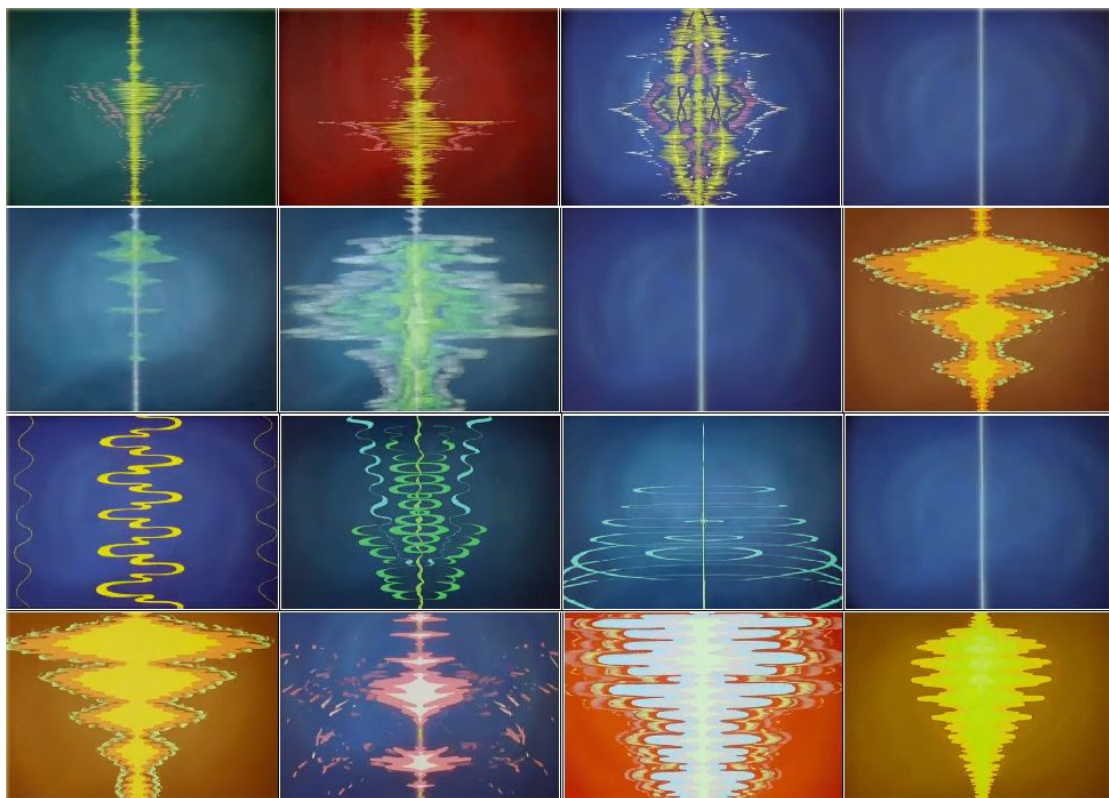


Blurry Lines

The convergence of non-diegetic and diegetic music



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Introduction

Since its dawn in the early 20th century, filmmakers have considered music and songs as an essential part of what is known as the ‘film experience’. Although the first thirty years of film industry movies were silent (accompanied by live music on stage most of the times), since 1927 films included sound and hence music, dialogues, etc. From this moment, filmmakers had the possibility to incorporate music to their films and create original music suitable for their own needs.

Due to the inclusion of music into the film, two types of music arose: *non-diegetic*¹ music and *diegetic music*. *Non-diegetic music* is defined as background music or underscoring which is performed off-screen by musicians and it is not included in the visible action of the motion picture itself. *Diegetic music*, on the other hand, is music that typically appears in, or is at least implied by on-screen events (Holbrook 2004).

¹ The term *Diegetic* involves everything into the (fictional) world in which the situations and events narrated occurs.

Both types have ‘traditional distinctions’ regarding the manner they have been used in music film design. According to various scholars (Chion 1994; Gorbman 1987; among others) *Diegetic music* in its ‘traditional use’ has a *realistic depiction* function; it is utilized as a part of the scenery, costumes, etc. in order to enhance the reality, the historical moment and other variables of the film. An example of this would be a particular decade’s hit song coming from a radio - which is part of the scene – used in order to enhance the link between the movie’s drama and the specific moment the drama takes place.

Non-diegetic music in its “traditional use” helps the *dramatic development* of the film and the audience’s understanding and emotionally connection with the film and its characters. Example of this would be a *leitmotif* for the hero: a theme when he falls in love or a strong music in a dramatic end scene while he is fighting with the bad guy, etc.

Nevertheless, these definitions of ‘standard uses’ of both *non-diegetic* and *diegetic music* seem not to fully embrace the new trends and the new uses of music in filmmaking. To exemplify this situation I analyze (later in Chapter II) certain movies in which the coexistence and convergence of *non-diegetic* and *diegetic music* goes beyond their theoretical ‘standard uses’ and even beyond its definitions, generating new streams for creation.

Previously (in Chapter I), as a method to understand the differences and evolutions of these new streams of creation, I examine some examples of these “standard uses” of both *diegetic* and *non-diegetic music*.

Numerous works and papers (Nikalls 2010; Neumeyer 2009; Pramaggiore & Wallis 2005) analyze the topic of *non-diegetic* and *diegetic music* separately, that is, excluding the relations and interactions between them. The aim of the current research is to study the different relations and novel uses of both types of music as a result of the developing of films.

From the necessity of providing a name to the phenomena of new utilizations and convergences of *non-diegetic* and *diegetic music*, in the last chapter of this study a new concept is proposed, presented and explained.

Finally, along with providing a theoretical framework from previous studies on the subject, my goal is to find new alternatives, possibilities and approaches for the relations between *diegetic* and *non-diegetic music*, considering at

the same time that these elements could help me and other composers in the creation of original ways for film music expression.

This research expects to contribute to the developing of film scoring by illuminating with new techniques, possibilities and tools to hopefully enhance the dramatic narrative ('dramatic' as a narrative concept not as a film genre) and the emotional impact of the scene, a major challenge for film composers.

Chapter I

“Traditional distinctions”

Important Definitions

The previous chapter introduced the concept of ‘standard uses’ of *non-diegetic* and *diegetic music* within the context of a film.

In order to go further into our analysis, it is necessary to understand and examine the cases in which standard roles are used in the first place. Obviously, because these are standard uses, the amounts of examples are endless. Nevertheless, I have selected some films to clearly characterize (and distinguish) these standard roles in useful and logical manner.

As mentioned earlier, now using the words of Morris B. Holbrook, a definition of the standard or traditional uses of *diegetic* and *non-diegetic music*, hence forth ‘traditional distinctions’:

Diegetic source music functions mostly to reinforce the realistic depiction of a film’s narrative action – as in the effects achieved by appropriate costumes, decor, scenery, or landscaping – by enhancing the verisimilitude of a film’s *mise-en-scène* (2004, p 173).

By contrast:

Non-diegetic film score serves primarily to advance a movie's dramatic development by fleshing out a character, developing a theme, signalling an impending event, or otherwise drawing on associations and identifications that add depth to the meaning of a motion picture (2004, p 173) .

Here, Holbrook clearly defined the traditional distinctions between *non-diegetic* and *diegetic music*. Based on this definition of standard uses, the role of *diegetic music* is comparable to the costumes, the scenario, etc. all features which help in the reproduction of the culture, date, epoch or moment in history, a place or location (a country, a civilization, a city, a planet, etc) in the film. *Diegetic music* anchors the viewer into the reality 'on-screen'. *Non-diegetic*, on the contrary, abstracts the viewer from the reality of the film.

Until today, this is how both type of music have been classified. These distinctions though will become controversial further in this research.

. Diegetic music in action

The first film to be used as example is *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis 1994). Besides the relevance of the music within this film, *Forrest Gump* is a "time travel" film, that is, a film that goes chronologically through the USA's history from the 1950s to the 1980s. It is an excellent source of examples of how *diegetic music* reinforces the different historical moments and a particular culture.

The first example is the scene in which Forrest meets Elvis Presley. Here, Elvis is playing the guitar and Forrest dances in a very strange way because of the orthopaedic braces on his legs (this dance will supposedly influence Elvis's dancing). After this first encounter Elvis became 'the King'. One night, Forrest and his mother are walking in the street and see Elvis singing and dancing *Hound Dog* in a television.

Elvis playing the guitar in the first scene but even more the song in the TV strongly define the moment in history, that is, the “overcome of Rock & Roll” and the pop culture that will follow it. This is an example of how *diegetic music* has been used to contextualize the historical moment.



Figure 1 Forrest with Elvis.

Also related to the historical function, Jenny (Forrest’s love) plays Bob Dylan’s *Blowing in the Wind* in a striptease club. This song represents the liberty of spirit of those years (late 1960’s) and the “exploration” of the Hippie movement. The contradiction of a hippie tune played in a striptease club is related with Jenny’s own personal searching and soul contradictions. It is very close to what the “traditional distinction” definition would refer as a *non-diegetic music*, i.e. film score role, because of its dramatic function within the plot. Nevertheless, it is useful to analyze the scene here as a manner to do the first connections with the second chapter.

In the Vietnam War episode of the movie, the scene in base camp when Forrest meets Lieutenant Dan, the song *Respect* by Aretha Franklin is played in the radio. This song gives a relaxed and playful atmosphere to the camp where all soldiers are eaten barbecues and drinking beer. Likewise, and even more important, this song represents an era of rights activism – *Respect* song was related in fact to the feminist movement struggle – in which the drama of the movie is inserted.

Another brief but important scene presents Jenny in a disco in the middle 1970s, disco music sounds and cocaine is being snuffed representing the post hippie pre-yuppie culture.

The examples of *diegetic music* included in this section have been especially used to reinforce what *Forrest Gump* film is about: a journey through an important part of USA history, the pop culture and the overcome of a new society born after the Second World War throughout the 1990's.

. Non-Diegetic music

Logically, most of the films encompass examples of *non-diegetic music*. Nonetheless, I will continue using the film *Forrest Gump*, this time as an example of the standard use of *non-diegetic music*, doing so, it is possible to compare the utilization of both sources of music in the very same film.

Forrest Gump's film score presents original music composed by Alan Silvestri, on one hand, and famous pop songs, on the other. The first example in this section is the *Forrest Gump Main Theme*. This theme is also known as "The Feather theme" because of the feather which falls from the skies on Forrest's dirty shoes at the opening scene. The sinuous and doubtful slow landing of the feather is a metaphor of Forrest's way of living. This theme is also played at the closing scene (but with different instrumentation) when the feather returns to the skies from Forrest's seat. This is a constant feature of film music, that is, important music themes are used repeatedly throughout the movie helping the story to have a cohesive and strong structure.

There are numerous examples in *Forrest Gump* of pre-existence songs acting as *non-diegetic music*. An important moment is again, the Vietnam War episode. This part of the movie is almost completely scored (it lasts 15 minutes) with songs of Vietnam War's years. The first song is *Fortunate Son* by Credence Clearwater Revival in the scene that a helicopter brings Forrest to Vietnam. This song is widely used in Vietnam War's movies mostly because it is known as an anti-Vietnam War song. The second song is *All along the Watchtower* by Jimi Hendrix (originally composed by Bob Dylan), a song also frequently utilized in

Vietnam War's movies. The third song is The Doors' *Soul Kitchen*, especially representative of hippie culture. The next song is one of the 'hymns' of the Hippie movement, *California dreamin'* by The Mamas and the Papas. This song is played along with interspersed images of Forrest writing a letter to Jenny in Vietnam and Jenny living her hippie life. The last song of this episode is other important protest song of those times: *For What Its Worth* by Buffalo Springfield.

In this Vietnam War segment, the *non-diegetic* songs are used to reinforce the historical moment and the 'Vietnam War culture'. All these five song are placed almost in a row while Forrest is describing his experience in that country. When the description ends and the drama actually begins (when almost all Forrest's friend have been shot), the original film score by Alan Silvestri is heard. Since the songs are *non-diegetic music* but used to reinforce time-place-culture (reality), the 'traditional distinctions' defined before became insufficient. In point of fact, in many movies in which songs are used as *non-diegetic* music the "traditional distinction" defined for *non-diegetic music* are not applicable.

The latter situations are examples of how both *diegetic* and *non-diegetic* are more or less used within its 'traditional distinctions'. A full comprehension of the 'traditional distinctions' both theoretical and practical (with the examples) would be essential to understand the next sections of the current research.



Fig.2 Forrest watching Jenny singing in a strip club.

Chapter II

“That blurry line”

In the previous chapter, examples of the ‘standard uses’ for both *non-diegetic* and *diegetic music* were analyzed in order to understand and contextualize the differences with the new streams and new techniques in film music. On the other hand, some of those examples also showed how the ‘traditional distinctions’ as defined in the Introduction are not always applicable and accurate.

In this section, the examples show not only the breakdown of ‘traditional distinction’ of both *diegetic* and *non-diegetic’s* function and utilizations but also how the primary definitions are not sufficient to appoint the musical phenomena that take place in the film.

To understand the multiple possibilities in the relation between *non-diegetic* and *diegetic music*, the next three examples are presented from the least to the more complex case (complexity defined as the amount of variables involved in each case).

The first example in this section is the opening scene of *The Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont 1994). Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) is a young and successful banker whose life changes drastically when he is convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of his wife and her lover. Set in the 1940's, the film shows how Andy, supported by his friend Red (Morgan Freeman), turns out to be a most unconventional prisoner.

At the opening scene (the production company credits), *If I didn't care* by the Ink Spots is heard, an old USA hit song from the 1940's. The song continues throughout the credits to the first image: a car in front of a house at night. At the precise moment when the viewer watches a man in the car, the *non-diegetic* song slowly becomes *diegetic music*. By the application of a filter and distortion, the music becomes gradually part of the environment of the scene and its 'new' source is now the car's radio. When the man takes his gun, original film music (by Thomas Newman) augments the suspense of the action. The low strings of the film score mixed with the song from the car's radio create an extremely dramatic effect which plays with the uncertainty and unawareness of the plot, enhancing the suspense and interest towards the story. On the one hand, this effect is created because of the obvious musical differences between them in terms of style, rhythm, sound quality and, evidently because of its *non-diegetic* and *diegetic* distinctions. On the other hand, the song's romantic lyrics create an effective contrast with the scene's action: a drunk man with a gun in a car at night. In this case, both *diegetic* and *non-diegetic music* are utilized in its 'traditional distinctions' but the song is additionally used with a dramatic purpose, condition typically related to a *non-diegetic* traditional distinction.

Nonetheless, the mix between the two types of music is what creates the ultimate effect in this scene. It is also important to consider the 'mutation' of the song from *non-diegetic* to *diegetic music*. The mix or overlapping and the 'mutation' condition suggests the incapability of the traditional definitions of both *non-diegetic* and *diegetic music* to explain what is musically happening in the scene.

Considering the relevance of this issue, I come back to it later on in this paper.



Fig.3 Andy drunk in his car.

The second example is a film from 1950: *Strangers on a Train* directed by Alfred Hitchcock.

Hitchcock is considered to be a visionary filmmaker hence it is no surprising that this example (as many others in his films) can be utilized in the current research.

The film is a thriller in which a psycho maniac person (Bruno) meets a famous tennis player (Guy) in a train. Guy has problems with his wife. In turn, Bruno hates his father so proposes Guy a plan: exchange murders. At first, Guy thinks Bruno is joking and he forgets the proposal as soon as he leaves the train. However, Bruno was serious and he kills Guy's wife. Later on, Bruno pushes Guy to go on with his part of the 'deal'.

In order to enhance Bruno's madness and the situations he is involved in, Hitchcock uses very effective techniques many of them comprising the music department.

The murder by Bruno is committed in an entertainment fair. The music heard in that moment is the *diegetic music* coming from the carrousel. As *diegetic music* (and its 'standard uses') does, it results very effectively conveying the viewer to the reality and experiences of the characters. The election of this type of music (carrousel music) for the murdered scene (usually associated with children, innocence and playing) creates a bizarre effect that boosts Bruno's madness.

Until this point, the music has been used within the boundaries of the 'traditional distinctions' and from a defined source, i.e. *diegetic music*. However, the carrousel's music comes back later on in the film although the music now

apparently sounds in Bruno's mind, specifically, when he sees Barbara (sister of the new Guy's fiancée) who reminds him his victim at the fair.

The definitions of *diegetic* and *non-diegetic music* are not perfectly clear in this situation, as the source of the carousel's music seems indefinable. That is, it cannot be determined for certain whether the music is heard 'on screen' by Bruno (characteristic of *diegetic music*) or, in contrast, the music is an abstract representation of his madness and his mind condition (a characteristic of *non-diegetic music*, 'background or underscoring music' as defined in the beginning of the study).

On the other hand and related with the 'standard uses', this music acts mainly in this scene as *non-diegetic music*, that is, as a dramatic and drama developer. In the murder scene however it acted in a *diegetic music* standard use.



Fig.4 Guy and Bruno meet on a train.

The last example is taken from *The Mission* (Joffé 1986). Ennio Morricone composed the music which is considered his most important film score work.

The plot is about Father Gabriel, a Spanish Jesuit who goes to the Amazon's wilderness to build a mission and convert the Guaraníes Indians of the region to Catholicism. Mendoza is a converted slave hunter who joins father Gabriel in his mission. When Spain sells the colony to Portugal, they are forced to defend all they have built against the Portuguese aggressors. However, Mendoza and father Gabriel have different methods to do it.

The first scene to analyze is one in which the Portuguese soldiers begin the assault to the mission. They are placed across the river listening how the

indigenous are singing a religious choral, *Ave Maria Guarani* by Ennio Morricone. We certainly know that they are singing it on screen since father Gabriel is presented conducting the choir hence it is *Diegetic music* in its definition and traditional use. Doubt and regret are evident in the soldier's faces while they listen this music, they are also religious persons but they have to attack the Indians anyway. When the attack begins with fire arrows the music continues until the arrows hit the mission. There is no hint on screen that the indigenous actually were singing all along the attack and actually one may think that is more probable that they run protecting themselves. This ambiguous situation does the *diegetic music* dissolves and turns to an undetermined condition throughout the development on the scene.

After the initial attack, Mendoza is running and killing Portuguese soldiers the choral music (*Ave Maria Guarani*) is heard again. The viewer associates this choral to 'on-screen' music event (*diegetic music*) but we do not see them singing in that moment, and is to be considered that Mendoza is geographically far from the mission so it would be unlikely to hear the choir if the Indians were singing. Similar to the scene of the fire arrows, the choral works from an ambiguous source which cannot be defined as neither *diegetic* nor *non-diegetic* music.

This ambiguity of source will show its ultimate and major expression in the scene where the Portuguese soldiers are attacking now inside the mission shooting the indigenous and the Jesuits. There is film music (classic orchestra) from Morricone improving the action of the entire scene, but in the moment that Mendoza is being shot the *Ave Maria Guarani* entered and juxtaposed the previous film music. The choral music represents the struggle of the Guaranies with the Spanish but also the achievements of the Jesuits in their effort to catechize the indigenous. So when Mendoza lays wounded on the floor is not possible to actually determine where the choir music comes from. Both because of the peculiar music mix created in this juxtapose and also because we already related the choir music with the singing of the indigenous. Although there is indigenous walking on screen and we do not see them singing, it does not mean that some of them could be singing outside the shot.

The battle between Spanish and Guaranies/Jesuits is plotted in the music by the counterpoint between the threatening film score (representing the invasion

by the Portuguese) and the religious choral. The undetermined source of the choral music and the mix between both music can be defined neither as *diegetic* nor *non-diegetic music* and it is this ambiguity which allow the drama of the scene to be fully achieved. If the choir music would have been *non-diegetic* or *diegetic music*, the effect would have been less dramatically because the viewer is able to establish a more conscious relation with a particular source of the music loosing the depth of the scene.

In this point of the analysis is it clear the requirement of a concept to define all the undetermined music situations presented formerly in the examples. Considering that this concept has been necessary and is going to be used consistently in this research I am going to propose – and to use hence forth - the term *trans-diegetic*. This concept, its uses and references are developed further in the next chapter.



Fig.5 Father and the Guaranies under attack.

Chapter III

“The trans-diegetic configuration”

After analyzing the formerly examples, definitions as *diegetic* and *non-diegetic music* seems limited to illustrate what is musically occurring on the screen. I propose a third term: *trans-diegetic music*. This term not only encompasses the convergences of *diegetic* and *non-diegetic music* but also defines a new arena in music design.

The use of the preposition *trans* is not arbitrary but used related with the concept of ‘transversal’, i.e. extending or lying across, considering that *trans-diegetic music* actually lies across both *diegetic* and *non-diegetic*.

In the previous examples, the *trans-diegetic music* creates an extremely effective mood which plays with time and space in a way that both *diegetic* and/or *non-diegetic* could not be able to create by themselves. As said before, in terms of uses and functions of the ‘traditional distinctions’, *diegetic music* anchors the

viewer to the reality of the scene. On the contrary, *non-diegetic* music abstracts the viewer from the concrete reality of the scene. *Trans-diegetic* music, on the other hand, has no boundaries in these terms allowing more movement in time and space or in real/unreal dimensions.

According to the analyzed examples in previous chapter, *trans-diegetic music* could be operationally defined as follows:

- The music occurring in the process when *non-diegetic* shifts to *diegetic music* or vice versa. “*Mutation*”
- The music occurring at the overlapping of *diegetic* and *non-diegetic music*. “*Juxtaposition*”³
- The music occurring when the source (‘on screen’ or ‘off screen’) is not evident or is not possible to determine. “*Off-source*”
- The music occurring in the combination of any of the mentioned phenomenon. “*Fusion*”

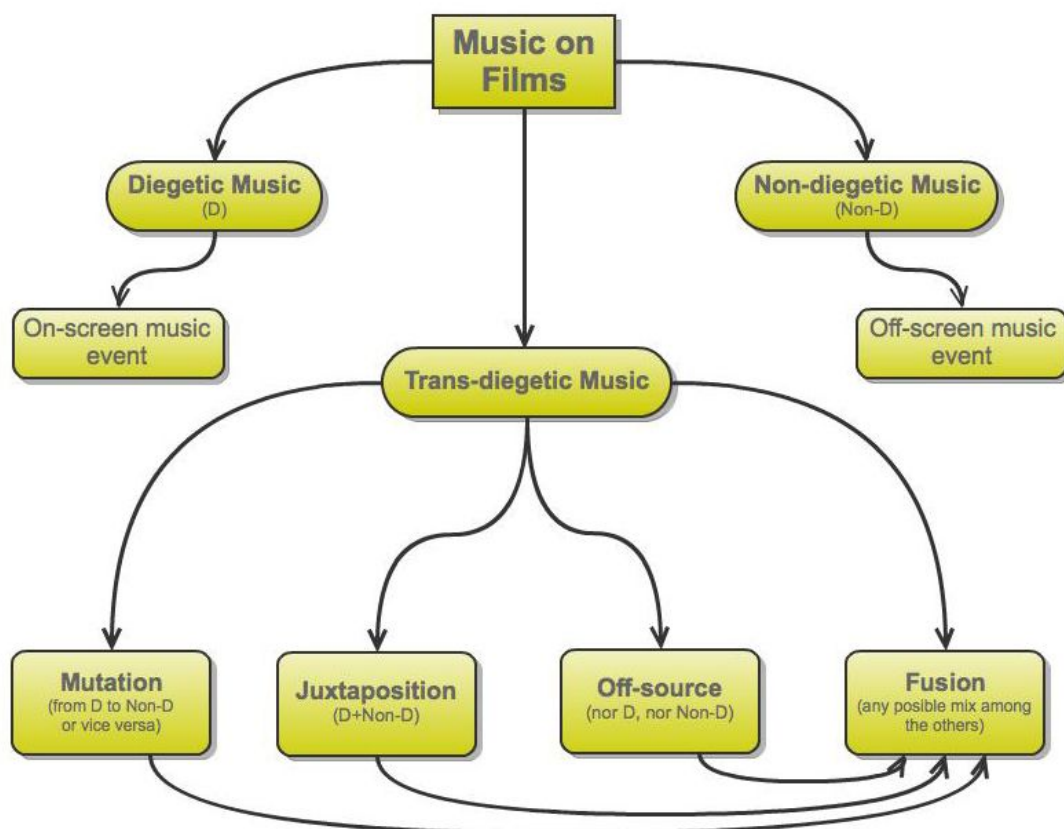


Fig.6 Diagram of Music in Film’s classification.

There is no extensive literature on the relations and convergences of *diegetic* and *non-diegetic* music, that is, the *trans-diegetic* phenomena. One of the scholars that have worked on the subject is Royal S. Brown in his book *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music (1994)*.

Regarding *mutation* and *off-source* (the latter in the next example as a consequence of *mutation*, that is, the music shifts from *diegetic* to an undetermined source music, arriving to *non-diegetic* or not), Brown analyzes an important scene of Coppola's *Godfather (1972)*.

In a five-minute sequence near the end of the film, Michael Corleone's (Al Pacino) nephew is being baptized. The baptism in the church is constantly alternated with images of the killing of the five heads of mafia families by Corleone's assassins. The music heard is *diegetic music* played by the church's organ. Altogether with the tension of the plot and the killings, the organ music subtly loses its obvious *diegetic* condition to apparently accompany the killing in a *non-diegetic* way with increased harsher and tension harmonies. However, the *mutation* process is long and the source remains undetermined during most of the sequence. Only at the end of the scene it has clearly mutated to a *non-diegetic* music, not only because the sound of the organ loses its church's reverb but also because the music style shifts dramatically. Brown says '*Coppola mixes flamboyant crosscutting with almost imperceptible metamorphoses on the music track (diegetic to non-diegetic) to suggest the final transformation of Michael Corleone into the new godfather*' (Brown 1994).



Fig.7 Godfather's baptism scene.

Another Brown's example is used to understand the *trans-diegetic's* "mutation". He analyzes a 'seduction-dinner' scene between Roger (Cary Grant) and Eve (Eve Saint) in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959). There is *diegetic music* in the dinner room that subtly "without missing a beat", as Brown says, mutate to *non-diegetic* (Bernard Herrmann's *Love Theme*) as the seduction increases during the conversation. Brown analysis '... the passage from the Muzak (source music) to the "Love Theme" in this scene from *North by Northwest* fortifies subliminal audience perceptions that Grant and Saint have passed from an ordinary to an extraordinary level of existence' (Brown 1994)



Fig.8 Grant and Saint's love scene.

Brown also analyzes how Woody Allen plays with the *diegetic* and *non-diegetic music* distinction in *Bananas* (1971) generating, in the context of this research, *trans-diegetic music*.

In one scene, Woody Allen's character Fielding Mellish receives an invitation to have dinner with the president of a fictitious country where he is at that moment. Clearly surprised he repeats several times 'Dinner with the president!'. In that moment a dreamy harp surrounds the scene apparently as a *non-diegetic* track. But Fielding has heard the harp as well and confused he gets up from bed and opens the closet's door. Inside the closet there is a man with a harp who explained him that he needed a place to practice.

The examples given by Brown show concrete narrative characteristic in which love, thriller and humour are enriched by the use of *trans-diegetic music*. The examples analyzed in previous chapters however were more related with diffuse, ambiguous, unreal situations. In those examples, confusion, disorder, mixed emotions and actions have been increased in a much more subtle way than could be done in straight *non-diegetic* or *diegetic music*. The mainstream tendency in filmmaking seems to track towards an indirect approach in the *music-image* relation, particularly affecting the music-composing department. Nowadays it is easier to find examples of this 'subtler approaches' where *trans-diegetic music* is used and developed as a dramatic tool as been shown in former examples.

The definitions of *diegetic* and *non-diegetic music* were done in parallel to what the mainstream film industry was doing. Considering the latest creativity developments in filmmaking, terms as *trans-diegetic* has become necessary: not only because of a theoretical and academic need but also as a tool for filmmakers, both directors and composers.

Conclusions

In a first moment, the purpose of this research was to study how *diegetic* and *non-diegetic* music were related in a film. During the analysis process not only this relation was extremely noticeable but also the convergence between *diegetic* and *non-diegetic* music created in most of the cases the need of a different term.

Trans-diegetic music encompasses moments or situations in which neither *diegetic* nor *non-diegetic* are capable to define what musically takes place on screen.

As it was shown, *Trans-diegetic* music has been used in multiple types of situation achieving the most unusual effects, proving that its use configured new possibilities within both the mainstream cinema and the new trends of creation.

To have control and comprehension of *trans-diegetic* music opens new possibilities of expression both in drama and sound design.

Throughout this past year, and largely influenced by this research, I have experimented using *trans-diegetic music* in my own work. Especially after define the different *trans-diegetic* variables (*mutation*, *juxtaposition*, *off-source* and *fusion*) it was easier to use them as a tool to develop and expand my composition.

It would be carelessness to say that all movies require *trans-diegetic music* to be successful but for me has resulted in a very handy tool.

I believe necessary to be aware of the *trans-diegetic* phenomena in the composing process, and I hope this theoretical approach will be useful also for others film composer and sound designers.

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