

Non-Diegetic Music in Narrative Fiction: Is There Such a Thing?

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The distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music has made perfect sense for film studies at least since Claudia GORBMAN borrowed Genette's category of *diégèse* and adapted it to cinematic sound in *Unheard Melodies* (1987). While we can easily project the notion of diegetic music back to literary narrative, where it textually manifests itself as Stephen Paul Scher's (1968) "verbal music"—a referential form of intermediality, according to Werner Wolf (1999)—non-diegetic music in film studies' literal sense appears to be virtually non-existent in fiction. With readers not perceptually exposed to musical sound, the chance that the text would be accompanied with musical extras playing in the reader's head is precisely just that: chance. At the same time, Werner WOLF explicitly argues that "intermedial thematization"—the telling about musical compositions within a storyworld—is neither definitive of nor sufficient for a "musicalization of fiction." Regarding Scher's onomatopoeic "word music" and structural analogies to musical forms in literary narratives as modes of "intermedial imitation," Wolf refrains from estimating their readerly appeals due to lack of empirical evidence. Since in my envisioned synthesis of audionarratology and intermediality studies we are still at the necessary pre-empirical stage of formulating hypotheses, I now suggest looking at musicalized prose in terms of its capacity for narrative tools that function analogously to non-diegetic music in film. I analyze a sample from William H. Gass's *MIDDLE C* (2013) to suggest that, although the term "non-diegetic music" does not symmetrically apply to verbal narrative, there is room for musical effects that characters are not aware of, while readers are. I conclude by cataloguing a series of loose binaries such as content/form, subject/style, or fiction/diction and draw the distinction between the non-diegetic and the *exegetic* (Schmid 2010) in relation to verbal representation of music in narrative fiction.

Let me first introduce my example text and context. Please listen to this song extract and see for how many of you the tune's familiar. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_xhgRKvQzQ

Now listen to a short extract from a one-act opera and see if that's recognizable. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySZJHLDSps4>

Now let's move straight to my Gass EXAMPLE.

In Chapter 33 of *Middle C*, the non-diegetic narrator tells us how the novel's protagonist, Joseph Skizzen, writes an article on Arnold Schoenberg's *Von Heute auf Morgen* (the second musical fragment I've played). Skizzen needs to get published and tenured at his third-rate midwestern college, where he has secured himself a music professorship by forging his own biography and academic credentials. The article, "Schoenberg's Saxophone," fakes Skizzen's musicological expertise, for which the protagonist chooses an appropriate subject. It focuses on a moment in Schoenberg's career when the inventor of the twelve-tone style and leader of the Second Viennese School tried to pretend that "he was one of the boys and could write operetta . . . seeking vainly for popular success" and composed "the heaviest light opera ever penned" (303), which is, to Skizzen's knowledge, hardly ever discussed in the literature.

Joseph Skizzen had chosen this subject and this theme in order that its author, who would have to be **Professor** Joseph Skizzen, would be noticed. It was desirable for the professor to be impressive so that the real Skizzen—Joey—who really didn't care much for either Schoenberg the man (a tyrant) or Schoenberg the musician (a romantic at war with romanticism)—who, when the maestro's atonal music washed over him, felt as if his head were being held in a toilet Polly who found these serenades and songs beyond him Wolly quite over his head, his hair, his head of hair like a sudden shower Doodle who recoiled as the land does in front of distant mountains Polly-Wolly for whom Liszt's *Transcendental Études* were about as adventuresome as Skizzen could bring himself to be Doodle as he could bring himself Polly-Wolly-Doodle yes, so the real Skizzen might fade like a figure a flower in the wallpaper a wall of paper flowers a pattern whom familiarity ignores, paint obscures, or the sun fades Polly-Wolly-Doodle all the day. (*MC* 303-304)

For a page and a half, the narrative account of Skizzen's genuine and simulated attitudes to and anxieties over Schoenberg gets contaminated with nonsense-words either taken or derived from the refrain of the popular vocal music piece I played earlier: "Polly-Wolly-Doodle," the 19th-century folk song from the American South, a sample of "the farm and family music Joey was able to play" (304). The non-sequitur and non-denotative sounds multiply like weeds. These intertextual insertions of the trashy tune contrast the high-brow thematic focus of the *PASSAGE*: "Alban Berg Polly Anton von Webern Wolly with the twelve tones they had to work with Doodle the twelve disciples that Schoenberg (Skizzen, too) had to seem to teach Polly-Wolly-Doodle even to prefer, Joseph had now to embrace as well" (304). With the original syllables getting phonemically varied as "Jolly," "Wooly," "Oodle," and alike, it becomes apparent that

the initial three nonsense-words from the song and their derivatives form a whole bank, a scale, a collection of sound elements. Once we agree to buy the metaphor that Gass so insistently (and fraudulently) tries to sell through his text's referential plane, we can count the number of individual "tones" in this collection, to discover that there are *twelve* components involved.

These apparently random cacophonous interruptions doublevoice the narration by providing a parallel stream of alien elements that the reader must 'weed' and discard as noise in order to restore a clear narrative message. On the one hand, this stream illustrates the inadequacy of Skizzen's understanding of Schoenberg's twelve-tone serialism. Elsewhere in the novel, Skizzen pictures a twelve-tone row in the shape of twelve syllables or words none of which gets repeated until the entire series is over, but there are neither pitches attributed to particular words nor intervallic relations involved in this amateurish verbal modeling. On the other hand, in the Polly-Wolly passage, there is *no diegetic musical presence*. Nobody is playing "Polly-Wolly-Doodle" in the storyworld; no one is even pronouncing these interjections, unless we push the idea that the passage contains free indirect discourse standing for the tune playing in Skizzen's head as he is writing the Schoenberg article. Applying Ockham's razor, though, we may come up with a simpler conjecture: the Polly-Wolly variations come from the non-diegetic narrator, who thereby, in FLAUBERTIAN fashion, provides us with the irony that the character is quite unaware of—particularly because he does not 'hear' what we do. As a case of narratorial irony, this effect is well-known outside music-related analysis of fiction: remember the agricultural fair episode in *Madame Bovary*, in which characters are not aware of the contrapuntal juxtaposition of high romance and farming idioms, so the comic effect isn't theirs. If we treat Gass's text phonocentrically, as he repeatedly required in his many essays and interviews advocating "the music of prose," and if we agree that sound combinations such as Polly-Wolly and Pilly-Dilly invoke musical imagery in the reader's mind (because the song is familiar, and because we know it has been played diegetically earlier in the novel), this must be the closest we can get to *non-diegetic music in narrative fiction*.

When the concept of non-diegetic music is introduced in film theory, a very similar case is described. GORBMAN seeks a musico-cinematic equivalent for Genette's "metadiegetic" narration—that is, a character's first-person narration embedded in the third-person narrator's (excuse this primitive paraphrase). In a Fellini soundtrack, a piece of music that was first performed for characters to hear under certain circumstances, and thus gets entangled with a

certain atmosphere, is later replayed non-diegetically, for a symbolic indication of the characters' past memory. Gorbman finds that the borders between diegetic and non-diegetic music in this example are blurred. Fellini's character cannot hear the music—instead, he recollects a scene from the past, but for the viewer, there is just the offscreen music acting as a pass into the character's mind, instead of verbal voiceover (Gorbman 22). In *Middle C*, "Polly-Wolly-Doodle" is collected in the paperback *Songs That Never Grow Old*, which young Joey takes hold of in Chapter 24 (230), when he even sings it (232-33). Thus, on first presentation, the music is diegetic. In Chapter 33, it returns non-diegetically: the reader can 'hear' and make sense of its supposedly 'serialized' fragments submitted in the narrator's voice. In both Gorbman's Fellini and my Gass examples, non-diegetic music in cinema functions metaphorically, to characterize something within the diegetic universe from without: either a subjects' inner state or an irony of the narrated situation. In the former case, it is the non-diegetic narrator's device of focalization; in the latter, it is a rhetorical device of irony.

All in all, non-diegetic music in narrative fiction is not the same as SCHER'S "word music," in which the sound of music is onomatopoeically imitated in the text, or "structural parallels to music" (when musical phenomena such as fugue or sonata form are rendered in the narrative discourse). Those technical forms of intermedial imitation, in Wolf's terms, are better characterized as *EXEGETIC*, as in the contrast between *DIEGESIS* vs. *exegesis* that Wolf Schmid (6) uses to distinguish between Genette's *diégèse* (the narrated world, the represented "what") and discourse (the "how," the manner of presenting). A whole THICKET of terminologically loose dichotomies may intuitively stand for the same relationship: content and form, subject matter and narrative manner, plot and style, fiction and diction (Genette), even theme and rheme (Genette again).

The writer can generally write "by the mouth to the ear" (Ammon 22), as Gass always did, without maintaining any connection between musical effects of prose and the events and ideas it constructs. Prior to *Middle C*, diegetic music never fully got into Gass's storyworlds: *The Tunnel* (1995), for instance, which in the author's repeated comments adopts Schoenberg's twelve-tone composition technique too, serial music is never performed diegetically. Only *Middle C* and Gass's last book, *Eyes* (2015), feature musicians as characters (in the latter, a pianist character is brought up by the grotesque narrator—the piano from *Casablanca*). In contrast to *diegetic music*, which belongs in the fictional universe, *exegetic music* is self-

referentially created by the verbal means itself. NON-DIEGETIC music, as I propose, first of all, stands outside the *diégèse* at the level of non-diegetic narration, but it can be identified as music that can be (fictitiously or actually) played. In my example, the narrator produces his anti-Schoenbergian soundtrack, the reader performs it, but the protagonist does not hear it. It is still a referential, not purely technical phenomenon, in Wolf's terms, but it refers to the level virtually inaccessible to diegetic entities. Second, as a narratorial device, non-diegetic music characterizes the narrated phenomena and events by providing them with extra characteristics, while characters cannot hear it. Therefore, references to musical sounds, compositions, and pieces that non-diegetic narrators make without placing those in the narrated reality are non-diegetic music. In embedded literary narratives, the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic will get relativized, as the category attribution will depend on the narrative level. In diegetic narration, when characters speak of past events from their own lives, all music is diegetic, but we can tell that some of it is used non-diegetically, when the first-person narrator refers to music to characterize a past situation, in which that particular music could be heard. None of the three types of musical presences (diegetic, exegetic, and non-diegetic) is absolute and stable; each time, it is a matter of their narrative function. All of them, however, may serve the purpose that Scher hinted at in defining verbal music: they "strive to suggest the experience or effects of music" ("Notes" 149).

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