

Discourses on *Diegesis*

## Does Anybody Hear?

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By Randolph Jordan

If a tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound? When Bart Simpson was asked this question by his sister Lisa as part of his Zen training for an upcoming miniature golf tournament, he answered by mimicking the sound of a falling tree crashing into its neighbors. “But Bart,” Lisa continued, “how can it make a sound if there’s nobody there to hear it?” Here Bart has a moment of clarity, and is now able to move to the next level of perception. Prior to this enlightenment, Bart seems never to have considered the idea that sound might only come into being in the presence of ears. This, of course, taps into phenomenological questions about the nature of perceived reality. It is also of some importance when considering the concept of diegetic sound.

When explaining the concept of diegetic sound to neophytes (students, neighbours, in-laws, etc), the question that I have found most useful is this: *could* a character in the film hear the sound under discussion? If so then it’s diegetic. After all, it’s easy for most of us to understand that while we watch Darth Vader striding through the halls of the Death Star, John Williams isn’t conducting an orchestra through the *Imperial Theme* just outside the frame (though the Imperials

might well enjoy such a thing, and could certainly afford it). Yet here my use of the word *could* is crucial. To ask if a character *could* hear the sound is different from asking if this same character *does* hear the sound. The first scenario suggests sound that comes from a character's environment, regardless of whether or not anyone is there to hear it. The second suggests that diegetic sound is that which is, in fact, heard by a character.

The cinema provides us with endless examples of environmental sound that exists solely for our benefit as an audience, with no ear-bearing creatures within earshot of the environment in question. By one way of thinking, such sounds might only be considered sounds because WE are there to hear them while seated in the theatre. We might accept this when considering non-diegetic sounds that are intended for our ears only. But within the diegesis, the world of the story, can sounds heard by nobody really be considered sounds at all? Surely this question is preposterous, for it is the *possibility* of these sounds being heard that constitutes their categorization as diegetic. Yet if we leave the question of defining *sound* out of the equation, might there be some use in distinguishing between diegetic sounds that are *actually* heard, and those that have only the *potential* to be heard?

I came to this question when presented with what seems to be a very unusual sonic moment from Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*. Very early in the film, we meet photographer Eli just before he encounters a couple on the field next to his school and takes a few shots of them for his portfolio. As he walks we hear him

sniffle as though afflicted with some light nasal congestion. At this point the camera is positioned at a distance roughly matched to the auditory perspective we are given. As he then takes his leave of the couple, the camera moves right to follow him briefly, then halts and remains still as we watch him recede into the distance. The sound of his footsteps diminishes accordingly until we are left alone with a few moments of ambient soundscape, grounding us in a firm congruence between the perspective of the camera and our auditory positioning. Yet just before the end of this shot, another nasal sniff is heard along with some light shuddered breathing – a sob. Who are we hearing here? The sound is close-miked, indicating that Eli might be wearing a lapel mic which continues to record him in close proximity even as pulls farther away from the camera. Yet there are no other sounds of his breathing or clothing rustling to suggest this. So I find this moment disturbing, a gently ominous presence revealing itself to be just outside of view, yet which was not acknowledged by any of the characters previously in his or her vicinity. And we can wait the entire film for one of its signature temporal replays that show us the same events unfolding from different perspectives: the source of this sobbing is never revealed.

We can, however, search for its significance. Is it the sound of another student, seated on the field in tears, perhaps in some precognizant awareness of the horror about to unfold in the school? Or perhaps the tears are for some other personal turmoil, one of the many inner worlds into which the film grants little access, leaving us with no real sense of what motivates any of the characters we

see on screen, much less the motivations for the shootings that take place shortly thereafter. Perhaps the shootings are equivalent to tears, pain externalized and made perceptible to others. The subtlety of rendering this gentle sobbing audible stands in stark contrast to the overt acts of violence that the film centers upon. This is a necessary contrast, indicating the tension between inside and outside that drives the film forward, culminating in a mad scramble amongst the students to find a way out of the building which has been turned inside out by the gunmen.

The gunshots are heard by everyone, but by then it's too late. Did anyone hear the soft sounds of the mysterious sobber on the field? This question is facilitated by a distinction between the two categories of diegetic sound that I have discussed here. It is important that the *actually* heard and the *potentially* heard are both grounded within the diegesis, for it is the potential locked within the latter category that bears the most ethical weight when considering the case of *Elephant*. It seems to me that these are the fundamental questions of the film: Could the shootings have been stopped? Did anyone hear the pain of the two killers? Could anyone see the Elephant in the room? To my mind, the question of sound that has the potential to be heard, but which remains unheard within the diegesis, is of great importance when considering Van Sant's film. In turn, the term *diegesis* remains an important part of this exercise, for without it the realm of unheard sound bleeds outward into areas that have no bearing on these questions. So I'll end by reprising the question posed to Bart Simpson by turning to the words of Bruce Cockburn: "If a tree falls in the forest, does anybody hear?"

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**Bio:**

Randolph Jordan holds an MA in Film Studies from the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, and is currently a doctoral candidate in Concordia's Interdisciplinary PhD Humanities program. His research focuses on the intersections between film sound theory, electroacoustic music and acoustic ecology. His dissertation examines films which thematize environmental issues through creative approaches to the relationship between sound and image on screen. He is also a pianist and soundscape composer. For more information, visit: [www.randolphjordan.com](http://www.randolphjordan.com).