

## Considerations on music and diegesis in the short film *A Casa na Esquina*

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**Abstract.** Music has been a part of cinema for a long time, participating in the creation of meaning in the filmic discourse. This paper gathered concepts of music, film, sound and narrative, in order to draw considerations on the relationship between music and the diegesis in the short film *A Casa na Esquina*. The findings include that elements of the musical discourse pinpointed crucial moments of the film, such as the reveal of the title; and also, that music was used to cross boundaries of the diegesis.

**Keywords.** Film Music, Soundtrack, Diegesis, Narrative.

### Considerações Sobre Música e Diegese no Curta-Metragem *A Casa na Esquina*

**Resumo.** A música tem feito parte do cinema há muito tempo, participando da criação de significados no discurso fílmico. Este artigo agrupa conceitos de música, cinema, som e narrativa para fazer considerações sobre a relação entre música e diegese no curta-metragem *A Casa na Esquina*. Entre os achados estão os elementos musicais que pontuaram momentos cruciais, como o aparecimento do título do filme; e a identificação do uso da música como meio de cruzar as fronteiras da diegese.

**Palavras-chave.** Música de Cinema, Trilha Sonora, Diegese, Narrativa.

## Introduction

In 1895 the Lumière brothers presented an invention to 33 people. A train arriving at the station, workers leaving a factory, trivial images captured from reality by the two brothers were transported into the moving picture that left cinema's first audience impressed (WIERZBICKI, 2009, p. 17). From then on, the audiovisual media the *Cinématographe* prompted has become part of our daily lives.

Narrative film is an art of representation. However, dramatic representation has long existed and bears a lasting partnership with music. Such compromise between the two passed on through the centuries, predating the Greeks, opera, making its way into nineteenth-century forms of entertainment, and lastly cinema (GORBMAN, 1987, p. 33).

Like opera or theater, cinema is a syncretic art. Several elements come into its making: dialogue, acting, lighting, color, cinematography, montage, sound effects, the list goes on. Different arrangements of these create the film, and film music is just another of the puzzled pieces upon which the structure of cinematic narrative is built. Because of its complexity and high cost of production, for a long time, cinema was only viable for production companies.

But audiovisual medium has become more accessible with the popularization of cameras and cellphones. This was crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic, when groups of performative arts had no choice but to adapt their works into this medium in order to stay connected to their audiences. One of those is the group *Trupe dos Pensantes*.

The purpose of this paper is to navigate through basic concepts of film music, sound, cinema and narrative in order to make considerations over the mutual implications established between music and diegesis in *A Casa na Esquina*, short movie produced by the theater group *Trupe dos Pensantes*.

## **Cinema, impression of reality and diegesis**

While addressing the struggles of pictures and the representation of reality, Bazin (2005, p. 12-14) states that photography, compared to painting, possesses an “advantage in virtue” in the “transference of reality” between object and its representation. Its automatic production impresses on the process an objectivity that “confers on it a quality of credibility”. Those qualities are thereby extended to cinema.

In realistic capacity, cinema goes beyond, via its ability of portraying movement. Also, staging such movements in studios can provide to the viewer the experience of “watching events which might have occurred in real life”, as if captured in the time of occurrence (KRACAUER, 1960, p. 33-34).

According to Chion (1994, p. 222), Cinema is an illusion, an “audiovisual contract”, a “symbolic pact to which the audio-spectator agrees when she or he considers the elements of sound and image to be participating in one and the same entity or world”. The “entity” to which he refers can be called “diegesis”.

The term “diegesis” comes from Greek and means “narration”. When introduced into cinema, the concept refers to the film’s “represented instance”, that is, the combination of its denotative elements. Fictional spatiotemporal dimensions, along with scenery, characters, events, and even the narration itself, form the diegesis of the film (METZ, 1991, p. 97-98).

Carrière (1994, p. 38, 53) reminds us that “every filmgoer is in his own way a little Doubting Thomas, believing only what he sees, and seeing what he believes he sees”, meaning that the audience willingly buys into the audiovisual contract. But the filmic experience is so fragile, for all its apparatus, that it can easily fade. “The instant an effect materializes”, unless such interruption composes “the very heart of the film” - its stylistic and narrative approach -, it may draw the spectator away from the narrative.

But, because cinema adds the reality of motion to the image, it can give an “impression of reality” to its diegesis. When watching a film, the spectators experience both their own reality and the reality of the space and time in which they inhabit while the film unfolds before their senses. It is because spectators can devise the two realities that they can choose to enter the “filmic state”, but the reason they are compelled to do so lies on cinema’s impression of reality (METZ, 1991, p. 10-15).

## **Diegesis and music**

The music that is part of the filmic fiction is commonly called “diegetic music”, as its source is located within the diegesis. When music in a segment of film does not stem from the fictional narrative, or is placed outside of the diegesis, and is perceived only by the audience, the term “extra-diegetic music” is applied. Another common name for this is “nondiegetic music”, but “underscore”, “accompanimental music”, and “background music” have also been used (WIERZBICKI, 2009; p. 22-23, 125).

There is still debate on what constitutes film music. Some say it is the music composed to support the film’s narrative as extra-diegetic, while others argue that the term refers to any piece of music that may be part of the film (WIERZBICKI, 2009; p. 216). We will base our approach on the latter, mainly because “the contemporary film soundtrack is likely to contain music both diegetic and extra-diegetic, both original and borrowed, playing “with” the action as well as “against” it” (p. 233).

It is important to notice that, in the filmic discourse, music is the only element that is extensively used in both diegetic and nondiegetic contexts, even crossing from one to the other, rendering a flexibility to the connotative, denotative, structural, dramatic, spatial and temporal functions it can take in a film (GORBMAN, 1987; p. 22).

## Film music's function and meaning

Music has meaning, but it may be difficult to describe. Copland (2011, p. 10-11) asserts that “no appropriate word can be found to express the music’s meaning”. That is because music is expressive, but nonrepresentational.

In contrast to music, which does not represent extra-musical elements, even those it may be composed in reference to, a picture is never fully free from the “world of objects” (ADORNO & EISLER, 2007; p. 47). That representational aspect in image is very important for cinema to convey its impression of reality.

In a narrative film, though, nondiegetic music shares the sonic space with the film’s diegetic acoustic phenomena – sounds that belong to the representation –, which makes it clearer that this music exists “outside” of the narrative (GORBMAN, 1987; p. 41). The existence of nondiegetic music in a diegetic film is not logical (p. 53-54), but still, it remains. How can such diametrically opposites be accepted by audiences in the same product?

A reason for this is that film music, immersed in the plethora of nonmusical elements of a film, is not made to be “closely attended to”, it serves a “utilitarian” purpose. Much like easy-listening music - the one played in a dentist’s office to relax the patient’s anxieties -, that intends “to lull the individual into being an *untroublesome social subject*”, [nondiegetic] film music induces an “*untroublesome viewing subject*”. It works to drown out other sounds and lessen the spectator’s awareness of the filmic technological and narrative articulation, rendering an audience more susceptible to the cinematic illusion. However, because cinema works not only based on relaxation, but also on tension, anticipation and conflict, film music allows a more expressive range than easy-listening music. It “*interprets* the image, pinpoints and channels the “correct” meaning of the narrative events depicted” (GORBMAN, 1987; p. 56-64).

Film music as discourse organizes its meaning around three different levels. First as the pure musical codes in which it is structured, secondly on the cultural codes brought by style, instrumentation and context, and thirdly on the relationships built between the music and the other elements present in the narrative, which Gorbman calls “cinematic musical codes” (GORBMAN, 198; p. 12-13).

On a given scene, music can behave in two ways: *empathetic* or *anempathetic*. Empathetic music participates in the feeling of the situation, and, through elements of rhythm, tone and phrasing, music and diegesis work together to build cultural emotional and narrative codes. Anempathetic music goes a different way. It exhibits an “indifference to the situation”,

having the story unfold despite the juxtaposition with music, which may intensify and not “freeze” the emotion as one might expect (CHION, 1994; p. 8).

The expressive value added by music to the image is obtained mainly through synchronism, which establishes an immediate correlation between them. When an acoustic event meets a visual event in film in a relevant way, we have a “*point of synchronization*, or *synch point*”. These points organize the structure of the narrative in film and conduct its audiovisual flow and phrasing (CHION, 1994; p. 58-59).

Because the audiovisual spectator perceives these synchronized elements as a “*combinatoire of expression*”, meaning will be drawn from their corroboration. Therefore, codified within the context of the film, whatever music placed in a sequence will affect the viewer’s perception of the film, intentionally or not (GORBMAN, 1987; p. 15-16), and its musical codes can interact with diegetic events through synchronization.

## **Tension and relaxation in music**

If cinema works based on tension, relaxation, anticipation and conflict, what in musical discourse can be related to those? Instead of harmonic functions, because not all film music is based on tonal music, we need other musical codes that can be used for a broader range of applications.

In music, we produce complex sounds, which contain a series of frequencies. The frequencies that stem from a fundamental frequency in a given sound are called harmonics. From the relationship between harmonics we derive the harmonic series, which relates to the occidental tempered music system, with its specific notes and intervals (FERNANDES, 2010, p. 50-51).

Drawing considerations from the works of Shoenberg, Helmholtz and Pythagoras, upon the concepts of consonance and dissonance, and using the ratio between fundamental frequencies of different notes, Fernandes (2010, p. 50-52) was able to classify the intervals in traditional music theory (perfect, major, minor, augmented and diminished) on a scale from 0 to 6, according to their degree of dissonance. Such classification is displayed on Table 1.

According to this, we have that the higher the degree of dissonance found on an interval, the more dissonant that interval is. On the opposite direction, the lower the degree of dissonance for an interval, the more consonant it is.

**Table 1 - Degree of dissonance for an interval according to the proportion of its fundamental frequency with that of a root note.**

Degree of dissonance	Interval	Proportion
0	unison	1/1
0	perfect 8 <sup>th</sup>	2/1
1	perfect 5 <sup>th</sup>	3/2
1	perfect 4 <sup>th</sup>	4/3
2	major 3 <sup>rd</sup>	5/4
2	major 6 <sup>th</sup>	5/3
3	minor 3 <sup>rd</sup>	6/5
3	minor 6 <sup>th</sup>	8/5
4	major 2 <sup>nd</sup>	9/8
4	minor 7 <sup>th</sup>	16/9
5	minor 2 <sup>nd</sup>	18/17
5	major 7 <sup>th</sup>	32/17
6	aug. 4 <sup>th</sup> /dim. 5 <sup>th</sup>	41/29

Source: FERNANDES (2010, p.52).

When FERNANDES (2010, p. 52-53) applies consonance and dissonance to the tensive semiotics model by Fontanille and Zilberberg, he arrives at the correlations relaxation-consonance-extent and tension-dissonance-intensity. Therefore, we can use dissonance and consonance to refer to tension and relaxation, respectively, in the musical discourse.

### **The house on the corner**

*A Casa na Esquina* (2022) is a short film produced by *Trupe dos Pensantes*, a theater group based on Crato (CE). Originated in 2012, the group develops and performs plays with political commentary influenced by the works of Brazilian theater practitioner Augusto Boal.

First intended for theater, with rehearsals started in 2019, due to the COVID-19 pandemic the production of *A Casa na Esquina* was interrupted, then later resumed via online meetings to become an audiovisual product.

With a 35-minute run, and a title that translates to “The house on the corner”, the black and white film portrays a solitary unnamed gay character, rummaging through the memories of his childhood as a victim of sexual abuse. The short film is directed by Lorena Lima, and based on the text written by Ailton Jesus, who plays the protagonist, also responsible for music and montage. Cinematography relied on the eyes of Francisco Luiz, ex-member of the group.

## Elements of diegesis and sequences

The diegesis can be delineated by the story of the film. The events are: an unnamed character, packing his luggage in his apartment (space), reflects on the sexual abuse suffered in his childhood, while interacts with family photos, takes unspecified pills, and contemplates suicide. The events happen through the course of an evening (time), and relevant elements of scenery are the family pictures, pictures of hands, pills, water, fridge and an electric piano.

The montage of the film is done in a way to present long shots as being only one shot, maintaining a general synchronicity between diegetic and narrative time. The character is kept in the frame, whether entirely or partially, through most of the film.

The character looks at and talks directly to the handheld camera in several occasions. Even though this crosses the boundary of the diegesis, because it is implemented as a pertaining element of the stylistic approach, it does not interfere in the credibility of the filmic discourse.

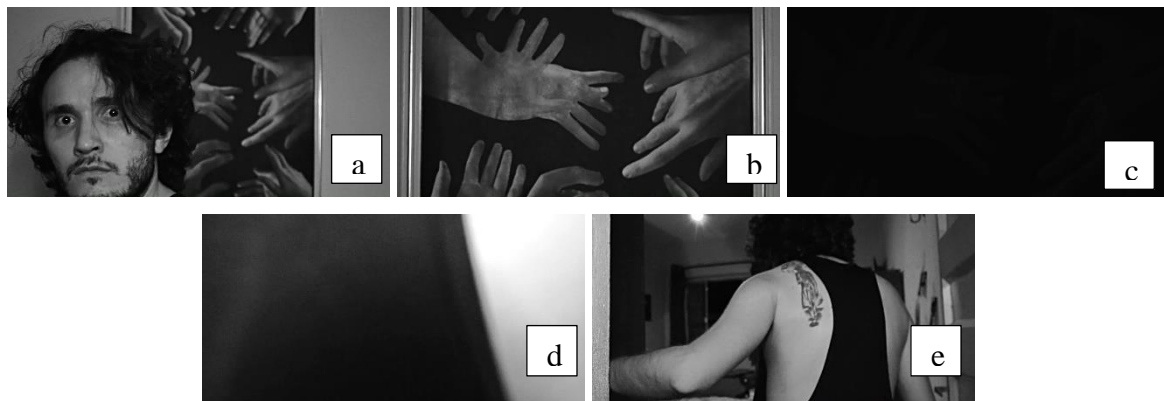
Changes in the diegetic and stylistic elements explicated above present important points in the structure of the filmic discourse. According to those changes, we can organize the film into five sequences.

First, we have the Title Sequence (TS), with the presentation of the group's logo, followed by the title of the film against a black background. When the title dissolves into the sunset shot, there is a clear transition through the montage, indicating the beginning of the Sunset Sequence (SS), which ends with the dark and the transition to a handheld camera movement entering the house. This initiates the Sequence of Act 1 (SA1).

SA1 is the longest of the film. It has several cuts, but they are blended, aided by camera movement and sound, not to disturb the viewer's perception of the diegesis. The end of SA1 happens when the character finishes a dialogue by looking at the camera and slowly leaving the frame for the first time in the film. The camera zooms in towards a picture of a collage of hands and fades to black, another clear intervention of the montage.

The end of SA1 leads to the start of the Sequence of Act 2 (SA2). The camera pulls out from the black at the end of SA1 via a movement initiated with the camera touching the back of the character's shirt (Picture 1). In SA2, the character no longer talks or looks at the camera, keeping himself in the diegesis. When the character stumbles towards the balcony, there is a sharp cut to black, with the sound still present, only dissipating with the reveal of the title, after which the End Credits Sequence (ECS) begins.

**Picture 1 - Transition from SA1 to SA2. Order of frames in the transition: a, b, c, d, e.**



Source: A Casa na Esquina (2022).

### Considerations on the object: the music-image discourse

The first piece, here called “Main Title Theme” is played on the piano over TS and SS, binding them together. It starts at the reveal of the logo of the group, with a descending chromatic scale on the left hand played over an arpeggio in E minor on the right hand. From the moment it starts, several elements converge towards the appearance of the title of the film, as shown in Picture 2.

**Picture 2:** Introduction of the Main Title Theme.



The musical score is for a piano piece in 4/4 time, marked 'Lento'. The right hand plays a descending chromatic scale with slurs and accents, starting with an 'accel.' marking and returning to 'a tempo'. The left hand plays a descending chromatic arpeggio. The piece begins with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic and ends with a fermata.

Source: transcribed by the authors.

Because this introduction is played with a sustain pedal, the descending chromatic scale accumulates minor 2<sup>nd</sup> intervals on top of each other. The last chord of the section, the one upon which the title appears, also uses intervals of high degree of dissonance: the augmented 8<sup>th</sup> E<sup>b</sup>-E (equivalent to a minor 2<sup>nd</sup>), the augmented 4<sup>th</sup> C-F<sup>#</sup>, and the major 2<sup>nd</sup> E-F<sup>#</sup>. Added to those, the chord is the apex of a *crescendo*; marks the return of the tempo after the *accelerando*; and the chord is held by a *fermata*. The combination of these elements creates



great tension around the title and sets the tone for the entire film, indicating caution for the events to come.

Throughout the piece, the arpeggiated pattern on the right hand is maintained, as the left hand performs descending scales. Here, we can point out the correlation between the descending pattern of the sunset and the bass line in the music<sup>1</sup>. The title theme leaks out into the next sequence, by leaving the piece unresolved to its tonal center in E minor, as shown in Picture 3, leading not simply to the end of SS, but to the start of SA1.

**Picture 3 - Last bars of the Main Title Theme.**



Source: transcribed by the authors.

The second piece of music is part of SA1 and is played on strings. Right after introducing the character, by the end of the sentence “[...] Because I forgot to lose myself in the stories they told me about the pictures,<sup>2</sup>”, the character gives the very first look at the camera and concludes: “about me”. That is when the second piece enters, in nondiegetic fashion. This piece is built upon a rhythmic bass motif, on the minor 2<sup>nd</sup> B-C interval, keeping an arpeggio on E minor for the violin voice in *pizzicato*.

The rhythmic bass, the dissonant intervals (dim. 5<sup>th</sup>, major 9<sup>th</sup>, minor 7<sup>th</sup>) between cello and viola, the violin arpeggio generally starting on the thesis beat, and the ternary time signature (Picture 4) convey a restlessness to the listener. As the music plays in the background, the character proceeds to close all doors and windows of the apartment, isolating himself from the outside. The music here takes an empathetic approach. Its uneasiness projects anxiety onto the image, already populated by the movements of camera and character.

<sup>1</sup> We are not saying that the descending scale on the left hand represents the sunset, but merely correlating visual and sound patterns present in the filmic discourse.

<sup>2</sup> Our translation.

Picture 4 - First measures of the piece played along the closing of doors and windows, rhythmic bass motif and dissonances.



The image displays a musical score for four instruments: Violin, Viola, Cello, and Counterbass. The score is in 3/8 time with a tempo of 180. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The Violin part starts with a pizzicato (pizz.) section followed by arco. The Viola and Cello parts are primarily arco. The Counterbass part is primarily pizzicato. Red boxes highlight specific dissonances: a flat note in the Viola and Cello staves, a major 9th interval between the Viola and Cello, a bass motif in the Counterbass, and a minor 7th interval between the Viola and Cello. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 180.

Source: transcribed by the authors.

There does not seem to be any synchronic events between the music and the action, except for the start and the end of the piece, the latter coinciding with the closing of the last door. This provides the energy for the scene without emulating a choreography that could alert the viewer to the fictional nature and technical apparatus of the film.

By introducing nondiegetic music along with the first time the character talks to the camera, the film signals that this escape from the diegesis is an important element in the narrative, helping the audience accept it as part of the filmic discourse.

Still in SA1 we have another musical piece. Alerted by the doorbell that his aunt is at the door, the protagonist isolates himself in his bedroom to avoid the awkward encounter. After

reopening the bedroom's door, he realizes there was no one, he is alone. The strings start to play and all the diegetic sounds are muted.

The choreography that follows is mainly based on hand movements. After all, the first important object introduced in the film is the picture of a hand. A second similar picture is faced by the character as he gives his opening monologue, right before turning his eyes to the camera. Through the course of the movie, several of those pictures are presented and interacted with. Because of the importance given to them, and the character using the word “touch” to refer to the abuse, the hands (Picture 5) pose as symbols of the abuse.

**Picture 5 - Presence of hands on set design as a symbol of abuse.**



Source: A casa na esquina (2022).

The “Dance” piece is organized over a bass motif, and a theme (Picture 6) played by the viola and mainly developed by the violins. Each section shows variations on the theme and tends to end in tension and relaxation that can be perceived as traditional harmonic cadences. The section changes are also marked by variations in bow technique and change of register. Different from the previous musical pieces, though, Dance does not have an arpeggiated E minor or any other arpeggios. One should ask why a prominent element would be missing in this piece. A possible answer is the distance this scene takes from the diegesis.

“Dance” does not have a source within the diegesis, so it is not diegetic music. The character interacts with the music; therefore, it cannot be nondiegetic. To categorize this moment of the film, we need to borrow from Genette (1969, p. 202) the term “metadiegetic”, which refers to a “secondary level of narration”, that is, another diegesis.

Picture 6 - First measures of “Dance”, theme and bass motif.

Violin 2  
Viola  
Cello

**A**  
♩ = 76

**B**

pizz.  
**Bass motif**

11  
Vln2. **theme**  
Vla. pizz.  
Cel.

Source: transcribed by the authors.

Other elements corroborate with this hypothesis. All the diegetic sounds have vanished during the character’s performance, and that separates him from the diegesis. This scene does not fit with the other narrative elements we had so far, there had been no indication to prepare for such performance. The music and the performance create within the diegesis a space for the memory of the abuse the character endured. It is, of course, music the element to navigate this transition between two levels of narration since, as previously noted, it possesses a much greater freedom in that respect.

In Picture 7, the ending of this piece shows a cadence from the dominant to the tonic. With the music well resolved, the metadiegetic level is ended and the character returns to the diegesis established.

Picture 7 - Last bars of “Dance” and its end cadence.

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Vln1. spiccato B7/D# arco  
Em

Vln2. spiccato arco

Vla. Spiccato arco

Cel. arco

Source: transcribed by the authors.

The next piece is in SA2. The character plays this on the piano, placing it as the only diegetic music in the film. Section A of the piece is in the key of G major; section B is in E minor, reinstating the arpeggio, chromatic elements and descending scales from previous pieces; and, section C is also in G major. After section C, the “Piano piece”, goes to back to section B’, with minor alterations over section B, and ends the piece unresolved (Picture 8).

**Picture 8 - Section B’ of the “Piano piece” performed by the protagonist.**



Source: transcribed by the authors.

The fact that this piece is introduced as the only diegetic piece, and that it starts in a different key, signals that something has changed. Many of the times the character speaks to the audience, he would say “I can’t feel<sup>3</sup>”, alluding a detachment of the protagonist from his emotions mirrored by his detachment to the diegesis. The fact that, after playing this piece in SA2, he does not talk to the audience anymore, may indicate his connecting with his feelings. After all, he displays anger and also cries towards the end of the sequence. Gorbman (1987, p. 5) says that music bathes the listener in affect. In this case, it may also bathe the character.

We have been shown the character’s detachment, pain, and his mentions of death. After crying in the bathroom, the intoxicated protagonist threads to the balcony and, because of a sharp cut in the montage, we do not know what happens next. However, the sound of his breathing and the progressive increase of the diegetic sound’s volume indicate that something will happen.

<sup>3</sup> Our translation.

An altered section A (section A', Picture 9) of this piece is used for the End Credits sequence, with not just the names of the people involved in the project, but also the pictures of the hands. This piece is also left unresolved. This unresolvedness is a recurring theme in the narrative of the film, and it makes sense that it would be structurally important for the music.

**Picture 9 - Last bars of Section A' of the Piano piece.**



Source: transcribed by the authors.

## Final thoughts

On this work, we discussed concepts that correlated two art forms: music and cinema. We were able to identify patterns, and the diversion of these patterns, among different film music pieces present in the short film *A Casa na Esquina*. We also classified pieces as diegetic and nondiegetic, and identified the use of music to cross the boundaries of different levels of the narrative.

For the Dance and Piano piece, we did not focus on their immediate relationship between musical codes and visual codes because their presence in the film as a whole, and how they relate to the diegetic instance of the filmic discourse, posed a more important task. However, the purpose of this paper is not to exhaust the discussions regarding film music, not even the discussions related to the short movie in question, but to talk over general ideas of its workings.

Because we are discussing meaning, it is preemptive to consider semiotics and cultural aspects that may influence the audience's perception of the music in the narrative. Since this is an ongoing research, and the considerations pertaining film music and diegesis alone have already shown themselves to be quite demanding, those shall be kept as a north for other investigations in the future.

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