

Discourses on *Diegesis*

The Success Story of a Misnomer

By Henry M. Taylor

Diegesis refers to narration, the content of the narrative, the fictional world as described inside the story. In film it refers to all that is really going on on-screen, that is, to fictional reality.

- Susan Hayward

Diegesis, and its various adjectival forms, *diegetic*, *non-diegetic*, *meta-diegetic*, *homo-diegetic* etc., have long functioned in literary and film studies as fetish or code words separating the cognoscenti of these disciplines from the general, "ignorant" public. To those on the outside, these terms must sound like cryptic jargon, a situation somewhat reminiscent of the mid-80s, when only the initiated knew what the acronym MS-DOS stood for. Yet it may come as something of a surprise that the highly successful term *diegetic* is really a misnomer.

In the third book of *The Republic (Politeia)*, Plato distinguishes between two kinds of narrative: the simple narrative (*haple diegesis*), featuring a narrator speaking directly in his own, undisguised voice, and *mimesis*, or imitative

representation, in which the author speaks indirectly, i.e. through other characters. Plato is critical of imitation *as imitation*, regarding it as dangerous since it simply copies the *appearance* of the real, providing us only with reproductions of shadows; hence mimesis is an inferior, degraded form of storytelling. This is, of course, ironic, as Plato himself in his dialogues does not speak to us directly, but through the voice of Socrates.

All this changes with Plato's pupil Aristotle, who, in his *Poetics*, recontextualizes and expands the significance of mimesis and mimetic narrative. Mimesis now does not reproduce reproductions (or shadows), but reality itself, and hence it is a first and not second order imitation. Reading Aristotle with Paul Ricœur (in the latter's *Time and Narrative*), we could say that any kind of creation of poetic worlds is mimetic. Aristotle still adheres to Plato's term diegesis, but reassigns it to the *mode* of mimesis: hence, while all narrative is mimesis in the wider sense, the simple or direct narrative (as in voice-over narration in film) is diegetic mimesis, whereas dramatic representations (of actors in a scene, for instance) are, strictly speaking, mimetic mimesis. Therefore, mimesis in Aristotle is the umbrella term designating all poetic representation.

Alas, for a variety of reasons, what should have been called *mimesis* and *mimetic* came to be designated by the terms *diegesis* and *diegetic*. In film studies, before the academic discipline was established as such, the French term *diégèse* was introduced around 1950 by Etienne and Anne Souriau, even if there is some dispute about its precise origin. According to Gérard Genette, it was Etienne

Souriau who first used the term in 1948; whereas Anne Souriau claims in the *Vocabulaire d'esthétique* to have coined it herself in 1950; and David Bordwell in his *Narration in the Fiction Film* refers to Etienne Souriau's introduction of the concept in a widely known 1953 publication, which is presumably appropriate regarding the expression's historical reception. This dispute notwithstanding, the English terms diegesis and diegetic, referring to the spatial story worlds primarily of fictional texts/films, are translations of the French words *diégèse* and *diégétique* — the matter being complicated by the fact that Genette (aligning himself with Etienne Souriau) asserts that these terms are *not* derived from the Greek *diegesis*.

Of course, by now this terminology has been so well established that it would be futile not to use it in its accustomed sense. It has been particularly useful in designating aspects and features of filmic sound as it relates to the relatively closed story-worlds of fiction (regarding non-fiction, and the documentary in particular, the terms remain somewhat problematic). A variant that I first heard of in the early 90s, and that may have been coined at Zurich University's film studies department, is the expression *transdiegetic*, referring to sound's propensities to cross the border of the diegetic to the non-diegetic and remaining unspecific. A good example can be found in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (USA 1979): when the PT boat crew member played by Laurence Fishburne turns up the radio playing the Stones song "Satisfaction," the music (at first simply located in on-screen space) swells, thereby encompassing on- and off-screen space; a similar

phenomenon can be observed in Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (UK 1989), when, after the victorious battle at Agincourt, one of the English soldiers (played by the film's composer, Patrick Doyle) starts singing "Non Nobis," before the rousing chant is picked up by what is in effect a phantom choir and orchestra on the soundtrack. The term *transdiegetic*, therefore, reveals that filmic sound, unlike the image, is not place-specific and delimited, and acts not solely to weld the images together (across shot edits), but also to *engulf* the spectator in the filmic experience. Plato would not have approved.

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Bio:

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