

Discourses on *Diegesis*

# Acoustics of the Soul

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By Randy Thom

In the thirty years of conversations I've had with co-workers on feature films in the USA and Britain, nobody has ever used the word *diegetic* except to deride it as an academic term of little practical use. I've never heard anyone ask a director a question like, "is this gunshot diegetic?" or "is this saxophone solo diegetic?" I suspect one reason is that there are more straightforward ways to ask such questions when working on a film: "Does Jim hear the gunshot?" "Does Angela hear the saxophone?"

But there may be a deeper and more interesting reason for sound practitioners to avoid using the word "diegetic." I think it's a term more appropriate for *analyzing* a film than for *making* one. Most filmmakers, whether they are directors, composers, or sound designers, are minimally analytical about their own work. We've all witnessed Q&A sessions with directors who, when asked a learned question about the theoretical foundation for a certain moment in one of their films, has said something to the effect of, "Interesting... I don't know."

Storytellers tend to live and work on gut feelings, intuition, and their own raw nerve endings. They thrive on finding new ways to use ambiguity to their advantage. If you ask them, "Does Angela hear the saxophone?" They are likely to say, "Maybe, what do you think?"

Most filmmakers simply don't find it very interesting, and even less useful, to ask the question, "Is it theoretically possible for Angela to hear the saxophone when she is lying on her bed in the scene after the party?" The music mixer may ask whether the sax should be treated as "source" or "score" in order to know if it should be muffled and treated with artificial reverb to make it sound like it's coming from an adjacent room "source," or if it should be played cleanly and crisply to give the impression that it is not coming from a place where it could be heard. The director will usually answer that question with a response like, "Play it as source." Or, "Play it as score." Or, "Try it half way between."

I have another, more radical suspicion: I think the question of whether a sound in a given scene is diegetic or not is often irrelevant to the effect the story has on its audience. I suspect that the audience intuits that Angela hears the saxophone regardless of whether or not it's theoretically possible for her to do so. Not only does she hear it, but we hear it through her. It emanates from her. She is the saxophone at that moment. Any artificial reverb we may add to it in an attempt to make it sound like it's coming from the hotel room down the hall will tend to be interpreted instead by the audience as the acoustics of Angela's soul, making the question of the diegesis moot.

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**Bio:**

Randy Thom works as a Film Sound Designer. His credits include: *Wild At Heart* (1990), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Contact* (1996), *Mars Attacks* (1996), *The Incredibles* (2004), *Ice Age: The Meltdown* (2006), and *The Simpsons Movie* (2007).