

# Altered States of Consciousness in Narrative Cinema: Subjective Film Sound

Mladen Milicevic

**Abstract**—In this paper subjective film sound will be addressed as it gets represented in narrative cinema. First, “meta-diegetic” sound will be briefly explained followed by transition to “oneiric” sound. The representation of oneiric sound refers to a situation where film characters are experiencing some sort of an altered state of consciousness. Looking at an altered state of consciousness in terms of human brain processes will point out to the cinematic ways of expression, which “mimic” those processes. Using several examples for different films will illustrate these points.

**Keywords**—Oneiric, ASC (altered states of consciousness), film, sound.

## I. INTRODUCTION

IT is believed, the first one who proposed the meta-diegetic category for, so-called, internal sounds was Claudia Gorbman [1] in her film sound taxonomy. According to Gorbman, sound source on the narrative level may be diegetic, extra-diegetic [2], and meta-diegetic. Meta-diegetic sound was explained as sound imagined, or perhaps, hallucinated by a character. Before Gorbman, there have been numerous theories, which agree on the basic principle that film sound may be perceived as either diegetic, or non-diegetic--as defined by its source of origin. Therefore, the sound which is normatively perceived and understood by the film characters may be called diegetic; e.g. all the dialogue, sound effects, and music that originate in diegetic space; and non-diegetic sound which would then be the opposite from diegetic; e.g. voice-over narration, and musical score--both of whose existence film characters are unaware.

Bordwell and Thompson [3] unnecessarily complicated this matter by looking at the diegetic and non-diegetic sound from its temporal relationship to the image. According to them, film sound can appear earlier, simultaneously, or later than the image. Classifying even further, they recognized displaced diegetic sound, which takes place in the past or the future, and simple diegetic sound, which is taking place in the present. In addition, they propose, each of these categories may be external, i.e. spoken aloud by the character(s) and internal, i.e. imagined in the character's head (thoughts).

Theorizing even further Michel Chion proposed two more new categories for internal sound. He writes:

*Internal sound* is sound which, although situated in the present action, corresponds to physical and mental interior of a character. These include physiological sounds of

breathing, moans or heartbeats, all of which could be named *objective-internal* sounds. Also in this category of internal sounds are mental voices, memories, and so on, which I call *subjective-internal* sounds [4].

All these film theories that attempt to classify film sound into absolute and complicated categories talk about sound which parallels or counterpoints the images, sound that is synchronous or asynchronous in relation to the images, sound that is either realistic or unrealistic, or sound that is literal or nonliteral. In order to accomplish this impossible pursuit and get to the bottom of the meaning of film sound, all these theories needed several sub-categories, which in return required their own sub-sub-categories, and so on ad infinitum. The reason why these film sound theories have difficulties lies in their attempt to get absolutely finite results beyond contingency. Unfortunately, in the end they become more about making classifications than they do about understanding cinema.

## II. META-DIEGETIC AND ONEIRIC

Even though Gorbman was critical of over-classifying film sound by the others, she likewise proposed just another set of categories. Gorbman was of considerable significance, since she established the term meta-diegetic and opened up the whole new analytical world of subjective and non-normative film sound. But before focusing on meta-diegetic sound, let me introduce another term--*oneiric*. In ancient Greek *oneiros* (ὄνειρος) means dream and the first one who adopted this term was Vlada Petric using *oneiric cinema* to describe films that deal with various kinds of altered states of consciousness. Petric's interest in oneiric film perception exists mostly on visual level, he states:

On a purely cinematic level, oneiric implies film imagery that stimulates a paradoxical experience: while the event on the screen is perceived on a rational level as absurd and impossible, it is at the same time accepted as "reality," with full psycho-emotional involvement on the part of the viewer in the diegetic world presented on screen. [5]

There is a significant difference in achieving the oneiric at visual and aural planes of experience, but if there is a common element it is represented by a departure from normative perception of reality. Freud writes in his preface to the first edition of *Interpretation of Dreams* that "the dream represents the first class of abnormal psychological phenomena" [6]; he depicts it as a *deviation* from the usual condition of mind.

The best way would be to use meta-diegetic to signify character's subjective perception of the reality, and oneiric to signify character's total or partial departure from reality. Both

Mladen Milicevic is Professor of Recording Arts at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA 90045 USA (phone: 310-338-4575; fax: 310-338-3030; e-mail: mmilicev@lmu.edu).

of these terms are referring to the deviation from normative film sound into a subjective sound of altered states of consciousness. Nonetheless, the notion of meta-diegetic perception could be traced back into the silent days of Italian Futurist cinema. Written in 1916 *Manifesto of Futurist Cinema* [7] among other important points stated that their films would be a sort of *polyexpressive symphonies* and *dramatized states of mind*. Siegfried Kracauer has written about *special modes of reality* [8] that could be cinematically represented. Kracauer pointed out, "films may expose physical reality as it appears to individuals in extreme states of mind generated by" various kinds of "mental disturbances or any other external or internal causes." The first actual creative use of meta-diegetic film sound as a dramatized state of mind dates back to 1929 and the first British talkie *Blackmail* by Alfred Hitchcock. In the well known *knife sequence* Hitchcock is using sound to penetrate the subjective mental state of Alice (Anny Ondra) whose aural perception of reality suppresses everything but the word *knife*, which rings in her mind and becomes the solely focus of her attention, until her father interrupts: "Alice, cut a bit of bread, will you." [9]

Many authors have written about this scene:

After having killed her assailant with a knife, the young heroine of Alfred Hitchcock's "Blackmail" finally returns to her parents' shop and there overhears the chatter of a gossipy woman customer. The camera is just focusing on the listening girl, as the woman suddenly drops the word "knife." [10]

Like images, sound can be used subjectively to express the impressions or state of mind of a character in the film. There is the famous scene from Hitchcock's *Blackmail* in which the words 'Knife, Knife, Knife', are repeated in a frightened girl's mind. [11]

Most of the experiments are in the expressionistic mode, the two most famous examples being the subjective distortion of the word "knife" in "Blackmail" and the interior monologue in *Murder*. Both experiments are attempts to convey a character's thoughts and feelings. Yet at the same time both techniques draw attention to themselves as tricks and leave the audience emotionally outside the characters. [12]

Back in 1929 the technological means of film expression were very limited and Hitchcock used them very creatively to achieve what he could do at the time of *Blackmail*.

### III. ALTERED STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

An altered state of consciousness is a temporary change in one's normal mental state without being considered unconscious. In such state the mind can be aware but is not in its usual wakeful condition, such as during hypnosis, meditation, hallucination, trance, and the dream stage. One of the main characteristics of the altered state of consciousness is a significant change in time perception.

Human ability to estimate passing time as perceived by our brains (subjective time) is synchronized with the ticking of an internal clock, pretty much like our daily life is influenced by the ticking of our watch (objective time). The subjective

perception of time depends on the number of pulses that have been collected (since the beginning of the stimulus). When the internal clock speeds up, the number of pulses increases, creating the impression that time is passing more slowly. Just as in film running at 24 frames per second where change in number of fps influences our perception of time; 18 fps feels fast while 40 fps feels slow.

Human perception of time is illuminating our emotional state thus the temporal misrepresentation caused by emotion is not the result of a malfunction of our internal clock. It rather represents a remarkable ability of human brain to adapt to events around us. For example, during high-stress situations, such as an accident, the brain receives enormous amounts of information to process, which affects human's perception of time. This may be explained as an evolutionary mechanism adapted by the brain to increase human survival rates. Thus, during a dangerous situation we can react fast and make a decision in a split second.

Furthermore, our perception of time as represented in the brain includes processes related to memory and attention. It seems that time passes faster when we are busy, or doing something pleasing or stimulating. Recent research indicates that the feeling of awe has an effect on time perception. Awe is an overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration, fear, etc., produced by that which is grand, sublime, extremely powerful, or the like. Therefore this perceptual immensity upsurges one's focus during the present by stimulating a need to understand and form new knowledge structures. It is packing more data into the brain than usual. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that one's temporal perception would slow down when experiencing awe.

### IV. CINEMATIC "FORMULA" FOR ONEIRIC MOOD

An aural *oneiric-feeling* in narrative cinema is usually achieved by some kind of departure from normative film sound. Most of the film sound is normatively diegetic and non-diegetic depicting a feeling of reality, thus deviation from it may lead into oneiric or meta-diegetic. Just as in real life where an altered state of consciousness alters our perception of time and focus, similarly cinematic oneiricism attempts to achieve the same. What is also important to understand is how the transition from cinematic reality into an oneiric state is achieved. In order to do so, let me introduce two terms *hypnagogic* and *hypnopompic*. The term "hypnagogic" denotes the state of consciousness during the onset of sleep, and "hypnopompic" denotes the beginning of wakefulness. The most common transition into an oneiric mood takes place by a gradual move (hypnagogic) to completely dropping off the normative sound effects and letting the non-diegetic music alone to take over. This gradual hypnagogic move is accompanied with a visual move into the slow motion, just as in real life where under aroused emotional state human perception of time gets altered and slows down. Thus, once transitioned into oneiric cinematic mood we will be seeing slow motion images, hearing non-diegetic music, and experiencing no sound effects, which establish diegetic reality. In some case, very selective sound effects may penetrate into

this oneiric mood. Breaking away from this mood is almost always abrupt so the hypnopompic transition is virtually non-existent.

Following are presented several examples of aural oneiricism as used in different films. Since all these examples share the common "formula" as described above of moving into non-normative film sound, let's see what are the ways of achieving it.

As in film *Monsieur Hire* (France 1989) directed by Patrice Leconte, when Hire (Michael Blanc) during the boxing match unbuttons Alice's (Sandrine Bonnaire) shirt and starts touching her, very prominent sound effects of the cheering crowd slowly get muffled and fade out (hypnagogic) while the musical score (Michael Nyman) singularly overwhelms the scene making it aurally oneiric. Later on, Alice's boyfriend comes back and we are abruptly (hypnopompic) brought back to diegetic reality cutting off the music and returning the normative sound effects. This form of intrusion into oneiric mood is fairly characteristic when it comes to reestablishing diegetic reality, a sort of a wakeup call for the character. Generally speaking, in oneiric film sound; the hypnagogic state takes place more gradually while the hypnopompic state is rather fast and relatively short.

This is not entirely the case with the sequence from *Empire of the Sun* (USA 1987) directed by Steven Spielberg where US airplanes come to bomb and liberate the Japanese prisoners of war camp. The main character a boy, Jim Graham (Christian Bale), is obsessed with airplanes, and in this sequence his obsession is presented through an altered state of consciousness and awe effect. In the midst of the battle Jim is speechless while looking in slow motion at an airplane whose pilot is waving to him from the open cockpit. Sound effects slowly disappear and the musical score (John Williams) completely takes over creating an oneiric effect. Gradually returning from this mesmerizing mood Jim yells "Go!!! B51 the Cadillac of the sky!" and then a big explosion brings the audience back to the fierceness of the battle by reestablishing all, the previously dropped, war sound effects and diegetic reality which comes with it.

One of the most vivid and interesting examples of an oneiric soundscape comes from *The Witness* (USA 1985) directed by Peter Weir. In the sequence at the police station where detective John Book (Harrison Ford) is showing the mug shots of the possible killers to the Amish boy, Samuel (Lukas Haas), sound effects to create the atmosphere of a police officer are deliberately mixed in, much louder than normally. This was done to highlight the subjective reaction of the Amish boy to the alien environment of the police office. Then, wandering around Samuel sees in a display cabinet a paper clipping and the photograph of officer McPhee (Danny Glover), a top narcotics policeman, who was honored for his achievements in a youth project. At that moment, the boy realizes that McPhee is actually the killer, meanwhile the sound effects have been dropped out and the musical score (Maurice Jarre) alone, creates an oneiric mood. Detective John Book comes in an awe through a subtle slow motion towards the boy who is pointing his index finger to McPhee's photo

identifying him as the killer. Book stunningly realizes the implications of boy's discovery and the fact that the police department itself is involved in the killing. The "wake up call" from this oneiric state comes as a door buzzer sound effect leading into the next scene.

Transitions to flashback sequences are often accompanied by an oneiric sound treatment like in *The Silence of the Lambs* (USA 1991) directed by Jonathan Demme. Young detective, Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster), while attending the funeral service for the police officer killed in the line of duty, is experiencing a flashback. As Clarice walks through the door the sound effects and diegetic music give a way to a non-diegetic musical score (Howard Shore) and set up an oneiric mood. A man playing a "soundless" organ can be seen as Clarice completely drifts away from the diegetic reality and walks towards the coffin. She is seen in a subtle slow motion going into a flashback of her father's funeral, who was, also, a police officer killed in the line of duty. Clarice's altered state of consciousness is interrupted by the voice of Jack Crawford (Scott Glenn) who abruptly brakes off the mood saying: "Starling, we are back here!"

Another marvelous example of flashback and oneiric mood comes in a sequence from *Chariots of Fire* (UK 1981) directed by Hugh Hudson, in which British athlete, Harold Abrahams (Ben Cross), is preparing for a race at 1924 Paris Olympics. The high level of concentration and an undoubtedly altered state of consciousness before the race is presented visually through the use of slow motion. On the aural level the same is achieved through the musical score (Vangelis Papathanassiou) by omitting the cheering crowd ambient sounds and selectively focusing onto footsteps and digging-in sounds of the racers as they prepare to take their marks. Then, just a few seconds before the race starts, the music fades out and we hear Abrahams' heartbeat sound alone. The firing of the starter's gun brings us back to the reality of the cheering crowd sounds and regular motion. Abrahams wins the race and stunned by that fact goes through a flashback of the entire event depicted in slow motion. We hear the start gun fired again but this time its sound quality is altered and reverberated to portray the subjective perception of Abrahams. The musical score accompanies everything, no cheering crowd sounds, and very few selected sound effects. Still in slow motion, we visually cut back and forth from Abrahams' flashback to reality but his altered state of consciousness is uninterrupted, even as he (in reality shots) receives handshakes of congratulations and poses for photographs. Abrahams' flashback ends as he breaks the ribbon crossing the finish line. The music withdraws abruptly and the full blast of the crowd cheering returns us to reality.

It is interesting to see how sound is oneirically treated in a flashback sequence from *Patriot Games* (USA 1992) directed by Phillip Noyce. The CIA detective Jack Rayn (Harrison Ford) is struggling to assemble the puzzle of an IRA terrorist group which is trying to kill him and his family. While washing his face in the bathroom, Jack is going through the series of flashbacks, some of which are triggered from reality by the appearance of a woman who accidentally interrupts his

oneiric state. Constantly going back and forth from the flashback to reality, a meta-diegetic mood is achieved through the use of the musical score (James Horner) and acoustically altered sound effects for the flashback parts. What is particularly interesting here is that in spite of very vivid visual oneiricism, on the aural level we never completely leave reality--ambient sounds are always present. This shallow acoustic representation of oneiric is deliberately used to show Ryan's striving to connect the puzzle pieces together in his head. The case of stunning revelation in *The Witness* required a very deep oneiric mood, while for the scattered flashback in *Patriot Games* demanded the use of shallow oneiricism. Sometimes, like in *The Fugitive*, USA (1993) by Andrew Davis, flashback scenes are nothing but glimpses in which to accomplish any sense of aural oneiricism, distorted visual images are being accompanied by acoustically transformed and heavily manipulated sound effects.

Very creative use of acoustically altered sound effects and transitions to flashback may be found in *Dead Calm* (Australia 1989) directed by Phillip Noyce. Early in the film John Ingram (Sam Neill) rushes to the hospital where his wife Rae (Nicole Kidman) is treated in an emergency room after the car accident. As he approaches Rae's bed and tries to talk to her, we see a subjectively blurred shot from Rae's perspective. Sound effects of her heavy breathing and heartbeat are overly emphasized while she is oneirically falling in a sort of comatose flashback. We see the windshield wipers whose rhythm perfectly coincides with the sound of Rae's heartbeat. Now, her heartbeat gradually transforms into the regular sound of windshield wipers, and we are no longer in the hospital, but riding in the car with Rae and her son. She is singing a child song to her baby boy, but her voice sounds reverberated--acoustically mismatching the diegetic space. As she continues to sing the sound of her voice gradually transforms and matches the acoustic perspective of the car. At this point we are out of the oneiric state but still in her flashback, which seems convincingly realistic. While witnessing the horrible accident we see Rae screaming, and that scream interrupts everything in an overlap into the next scene, which takes place on the sailing boat. For a moment of confusion we see Rae waking up in tears and this entire episode appears to be in her dream. The sequence is integrally scored by an eerie electronic music (Graeme Revell), which non-diegetically unifies these three diegetic places--the hospital, car, and the sailing boat.

Sound alteration is characteristic of a bathroom sequence from the *Reservoir Dogs* (USA 1992) directed by Quentin Tarantino. When Mr. Orange (Tim Roth) loaded with drugs in his bag walks in the bathroom with three cops, he deliberately uses the hand dryer in order to show them he is causal and non suspicious. When Mr. Orange presses the hand dryer's button we hear the sound of an airplane jet, which totally obstructs the cops' conversation. This is visually shown in an oneiric slow motion and all the sound effects are dropped giving way to the blasts of the "dryer-jet". Over that noise police officers cannot talk so they look at Mr. Orange while their dog barks "soundlessly." When the dryer sharply cuts off, we are back in reality.

In *Scarface* (USA 1983) directed by Brian De Palma, oneiric mood is achieved by using the juxtaposition of diegetic disco club music with non-diegetic musical score (Giorgio Moroder). In the sequence when Tony Montana (Al Pacino) and his buddy Manny Ray (Steven Bauer) walk in a disco, they see Tony's sister Gina (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) dancing at the dance floor with some guy. This upsets Tony a lot and while camera closes up on his eyes, the non-diegetic musical score is being introduced to parallel Tony's altered state of consciousness--two different kind of music are heard simultaneously creating a rather abrasive combination. A few moments later, Tony's business conversation is interrupted as he pays attention to Gina again. Now, she appears to be in a cozy relationship with her dancing partner as they walk together towards the bathroom--this makes Tony absolutely furious. Here again, camera subjectively closes on Tony's face, and this time the non-diegetic score completely overwhelms the diegetic disco music. The loudness of the non-diegetic musical score parallels the degree of Tony's anger. As Tony suddenly gets up and runs to the bathroom to attack Gina's partner, the non-diegetic music is abruptly dropped and we are back in the reality of disco dancing. These two examples are relatively short when compared to the one that follows a few minutes later. Tony sits alone, drunk and stoned, smoking his cigar and drinking scotch while he notices two hit men hiding their machine guns under the table across the room. When Tony realized the seriousness of his situation, the non-diegetic musical score is juxtaposed again with the ongoing disco music. This not only portrays Tony's altered state of consciousness but also creates a counterpoint to the continuing amusement of other people in the club. Here, two entirely different moods are conveyed aurally through simultaneous use of different music. This music is abruptly cut off as the two hit men start shooting and wake up everybody to the fearful reality.

A very interesting and truly unique use of oneiric soundscape can be found in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (USA 1992) directed by David Lynch. The night club sequence in which Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) and her friend Ronette Pulaski (Phoebe Augustine) decide to go next day to a sex party with Jacques Renault (Walter Olkewicz) and Leo Johnson (Eric DaRe), treats dialogue and diegetic music (Angelo Badalamenti) in an unorthodox manner. Normatively in most of the films, no matter how loud the music in a disco club in reality may be, it is always cinematically treated as subordinate to the dialogue, which is clearly heard over the music. Here, Lynch decides to do the opposite and depart from the norm and move into an oneiric mood in order to sonically depict the altered states of consciousness in his characters that are either drunk or stoned. Therefore, the music is blasting and the dialogue can barely be heard, thus Lynch has to resort to subtitles making the sequence meaningful via written signs. However, once the film gets internationally distributed here is an example of what could happen:

The stroboscopic lights provoke a sense of dizziness and the volume of the music played by the group is purposefully kept very loud, so much so that the director

had decided to make the dialogues between the characters barely audible and to use subtitles in order for the spectator to decode what was being said. The original version contributes to offer the impression not only of an infernal environment, but also of a psychological situation of Laura being on the verge of her “breakdown.” The feeling that the spectator gets is sort of “psychological terrorism” on the part of the director, straining to make an almost unbearable “audio-vision” of this sequence.

The Italian distributor has canceled the sense and the strength of this sequence, arbitrarily lowering the volume of the music and bringing up the dialogue, making the recourse to the subtitles superfluous, which in fact, has been eliminated. This description is not sufficient to understand how an operation of this type, besides being always and in any sense stigmatizing because of disrespectfulness of director’s choices, radically changes the nature of the sequence and annuls its destabilizing potential, normalizing it. [13]

Finally, let us finish with the opening sequence from *Apocalypse Now* by Francis Ford Coppola. It starts oneirically from the very beginning with the song *The End by The Doors*. We see the explosions but don’t hear them, the helicopters are flying by, but we hear acoustically altered helicopter sounds, which don’t match the visuals in perspective or the rhythm. Then, we see Captain Willard lying on his bed and we discover the opening images are visuals from a nightmare he has been having. While looking at the ceiling fan he hears meta-diegetically transformed helicopter sounds. This mood is invaded by the sound of a real helicopter, which comes through Willard’s window, and he is prompted to wake up from this oneiric state while the music slowly fades out into a distant reverberation creating a hypnopompic transition to reality. He gets up and looks through the window talking to himself in an internal monologue: “Saigon, shit...” This monologue continues and as he talks about jungle, even though we see him in a hotel room, jungle ambiance sounds are introduced, subjectively portraying Willard’s drunken aural imagination.

#### V.CONCLUSION

Regardless of the category, film sound is trying to create a hyperreal aural representation of the plot, which can make the audience transcend the limitations of cinematic medium and believe the conceit presented before them. Looking at the examples presented and analyzed here, it is clear why narrative cinema is such a powerful medium creating its “better than reality” virtual world. So far, not much has been written about the aural oneiricism as a part of cinematic virtuality, and this contribution might prompt the film makers to more often effectively use meta-diegetic film sound in their ways of artistic expression.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] C. Gorbman, *Teaching the Soundtrack* Quarterly Review of Film Studies (November 1976): pp. 446-452.
- [2] C. Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 3.

- [3] D. Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 2nd. ed. New York: Addison and Wesley, 1979, pp. 246-249.
- [4] M. Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 76.
- [5] V. Petric, *Oneiric Cinema: The Isomorphism of Film and Dreams*, Handout for the course *Oneiric Cinema*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, Spring 1995, pp. 1.
- [6] S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, New York: Avon Books, 1965, pp. xxiii.
- [7] U. Apollonio ed., *Futurist Manifestos*, New York: The Viking Press, 1973, pp. 218.
- [8] S. Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1960, pp. 58.
- [9] R. Stephenson and J. R. Debrix, *The Cinema as Art*, Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1965, pp. 198.
- [10] S. Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1960, pp. 122-123.
- [11] R. Stephenson and J. R. Debrix, *The Cinema as Art*, Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1965, pp. 198.
- [12] E. Weis and J. Belton, *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, pp. 302.
- [13] R. Caccia, ed., *David Lynch*, Pavia, Italy: Il Castoro, 1993, pp. 102-103.