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Beethoven and Byzantium: How does Film Music Help to Tell a Story?

Barry Sanders

In this article I would like to discuss how film music helps to tell a story, particularly looking at whether the audience's understanding of film narrative can be modified by presenting film music either diegetically or non-diegetically. In order to understand that relationship I would like to explore how the terms 'diegetic' and 'non-diegetic' have been defined and to summarise the alternative interpretations which have been proposed by musicologists to date. In addition, I would like to consider a psychological survey conducted in 2013 by Matthew Spackman, Elizabeth Wakefield and Siu-Lan Tan which tests how narrative is shaped by film music.¹ I would like to focus on the use of the Adagio (movement II), from Beethoven's piano sonata Op. 2 No. 3 in the film *Byzantium*, to discuss how both its diegetic and its non-diegetic presentation of this sonata helps director Neil Jordan to articulate the complexity of the narrative, which is unveiled as the film progresses.² Finally, I would like to review how the presentation of film music can help to progress a narrative, and would like to suggest that thoughtful engagement with the way that film music is presented is more valuable than continuing the debate about how those presentations are categorised.

In his examination of ancient Greek poetry Plato explains that events may be portrayed by a narrator telling a story, for which the Greek word is 'diegesis'.³ The definition of diegesis for audio visual media like film, however, is not without controversy as it is not clear where the boundaries for narrative are in film.

¹ Siu-Lan Tan, 'How Film Music Shapes Narrative', *OUP Blog* (2013) <<http://blog.oup.com/2013/09/how-film-music-shapes-narrative>> [accessed 25 March 2016].

² *Byzantium*, dir. by Neil Jordan (Demarest Films, 2012).

³ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by Desmond Lee (London: Penguin, 1974), p.152.

Étienne Souriau suggests that there exists a unique universe for each movie which he called the film's diegesis.⁴ In addition, Gérard Genette describes a structure for literary narration which includes the narrative voice. For Genette, narration is 'intra-diegetic' when it comes from within the story, or 'extra-diegetic' when it comes from outside of the story.⁵ In 1974, Christian Metz built on these definitions by defining a film's universe or diegesis as inclusive of all denoted characters, events, space and time implied by the narrative.⁶

In 1980, Claudia Gorbman defined diegesis as the 'narratively implied spatiotemporal world of the action and characters' and diegetic music as 'music that (apparently) issues from a source within the narrative'.⁷ She articulated three of Genette's levels of narration as 'diegetic', associated with the primary narration, 'extradiegetic' (or non-diegetic) which is an intrusion upon that narration and 'metadiegetic' which describes secondary narration, (or a narration within the narrative).⁸ She suggests that metadiegetic music enables us to access the thoughts and feelings of the secondary narrator.⁹ However, Annahid Kassabian questions this compartmentalisation and asks whether maintaining a distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music detracts from identifying the part that film music plays in creating a film's diegesis.¹⁰

Daniel Frampton also questions this, suggesting that a film creates its own film-world and is subject to its individual 'filmind'.¹¹ Frampton argues that a film-world is not a copy of reality and therefore it is not subject to the same rules and it might be quite acceptable to make music, which has no discernible source within the diegesis, available to both audience and characters, and that

⁴ Étienne Souriau, 'La structure de l'univers filmique et le vocabulaire de la filmologie', *Revue Internationale de Filmologie*, 7.8 (1951), 231-40.

⁵ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 227-243.

⁶ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. by Michael Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 98.

⁷ Claudia Gorbman, 'Narrative Film Music', *Yale French Studies*, 60 (1980), 183-203 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2930011>> [accessed 25 March 2016] (p. 195, p. 197).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁰ Annahid Kassabian, *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 42.

¹¹ Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), p. 12

music could influence that diegesis.¹² Also in 2007, Robynn Stilwell observed that film music can cross the boundary between diegetic and non-diegetic presentation and that this boundary is crossed so often that it heightens our awareness of the difference.¹³

In 2009, Jeff Smith observed that metadiegetic music can be presented either diegetically or non-diegetically because imagined music does not require a physical source to produce it.¹⁴ Also published in 2009, David Neumeyer observes that Genette actually derived his use of diegesis not from Plato but from Étienne Souriau, who defined 'diégétique' as 'not the story but the universe in which the story takes place'.¹⁵

In his 2010 article Ben Winters argues that non-diegetic music is also part of the story telling for a film's audience. Winters builds on the work of Frampton, suggesting that the worlds created by 'filminds' are not subject to the rules of the real world, and that categorising music as non-diegetic denies it the intended ability to influence the audience's perception of the film narrative.¹⁶ However, Daniel Yacavone challenges Winters' argument and suggests that rather than extending the film-world to include the non-diegetic, that film-world should be reduced to its 'symbolic, aesthetic, and phenomenological whole' to represent the lives and stories of the film's characters.¹⁷

Having defined the terms diegetic (or intra-diegetic), metadiegetic and non-diegetic (or extra-diegetic), and having identified some of the problems associated with those definitions, it is useful to explore the scholarship that has attempted to measure the effect of presenting music to a film audience in these different ways. Here, we can call upon the work

¹² Ibid., p. 79.

¹³ Robynn Stilwell, 'The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic', in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, ed. by Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 184–202 (p. 184).

¹⁴ Jeff Smith, 'Bridging the Gap: Reconsidering the Border between Diegetic and Nondiegetic Music', *Music and the Moving Image*, 2.1 (2009), 29–53 (p. 50).

¹⁵ David Neumeyer, 'Diegetic/Nondiegetic: A Theoretical Model', *Music and the Moving Image*, 2.1 (2009), 15–28 (p. 16).

¹⁶ Ben Winters, 'The Non-Diegetic Fallacy: Film, Music, and Narrative Space', *Music & Letters*, 91.2 (2010), 224–244 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcq019>> [accessed 25 March 2016] (p. 243).

¹⁷ Daniel Yacavone, 'Spaces, Gaps, and Levels: From the Diegetic to the Aesthetic in Film Theory', *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*, 6.1 (2012), 21–37 <<https://doi.org/10.3828/msmi.2012.4>> [accessed 25 March 2016] (p. 36).

of Spackman, Wakefield and Tan, who conducted a psychological experiment that tested whether there was any difference in audience perception of a film scene's narrative if the film music were presented diegetically or non-diegetically, in an attempt to determine whether changing the existing non-diegetic music to a different piece of music had any effect on audience perception of film narrative.¹⁸

The method for Spackman, Wakefield and Tan's experiment was firstly to identify a film scene for analysis. The film scene chosen was an extract from the film *Minority Report*.¹⁹ This 85-second shopping mall sequence is found between 1:35:33 and 1:36:57 on the 2002 DVD. This scene depicts two characters (John and Agatha) evading capture in a busy shopping mall. During the scene an instrumental version of Henry Mancini's 'Moon River' plays diegetically over the mall's loudspeakers. The next step was to prepare three versions of this scene. In the first version the original diegetic music was played, in the second version the exact same instrumental version of Mancini's 'Moon River' was purchased and mixed with the film sound track to make the music louder and clearer to sound like a non-diegetic score with the speech and sound effects retained from the original film. In the third version of the scene an alternative non-diegetic piece of music was mixed with the original soundtrack in the same way as with alternative two. For alternative three, speech and sound effects were again retained but the alternative piece of music chosen was intended for a chase sequence from the film *Empire of the Sun*, at 0:39:49 on the 2001 DVD.²⁰ The music was taken from the CD soundtrack (Track 10, 2:03-2:30 and 2:42-3:42).

A sample set of 245 students participated in the experiment which was described to them as a study 'to examine how people understand story lines of film scenes'.²¹ Each participant watched only one version and were then asked to answer ten questions about their

¹⁸ Tan (para. 5 of 17).

¹⁹ *Minority Report*, dir. by Steven Spielberg (Twentieth Century Fox, 2002) [on DVD].

²⁰ *Empire of the Sun*, dir. by Steven Spielberg (Warner Bros, 1987) [on DVD].

²¹ Tan (para. 7 of 17).

understanding of the scene by drawing an X on a horizontal line where the left of the line corresponded to 0% agreement and the right of the horizontal line indicated 100% agreement. This numeric coding was achieved by measuring in millimetres from the left hand side of the line to the centre of the X. In order to avoid any bias associated with having previously seen the film, and therefore having a prior awareness of the narrative, the analysis of the results only included the 111 participants who said that they had not previously seen the film.²²

The results of this experiment suggested that the participants' impression of the film narrative differed significantly depending on which version of the scene they had watched. Each version of the scene's soundtrack seemed to have a different impact on the participants' perception of the story. Spackman, Wakefield and Tan concluded that the greatest contrasts in audience perception of the film narrative were found for responses to the diegetic versus the non-diegetic version of the same piece of music. The original diegetic version was considered more tense, 'antagonistic and hostile and less romantic' than either of the two non-diegetic versions.²³ It is interesting that that the shift from diegetic to non-diegetic musical presentation produced more varied responses than changing the film score entirely. There are, however, problems with this study: the sample set was quite small with results from only 111 participants being included. Secondly, all of the participants were students who might share similar conditioning and therefore the results might not be scalable. And thirdly, diegetic versus non-diegetic presentation was differentiated by loudness and this variable was not tested. At what level of loudness would an audience perceive that the piece had moved from a diegetic presentation to a non-diegetic presentation?

Having established one case where the shift from diegetic to non-diegetic presentation appears to affect audience perception, it is interesting to look at a case study to identify how a single piece of music has been presented in a specific film. For my case study I would like to

²² Ibid. (para. 8 of 17).

²³ Ibid. (para. 9 of 17).

analyse the film *Byzantium*, focussing particularly on the use of the Adagio, (movement II), from Beethoven's Op. 2 No. 3 in C, a piano sonata that consists of four movements. The second movement is presented in the key of E major and starts with a short classical statement and response. However, after the initial ten bars a melancholy romantic middle section is presented in the key of E minor. The middle section lasts for thirty-two bars, alternating dynamics with wistful soft (*piano*) sections contrasted by loud (*forte*) representations of the same thematic material, after which the initial theme is restated again in E major for twelve bars when the romantic theme returns triumphantly, also in E major, for sixteen bars until the initial theme returns for 12 bars to end the movement.

The film *Byzantium* is a tale of human relationships. Two women, Gemma Arterton's Clara and Saoirse Ronan's Eleanor Webb, are a mother and her sixteen-year-old daughter who escaped death from disease 200 years ago by becoming vampires. They have to avoid detection and survive un-recognised by presenting themselves to the world as sisters. Clara provides for the couple through prostitution while Eleanor yearns for release from her memories, a burden that she longs to share.

We are first introduced to the Beethoven sonata in the first minute of the film, as Eleanor narrates her story as she writes it into a journal. The theme associated with Eleanor's narration is the minor key romantic theme from the middle section of the Adagio. The choice of this particular sonata seems relevant as Jordan presents his two protagonists as having existed in both the past and the present. The use of music by Beethoven, who was a transitional figure between classicism and romanticism, reminds us that changes occur over time and this extra-diegetic knowledge helps the audience to comprehend that Eleanor may also have been subject to changes over the period of her lifetime.²⁴ In addition, this particular piece was composed in 1794-95 but has a melodic line which could be perceived as far more modern, reflecting the

²⁴ Raymond L. Knapp and Julian Medforth Budden, 'Ludwig van Beethoven', in *Encyclopædia Britannica* <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ludwig-van-Beethoven>> [accessed 10 November 2016].

ambiguity of the date of origin of the two women. Already, the narrative music is suggesting a link with both modernity and history and this wistful melancholic theme is permanently associated with Eleanor's secondary metadiegetic narration.

At minute 3 Eleanor's metadiegetic narration continues, but the scene switches to the mother Clara who is lap dancing for money as the minor key romantic theme reaches its more strident *forte* section. At the seventh minute Eleanor's metadiegetic theme returns as she shares the secret of her existence with an old man whom she helps to die. Strikingly, between minutes 16 and 18, Ronan's Eleanor walks into a restaurant and plays her theme diegetically on a grand piano where she meets her lover, a waiter called Frank. As Eleanor plays, the volume of the piece increases and 'bridges the gap' between the diegetic and non-diegetic world as we switch to Clara's prostitution, tying the activities of the two women temporally and contrasting their activities and lifestyle choices. This diegetic presentation of the sonata facilitates Frank's first clue of Eleanor's longevity at minute 22 as he asks: "How did you learn to play like that?" Eleanor responds: "I practised." Frank: "For how long?" Eleanor: "200 years". The metadiegetic theme returns at minutes 26, 28, 36 and 37 as Clara and Eleanor's story is revealed through Eleanor's narration. However, at minute 38 we hear, for the first time, the opening theme of the movement, as the start of Clara's story is revealed. Eleanor's theme returns at minute 39, but by minute 48, as Eleanor's relationship with Frank grows we find Eleanor presented without her accompanying theme, suggesting that she is no longer dwelling in the past, but rather living happily in the moment. In minute 88 we hear the triumphant return of Eleanor's metadiegetic theme, in a major key, with additional orchestral and vocal scoring as we learn how Clara overcame adversity. As the movie ends at minute 107 we hear a non-diegetic restatement of the opening of the movement, implying an end which is a new beginning.

Having identified that the diegetic, meta-diegetic and non-diegetic presentation of film music can assist to progress the linear narrative, and having demonstrated that diegetic

music does affect audience perception of the narrative, we can conclude that Jordan's diegetic, metadiegetic and non-diegetic use of Beethoven's piano sonata Op. 2 No. 3 does indeed help to articulate the complexity of the narrative which is unveiled as the film progresses. Therefore, I would like to suggest that it is more valuable to engage with the way that film music is presented and how those presentations help to advance the narrative than it is to continue the debate about how those presentations are categorised.

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