Discourses on *Diegesis*

# Diegetic Commentaries

By Martin F. Norden

As a professor who has taught intro-to-film classes for many years, I find critical and pedagogical value in maintaining the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic sound as blurry as that line often is. I also think, however, that assumptions about these two broad variants of sound usage sometimes interfere with our understanding of what filmmakers can actually do with them.

To illustrate this general point, let us first consider a fundamental observation about non-diegetic sound: that it provides commentary on a film's characters, events, locations, etc., but only for the benefit of the audience. This commentary can be literal—as in the case of voice-over narration—but can also take the form of general mood music or specific musical "indicators." Whether it's the narration spoken by Morgan Freeman in *WAR OF THE WORLDS* (2005), Jerry Goldsmith's ominous strings-and-organ music in *SECONDS* (1966), or John Williams' bass-fiddle motif in *JAWS* (1975), non-diegetic sound places the audience in a privileged position: we are privy to information—often crucial information—of which the characters are frequently unaware.

Though I would argue that this assumption holds up reasonably well, it would be a mistake to conclude that diegetic sound cannot be used in a similar way. Indeed, there are a number of instances in which sound, audible to both characters and audience, conveys information that the characters may only be dimly aware of, if at all.

In some films, the commentary may be rather heavy-handed, such as the use of several Tammy Wynette songs to mirror the emotions of C&W fan Rayette DiPesto (Karen Black) in *FIVE EASY PIECES* (1970). Other "diegetic commentaries" are subtler and perhaps more rewarding. Consider, for instance, the scene in *THE CONVERSATION* (1974) in which professional wiretapper Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) lies on a bed in his workshop while listening to an audio recording of the titular conversation. He and the audience hear a woman's taped voice (provided by Cindy Williams) commenting on a homeless man asleep on a park bench. At the moment the woman begins the phrase, "he was once somebody's baby boy," the film cuts to a shot of Harry who now resembles the homeless man due to the way he's photographed on the bed. As the camera slowly dollies in on the emotionally childlike protagonist, it's apparent that the woman's statement applies as much to him as to the man she's observing. This image-sound juxtaposition, which occurs entirely within the film's diegetic space, is a filmic utterance created solely for the audience. *THE CONVERSATION* offers further Harry-as-baby commentary when Caul awakens in a hotel room to the sound of a television set playing an episode of *THE FLINTSTONES*. The

program's visuals are obscured, but its characters are clearly talking about the impending birth of a child. Once again, Harry has little if any clue that this commentary applies, however obliquely, to him.

For this type of diegetic sound usage to work, the characters and the audience have to ascribe differing values to the things that they hear, just as people do in everyday life. The whistled tune in Fritz Lang's *M* (1931) and the varied responses to it serve well as a case in point. To Hans Beckert (Peter Lorre), the murderer who whistles "In the Hall of the Mountain King," it may simply be the product of a nervous habit; in fact, he may be unaware that he's doing it. To his young victims, it's a quirk of a seemingly kind gentleman. To the blind balloon seller, it's the primary means of identifying the killer. To the film's audience, the tune becomes a frisson-inducing motif; whenever we hear it, we know the murderer is about to strike again. Diegetic commentaries have the potential to be a more poignant use of sound than their non-diegetic counterparts, in that certain characters have a chance to learn something simultaneously with the audience. If these characters ignore the sound or downplay its significance, a particularly resonant form of dramatic irony often ensues.

---

**Bio:**

Martin F. Norden teaches film history/theory/criticism and screenwriting as Professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. He is Book Review Editor for the *Journal of Popular Film & Television* and the author of more than 90 publications on moving-image media. His anthology, *The Changing Face of Evil in Film and Television* (Editions Rodopi), and a Japanese translation of his *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (Akashi Shoten) are forthcoming.