Discourses on *Diegesis*

Constructing the Diegesis in a Multi-Channel World

By Mark Kerins

On the rare occasions they pay attention to the aural portion of film, theorists often mention whether sounds are *diegetic* or *non-diegetic*. The continued use of these terms despite their limitations demonstrates that making this distinction has some value. Yet the focus on differentiating sounds based on their existence inside or outside of the diegesis seems to have overshadowed the question (perhaps more interesting in recent years) of *how* diegetic sounds are used. In particular, the last decade or so has seen a major shift in where diegetic sounds appear in relation to the screen and, indeed, how the diegesis itself is constructed.

In the monophonic era, all sounds — diegetic and otherwise — came from the screen. In the 1970s the widespread adoption of Dolby Stereo and its rear (or "surround") channel allowed the diegetic space to spread out into the theater itself. Atmospheres and ambiences could envelop the audience, enhancing the aural illusion that the theater space itself had been replaced with an environment

matching the one seen onscreen. Yet this stage of cinema required a curious disconnect between the aural space of the spectator and the diegetic space of the narrative world. Thanks to Dolby Stereo's technological limitations on what types of sounds could be placed in each channel, only "non-essential" elements like room tone, backgrounds, and music could make their way out into the space of the theater. Other elements more crucial to the story, like dialogue, were forced to remain tightly anchored to the screen. So while the sounds of the diegetic world could theoretically envelop the audience, it was really only the "background" portions of that world that were given the freedom to leave the screen. The result was a filmic environment where just about all important sounds emerged from the same place as the image, regardless of where their sources were supposed to be located in relation to the world represented by the image.

With the adoption of digital surround systems (from 5.1 onward) as the exhibition standard in the 1990s, those rules were thrown out the window; filmmakers gained the ability to place and move *any* sounds throughout the space of the theatre. For the first time, a coherent diegetic world can be constructed, where the location of sounds in space reflects their logical position with respect to the screen. Rather than the screen being the focus of both the eye and the ear, it now becomes merely a point of departure for the audience to understand the multi-dimensional aural world through their visual "window" into that space. The

spatial component of the diegesis, in other words, is constructed by the multi-channel soundtrack, while the screen acts as a point of reference.

Some filmmakers have been afraid of the so-called "exit door effect," where spot sounds in the surround channels distract the audience's attention away from the screen. This can be particularly problematic if the sounds are interpreted by the audience as "non-diegetic," such as when the sound of a door slamming in the surrounds is mistaken for the theater door. The result has been a hesitancy by some to abandon the old models of screen-centered soundtrack mixing. Nevertheless, the last ten years have seen a variety of films usher in this new model of diegesis creation by taking advantage of the new multi-channel systems to create complicated spaces primarily through sound. The opening battle scene of 1998's *Saving Private Ryan*, for instance, places the audience right in the middle of the fray, with bullets whizzing and explosions erupting all through the theater space (including directly behind the audience). The emotional effect is striking – we feel as if we are *in* the battle, not merely watching it onscreen. 1999's *The Matrix* frequently employs the same strategy, but relies even more heavily on its multi-channel soundtrack to create the narrative space. With several key sequences employing few wide shots and no establishing shots, we understand the location of key characters and other objects through the constantly shifting soundspace, which changes with nearly every cut to maintain a consistent spatial match between image and sound. Even less action-driven movies have found new ways to build diegetic spaces; *Being John Malkovich* (1999), to cite

one example, uses complex multi-channel mixing to help us distinguish between diegetic, non-diegetic, and voiceover sound for the scenes within Malkovich's head.

In the end, these films still use the idea of diegetic sound as a frame of reference, but they exploit this idea in new ways: to create the diegesis itself, and to move the movie from "what's going on in front of us" to "what's going on all around us." From one perspective, then, the important question becomes not *whether* sounds are diegetic, but *how* both diegetic and non-diegetic sounds are used. This is not to diminish the use value of the diegetic / non-diegetic distinction, but to point out that today there is more to the relationship than mere nomenclature. In a multi-channel world, many (though not all) films are willing to let diegetic sounds spread out into the theater to create a more "complete" space.

But what about non-diegetic sounds, such as music and voiceover? Should they envelop the audience along with the diegetic sound, or should the theater space be left to the diegetic world? What about sounds like music that may start out as non-diegetic and then become diegetic — where should they be located? These are questions without clear-cut answers that at the moment are being addressed differently by different filmmakers. And they will only become more complicated as sound systems continue to evolve through the adoption of 6.1-channel and 7.1-channel systems, with even more complex arrays on the horizon. Perhaps only one thing can be said for sure: the concept of the

"diegesis" will only grow richer as filmmakers experiment with new relationships between the onscreen image, the soundscape, and the filmic world.

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