

Favourite Moments of Film Sound

Overlapping Levels of the Diegesis in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

By Jim Batcho

The soundtrack for Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is remarkable in its ability to stretch the concept of the *diegesis* to the extreme. The film employs strategies of creative ambiguity regarding the line between the inside and the outside of the diegesis by incorporating what might best be thought of as two distinct, overlapping and often simultaneous levels of diegetic sound. The first (D1) is the more objective world of the narrative's unfolding, including the romance of Joel and Clementine and the events revolving around support characters. The second (D2) is the completely subjective, internal, experiential "story" of the romance, and the threats by science and psychological insecurity to dismantle their blossoming relationship. But it isn't simply a matter of two separate attributes of the story told in juxtaposition (although that does occur). The real magic is the way in which the two realities blend and even interact with one other. This magic lies within the realm of the aural.

The simultaneous co-existence of the two layers of the diegesis is best exemplified by a three minute sequence in which two medical assistants are in Joel's living room erasing his memories of Clementine. The objective representation of the medical procedure can be thought of as the first level of the diegesis (D1). As this plays out, we are also offered the subjective diegesis (D2) which presents us with Joel's mental experience of the erasure process. Inside D2, we are given the story of his romance with Clementine and his efforts to stop the process that he now regrets undertaking. But these conditions do not happen in isolation. While Joel interacts with the memories being eliminated in D2, he can also hear the events taking place in D1.

Objective reality is represented using the standard Hollywood aesthetic code: clean, monophonic dialogue complemented by unobtrusive room ambience, a dog barking outside, and literal, onscreen sound effects like paper shuffling, a computer keyboard, beer bottles, and footsteps. Joel's internal experience of these same events, on the other hand, is suggested through offscreen, unlocalizable dialogue that is reverberated, flanged, and spread out across multiple channels. At the same time, he is reliving his memories, the sonic treatment of which varies depending on the situation. When his memories are clear and tangible, the soundtrack is dry, free of noise, and perfectly intelligible. But as a memory is removed, these same sounds are degraded using techniques that suggest loss. At one point, Clementine's dialogue becomes fragmented and distorted. Concurrently, the music that we assumed was the non-diegetic score follows the

same process through its gradual eradication. Finally, we are given subtle non-diegetic sound effects to enhance the sense of erasure. As a memory is being eliminated, we hear either tape rewinding at high speed, or a pyrotechnic fizzle as it disappears. These sounds are not to be found on any level of the diegesis; they are not a part of the objective diegesis, nor are they to be found within Joel's memories. They exist simply for the audience as a means of intensifying the idea that such erasure has occurred. It might be said that these non-diegetic sound effects constitute a third level of the diegesis: that of audience's perception of the events presented within the other two. It is on the point of erasure that these three levels merge, and it is here that film's soundtrack is most interesting.

The soundtrack to *Eternal Sunshine* not only offers a clever means of telling a story, it is also one of the most courageous I've ever experienced. A particular concept of fidelity (based on intelligibility) is the guiding principle of Hollywood sound, and here this principle is radically disregarded in order to support the concept of erasure. The film literally destroys clarity, yet this is not done arbitrarily. Rather, the creative minds behind the film realized how such treatments would evoke strong character empathy and the narrative progression of a story about loss, both on the level of personal relationships and the loss of the line that separates levels of the diegesis into neat categories for our unquestioning consumption.

Bio:

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