same way? He has grown up in a carefully constructed world, after all, and may accept the presence of music as lightly as the sound of rain. The character of Christoff might even be read as an example of a filmind portraying itself; Truman, on the other hand, stands metaphorically for the character of most fictions, unaware that his ‘reality’ (including the presence of music) is entirely the product of a filmind.

What, then, are the implications of this change in perspective for reading a film? Just this: accepting music’s location in the same realm as the characters as an instance of film-thinking potentially allows it far greater agency to influence the other aspects of the diegesis; the filmind can suddenly allow the music to be heard by the characters, or imagine it influencing their actions, without requiring it to cross what Robynn Stilwell called the ‘fantastical gap’ between the nondiegetic and diegetic.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, this change in perspective resists the notion that the score functions as an invisible, interpretative, and thus manipulative force on the audience. It may potentially still operate in such terms, yet not on the audience—who are often exposed to a film’s score before they even enter the cinema, and are surely far more aware of a film’s music than Gorbman suggested in 1987<sup>56</sup>—but on the characters in the film, who may or may not be aware of its presence in their world. In short, it becomes one aspect of the filmind’s creative arsenal to shape the film’s narrative world. It should be said, however, that musical underscoring is not necessarily to be thought of as occupying a realistic physical space: in other words, it need not appear

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<sup>55</sup> See Stilwell, “The Fantastical Gap Between Diegetic and Nondiegetic.”

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Jeff Smith “Unheard Melodies? A Critique of Psychoanalytic Theories of Film Music,” 230–247 in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

to issue physically from the depicted space in the way that playback of diegetic music is often altered to suggest a source in the diegesis. We do not look for the source of the music because it has a sound fidelity that distinguishes it from diegetic music; but it does not necessarily follow, as Neumeyer's emphasis on spatial anchoring would suggest, that we then interpret the sound as external to the diegesis.<sup>57</sup> Abandoning the notion of cinema as a realistic medium, we could perhaps think of it as a different kind of diegetic sound—one that is not subject to the physical laws of our reality, but exists in a filmic universe of mutable physical laws (as with the propagation of sound in the vacuum of space, heard in virtually all science fiction films with the notable exception of *2001: A Space Odyssey*; and with the cinematographic concept of depth of field, which plays with the physical laws of focus).

While many scholars are happy to consider the diegetic–nondiegetic axis a continuum along which music may sit at various points, the nondiegetic end (if we regard it in its narratological context as one implying a separate level of narrative) strikes me as a state that is certainly not the norm with film music, and is rarely achieved unambiguously. Perhaps only in credit sequences, where the cinematic frame and the constructedness of the fiction is openly acknowledged, does the world created by the film come to an end. In these situations, I admit, the music clearly cannot be part of the narrative, though the transition between these states can be extraordinarily fluid. This might accord, then, with Edward Branigan's 'extra-fictional' level of narration in his discussion of the opening credits music of *The Wrong Man*.<sup>58</sup> In Branigan's model, though, the next level down is the nondiegetic;

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<sup>57</sup> Neumeyer, "Diegetic/Nondiegetic."

<sup>58</sup> Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London: Routledge, 1992), 96.

and it is in describing nondiegetic music as music that “can only be heard by us,”<sup>59</sup> and implying a narrative level removed from the fiction, that existing film theory in operating via real-world codes of reality seems problematic to me.

That said, I do not wish to claim that music *cannot* operate on a different narrative level. Just as Carolyn Abbate sought to distinguish specific morally distancing acts of narration in opera from music merely ‘acting out’ or ‘representing’ narrative events, so I want to differentiate the majority of musical underscoring in film from specific distancing enunciations.<sup>60</sup> The montage sequence is a case in point. As it plays with cinematic time, the montage sequence has traditionally been thought of in film theory as part of a film’s *syuzhet* but not its *fabula*. It seems reasonable to posit, therefore, that the music heard in these sequences might be operating on a different level from such *fabula*-defining music as Indiana Jones’s theme, or Anton Karas’s music in *The Third Man*. Music that functions to unify a montage sequence might well be understood as ‘narrating’ from an external perspective the events we are witnessing, passing in a compressed time frame, and be labelled legitimately ‘nondiegetic’ or, perhaps more appropriately, ‘extradiegetic’.

This is a more restrictive definition of ‘narrative film music’ than that of Jerrold Levinson, who equated nondiegetic music that has “a narrative function, and [is] thus...attributable to a narrative agent,” with situations “where these things would not be established, or not so definitely, without the music.”<sup>61</sup> But this does not suggest that music is operating in a fundamentally different way from other elements in

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> See Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), xi-xii.

<sup>61</sup> Jerrold Levinson, “Film Music and Narrative Agency,” *Post-Theory* ed. Bordwell and Carroll, 259-260.

narrative space, such as costume, which establish similar ‘fictional truths’. If as Levinson claims, ‘making a difference’ in the narrative is the essential definition of narrative film music, then potentially every sound we hear and everything we see may also be attributable to a narrative agent. Levinson’s view of ‘narrative’ film music is so broad, then, as to be indistinguishable from anything else that exists *within the diegesis*, and certainly does not imply a separate level. In fact, his non-narrative film music, which is assigned to an implied author figure, is closer to my conception of ‘narrative’ film music.

The essential distinction I wish to introduce, and the one that is most important for my perception of filmic diegesis, then, concerns narrative space rather than narrative levels: it is not whether or not the characters can ‘hear’ music that dictates whether the music is part of the fictional world (though that distinction is not without interest), but whether the music appears to exist in the time and narrative space of the diegesis; or whether it appears to ‘narrate’ at a temporal distance from that space.<sup>62</sup> Thus we might propose firstly a broad distinction between two types of music: extra-fictional and fictional. The former covers music that exists outside the film’s frame (and might include the overture and intermission music to *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962), for example), while the latter broadly includes all other music. Within the category of the ‘fictional,’ however—all of which is the product of Frampton’s filmind—there are distinctions to be made based on the music’s function and its imagined location. Firstly, the extradiegetic might be understood as music or

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<sup>62</sup> The famous montage sequence in *Citizen Kane* is unlike many montage scenes in that the music changes as a result of the changing time in which we see Kane and his wife eating breakfast. The music thus belongs in their narrative space, and what we hear is a series of variations as the narrative space changes, rather than a piece of music that appears to exist independently of these jumps in time.

sound whose logic is not dictated by events within the narrative space, and therefore does not seem to be part of the film's *fabula*. This is music that accompanies certain montage sequences, or seems to be deliberately distanced from the here-and-now of the narrative space's everyday world: it may have a self-consciously narrative function or may even be perceived as an expression of the filmind's own emotional reaction—such as the use of Barber's *Adagio* in *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986) to underscore Sgt Elias's death, which in contrast to Georges Delerue's underscoring seems distanced from the narrative action.<sup>63</sup> Secondly, intradiegetic music or sound exists in the film's everyday narrative space and time, and is thus properly thought of as part of the film's *fabula*: it may be considered to be produced by the characters themselves (either as a result of their physical movements, as with mickey-mousing, as an expression of their emotional state, or as a musical calling-card), or by the geographical space of the film—as with the zither music of *The Third Man*.<sup>64</sup> This category accounts for the majority of music heard in Classical Hollywood film usually labelled 'nondiegetic,' and represents my largest change to existing models. Finally, music which is heard by the characters 'as music' in the diegesis (much like

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<sup>63</sup> The prominence of music in the sound mix, and the fadeout of diegetic sound helps to create this sense of an overlaid narrative layer. This, ironically, may accord with Levinson's 'non-narrative' music.

<sup>64</sup> Characters' occasional acts of narration within film may be accompanied by music in a way that corresponds with the overt acts of narration encountered in Wagnerian music drama (see Abbate, *Unsung Voices*). In *Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand, 1983), C3PO narrates the story of the previous two films in the *Star Wars* trilogy to a group of Ewoks, accompanied by the appropriate musical themes. As this music can be conceived of as emanating from the character in the act of narration, however, it is still considered to be intradiegetic, though it may better be described as an instance of metadiegetic narration.

phenomenal song in opera), along with sounds that the characters seem to hear, retains its label of ‘diegetic’ for continuity’s sake.<sup>65</sup> Evidently, the music can easily cross these boundaries as a result of fluid film-thinking, and music considered extradiegetic can easily become intradiegetic without necessarily becoming audible to the characters. Similarly, diegetic music can easily become partly or wholly intradiegetic on the whim of the filmind. Indeed, it is in the liminal space between these three categories that Stilwell’s “fantastical gap” may be located.<sup>66</sup> Crucial in this model, though, is the lack of a hierarchy suggestive of layers of nested narrative, and the return to a filmic concept of diegesis that is less about narration and more about narrative space. This model is depicted in Figure 1.

While all ‘fictional’ music is, as the product of the filmind, strictly speaking ‘diegetic’, it is the music (and sound) that sits in the spaces labelled ‘intradiegetic’ or ‘diegetic’—i.e. in the narrative space—that has the power to impact on the course of the story (*fabula*). Indeed, one of the reasons for positing music’s location within diegetic space is precisely to allow the characters access to it, bringing it in line with Branigan’s definition of diegesis as the aspects of the fictional world accessible to the characters.<sup>67</sup> For an example of the interpretative freedom this allows, we might look

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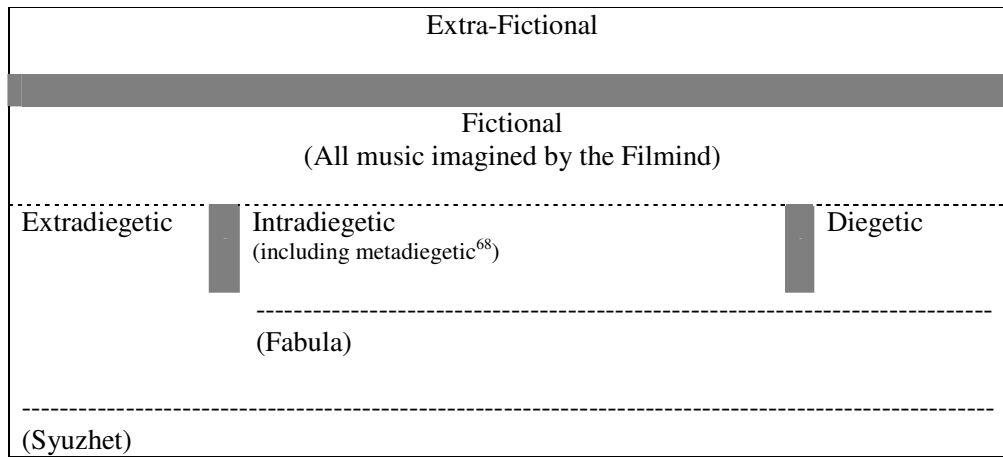
<sup>65</sup> In film theory, the use of the words ‘diegetic’ and ‘intradiegetic’ would be considered a tautology. I am differentiating them, however, in order to distinguish music that the characters acknowledge they hear (diegetic) from underscoring that exists within the world of the diegesis, but is not necessarily ‘heard’ by the characters (intradiegetic).

<sup>66</sup> Stilwell, “The Fantastical Gap Between Diegetic and Nondiegetic.” Evidently music crosses the levels I have outlined just as freely (and problematically) as in previous models. My intention is not simply to create an extra level, but to shift the majority of music inside the narrative space.

<sup>67</sup> Edward Branigan, “The Spectator and Film Space: Two Theories,” *Screen* Vol. 22 No. 1(1981): 55-78.

briefly at the way in which characters engage with both intradiegetic and diegetic music in *Saving Private Ryan*.

Figure 1. Layers of Music in Film (greyed areas indicate liminal spaces)



### *Saving Private Ryan*

The 'filmind' of *Saving Private Ryan* uses music as a force for subverting the expected roles of a Hollywood soldier, making it an essential element in shaping the world presented to the audience. By allowing the characters to engage with both intradiegetic and diegetic music, the film strips away the semi-heroic aura surrounding them in the music-free D-Day sequence mentioned above, and opens them up to dangerous 'emasculating' emotions that, in having little to do with Hollywood soldiery, threaten their very lives. This emasculating danger is associated specifically with music and is first introduced in the scene where Caparzo (Vin Diesel) is shot by a sniper—the first death amongst the squad sent out to search for and bring home Mrs Ryan's fourth son (the Private Ryan of the film's title). As the shot rings out, it is accompanied by a low, pedalled piano-note cluster

<sup>68</sup> See note 12.

(intradiegetically), anticipating the diegetic chord sounding as Caparzo falls against an on-screen piano. Furthermore, it is Caparzo's compassion for a French girl that proves his undoing, strengthening the implicit link the film has already made between music, death, and the compassionate emotions associated with femininity. Thus the violence of the music-free D-Day battle is followed by a contrasting sequence in which we hear the first music for some twenty minutes; see several lingering close-up shots of the women of the typing pool preparing telegrams for unfortunate families (Figure 2); and witness Mrs Ryan receiving the news of her sons' deaths.

Figure 2. Emphasizing the feminine in *Saving Private Ryan*

Caparzo's death thus triggers the collapse of the mechanism by which music is separated from the world of the soldiers. From this moment on, the characters engage with music, both diegetically and intradiegetically, and in partaking of the 'feminine' emotions it represents, are led further from the soldierly ideal—with fatal consequences.

Diegetically, Mellish (Adam Goldberg) sings to himself and is killed in the final battle, and Sgt Horvath (Tom Sizemore) articulates the danger of an Édith Piaf record to a soldier (of which, more below), remarking that “any more songs like this, the Krauts aren't going to have to shoot me. I'm just gonna slit my own wrists.” He, too, is killed. It is Corporal Upham (Jeremy Davies), though, who demonstrates most clearly the inherent dangers of the film's diegetic music to the Hollywood soldier.



During the climactic battle scene, he becomes paralysed with fear and can do nothing to prevent the death of Mellish, murdered by the German PoW that Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) had earlier set free. His failure to act is partly prepared by his characterisation as a sensitive man of literature, an outsider whose introduction to the squad of combat-hardened veterans seems to endanger the group, and Captain Miller in particular, with whom he shares his literary education. Yet there is a degree to which Upham has begun to bond with the others, becoming more ‘soldierly’ in his manner (smoking) and adopting the slang of the squad. Mellish makes the in-joke of the group so obvious that Upham finally understands; ‘Fubar’ is not a German word, as he had been told, but a typical soldier’s acronym: “Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition.” So great is this bonding, in fact, that Upham’s ‘failure’ comes as something of a surprise to the viewer; we expect the film to transform him from nervous, effeminate map-maker to heroic combat soldier. What, then, happens to precipitate his spectacular fall?

Upham, I suggest, is undone by the power of music, and his impending failure is well signposted in the sequence leading up to the final battle. Specifically, it is the diegetic playing of the Édith Piaf record that brings about his undoing.<sup>69</sup> Though the whole squad can hear the record, Upham not only listens, he *engages* with the music, translating the lyrics for his comrades:

Even life itself only represents you  
 Sometimes I dream that I’m in your arms  
 And you speak softly in my ear  
 And you say things that make my eyes close

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<sup>69</sup> The 1943 song “Tu es partout.”

And I find that marvellous<sup>70</sup>

In so doing, he makes the mistake of translating in the first person, becoming feminised to the point where Mellish jokes: “Upham, to be honest with you, I find myself curiously aroused by you.” Upham’s feminisation at the hands of Édith Piaf seems to remove the heroic aura that he has absorbed from the squad, and re-inscribe the sensitive emotions of compassion, mercy, and remorse that are implicit in his character and that are so dangerous to the Hollywood soldier.<sup>71</sup> It should be no surprise therefore that he fails in combat: music has marked him as other to the normative world of the Hollywood soldier established in the film’s ‘music-free’ D-Day sequence.

If Upham has engaged with music diegetically, Captain Miller suffers equally by engaging with the film’s *intradiegetic* music. By that I mean that he seems to respond to the presence of underscoring; that his emotional crisis triggers the presence of music in the narrative space of the film and is, in turn, fed by it in a kind of self-destructive feedback loop. This process begins in the immediate aftermath of the D-Day assault as the filmind imagines the entrance of a chorale theme<sup>72</sup>—music that

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<sup>70</sup> The original French lyrics are: “Même la vie ne represente que toi/Des fois je rêve que je suis dans tes bras/Et qu’à l’oreille tu me parles tout bas/Tu dis des choses qui font fermer les yeux/Et moi je trouve ça merveilleux.”

<sup>71</sup> In episode three of Spielberg’s 2001 HBO mini-series *Band of Brothers*, Lt. Spiers (Matthew Settle) outlines how a real/reel soldier should function: “Without mercy, without compassion, without remorse. All war depends upon it.” Upham embodies these qualities: when the rest of the squad want to execute the German PoW, it is Upham who appeals to Miller, claiming “this is not right.”

<sup>72</sup> The music is, of course, written by John Williams, but it is not Williams’s musical voice that is operating here, but that of the film itself.

seems to say so much about the brotherhood of war (a condition to which Upham aspires, and about which he is writing his book). Miller is, however, able to silence this music, initially banishing it from his everyday activities as a soldier in his scenes with Lt. Col. Anderson (Dennis Farina) and Capt. Hamill (Ted Danson). Music, though, becomes ever more pervasive in his world. By the time that the squad are searching for Ryan among some passing airborne troops, Miller is actively underscored with music—though as this cue's orchestration is dominated by the trumpet, an instrument that retains its connection with the military, it suggests he maintains at least some measure of control. As he begins to lose his grip on the mission, however, he is increasingly underscored by instruments that perhaps connote a more feminine musical 'voice.' In the scene where he breaks down and weeps, for example, we hear low clarinets and strings, and it is only by pulling himself together that he silences the music seemingly emanating involuntarily from him. He might seem to engage with his music in ways that traditional film music theory, in labelling it 'nondiegetic' and assuming that it is a passive reflection of, or commentary on, his actions would perhaps deny.

Alongside this growing lack of control (of both himself and his men, and his musical voice), Miller's home life, which he has so assiduously guarded, gradually intrudes. Having deduced that he does not have a (living) mother, the men have characterised him as some sort of ideal soldier: "Captain didn't go to school. They assembled him at OCS out of spare body parts of dead GIs." Once his 'mysterious' past is revealed to include a wife, to whom he is emotionally attached, and an unremarkable schoolteacher background, he is further removed from the soldierly

ideal, warranting ever more underscoring.<sup>73</sup> In fact, a music cue enters immediately after the following dialogue: “I’m a schoolteacher. I teach English composition in this little town called Addley, Pennsylvania. The last 11 years I’ve been at Thomas Alva Edison High School. I was the coach of the baseball team in the springtime.” Significantly, the cue begins with the same low clarinet theme heard in a previous scene as Wade the medic (Giovanni Ribisi) voices his concern for Mellish, Jackson and Reiben’s irreverent search through the dog tags of dead soldiers in full view of onlooking airborne troops. Undone by his concern for “the decent thing to do,” Wade is also marked as ‘other’ by intradiegetic music that contrasts with the normative sound world of Hollywood soldiery, and in the very next set piece—the attack on the radar position—it is Wade who is shot. During his death scene, Wade begins to call for his mother, prompting another intradiegetic music cue and leading into a period of emotional crisis for the whole squad as they grapple with the implications of his demise. This ‘othering’ from the normative world of Hollywood soldiery through music thus endangers Miller too, and offers a clue to his eventual fate. Though he is portrayed in the final battle in the heroic, self-sacrificing role of the traditional Hollywood soldier, it is perhaps no surprise that he does not survive: his developing characterisation, shaped by his underscoring, has decreed that he no longer belongs to the machismo world of warfare. The associations in *Saving Private Ryan* thus seem clear: decency/femininity leads to/is caused by intradiegetic/diegetic music and, ultimately, results in death. Only with the increasingly heroic actions of Private Reiben (Edward Burns) are these associations challenged.

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<sup>73</sup> Miller has also admitted that “every man I kill, the farther away from home I feel.” This is in stark contrast to the squad’s earlier portrayal of him as the ideal soldierly machine, or of Jackson’s own claim to be “a fine instrument of warfare.”

Reiben is the only member of the squad around whom some musical association fails to materialise until the very end of the film, and it is his character that emerges as the archetypal soldier of the generation that Spielberg so obviously wishes to commemorate. It is Reiben who, having conquered his mutinous tendencies, seems to take control in the final battle as Miller, undone by his musical characterisation, slips further from the soldierly ideal. It is Reiben who ultimately ‘saves’ Ryan; and it is Reiben who takes control when Miller is incapacitated by shock. Only in his last appearance on camera is the character underscored by music. Crucially though, it is not the feminised sound world of strings or clarinets that surrounds him, but the nobility of trumpets. Reiben, it seems, has replaced Miller as the ‘ideal soldier’ in the film’s film-thinking, and assertively claims the only music that carries with it a sense of military dignity, bringing the errant music back under control. Furthermore, he is identified closely with an overtly heterosexual, masculine position, as his story about Rachel Troubowitz attests, and the only compassion he displays is for fallen Americans (Miller), once the battle is over. If, as Catherine Gunther Kodat suggests, *Saving Private Ryan* can be seen as a reaffirmation of patriarchy, and particularly the patriarchy of the founding fathers (as it is presented in the film, the premise of the mission to save Ryan is inspired by Abraham Lincoln’s Bixby letter),<sup>74</sup> then it is Reiben who is able to tame the film’s music, and emerge as its hero.

## Conclusion

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<sup>74</sup> See Catherine Gunther Kodat, “Saving Private Property: Steven Spielberg’s American Dream Works,” *Representations* No. 71 (Summer, 2000): 77–105. The passage discussing the Bixby letter can be found on pages 86–88.

Music's perceived cultural power to undo masculinity and evoke pacifying emotions is thus used by the filmind of *Saving Private Ryan* to shape the world it has created—to trigger the removal from the film-world of characters that do not fit its idea of the soldierly ideal.<sup>75</sup> Crucially, though, it is not just through the film's diegetic music that this is achieved (the Édith Piaf song), but also through the intradiegetic underscoring: while the characters do not appear to hear it, music seems to inhabit the same narrative space they occupy and is thus able to influence the course of the *fabula*. Music might be envisaged as a kind of energy field imagined by the filmind, which surrounds the space of the film and responds to the presence of characters, or to other elements of the diegesis. Concepts such as 'brotherhood' may trigger a musical response; characters undergoing extremes of emotion may cause large waves of musical energy to traverse it (as with Miller); or the filmind may induce its own ripples in its musical fabric to induce a reaction in the characters. In that sense, it demonstrates the greater interpretative freedom offered by a model of film music unconstrained by an overly-realistic philosophy of film, or by models of narratology arguably more appropriate to literature.

Evidently, as recent theorisations of the nondiegetic by such scholars as Neumeyer, Stilwell, and Smith reveal, the use of the term 'nondiegetic' does not straight-jacket film musicology entirely into invoking a set of pre-conceived functions

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<sup>75</sup> Peter Franklin's exploration of music's role in negotiating tropes of gender and subjectivity in *King Kong* suggests that these associations are, to a degree, inbuilt in films of classical narrative cinema. See "King Kong and Film on Music: Out of the Fog," 88-102 in *Film Music: Critical Approaches*, ed. K. J. Donnelly (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001). See also Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997); and Lawrence Kramer, *After the Lovedeath: Sexual Violence and the Making of Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

for music; and yet I find the term unhelpful for what it implies about the cinematic object. Indeed, separating music as a matter of course from the events occurring in the fictional world, as the expression of a critical or narrating voice, may even be unconsciously reinforcing modernist paradigms. Music, according to Adorno, only fulfills its social function “when it presents social problems through its own material and according to its own formal laws,”<sup>76</sup> thus implying a separation, or at least a distancing, from such problematic arts as film. My reconceptualising of music’s role in film, therefore, is in part motivated by an instinctive reaction to the modernist tenet of Adorno and Eisler’s criticisms. In their advocacy of a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* and their rejection of ‘redundant’ musical illustration, they suggest a composer’s voice able to stand apart from the fictive world, much in the way that Adorno talked about the role of an artist in society. Evidently, for Adorno and Eisler, film’s relationship with reality was a crucial issue, but as I have argued I do not believe film should be evaluated in terms of its fidelity to reality. Perhaps with that postmodernist shift in attitude that sees and *embraces* music as deeply implicated in our messy every-day world, so we can also regard the worlds created by film as open to the influence of music—rather than positing underscore as something akin to a modernist critical voice, operating above and beyond their (filmic) worlds. I believe that we construct cinematic diegesis not according to the everyday rules of our (real) world, in which music does not underscore our actions, but rather with reference to the conventions of film. Theorising music as nondiegetic denies it the agency in film that it has enjoyed throughout much of its history, and which it enjoys in other fictional genres, such as opera and musical theatre.

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<sup>76</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Social Situation of Music,” *Telos* 35 (Spring 1978), 130.

By replacing ‘nondiegetic’ with ‘extradiegetic’ and ‘intradiegetic’ in my reconceptualisation, I have not only suggested that ‘background’ music plays a constitutive role in shaping our construction of the diegesis, but also revealed music’s potential to play an active role in the diegesis while still appearing to remain ‘unheard’ by its characters (though this is not an essential condition of its existence). While this may be a controversial move in our understanding of music’s role in cinema, aligning film with a less realistic medium such as opera, it potentially allows a more flexible approach to film music criticism. We may speak of characters radiating music and thus accidentally revealing their presence,<sup>77</sup> or of underscoring revealing the falsity of a character’s verbal utterances, much in the way that film scholars might talk of a character’s body language betraying their intentions. More than that, though, we are no longer required to imagine that the fantastical fictional film worlds and characters we enjoy in the cinema exist in some realistic world, separated from the music that defines them.

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<sup>77</sup> In episode three of *Band of Brothers*, for instance, the sensitive Private Blithe (Marc Warren) despite appearing to maintain ‘noise discipline’ cannot help but radiate Michael Kamen’s music, revealing his position to a German sniper. He is shot through the throat, which silences his whispers and the intradiegetic music that appears to originate from his body.