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Thinking diegetically

Spatiotemporal principles and mimetic rhetorical functions in videographic criticism

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Abstract

In the process of thinking diegetically, the videographic practitioner is guided by the diegetic (story world) logic of the films or media works under scrutiny. As opposed to videographic approaches that extract audiovisual segments from a narrative and spatiotemporal logic, this form of videographic work engages with the constraints of the source materials' diegetic tethers to (re)construct a story world in meaningful and productive ways. This essay seeks to explore the ramifications of such diegetic argumentation through an analysis of several videographic works: the author's "Imagining Orphée | Orphée imaginé" (Oyallon-Koloski 2023), Catherine Grant's "Fated to be Mated: An Architectural Promenade" (2018), Dayna McLeod's "Speculative Queer Autoethnography: *Desert Hearts*" (2023), and Liz Greene's "Spencer Bell, Nobody Knows My Name" (2022). These examples embrace the intrinsic form of their source material's diegesis, prioritize the rhetorical impact of spatiotemporal construction, and deliberately balance the pulls between original and videographic diegetic logic through the application of precise videographic techniques. Video essayists use the formal,

performative, and nonverbal options afforded by centering diegetic principles in powerful ways to shape their rhetoric.

Keywords: videographic criticism, film narration, spatiotemporal functions, rhetoric, film form

Introduction

Do video essays have a diegesis, that is, a coherent story world that shapes their narrative and rhetorical organization? I often put this question to the students in my videographic criticism course to get them thinking about how principles from filmmaking can translate to their own academic and creative process. Many methods used in the academic filmmaking practice of videographic criticism come from film studies (history, theory, criticism) and other humanistic disciplines. Because of the practice-led nature of this scholarship's audiovisual form, methods from film and video production are also inherent to the work, the application of editing principles in particular. From a practice standpoint what does it mean, then, to be guided by the diegetic, or spatiotemporally grounded, logic of the films or media works under scrutiny? This is often a significant starting point for videographic work, as Jason Mittell articulates (2019, 226), but certain modes of videographic scholarship deliberately extract the material from its original diegetic logic. We can observe this in Mittell's own videographic deformations of *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952), where the goal is to "break" the film according to various formal parameters by intentionally distancing the work from its original narrative and spatiotemporal realms (2021). These videographic methods can emphasize non-diegetic or non-narrative elements to create powerful arguments, elements like authoritative voiceovers (Keathley 2011, 180), text-and-image relationships (Keathley, Mittell, and Grant 2019), multiscreen and supercut approaches (Groo 2012), parametric constraints (O'Leary 2021, Mittell 2021), or artefact-driven and presentational modes (Lee and Avissar 2023, Kiss 2021). Other video essays engage with the constraints of the source materials' diegetic tethers to (re)construct a story world in meaningful and productive ways. In "Spencer Bell, Nobody Knows My Name," for example, Liz Greene re-edits an adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* to center a marginalized character and the actor who plays him, altering the

story to correct an omission in histories of film. This piece answers the question that opens this essay with a resounding "yes!" Within such a mode of material thinking (Grant 2014), diegetic logic anchors the creative thought process.

This essay seeks to explore the ramifications of such diegetic argumentation through an analysis of several videographic works that embrace the intrinsic form of their source material's diegesis, prioritize the rhetorical impact of spatiotemporal construction, and deliberately balance the pulls between original and videographic diegetic logic through the application of precise videographic techniques. This idea connects to a larger topic of videographic narration and how videographic practitioners, like filmmakers, have used narrative modes to structure their work and construct videographic characters or narrators as we can see in pieces like Chloé Galibert-Laîné's "Watching *The Pain of Others*" (2019), Jason Mittell's "*Adaptation*'s Anomalies" (2016), or Kevin B. Lee's "Talking with Siri About Spike Jonze's *Her*" (2014). These pieces often incorporate extensive original audiovisual footage (voiceovers, video, performances, and screen captures) to reshape the existing material. In contrast, I am particularly interested here in works, like Catherine Grant's "Fated to be Mated: An Architectural Promenade" (2018), Dayna McLeod's "Speculative Queer Autoethnography: *Desert Hearts*" (2023), and Liz Greene's "Spencer Bell, Nobody Knows My Name" (2022), that willingly allow themselves to be restricted by the source material's diegetic form, resulting in limited videographic interventions. Notably, as we learn from the videos themselves and the written statements accompanying them, the material output of these video essays is often impacted by the original work's resistance to a diegetic restructuring, revealing insights about the film as well as the videographic practitioner's process.

Spatiotemporal principles

In narrative filmmaking, the "diegesis" refers to an intrinsically coherent story world that shapes the media object's spatiotemporal logic through the deliberate selection of images and sounds. In thinking about this diegetic construction, we may first focus on the unfolding of the narrative and the differences between plot (syuzhet) and story (fabula). Whereas the story encompasses the "action as a chronological cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within

a given duration and a spatial field," plot refers to the actual presentation and arrangement of those actions (Bordwell 1985, 49–50). While these formal narrative choices are predominantly dramaturgical, we must also not ignore the more technical side of this storytelling process. Film narration unfolds through temporal and spatial construction; videographic works that take advantage of this diegetic mode tend to selectively alter a few spatiotemporal elements of the chosen source material while keeping the remaining diegetic tethers in place.

A film's diegetic logic arises from the control of plot, story, and screen time through the ordering, duration, and frequency of events and from the construction of "scenographic" spaces: within the shot, through editing, and in sound design (Bordwell 1985, 113). Whereas position or perspective is often a central concern in an analysis of film narration and space (Morgan 2021), an emphasis on spatial construction is central to the argumentative rigor of these videographic forms. Viewers make sense of a film's story and diegesis through a parsing of the gaps in the plot, and these absences are precisely what mobilizes this videographic process. David Bordwell discusses gaps in relation to the absence of explicit story information that the viewer must intuit from cues in the film (1985, 100), but videographic creators use this idea of gaps in a much more practical and material way, taking advantage of elements like characters' off-screen presence (essential for the construction of shot/reverse shot editing patterns), negative space, and silence, to rework a film's diegetic logic.

Sometimes videographic practitioners apply this practice to rethink the intrinsic patterns of a single film, drawing attention to the choices made in the original work and to the new meanings created by this alternate diegetic (in)coherence. In other instances, bringing together material from multiple sources allows the academic filmmaker to work stylistically, ethnographically, speculatively, or counterfactually through the extrinsic juxtaposition of diegetic approaches combined with historical or embodied context. Formal systems cue the film audience to construct a coherent story, but they also constrain and cut off meanings to reinforce a specific narrative comprehension (Bordwell 1985, 49). Videographic practitioners accordingly break these spatiotemporal rules to alter or re-introduce meaning into these audiovisual texts.

Mimetic rhetorical functions

In considering the persuasiveness of videographic criticism's rhetoric we can see how the nonverbal, performative aspects often outpace any written (or spoken) accompaniments (Grant 2016). While some modes of narration emphasize a telling, mimetic forms of narration emphasize a showing, with early Aristotelian conceptions of *mimesis* translating roughly to "the imitation of animate beings . . . by the body and the voice" (Bordwell 1985, 3–4). As with Christian Keathley's distinction between explanatory and poetic forms of videographic criticism (Keathley 2011, 181), most narrative forms draw on both modes of telling and showing. Videographic scholar-practitioners employing mimetic, or imitative, narrative techniques mobilize the rhetorical advantages of diegetic manipulation to reveal important knowledge about their objects of study.

One strength of diegetically-focused videographic arguments is the power that derives from re-orienting the viewer in relation to the original source material through an altering of the film's spatiotemporal logic. Adopting the idea of a diegetic coherence through the application of (new) diegetic rules can provide a rhetorical persuasiveness through a narrative-driven logical cohesion. When it comes to creating a coherent flow of action, time, and space across shots, no other system is more widely used by editors to ensure narrative clarity than continuity editing, used in conjunction with the application of these principles to the filming of the action and stemming from the work of earlier avant-garde filmmaking practices such as Soviet Montage or Maya Deren's experimental cinema. Creating a continuity of movement, screen direction, and eye-lines across cuts is possible through an adherence to a consistent axis of action and a selective placement of camera set-ups, and videographic practitioners take advantage of this spatial segmentation. Significantly, however, cues from the film's form aid in the viewer's understanding of spatial representation, and enough of those cues must carry over for videographic works to convey an argumentative plausibility.

I use continuity principles in "Imagining Orphée | Orphée imaginé," to impose a diegetic logic that connects Jacques Demy's *Parking* (1985), an adaptation of the Orpheus myth, with shots from Jean-Luc Godard's *Détective* (1985) to counterfactually analyze Demy's casting choices (Oyallon-Koloski 2023). I wanted to envision a

version of *Parking* with an alternate actor, knowing that Demy had expressed interest in casting Johnny Hallyday as Orpheus in his film. Hallyday appears instead in *Détéctive*, and the film serves as a historical record of the actor on screen during the same period. However, the lack of appropriate gaps in *Parking* and *Détéctive* did not allow me to easily change the romantic pairings in Demy's film, as the filmmaker frequently shows his couples with depth staging and in two-shots. Demy shoots key scenes between Orpheus (Francis Huster) and Persephone (Marie-France Pisier), by contrast, in a shot/reverse shot pattern, making it possible to insert shots of Hallyday from *Détéctive*. The juxtaposition is convincing, however, because of the films' diegetic compatibility. Tighter framings on the actors' eye-lines into the off-screen space match up, Demy conveniently stages a waiter to block Huster's body as Pisier delivers one of her lines, and both scenes are set in Parisian cafés with similar décor (figures 1 and 2). Diegetic continuity of eye-line matches and correspondences of the mise-en-scène help to strengthen the plausibility of inserting a new performer in this counterfactual experiment, and the result draws attention to Demy's inclusion of Persephone's power ambitions in his adaptation of Orpheus' story.

Figure 1: A shot of Marie-France Pisier as Persephone in Jacques Demy's *Parking* shows her looking off-screen left as she speaks to a character (Orpheus) who I "re-cast" as Johnny Hallyday "Imagining Orphée | Orphée imaginé."

Figure 2: I juxtapose the image in Figure 1 with this shot of Johnny Hallyday in Jean-Luc Godard's *Détective* to imagine him as the main character (Orpheus) in Demy's film. Hallyday's gaze off-screen right matches Pisier's eye-line in the set-up from *Parking*.

The rhetorical value of altering a film's diegesis to create a shift of perspective is particularly visible in queer videographic arguments. Using divergent videographic techniques, Catherine Grant in "Fated to be Mated: An Architectural Promenade" and Dayna McLeod in "Speculative Queer Autoethnography: *Desert Hearts*" rework the diegesis of a single film to highlight its intrinsic formal design and emphasize the material's queer resonances. Grant describes "Fated to be Mated" as a queer remix that defamiliarizes the existing heterosexual romance between Cyd Charisse's and Fred Astaire's characters (Grant 2018). Through a multi-screen approach, Grant fractures the diegesis of a duet from *Silk Stockings* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1957). to make us rethink the relationship portrayed on screen (figure 3). Through a division of the sequence's single shot into two segments and a manipulation of their size, Grant changes the diegesis' spatial coherence, an act she describes as a "queer experiment in cinephilic re-spatialisation" (Grant 2018). Side-by-side screens in videographic works more often create a sense of simultaneity than of spatial contiguity, but Grant's piece evokes a dual register of both spatial correspondence – through the clear passage of characters across the screens – and spatial separation – through the act of segmentation and the negative space that separates the two

halves of the original composition. This choice to break *Silk Stocking*'s spatiotemporal logic parallels the musical genre's tendency to generate a plurality of diegetic spaces through the inclusion of heightened musical numbers. In addition to the multi-screen spatial adjustment, Grant slows down the danced sequence and replaces the soundtrack. These changes also draw greater attention to how the characters in *Silk Stockings* fill – or don't fill – the diegetic space. As Grant notes in the video essay's accompanying text, the number's choreography emphasizes a frontal facing and a greater use of lateral staging which draws attention to the egalitarian nature of the characters' relationship. Beyond this, the inclusion of negative space around the frame(s) makes the unactivated space within the frame even more apparent, despite the frequent horizontality of the dancers' movements. Grant's focus on re-spatialization presents this early CinemaScope film through a multiscreen intervention that turns the shot into two side-by-side frames that are more reminiscent of the 1:1.37 academy ratio than the 1:2.35 CinemaScope one. Hermes Pan, one of *Silk Stockings*' choreographers, was vocally resistant to the formal impositions of the widescreen aspect ratio (Franceschina 2012, 224), and "Fated to be Mated: An

Figure 3: In "Fated to be Mated," Catherine Grant uses multi-screen techniques to alter the spatial diegetic logic of *Silk Stockings*.

Architectural Promenade" becomes a playful diegetic parallel to an earlier number in the film, "Stereophonic Sound," that mocks the excess of diegetic space.

Using visual overlays in addition to multi-screen compositions, Dayna McLeod addresses this idea of shifting perspectives through diegetic manipulation in her videographic work on Donna Deitch's film *Desert Hearts* (1985). By adding a literal "talking head" recording of herself as a layer over the faces of the film's key characters in "Speculative Queer Autoethnography: *Desert Hearts*," McLeod materially imposes her point of view on those characters through her videographic intervention to challenge the original film's representation of lesbian desire and aging women (McLeod 2023). Her voiceover commentary carries over the shots, creating a unifying sonic space, while the video of her talking moves through the videographic space, at times filling the frame, at times side-by-side with the footage of *Desert Hearts*, and most often in an oval matte overlaying the faces of *Desert Heart*'s multiple female characters (figure 4). McLeod's shifting spatial relationship to the film parallels her autoethnographic analysis as she investigates her thoughts about

Figure 4: In "Speculative Queer Autoethnography: *Desert Hearts*," Dayna McLeod superimposes a talking head of herself over *Desert Hearts* to simultaneously engage critically and performatively with the film's characters.

the characters in the film while also enhancing the intentionally lighthearted tone of the piece. Her talking head overlays match the diegetic placement and relative size of characters in the frame, resizing as their depth position changes and moving with them as they travel. In contrast, McLeod maintains a frontal facing in her talking head recording even as the characters behind her rotate or are faced away from the camera and keeps the sharp edge of the matte visible, both incorporating herself into the source material's diegesis and maintaining a critical distance. As part of her voiceover commentary, she also emphasizes how *Desert Hearts*' narrative choices impacted the construction of an earlier videographic piece on the film, "s/mother love/r" (2022), where discoveries about the diegetic characters' ages shifted her attention to consider how female aging is represented in the film.

In addition to its stylistic, autoethographic, queer, and speculative affordances, this practice has methodological value to counterfactual historical approaches. This work can open onto what Katherine Groo describes as "the possibility of new film histories and historiographic futures" (Groo 2012). Liz Greene uses the power of diegetic unmaking in "Spencer Bell, Nobody Knows My Name" (Greene 2022) to re-center attention on Black actor Spencer Bell, who plays the Cowardly Lion in the 1925 film *The Wizard of Oz* (Larry Semon). As Greene's historical analysis demonstrates, Bell was denied the respect his craft deserved during his Hollywood career because of his race, and they break the film's diegetic order and duration as a formal parallel to their condemnation of these institutional and cultural failures. "Spencer Bell" alters the 1925 film's spatiotemporal logic by running the footage in reverse and including only the moments with Bell on-screen. The film's feature-length duration reduces to merely twelve minutes of plot time, comprised of 54 sequences. Greene emphasizes how these videographic interventions impact the narrative, arguing in their research statement that these changes "allowed me to tell the story of the film differently, to disrupt the narrative, to offer instead a radical oppositional text" (Greene 2022), with their voiceover in the video essay frequently emphasizing the new narrative imposed by these editing decisions. Greene reverses the sound of the music as well but includes it as a single segment on the soundtrack under the voiceover, creating a new unifying sonic space that connects the oppositional

diegetic logic that emerges from the reversed and extracted images. In this diegetic logic, Bell's centrality becomes more important to the intrinsic logic than a spatial sense of continuity through maintained eye-line matches or screen direction. Significantly, observing the formal composition of the 1925 film changed Greene's research project, as they discuss in their creator's statement, moving the work away from *The Wizard of Oz* and its adaptations to instead focus on Spencer Bell's marginalized presence. In connecting a diegetic spatiotemporal logic with both spoken and shown rhetorical strategies, Greene's work demonstrates the counterfactual power of mimetic narration in videographic criticism. Their explanatory voiceover explicitly lays out the problematic racial representations present in Bell's character and historicizes the origins of such racist portrayals of African American performers. However, through a temporal reversal of the film's diegesis, which simultaneously draws the viewer's attention to the film's choices and undermines their original intent, Greene works to resist the potential of re-presenting those hurtful stereotypes.

Conclusion

Videographic scholars are aware of the argumentative strengths of mimetic narrative principles and often draw upon these established formal techniques to guide viewer attention and shape their audiovisual material. This more audiovisual way of thinking, as Ben Spatz theorizes, cannot and should not replace the "writing way of thinking" or a continued understanding of the embodied practices that precede either (Spatz 2018, 151–152), and academic filmmakers are keenly aware of the advantages of both modes. In attempting this exercise of thinking diegetically, the videographic practitioner analyzes the intrinsic norms of the diegeses in question through a practice-led analytical process, and the ability to create plausible diegetic correspondences communicates much about the material's stylistic and narrative compatibility, or lack thereof. Studying the rhetorical potential of diegetic principles in videographic criticism reminds us that the audiovisual elements under scrutiny are always formally "speaking" for themselves, in addition to the argumentative and aesthetic frames imposed by the video essayist. As Christian Keathley argues, "the incorporation of images into the explanatory text—especially moving images and sounds—demands an

acknowledgement that such images, themselves quite mysterious and poetic, do not always willingly subordinate themselves to the critical language that would seek to control them" (Keathley 2011, 190). Harnessing the spatiotemporal logic of these images and sounds is one way of connecting the divergent communication modes of the source material and the resulting videographic creation. Using both intrinsic and extrinsic combinations of audiovisual materials, video essayists use the formal, performative, and nonverbal options afforded by thinking diegetically in powerful ways to shape their rhetoric.

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