

# **Diegetic versus nondiegetic: a reconsideration of the conceptual opposition as a contribution to the theory of audiovision**

Alessandro Cecchi

Università degli Studi di Siena  
alessandrocecchi@tin.it

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The concept of diegesis and the alleged distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic have taken on such a central position in considerations of narrative cinema as to suggest their intrinsic validity. Many commentators would subscribe *in toto* to the idea, set out with great clarity by Robynn J. Stilwell, that the concept of diegesis is based on objective configurations of on screen reality, and that the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction corresponds to immediate perceptive data (Stilwell 2007: 184). To accept this idea means renouncing a systematic clarification of the concept, while one only need look at the various ways in which it has come to be applied to see that such a clarification is particularly urgent. I give here a philosophical analysis of the concept of diegesis articulated in two phases: first the premises and implications of the concept as it is commonly used are set out, highlighting the problem areas; then I go on to outline a critical revision in terms of a coherent but still largely hypothetical formulation of the theory of audiovision.

## 1. Premises and theoretical implications of a fundamental concept

The concept of diegesis had its beginnings in a notion put forward by Gilbert Cohen-Séat, promptly taken up and codified by Etienne Souriau (Souriau 1953: 7). It was then extensively used by Gérard Genette. Whereas initially he proposed a partial redefinition of the concept (Genette 1969: 211), he would later insist that it had nothing to do with the Greek term *diegesis* in Plato (Genette [1983] 1988: 18). Subsequently Paul Ricoeur affirmed that there could be no question of assimilating the modern concept to the term as it was used first by Plato and then, rather differently, by Aristotle (Ricoeur [1984] 1985: 179). Thus any discussions seeking to clarify the concept starting from its use in classical times, and the alleged antithesis of *mimesis* and *diegesis* (Taylor 2007), can safely be ignored.

Nor is Claudia Gorbman's reconstruction of the history of the concept (Gorbman 1980: 194) entirely convincing. The relationship between story (*fabula*) and plot (*syuzhet*) which was so crucial to the Russian formalists in the 1920s – viewed above all as a relationship between abstract typological structuring of the narration and its concrete articulation – cannot be considered as a precursor to the relationship between diegesis and narration discussed in French cinema criticism from the fifties onwards. In any case Gorbman does not properly clarify the link between the two pairs of concepts, and fails to support it with appropriate bibliographical references, while someone more conversant with the narratological theories of the Russian formalists (Bordwell 1985) was careful not to confuse the two conceptual planes. All the same, Gorbman can be credited with giving a full account of the concept in terms of the definitions given by Souriau and Genette. Following Souriau, she includes in the diegetic perspective “all that belongs, ‘by inference’, to the narrated story, to the world supposed or proposed by the film’s fiction” (Gorbman 1980: 195), while with Genette she defines diegesis as “the narratively implied spatiotemporal world of the actions and characters” (ibid). The specific definitions introduced by Gorbman undoubtedly contribute to the discussion of the concept: in particular the role of inference – a term she herself introduced in translating Souriau’s original expression “dans l’intelligibilité” as “by inference” – has proved crucial in clarifying the strict connection that exists between diegesis and the ontological position of the narrated story within the fictional horizon of cinema.

The definitions set out above suggest that the concept of diegesis is grounded in a representative conception of film language. This can be illustrated by referring to the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, containing Ludwig Wittgenstein’s first theory of propositional language. He explains

that propositions confront us with “facts”, in the sense of the “existence of states of affairs” (Wittgenstein 1922: §2), insofar as they offer a “picture” (§2.1) or “model” (§2.12). The representative theory is based on the observation that the image of a fact is in turn a fact (§2.141). What enables a fact to represent another fact is the “pictorial form” they have in common (§2.17), also referred to as “logical form” (§2.18). Whether an image does or does not really represent a fact from the real world depends not on the intrinsic characteristics of the image but on the correspondence between the image and an actual state of affairs. Thus strictly speaking the logical image represents “a possibility of existence and non-existence of states of affairs” (§2.201). What the image represents, its “sense [*Sinn*]” (§2.221), is only “a possible situation” (§2.202). In other words: it may or may not conform to the real world, according to whether it is “correct or incorrect, true or false” (§2.21). Non truth, meaning nonconformity of the situation represented with an actual state of affairs, does not imply that the sense of the proposition (the representation) is invalidated, but merely the non correspondence between the situation represented and a fact which actually happened (§2.222). Without going into the reasons for Wittgenstein’s particular conception of the relationship between sense (*Sinn*) and meaning (*Bedeutung*), with the latter being restricted to the relationship between name and object, while only the former refers to the representation of a state of affairs (§3.3), it is clear that such a conception can be easily transferred to film language. Moreover, in spite of holding a different position, Ricoeur recognised that, through the concept of diegesis, Souriau set out to “oppose the place of the signified in film to the screen-universe as the place of the signifier” (Ricoeur [1984] 1985: 179). This confirms the link between the concept of diegesis and a propositional conception of film language, implicitly setting up an ontological opposition.

The concept of diegesis also points to a realist conception (in the philosophical sense) of inference or induction. The premise is that logical induction is able to guarantee a more reliable and complete knowledge than that deriving from sensible perception. In terms of the cinema, this leads to the conviction – whether implicit or explicit – that the act of inference confronts us with knowledge of an objective and coherent world (diegesis), while what appears on screen (the narration) is merely a subjective and partial perspective on this. Given the context of the cinema, it is not, of course, a question of asserting the physical reality of the inferred world, but simply of affirming its ontological primacy with respect to the reality represented on screen. In other words: the concept of diege-

sis contains a 'thetic' moment, implicitly instituting an ontology within the fictional representation.

To remain coherent with these premises, the theory should make it possible to maintain a clear distinction between diegetic and narrative: diegesis, in the sense of a reality established by inference starting from the data of perception, should remain separate from narration, or how such reality is presented on screen. Moreover, the objective contents of the narration (what is represented, the signified) should maintain its primacy with respect to the modalities of the secondary and subjective narration (representation, the signifier). This distinction, deriving directly from the propositional conception of film language, connects up with a topological interpretation of the diegetic/nondiegetic relationship, which presupposes a juxtaposition of specific places (Ricoeur [1984] 1985: 179). A coherent theoretical account of the concept should clearly maintain the separation between the two dislocations. In addition, the topology of every possible film sequence with respect to diegesis should tend to be definable in only one manner: if diegesis is an objective moment or specific place in the reality of the film, the diegetic aspects must on principle remain distinguishable from the nondiegetic aspects. Each aspect of each single narrative sequence can thus find itself, at a certain moment, on only one side of the divide separating two realities which are complementary but ontologically distinct. There cannot be moments of indecision, but only moments of discontinuity or shift. Each single element can of course change its position with respect to diegesis, and may indeed follow quite complex trajectories; but the instant of this shift must always be identifiable or at least imaginable.

These implications highlight a series of problems which are difficult to resolve. In terms of the diegetic/narrative distinction, it is impossible to be coherent in maintaining it as a distinction between objective contents and subjective modalities of the narration: in the case of fiction everything clearly points to the fact that they coincide. Even in a film which is as classically historical and narrative as Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975), it is clear that the story being narrated can only be a function of the narration, or rather of one of the narrations: whether the first person narrative of the protagonist of Thackeray's novel on which the film is based, the third person narrative of the unseen narrator in the film, or again the narrative confronting us on screen, comprising images, dialogue and music. Nothing points to an objective entity which exists somewhere outside the narration which could be referred to as 'the world of Barry Lyndon' or 'the story of Barry Lyndon'. All we have as a primary feature is the narration, while the narrated contents – which are in fact the product of inference – prove to be quite sec-

ondary, as well as varying from one viewing to the next. Any claim to the contrary would mean recognising the possibility of an objective (objectively described) contents with respect to which every possible human narration would only be one of the many subjective modes of narrating the reality. This is clearly untenable: the narrated contents do not exist except in their own peculiar form, as they are mediated by narrative viewpoints. This viewpoint is not an accidental reality of the contents of the narration; on the contrary, there can be no narration without a viewpoint. Thus if narration is a subjective construction, diegesis is no less subjective; indeed it is all the more so, being the result of a (subjective) act of inference based on a construction which has itself been mediated from a subjective viewpoint.

Even maintaining the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction as a topological one is not without its difficulties. In the first place there are plenty of cases when the distinction cannot be made with respect to the world of the narrated story, above all when it is a question of the audio dimension and of diegetic or nondiegetic music. This is true in part because music does not easily lend itself to the propositional conception of film language. Music neither offers nor represents images or models of situations; signified and signifier tend to overlap, when they are not actually indistinguishable. Thus the attempt to distinguish between diegetic and nondiegetic music comes down to identifying the source and accounting for its dislocation. This is not without interest, but it does not throw light on the (contextual) sense of music in the audiovisual structure. There are other difficulties too. As has frequently been pointed out even by those who uphold the objectivity of diegesis (Gorbman 1980; Percheron 1980; Bordwell 1985; Johnson 1989; Brown 1994), the function of music is broadly independent of its topology. Whether it is diegetic or not, this function, and the very meaning of music, depend above all on its ability to introduce itself into the audiovisual structure at the narrative level. The music can fulfil varying functions according to whether we are considering the perspective of the spectator or of the various characters (so far as these can be inferred), each of whom represents a different viewpoint (Norden 2007). The inescapable incoherence of the theory of diegesis is seen above all in the fact that scholars so often relegate music to ambiguous zones of the overall topology. The observation that music enjoys great liberty in shifting with respect to diegesis (Gorbman 1980: 196) should not lead to the substantial difficulties that force analysis to postulate broad zones where topology is either uncertain or cannot be decided. By definition, analysis is based on the theoretical reduction of complexity; if the decision concerning the topology of music were merely the result of

analytical observation, it would always be possible to describe the shift without any difficulty in terms of diegesis. The difficulty cannot be attributed to the peculiarities of a specific situation on screen: such cases are so common and significant that we have to ask ourselves about the adequacy of the basic concept. The proposal to conserve the diegetic/nondiegetic divide while at the same time making it more fluid, resorting to the theoretical expedient of describing the shift from one state to another as a process (Stilwell 2007: 184-185), appears to elude a genuine conceptualisation of diegesis, focusing instead on the question of continuity over time. For the purposes of analysis, the discrete conception of temporality is abandoned, while in fact this is fundamental to the concept of diegesis. It implies a world which is coherent with logical and spatiotemporal parameters, involving an articulation based on precise events; moreover, the audiovisual structure always enables a discrete analytical observation.

In general, zones of topological indeterminacy – which may even require the introduction of such a term as “transdiegetic” (Taylor 2007) – cannot readily be reconciled with the representative perspective presupposed by the concept of diegesis. In ontological terms this perspective separates the act of representation (signifier) from what is represented (signified), enabling a clear distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic. Far from dialectically reinforcing the difference between two places – as the emphasis on crossing the border does (Stilwell 2007: 184) – the postulation of an uncertain topology calls into question the utility of the distinction between positions which are antithetical by definition, even if they are complementary. On the contrary, the attempt to relativise the analytical centrality of the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction by introducing it into a complex network of conceptual oppositions or relations does have at least one merit. It reinterprets situations on screen which are often considered topologically ambiguous as the outcome of strategies based on the possibility of freely articulating in narrative terms the relationship between audio elements whose position with respect to diegesis is perfectly clear (Smith 2009). In this sense the relativisation of the distinction leads automatically to a more scrupulous use.

## **2. Revision of the concept and audiovision theory**

The problems which emerge in relation to the concept of diegesis and the alleged distinction derive directly from the philosophical premises that we have set out. Since we are dealing with a concept and a distinction which are crucial to film analysis, it is important to tread carefully. It is usually the

practitioners of cinema who propose doing away with the concept altogether; some argue that the terminological opposition of diegetic/nondiegetic serves no practical purpose (Thom 2007), although they are clearly motivated by a fundamental prejudice against the very idea of analysis and theory. Clearly such an attitude is of no help in any reflection on the concept. The fact that the concept can easily be eluded in practice does not by itself imply that it is totally invalid. Rather, such criticism should prompt reflection on the limits of its use, which in turn will help to reach a better understanding of its spheres of applicability. Better still, this reflection can help in achieving an alternative theorization of the discipline's premises.

The concept of audiovision proposed by Michel Chion ([1990] 1994) is significant in this respect, and we can try to clarify its philosophical basis. In a hypothetical formulation, an entirely coherent theory of audiovision should be endowed with a constructivist conceptual framework whose foundations can be deduced, for example, from the philosophical elaboration of Nelson Goodman (1968; 1978). A theory of this type should first of all call into question the thetic attitude, focusing on the audiovisual narration as the primary construction. From this perspective diegesis could maintain some of its prerogatives while taking on a less ambitious ontological status, in keeping with its condition of secondary construction. Diegesis is based on an act of inference which cannot lay claim to any kind of objectivity: it is a subjective act, and hence merely hypothetical. As a matter of fact this theoretical perspective is not alien to the scholars who use the concept in the customary sense. Indecision concerning the position of certain elements of audiovision – particularly the audio – often conceals an arbitrary shift from a thetic perspective to one which is prevalently constructivist. A full commitment to the constructivist model would probably do away with most of the difficulties associated with the theoretical concept of diegesis. The result would be a reappraisal of the concept of diegesis and the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction: from being fundamental concepts, they would be deliberately turned into tools or theoretical constructs to be empirically negotiated from one situation to the next. This is in fact the orientation adopted recently by two scholars who have focused on the collocation of the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction in their own theoretical-analytical models (Smith 2009; Neumeyer 2009).

In terms of the theory of audiovision, the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction should renounce its topological significance and be reformulated in a functional sense. In the final analysis, distinguishing between what is diegetic and what is nondiegetic means abstracting from the audiovisual configuration as the primary construction, elaborating a theoretical model

whose applicability is limited (detecting some relations while ignoring others) and consciously focusing on a secondary construction based on an act of inference. In other words, all the affirmations concerning the significance of the distinction have to be contextualised in a situation which is able to make the conditions of the concept's applicability explicit. Moreover, from the standpoint of the theory of audiovision, the diegetic and nondiegetic aspects cannot be distinguished at the ontological level; rather, they cooperate in the audiovisual narration, within which they are constantly interacting. In any case, the constructive moment must be primary with respect to the representative moment, which is a derivative. The fact that in many cases (but not "always") the traversing of the boundary "does [...] *mean*" (Stilwell 2007: 186) depends strictly on the theoretical construction applied to the particular audiovisual situation, and not on the claimed perceptive objectivity of the diegetic/nondiegetic threshold. Deriving a universally valid concept of diegesis from this means passing off a merely hypothetical inference for objective knowledge of an actual reality.

It is only in the context of audiovisual narration that the audio can express all its aesthetic and constructive potential. In the most famous scene of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), "The Murder", an analytical appraisal should consider not the represented contents but primarily the construction of the audiovisual sequence in the sense of an on screen narration in which Bernard Herrmann's music plays its full part. This music is clearly nondiegetic with respect to the diegetic sounds. If the sequence is deprived of the audio, we immediately see all the diegetic insufficiency of the images with respect to the audiovisual impact of the complete sequence. The piercing E flat in the violins – which in the space of eight bars organizes itself into a cluster involving all the strings on the subsequent three degrees of the chromatic scale spread over four octaves – is perfectly synchronised with the killer's hand pulling aside the curtain. It is precisely the metallic grating sound, heard just before as the victim pulled the curtain to, which suggests the musical timbre. The clusters in the following eight bars, made all the more dissonant by rapid rising *glissandi* in all the instruments, prove to be not only narratively but also diegetically more convincing than the representation of the stabbing, an abstract sequence stripped of the potential violence of the blows. In a sense this has been absorbed by the nondiegetic music, even though there is no strict synchronization. The position of the music with respect to diegesis is perfectly clear, but its function does not stop here. It actually determines the audiovision in its representative capacity, and thus exerts an influence on the very possibility of inferring a diegesis, even though of



course there are other elements which collaborate in equal measure: the woman's screams, the noise of running water, the metallic rasp of the curtain and the slump of the moribund body. The very sense of the diegetic sounds is reconfigured in the interaction with the nondiegetic music. Thus it is perfectly evident that in terms of narrative the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction has a function which is quite marginal with respect to the sequence in question. We experience the threshold only in the limited degree to which we perceive its secondary status in terms of the aesthetic experience of the film, which is in fact our experience of the audiovision.

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### Film details

#### Hitchcock Alfred, *Psycho* (USA 1960, 109’)

SUBJECT: R. Bloch (novel) – SCREENPLAY: J. Stefano – EDITING: G. Tomasini – PHOTOGRAPHY: J. L. Russell – ORIGINAL MUSIC: B. Herrmann – SOUND: W. Russell, W. O. Watson – SPECIAL EFFECTS: C. Champagne – ART DIRECTION: R. Clatworthy, J. Hurley – PRODUCER: A. Hitchcock – PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT: L. Leary – CAST: J. Leigh, A. Perkins, V. Miles, J. Gavin, M. Balsam, J. McIntire, S. Oakland, V. Taylor, F. Albertson, L. Tuttle, P. Hitchcock, J. Anderson, M. Mills.