MODULE 03

TOPICS

- Re-examination of the conventionally accepted contribution of music to film
- Diegetic vs. non-diegetic music: function & assumptions
- Original vs. adapted film music

PART I

Selective summary of and commentary on

Commentary [in brackets] based on

Diegetic Vs. Non-diegetic music

**Diegetic** or source music originates in seen/implied action on screen and can be heard by the film’s characters. Along with dialogue, effects, foley (see [http://www.filmsound.org/foley/](http://www.filmsound.org/foley/)), etc., diegetic music articulates the film’s space and has a dual function: It presumably

a. strongly reinforces our sense of temporal and spatial contiguity of discrete shots and
b. provides depth, distance, direction, and motion cues.

**Nondiegetic** or background music does not originate in seen/implied action on screen and exists for the audience’s benefit. Gaps of diegetic time are often bridged by non-diegetic music. This practice reflects the belief that music promotes thematic, dramatic, rhythmic, and structural continuity, which is presumably threatened by image editing techniques and the film narrative’s disjunct treatment of time.

[Our confirmed ability to cognitively impose continuity to discontinuous stimuli suggests that, rather than infusing 'fragmented' images with continuity, music’s function may be to
a. support point of view through theme identification and move between diegetic and non-diegetic status,
b. highlight meanings through semiotic functions, and
c. create an emotional dimension, based on the ways it reconfigures our experience of time, which interacts with the emotional content of the images and contributes to the emotional dimension of the film as a whole
More on (b) and (c) towards the end of the semester.]
Paradox of non-diegetic music’s presence in films

Is the rhetoric of filmic discourse (representational, naturalistic, and rhythmically irregular) compatible with the rhetoric of musical discourse (non-representational, lyrical, and rhythmically regular)?

Music’s struggle with narrative representation is clearer in cases where musical codes apparently dominate, as is the case with the filming of a musical performance. In these cases, point of view of character/camera and actual actions and framing of performers constitute visual and narrative cinematic codes that compete with the musical codes.

The drastic degree of cinematic minimization necessary in order for musical codes to dominate (e.g. Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach by Jean-Marie Strauss, 1967 or films of music concerts/performances) testifies to the viewers’ conditioning for imposing narrative motivations when viewing a film.

Exception: when musical codes are broken -even while in the background- they suddenly attract attention to the music.

Within the CHC model, non-diegetic music represents a theoretical anomaly. This is exploited by comedies, which satirize its presence by having its source appear and/or actors react to it. e.g.:

W. Allen’s “Bananas”:
- a dreamy harp sound marking Allen’s daydreaming of having “dinner with the president” promotes a reaction by Allen’s character and ends up coming from a musician practicing in Allen’s hotel room closet
- during dinner, a visible orchestra plays on invisible instruments and Allen’s character asks them to keep it down

M. Brook’s “High Anxiety”:
- a stinger accompanying a statement that expresses realization of “foul play” startles actors; it then appears as coming from a passing bus holding practicing members of the L.A. symphony.

Instances such as the ones described are comedic because they play on two assumptions:

a. there will always be some non-diegetic music aimed at boosting the emotional impact of a scene and
b. both, film characters and audience can hear the same ‘diegetic’ music.

The distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music originates in music practices from the silent and early sound-film eras. In silent films, the musical accompaniment was necessarily non-diegetic. For the first ‘talkies,’ before post-recording techniques had been developed, films could only include diegetic sound, giving rise to the short-lived aesthetics of realism

Underlying assumption/prejudice:

Diegetic music: real (convincing but divorced for the tasks of articulating moods and dramatic tensions)

Non-diegetic: unreal (of questionable presence but capable of expression).

Some movies bypass the tension between diegetic and non-diegetic music by not including music at all
Potential affective roles of diegetic music

In contrast with the conventional understanding of diegetic music as “real” and, consequently, often unrelated to the film-characters’ concerns and trials:

Diegetic music can provide interesting commentary to a scene with special expressive effect (e.g. the Albert Hall scene in The Man Who Knew Too Much; the 5,6,7,8s scene in Kill Bill I; the hotel scene at the opening of North by Northwest).

Diegetic music can create special ironic effects because it seems (or can pretend to be) unaware of or indifferent to dramatic tensions. It works within its own regular timeframe and can be put at odds with the human experience of time, which is less logical and more subject to the aleatory experiences of real life. This contrast has the potential to provoke emotional responses.

Coincidental diegetic music is often placed strategically to match the scene’s mood and pace (e.g. source music at Rick's club in Casablanca; the scene at Alberto’s villa in Nights of Cabiria; the Albert Hall scene in The Man Who Knew Too Much; etc.). In the case of diegetic music, submission to musical rather than dramatic time constitutes a departure from psychological realism and acts as a much stronger narrative intrusion than non-diegetic music.

[There is a contradiction in the film music theories discussed so far, in that they see music on one hand as providing emotional support and meaning to a scene and on the other as departing from psychological time, which is the time in which we feel and think, and in which we initiate the actions we perform in "real" time.]

Visual and aural cinematic cues distinguishing between diegetic & non-diegetic music

a. Visible source of the music (e.g. musician(s) / radio / speakers / etc.)
b. Characters reacting to the music, whether or not its source is visible
c. Sound quality. For diegetic sound, the quality is expected to reflect the type of source (e.g. live versus radio) as well as the character’s/camera’s location relative to the visible or implied source.

Manipulation of such cues supports the creative use of both diegetic and non-diegetic music and makes possible the seamless shift from one to the other. After the first successful shift within a film occurs, it is much easier for the composer to shift back and forth between the two.

Examples of successful shifting between diegetic and non-diegetic music

Examples of move from diegetic to non-diegetic, supporting moves from ‘reality’ to ‘myth’:

Flashback scene in Laura – Albert Hall scene in The Man Who Knew Too Much - love scene in the train’s dining car in North by Northwest – first instance of “As time goes by” and Paris flashback in Casablanca – Elle’s attempt to kill the heroine in Kill Bill I – etc.
Examples of move from non-diegetic to diegetic, infusing a diegetic event or character with emotional and other qualities that have been established non-diegetically:

Herrmann’s theme for *Twisted Nerve* becomes the psychopath character’s whistle – During the first visit to Laura’s apartment in *Laura*, the theme we have been hearing as non-diegetic appears to be now coming out of Laura’s phonograph.

Examples of diegetic music actually becoming a part of the narrative:

Albert Hall scene and "Que Sera Sera" sung at the ambassador's house in *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.

In such cases, the musical continuity of the diegetic music counteracts the spatial discontinuity caused by editing, in a function that is similar, in some respects, to non-diegetic suture.

Examples of musical structure taking precedence over visual structure to control narrative flow:

In the Albert Hall scene from *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, music structure takes narrative control, turning the scene into a mini silent film. Music moves from diegetic to non-diegetic status and supports the narrative action through:

a. constant sound level and timbre that does not correspond to changes in point of view,
b. gradual removal of voices or other diegetic sound,
c. matching between image cuts and musical accents, and
d. matching between narrative and musical build-ups.

In the baptism scene from *The Godfather*, crosscutting and discrete musical metamorphoses, help blend together a large variety of shots and support the character’s transformation into the new ‘Godfather.’ The harmony (minor) and style (doom and gloom) of the music becomes increasingly non-diegetic, backing the killings witnessed as the baptism progresses, while the timbre (organ) remains diegetic, supporting the church scene and being occasionally supported by other diegetic sound within the church. In the first cutaway, the music moves to Bach’s *Passacaglia and Fugue in G minor*, a piece unfit for a baptism but appropriate to the upcoming violence. In the third cutaway, the images (guns, stolen badges) confirm the sinister nature of the scene. In the fourth cutaway, the music moves to silent film ‘doom and gloom’ style, maintaining its link with the baptism just via timbre (organ sound). In the sixth and seventh cutaways, organ crescendos lead to sustained chords for each murder, returning to Bach for the cut back to the church and ending on a sustained seventh chord to suggest that, despite the end of the baptism and killings, nothing has been resolved. Actually, at the end of the scene and due to the established importance of musical/sonic cues (whether diegetic or non-diegetic), even the diegetic church bells and the baby's cries can and do acquire non-diegetic, emotional significance in the minds of the audience.
PART II

Selective summary of and commentary on
(Chapter 1: Narratological perspectives on film music; pp.11-30)
Commentary [in brackets] based on

Guiding questions

- How do music and image interact?
- What is the correct balance between them? What makes for “good” film music?
- What are the similarities/differences between diegetic and non-diegetic music?

New Assumptions (based on post 1980s film music theory literature)

**Whether diegetic or non-diegetic, music is not “innocent.” It sets moods, shapes perceptions, and guides vision.**

*Hearing vs. Vision:*

- hearing is less direct than vision (can you think of examples illustrating this?)
- sonic/musical stimuli require longer duration than visual stimuli in order for us to be able to attach meaning to them
- hearing is ‘lazier’ and more selective than vision (we can focus on a maximum of up to two sound events at any given time)

*So:*

- Film narrative takes precedence and musical organization is relegated to our sensory background. We do not contemplate the abstract structuring of sound (*i.e.* music) because it is non-representational and does not inhabit the perceptual foreground of narrative films. Within film, music is the aspect least susceptible to rigorous judgment and most potent with regards to affective manipulation. [However, it is important to note that associations and temporal organization can help turn music into a narrative of its own.]
- We cannot and should not judge film music as we judge ‘pure’ music. Its effectiveness is determined by the narrative context (*i.e.* the interrelation between music and the rest of a film’s system). Ultimately, all film components function as a single system.

Music can organize discourse and contribute to a film’s meaning through:

- **Pure musical codes** (*musical structure*): referring to music listening separated from on-screen activities not related to the music’s production
- **Cultural musical codes**, eliciting enculturated reactions
Aesthetics of the Motion Picture Soundtrack

- **Cinematic musical codes**: referring to musical aspects bearing some specific formal relationship to coexistent elements in the film

**Relationship between a scene and the accompanying non-diegetic music**

Film music may possess its own logic but always bears a relationship to the film in which it appears [whether this is intended or not].

The **narrative-music relationship** is usually described in terms of **parallelism and counterpoint**, wrongly implying that the film image is autonomous.

A more accurate way to describe them is in terms of ‘**mutual implication,**’ especially since the information provided by such disparate media as image and sound is not easily comparable.

“… the relationship is not one of similarity but of question/answer, appearance/essence etc.” Eisler (1947).

**Is any non-diegetic music sufficient to accompany a film segment?**

In some respects yes, as indicated by Jean Cocteau’s accidental music synchronization experiments and Eisenstein’s principle of film montage.

[Whatever two components (image, music, dialogue, etc.) are put together, a new meaning will be produced that will be different from that of each individual component, thanks to the spectator/listener/reader partially imposing meaning. In other words, whether a montage of elements is intended or not, their corroboration will generate meaning. This is also the case with real life where the ‘montage’ of experience is not intended –rather it is often unexplained- with meaning arising reflectively.]

Occasional temporal coincidence of musical and visual accents and absence of major such conflicts between them contribute to a convincing/acceptable pairing of music and image, with different effects being created through dynamics, tempo, orchestration, etc.

As long as the general musical style is not completely at odds with the visual component (rendering it either comedic or wrong), the scene (image & music) will seem acceptable. **For example**, rhythmic/repetitive music is fit for rhythmic, repetitive tasks, not necessarily by being aligned to them (as in ‘mickey mousing’). In the pedaling scene for Francois Truffaut’s *Jules and Jim*, the music “turns” regularly and although there is no identity between musical and diegetic rhythm, the musical choice seems convincing and there is a sensation of mechanic continuous urgency. For another similar example see the online clip from ET’s closing scene.

**Music can influence/set the mood and meaning of a scene through**

- mode (major/minor)
- tempo (allegro/staccato may add optimism to an otherwise neutral scene)
- instrumentation (violin=passion – tuba=humor – large orchestra=Romantic excess)
- mickey mousing (comedic touch)
- changes in rhythm/accents/phrasing/articulation
  
  [We will address how/why such changes may affect a scene's mood towards the end of the course]
According to Gorbman, all devices listed work mainly as associations. Associated meaning can build up through repeated use of certain devices in similar, long-term (e.g. through tradition) or short-term (e.g. within a specific cinematic/musical style or even a single film/piece) contexts. Violating long-term associations may result in an image/music pairing that might be judged as inappropriate.

The function of silence

*Convention: Silence is not a part of music – a film should not have sonic gaps/holes*

[This convention probably originates in silent film music practices, where some of music’s functions were to compensate for the (unnatural) silence of the screen, cover projector noise, and make up, in general, for the unsatisfactory cinematic experience due to the primitive film technology.]

Silence can work in one or more of three ways:

- **diegetic silence as in the aesthetics of realism** (i.e. silence consistent with the action on screen as in the case of scenes with no dialogue or other sound-producing action)
- **non-diegetic silence** - complete absence of sound (used for dream sequences, scenes of intense mental activity, comedic scenes (Godard’s *Bande à Part*, 1964), etc.)
- **structural silence**: absence of expected (due to its presence in previous similar scenes) sound, causing us to notice the silence and eliciting a variety of responses (sorrnerness, loss of innocence, numbness, pure fear, serenity) depending on the visual and narrative context. (e.g. opening and closing scenes in Fellini’s *Nights of Cabiria*.)

Songs with lyrics

**Diegetic songs**

When a character sings a song, action presumably freezes for the song’s duration. This is not necessarily true as indicated by examples from *Casablanca* (first diegetic performance of "As time goes by") and *The Man Who Knew Too Much* ("Que Sera Sera" sung at the ambassador's house).

**Non-diegetic theme songs**

Rather than participating in the action, non-diegetic theme songs function much like an ancient Greek chorus, commenting on a narrative that is temporarily frozen into a spectacle.

The 1983 re-editio of F. Lang’s *Metropolis* (1926), featuring a rock score by G. Moroder, is an example of using song lyrics to comment on or supplement the dialogue and action. [Although some viewers have found this hard to follow, it is a common practice in musicals. Therefore, contrary to Gorbman’s contention, song lyrics do not threaten to offset the balance between music and narrative cinematic representation but may often provide a poignant commentary while the action is going on. (e.g. the opening hotel scene in Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest*, several scenes in *American Graffiti*, etc.)]
Narrative, diegesis, “reality,” and music

French theorists (Gerard Genette, Etienne Souriau, etc.) introduced the term diegesis [storytelling] to describe the narratively implied spatiotemporal world of a film’s actions and characters.

How do the spliced portions of sound and images give the impression of some “real” world from which they are supposedly extracted?

We seem to have the psychological capacity to impose continuity on filmed images and sounds before us, similar to our capacity to impose continuity on our fragmented real-world experiences. For example, the ‘montage’ of real-life experiences is not always intended, is hardly controllable, and is definitely fragmented, but generates, for the most part, meanings that appear clear. *(Kuleshov effect*: our ability to infer that someone is, for example, eating a soup from three discontinuous/discrete shots (face/soup/face).

Although we can accept metadiegetic images (*e.g.* dreams, visions, fantasies, flashbacks) we have a hard time accepting non-diegetic images (*i.e.* images that have nothing to do with the action/events on the screen and cannot be explained from within the diegesis).

Music and sound take more liberties with the diegesis than the image. Sound-effects may tend to remain diegetic but music can and often does cross the line between diegetic and non-diegetic with great success and ease.

Music, whether diegetic or non-diegetic, can have many functions: temporal, spatial, dramatic, structural, denotative, connotative – both in the diachronic flow of the film and at various interpretive levels simultaneously.

[Proposed function of music in films]

[Music behaves synergistically in films. Rather than simply commenting on the film’s meaning, as this has been already set by the image alone, it works along with the image in creating narrative meaning. Music’s non-verbal and non-denotative status contributes to its mediating character, permitting it to cross boundaries among:

a. levels of narration (diegetic/non-diegetic)

b. narrative agencies (objective/subjective narrator – *e.g.* how we or the film’s characters feel about events occurring in the world outlined and implied by the film)

c. different levels of narrative and experiential time, such as

i. viewing time (*i.e.* actual time the film begins and ends),

ii. implied time (time in which the diegesis is supposed to be taking place),

iii. psychological time (the audience’s experience of time’s passing)

iv. musical time (time as configured through musical structures)

d. disparate spatial and temporal locations (*e.g.* transitions).

For its connotative function, music does not only rely (as Gorbman suggests) on codes/associations. The atmosphere, shading, expression, and mood of specific scenes or of a film as a whole are set at the intersection of the film’s and spectators’ systems of connotative elements. Of these elements, music is arguably the most significant, mainly thanks to its power to influence the way we experience time (*i.e.* the way our experience of present events configures and is configured by our memory of past events and expectation for future events). We will return to this topic during Module 07.]