Rethinking the Diegetic/Nondiegetic Distinction in the Film Musical

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The concept of the “diegetic number” has become as central to scholarship on film musicals as “diegetic music” is to other genres of film. In connection with musicals on stage and screen, a “number” refers to music and/or dancing that is either performed or imagined by named fictional characters. Classifications of diegetic status typically apply to the entirety of the audiovisual display, including not only on-screen performances of singing and dancing but also any instrumental accompaniment, whether or not it is shown on-screen. Admittedly, some scholars endorse disjunctive conclusions with respect to numbers that pair realistic singing and dancing with an instrumental accompaniment that lacks a plausible fictional source. But given the highly coordinated nature of the components of such numbers, it makes little sense to reach different conclusions about their diegetic status.

In The Band Wagon (1953), a musical about putting on a Broadway show, the numbers commonly classified as “diegetic” include rehearsals for and performances of this fictional show, characters’ performances in other shows, and the cast’s post-show singalong. Such numbers are generally contrasted with instances of singing and dancing that do not take place in realistic performance contexts (such as when one is alighting from a train, getting a shoe-shine, or taking a stroll through Central Park) and which are not explicitly acknowledged as instances of singing and dancing by the fictional characters. Such numbers are sometimes referred to as

2 The so-called diegetic numbers include “Oedipus rex,” “The Beggar’s Waltz,” “You and the Night and the Music,” “I Love Louisa,” “New Sun in the Sky,” “I Guess I’ll Have to Change My Plan,” “Louisiana Hayride,” “Triplets,” and “Girl Hunt Ballet.” The other numbers are “By Myself” (and reprise), “A Shine on Your Shoes,” “That’s Entertainment” (and reprise), and “Dancing in the Dark.”
“nondiegetic,” though there is less consensus on the most appropriate antithesis to “diegetic” in this context.³

This paper exposes problems with the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction as a means of describing film-musical numbers. After tracing the use of these terms from Plato to present-day cinema studies, I identify a divergence of meaning between scholarship on film musicals and that directed towards nonmusical films. Film-musical scholars’ idiosyncratic use of these terms not only poses obstacles to effective scholarly dialogues across film genres but also leads to logical problems when the standard criteria for diegetic status are combined with the realism criterion presupposed by most scholars of film musicals. As an alternative means of describing differences between film-musical numbers, I propose two scalar concepts, one tracking the number’s level of realism, the other its degree of formality.

The Diegesis and Realism

The term diegesis originates in Plato’s attempts to distinguish between two primary modes of storytelling.⁴ Its antithesis, mimesis (“imitation” in most translations), refers to the kind of storytelling one finds in the theater: actors portraying fictional characters by representing, by means of imitation, the characters’ speech and bodily comportment. By contrast, diegesis (“narration”) involves a single storyteller who makes no attempt to imitate the speech or actions of the dramatis personae. As an example of pure diegesis, Plato cites the choral hymns

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(dithyramb) associated with the cult of Dionysus. Epic poetry’s reliance on directly quoted speech placed it in a third, mixed category for Plato.

Flash forward to the mid-twentieth-century, French philosopher and film critic Étienne Souriau brought the term diegésis into the emerging scholarly discourse on cinema. Unfortunately, the term is all that he brought. Souriau uses diégèse to distinguish between the profilmic events the camera captured and what these images represent in the fictional world of the film. He defines diégèse as “all that is intelligible within the narrative, in the world implied or suggested in the fiction of a film” and diégétique as “any event concerning the characters of a story which involves them in a change of position within the space contained in the narrative.”

Far from referring to a mode of storytelling, Souriau’s term diégèse refers to both the totality of fictional events and the fictional world in which those events take place.

The differences between Plato’s and Souriau’s use of the term is captured in French by the distinction between diégésis (Plato’s meaning: a purely narrative mode of storytelling) and diégèse (Souriau’s: the fictional story and story-world). The English language is impoverished, by comparison, in possessing only one word to refer to these two concepts, a situation that has caused some confusion, even among experts in narratology and its impressive assortment of jargon. In light of Souriau’s lack of interest in Plato’s meaning, and the Greek term’s ponderous indigestibility (to echo a quip from Jean Mitry), one might wish that he had chosen a different

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term entirely. Particularly in English-language discourse, I believe that clarity would be better served by substituting phrases like “fictional world” or “totality of facts about the story.” Yet, having withstood half a century of use and numerous critiques, the complete displacement of the term *diegesis* from the scholarly discourse on cinema seems as unlikely as its incorporation into the nonscholarly discourse on any subject.

From French film theory, *diégèse* entered literary narratology through the work of Gérard Genette. In “Discours du récit,” Genette follows Souriau’s two-fold meaning as both the contents of the story and the story-world. However, in his later *Palimpsestes* and *Nouveau discours du récit*, Genette denies the former sense, claiming that Souriau intended *diégèse* to refer to a fictional “universe rather than a train of events (a story).” Regardless of whether Genette accurately represents Souriau’s intentions with regard to the meaning of *diégèse*, Genette’s intention for it to refer to a world rather than a story proved influential on subsequent film theory, particularly in its examination of the role of sound and music.

Although Claudia Gorbman’s *Unheard Melodies* (1987) has done much to place the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction at the center of discussions of film music, she was not the first person to apply these concepts to film sound. The first edition of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s popular textbook *Film Art* (1979) contains the following definitions: “If the source of a sound is a character or object in the story space of the film, we call the sound *diegetic*. The voices of the characters, sounds made by objects in the story, or music coming from instruments

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in the story space are all diegetic sound. On the other hand, there is non-diegetic sound, which does not come from a source in the story space.”10 Bordwell and Thompson follow Genette’s subsequent understanding of diégèse, defining diegetic music as music that spectators are invited to imagine as making up part of the fictional world. Since the music’s source can be either on- or off-screen, the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction does not precisely map onto the industry terms “source music” and “background scoring,” which track whether the performers appear on-screen for the purpose of determining their rate of pay.11

Somewhere in the development of the scholarly discourse on film sound and music, the diegetic became synonymous with the realistic. Most explicit on this score is David Neumeyer, who introduces the concept of diegetic sound via Christian Metz’s concept of “spatial anchoring,” which Neumeyer defines as “the degree to which a recorded sound is ‘attached’ to its object—in effect a measure of its ‘diegetic-ness’ or its ‘realism.’”12 In his ensuing analysis of Casablanca (1942), Neumeyer reasons that “diegetic [music] must be ‘realistic’ . . . how can we be convinced that the [characters] hear it otherwise?”13

Neumeyer’s assumption that the fictional worlds of films are governed by the same acoustic laws and social conventions as our world is unproblematic in the case of Casablanca.

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11 Bordwell and Thompson, Film Art, 200. On the difference between the diegetic/nondiegetic and source/background distinctions, refer to James Buhler, “Analytical and Interpretive Approaches to Film Music (II): Analysing Interactions of Music and Film,” in Film Music: Critical Approaches, ed. K. J. Donnelly (New York: Continuum, 2001), 40.


However, applying such an assumption to many film musicals leads to a variety of contradictions, particularly when Neumeyer’s realism criterion is combined with Souriau’s definition of the diegetic as contents of the audiovisual display that represent contents of or occurrences in the fictional world.

The precise ways in which film musicals depart from the norms and conventions of our world depend on the musical in question. Several commonplace fantastical qualities of film musicals arise in Neumeyer’s attempts to determine the diegetic status of “The Trolley Song” from *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944):

Although [Esther] and her several friends move throughout the trolley in the course of the number, the sound is remarkably consistent with that of a person standing in front of a stationary microphone with a chorus behind her. And what do we make of the orchestra? Is it diegetic? No physical space can reasonably be imagined for the orchestra members to occupy (the sidewalk? another trolley following behind?) Is the orchestra non-diegetic? If so, then the singing cannot be diegetic, since it is utterly implausible that a large group of persons would all be singing to an imaginary orchestra.  

Since the audio recording of film-musical numbers is typically conducted prior to the filming of the visuals, the acoustic properties of the recording may bear little relation to the acoustics of the fictional space or the configuration of the characters. And, as Neumeyer observes, characters in musicals often sing and dance to accompaniment with no plausible fictional source. Furthermore, singing and dancing often take place in unrealistic situations. Aside from the phenomenon of flash-mobs, people in our world do not tend to spontaneously...

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burst into song while taking public transit. Even backstage or show musicals like *The Band Wagon* typically contain numbers that do not take place on stage or in rehearsal (*Cabaret* [1972] is exceptional in this regard). In their capacities for expression through song and dance, characters in musicals—whether professional performers, prospective nuns, cowboys, or gang members—vastly exceed average levels of human capability in our world. Musicals like *The Band Wagon* naturalize the extraordinary performances of Cyd Charisse and Fred Astaire by casting them as professional performers. Nevertheless, their spontaneous improvisation of exquisitely choreographed song-and-dance numbers strain plausibility.

The fantastical character of film musicals may also extend to their visual components. As Robynn Stilwell has remarked, “the visuals of your basic Busby Berkeley extravaganza are far more ‘nondiegetic’ than the music.” Most numbers are framed as performances of or rehearsals for a Broadway show, beginning with shots of an orchestra, conductor, audience, and proscenium arch, but quickly cut to a space far more expansive than the one shown in these framing shots, including improbable mise-en-scène (e.g., “By a Waterfall” from *Footlight Parade* [1933] contains a giant swimming pool and a half dozen waterslides), where effects that could never be realized in a live performance take place, such as instantaneous changes of setting or costume (e.g., “I Only Have Eyes for You” [Reprise] from *Dames* [1934]) and reverse-motion shots (e.g., “The Words Are in My Heart” from *Gold Diggers of 1935*).

Observing the different conventions governing film musicals in contrast to most other genres of film, some scholars have concluded that the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction is

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16 For more on the backstage or show musical, refer to Altman, *American Film Musical*, chap. 7.
inapplicable to this genre.\textsuperscript{18} Such statements occur primarily in the context of studies focusing on nonmusical films, however. By and large, scholars specializing in the film musical disagree.

Jane Feuer, departing from most other film-musical scholars, understands diegetic numbers as those that are integral to the plot of the film. Regarding \textit{Everyone Says I Love You} (1996), she remarks: “You can’t exactly take the numbers away—they are diegetic.”\textsuperscript{19} The fact that they do not represent realistic behavior is not troubling for Feuer. In fact, she implies that diegetic numbers typically occur outside of realistic performance contexts and often take on fantastical characteristics: “In \textit{Strictly Ballroom}, the numbers are not quite diegetic, in the sense that they are motivated by the dancers’ profession rather than life itself, and yet there is clearly a level that elevates the dancing to a higher, less realistic realm in the way that numbers functioned in Busby Berkeley musicals.”\textsuperscript{20}

If Feuer’s understanding of the diegetic number were commonplace, there would be few points of disagreement between scholars of film musicals and their colleagues specializing in other genres of film. However, Feuer’s understanding does not reflect the prevailing currents of discourse on the film musical. More typically, diegetic numbers are defined as those that take place in realistic performance contexts, such as performances of shows, auditions, rehearsals, instances of improvisation (“Hot Lunch Jam” from \textit{Fame} [1980]) or composition (“Ka-lu-a” and the first occurrence of “They Didn’t Believe Me” from \textit{Till the Clouds Roll By} [1946]), recording

\textsuperscript{18} Royal S. Brown, \textit{Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 67; James Buhler, David Neumeyer, and Rob Deemer, \textit{Hearing the Movies: Music and Sound in Film History} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 82–83; Guido Heldt, \textit{Music and Levels of Narration in Film: Steps across the Border} (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 138. Sergio Miceli, “Method of Internal, External, and Mediated Levels: Elements for the Definition of a Film-Musical Dramaturgy,” \textit{Music and the Moving Image} 4, no. 2 (2011): 17, observes that “the film musical is the coexistence and therefore the annulment of the levels” he proposes: internal (intersubjectively accessible music in the fictional world), external (music that is not part of the fictional world), and mediated (music that is imagined by fictional characters).


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 59.
sessions (“Don’t Leave Me Now” from *Jailhouse Rock* [1957]), singing or dancing contests (“Hand Jive” from *Grease* [1978]), family gatherings (“Edelweiss” from *The Sound of Music* [1965]), social dances (“Disco Inferno” from *Saturday Night Fever* [1977]), parties (“Skip to My Lou” from *Meet Me in St. Louis*), serenades (“Looking at You” from *Everyone Says I Love You*), singalongs (“I Love Louisa” from *The Band Wagon*), and lullabies (“Stay Awake” from *Mary Poppins* [1964]). For numbers taking place outside of such contexts, a verbal acknowledgement of the singing or dancing also seems to do the trick. Scott McMillin classifies the opening number of *Oklahoma!* (1955), “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning,” as a diegetic number because, when Aunt Eller asks Curly what he’s doing, he reports that he’s singing.  

Much singing and dancing that goes on in film musicals lacks both a realistic context and an explicit verbal acknowledgement. In scholarship on film musicals, there is less consensus about how to categorize such numbers. Although some scholars have adopted the antithesis common to nonmusical films, nondiegetic, a variety of alternatives have been proposed, including “supradiegetic music” (Rick Altman and Guido Heldt), “Musically Enhanced Reality Mode” or MERM for short (Raymond Knapp), “book song” (James Leve, borrowed from stage-musical terminology), and “out-of-the-blue number” (Scott McMillin).  

Despite a lack of terminological consensus, most scholars agree that diegetic songs are realistic songs. This understanding is based on the assumption that all fictional worlds adhere to the physical laws and social conventions of the world in which we live, an assumption easily debunked by pointing to the existence of predominantly fantastical film genres, including science


fiction, fantasy, and, arguably, film musicals. Furthermore, the equation of the diegetic with the realistic is inconsistent with the understanding of the diegetic in other areas of cinema studies, particularly those that concern films’ visual components. As Jeff Smith has remarked, “nowhere else in film studies is the notion of the ‘diegetic’ wholly equated with a concept of realism. Elements of mise-en-scène or cinematography, for example, are often treated in highly stylized fashion.” Consider the expressionist mise-en-scène featured in The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920) or the components of the fictional world represented by 2D chalk drawings in Lars von Trier’s Dogville (2003). Such flagrant departures from the visual appearance of the world in which we live do not “disqualify [these] spaces and objects from being considered part of the film’s diegesis.”

Encountering such phenomena, spectators are more likely to consider the possibility that the filmmakers are inviting them to imagine a world that is unlike the real world in at least these respects. Such an approach bears a closer affinity to Souriau’s original conception of the diegesis in cinema than forcing the fictional world to correspond to our understanding of reality. In a study of mid-twentieth-century French film theory, Edward Lowry explains that Souriau believed that each film “creates its own universe, with its own rules, systems of belief, characters, settings, etc. This is just as true of a Neorealist film like Bicycle Thief as it is of a fantasy film like René Clair’s I Married a Witch,” or a film musical like Meet Me in St. Louis. There is nothing in Souriau’s account to suggest that a film could not represent a world in which characters regularly burst into song and dance, whether they are performing on Broadway, strolling through Central Park, or riding on a trolley.

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24 Edward Lowry, The Filmology Movement and Film Study in France (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982), 84.
Unconscious Singing to Unheard Melodies?

Given that the adjective *diegetic* standardly picks out contents of the audiovisual display that represent contents of the fictional world, referring to only the realistic songs of a musical as diegetic implies that the rest of the songs do not represent occurrences in the fictional world. This assumption is especially problematic for numbers that advance the story in some way. Such numbers are often described as being “integrated” with the narrative of the film. In recent years, the concept of integration has become increasingly fraught as to its meaning as well as its importance and artistic value in connection with musicals on both stage and screen. Engaging in the latter debate would be an unnecessary distraction. Yet, in the interest of clarity, the former issue cannot simply be brushed aside.

John Mueller has defined no less than six different senses in which a number may be said to be integrated with the film’s narrative. Of primary interest in the present connection is the strongest sense he defines: the number’s content makes new things true in the story, either about the characters’ personalities, relationships, and endeavors, or about the fictional world they inhabit. In other words, removing the number from the musical would sacrifice narrative logic.25 As several scholars have observed, most numbers fail this test, even those in shows commonly considered to be highly integrated.26 According to current linguistic use, the concept of the integrated number is broader than the most robust sense of integration defined by Mueller. Nevertheless, I am focusing on numbers that generate new story facts because it is these numbers that pose the most difficulties for the prevailing understanding of the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction in the film musical.

26 Ibid., 29; McMillin, *Musical as Drama*, 8.
Mueller cites “Dancing in the Dark” from *The Band Wagon* as an example of a number that advances the story through its content. When rehearsals for the initial version of the fictional show “The Band Wagon” are not going well, its leading lady Gaby (Cyd Charisse) asks her costar Tony (Fred Astaire) if he thinks that a ballerina like her and a song-and-dance man like him “can really dance together.” To find out, they take a stroll through Central Park, during which they perform a dance duet marrying ballroom steps with balletic pirouettes and leaps. In this number, Tony and Gaby not only find an answer to Gaby’s question but also find love. A comparison of the before and after shots of the couple in the carriage make the latter point most forcefully. On their ride to the park, they pointedly keep their distance from one another, but after their dance, they glide into the carriage, Tony naturally clasps Gaby’s hand, and they sink into an after-glow moment of blissful contentment. Labelling this number as nondiegetic suggests that it is extricable from the narrative. Since the number cannot be removed without a gap in logic, it must represent something about the development of Tony and Gaby’s relationship.

Perhaps the number represents a series of entirely realistic occurrences (walking, talking, gesticulating), which have only been rendered as dancing because *The Band Wagon* is a musical. In other words, if we were to enter Tony and Gaby’s world and spy on them during “Dancing in the Dark,” we would see no dancing and hear no music. Instead, we would witness the characters walking and, though speech and realistic gestures, expressing their feelings and working out a plan for how to combine their respective dance idioms.

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The problem with such an approach is that it renders the changes the characters undergo during this number less plausible. The change in the characters’ attitudes toward the prospects of their joint artistic endeavor is especially difficult to explain if the characters are merely having a conversation about dance, as opposed to successfully testing out some dance moves. Imagining that the characters are communicating through song and dance may also render more plausible the alacrity with which they fall in love. In a summary of the tropes of musical numbers, Raymond Knapp and Mitchell Morris note that characters are “more capable of interpersonal connection” while they are singing and dancing. The tendency for singing and dancing to forge social bonds more quickly and effectively than spoken conversation is also supported by empirical research.

Alternatively, one might follow a suggestion made by Neumeyer: “If a song is not a ‘public’ performance but an expression of the [character’s] subjectivity; under such circumstances it is plausible that the [character] does not know that he or she is performing.” Applying similar logic to “Dancing in the Dark,” one might imagine that Tony and Gaby are dancing but that they do so unconsciously. Such suggestions are often accompanied by the proposal that other fictional characters do not have perceptual access to such performances. For instance, McMillin’s suggestion that Aunt Eller “hears [Curly’s] song just as we hear it” implies that she and Laurey do not hear the cowboy’s next song, “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top,” since it is not explicitly identified as a song. A potential problem is that some characters in

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31 Neumeyer, “Performances in Early Hollywood Sound Film,” 46.
32 McMillin, Musical as Drama, 104.
musicals seem to hear the music of the so-called nondiegetic songs and, in their subsequent musical performances, show that they have been influenced by this music.

Just as Tony and Gaby’s love develops through their successful marriage of dance styles, lovers in musicals often have a musical-stylistic influence over one another. The musical influence Eliza seems to exert over Higgins in My Fair Lady (1964) is one reason why they are a more plausible love match by the end of the musical than they are by the end of Shaw’s play. At the beginning of the film, however, this eventuality is practically unthinkable. Not only are they separated by age and class but they also lack a common mode of discourse. Despite being the leading phoneticist of his generation, Henry Higgins (Rex Harrison) cannot sing. By Higgins’s estimation, Eliza (acted by Audrey Hepburn but sung by Marni Nixon) cannot speak (but as soon as she opens her mouth to sing, she more than makes up for it). Like Tony and Gaby’s relationship, their union hinges on a compromise being struck. That the ostensible plot revolves around Eliza’s English diction lessons suggests that the burden of this compromise will be chiefly borne by the woman through her absorption of the teachings of her elder male companion (as per usual). Listening to their respective musical idioms, however, suggests that Eliza has just as much to teach Higgins, her course of instruction being how to be a character in a musical.

33 Shaw had no intention to imply that Eliza and Higgins would eventually marry, though many directors have. In response, Shaw wrote a postscript outlining his preferred future for Eliza, involving marriage to Freddy. First printed in George Bernard Shaw, Androcles and the Lion; Overruled; Pygmalion (New York: Brentano’s, 1916), 209–24.
34 Refer to Altman’s discussion of the “personality dissolve” in American Film Musical, 80–89. What Altman fails to note is how the woman usually sacrifices more than the man. In Funny Face (1957), Audrey Hepburn’s character must abandon her bookish apparel for the haute couture stylizings of her fashion-photographer lover (Fred Astaire), but he is not required to read philosophy.
35 A similar observation is made by Knapp, American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity, 289: “The real question of the show is . . . not whether Eliza will learn to speak properly . . . but whether Higgins will learn to ‘sing.’”
Eliza’s musical influence on Higgins has been observed by many scholars. In Higgins’s final number, “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face,” his digressions about Eliza marrying Freddy are transpositions of Eliza’s rant-song “Just You Wait.”

The problem, for our purposes, is that it is unclear how much of Eliza’s song Higgins overhears. She only begins to sing after Higgins has retreated to his office and shut the door. Although Higgins makes an appearance in the middle of the number when he is marched out and shot, these occurrences are framed as figments of Eliza’s imagination. At the end of the number, Higgins is revealed to be watching her from the top of the stairs. Evidently he has caught the tail end of the spectacle. Less evident is whether he has heard enough of it to establish the similarities between “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face” and “Just You Wait” as intentional appropriations.

A stronger argument for Higgins’s hearing of Eliza’s music is his gradual acculturation into the conventions of the musical. For most of the film, Higgins talks his way into his numbers, his “singing” only ever achieving the tunefulness of Sprechstimme. Furthermore, he proves incapable of conforming his “sung” utterances to conventional song forms. In his first song, “Why Can’t the English,” he sets up a standard AABA structure for the chorus only to spoil it at the very last second by avoiding the expected rhyme and (harmonic) cadence in favor of a rant about the Scottish, Irish, and American dialects (Table 1). Eventually, he returns to the chorus, but before he even reaches the contrasting B section, his mention of the French prompts another

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spoken digression. To hear how an AABA chorus ought to go, one has only to listen to Eliza’s “Wouldn’t It Be Loverly” or “I Could Have Danced All Night.”

Table 1: Form of “Why Can’t the English?” from My Fair Lady

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Musical Form</th>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Lyrics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Why can’t the English teach their children how to speak? This verbal class distinction by now should be antique.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>If you spoke as she does, sir, Instead of the way you do, Why, you might be selling flowers too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>An Englishman’s way of speaking absolutely classifies him. The moment he talks he makes some other Englishman despise him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>One common language I’m afraid we’ll never get. Oh, why can’t the English learn to—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digression 1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Set a good example to people whose English is painful to your ears? The Scotch and the Irish leave you close to tears. There even are places where English completely disappears. (spoken) In America, they haven’t used it for years!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Why can’t the English teach their children how to speak? Norwegians learn Norwegian; the Greeks are taught their Greek.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>In France ev’ry Frenchman knows his language from “A” to “Zed”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digression 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>(spoken) The French never care what they do, actually, as long as they pronounce it properly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Arabians learn Arabian with the speed of summer lightning; The Hebrews learn it backwards, which is absolutely fright’ning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A’</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>But use proper English, you’re regarded as a freak. Why can’t the English— Why can’t the English learn to speak?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Higgins’s final song, “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face,” is based on another standard song form of his period, ABAC (with a short coda based on A). After singing it through once, he indulges in one final, though exceptionally long, rant-fantasy about the wretchedness of Eliza’s fate as Mrs. Freddy Eynsford-Hill (sung to “Just You Wait”) and a reprise of both the narcissistic verse and misogynistic chorus of “I’m an Ordinary Man.” But before Higgins
manages to retreat to his home, the orchestra bursts in with a glamorous version of the A section of “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face,” calling Higgins on his lie. Seeming to take their cue, he joins in, completing the rest of the song in as tuneful a voice as Rex Harrison could muster, without a single rant or digression. In so doing, Raymond Knapp has remarked, Higgins demonstrates that “he has noticed her and is trying to approximate ‘the tune / She whistles night and noon.’” 39

Examples of characters influencing the musical style of other characters seem to provide evidence that characters in musicals not only sing consciously but hear each other’s singing. However, this is not the only way of explaining the gradual rapprochement of Higgins’s and Eliza’s musical idioms. One could interpret their similarity in a purely symbolic way. Without Higgins intending to model his singing on Eliza’s, his songs take on characteristics of hers, their emerging musical similarity representing their growing attraction and suitability for each other.

Another alternative explanation is McMillin’s proposal that the characters “sing their way into the ‘voice of the musical.’” 40 McMillin borrows this phrase from Carolyn Abbate’s concept of the “voice of the opera.” As he explains, the voice of the musical refers to “a melodic and harmonic world in which various characters enter at various times, not so much because they are like one another psychologically (although they may be), but because they belong to the same aesthetic design.” 40 To be clear, McMillin is referring to the composer’s aesthetic design, but if one wished to sidestep the figure of the composer (as Abbate is wont to do), one could also refer to the aesthetic design of the work itself.

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40 McMillin, *Musical as Drama*, 68.
To weigh the interpretive gains and losses of these proposals, it will be useful to distinguish between two ways of looking at a narrative. From an internal perspective, we regard the narrative as actual, seeking explanations that are grounded in the characters’ intentions and actions as well as the fictional social and political contexts in which they are acting. Alternatively, we could regard it from an external perspective, recognizing that it has been crafted by a real-life author or authorial team and explaining its features in terms of those agents’ intentions and actions as well as the real-life artistic, social, and political contexts in which they were working. Appreciating narratives generally requires us to employ these perspectives in tandem, although one perspective may assume salience at particular moments or in conjunction with particular interpretive questions.

If the musical numbers of *My Fair Lady* are regarded as nondiegetic (aside from the dancing at the ball, all numbers are fantastical), only external perspectives are open to us. We cannot understand Eliza as influencing Higgins because Eliza lacks the requisite knowledge and intentions. According to some scholars, Eliza and Higgins aren’t singing at all. According to others, they are singing but they do not know that they are and they do not hear each other’s music. Under either of these interpretations, Higgins does not hear Eliza’s singing and, thus, cannot be understood as being influenced by her, either consciously or unconsciously. Regarding the singing as nondiegetic, one can explain their similarity as part of the author’s, implied author’s, or fictional narrator’s attempts to represent their growing attraction or compatibility. Or, regarding these similarities as irrelevant to the narrative, one could attribute them to the composer’s stylistic preferences and attempts at musical unity.

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Regarding the numbers of *My Fair Lady* as diegetic, by contrast, allows for a wider range of possible explanations. In addition to the foregoing external explanations, we have recourse to internal explanations of various kinds. We can regard Eliza as choosing to sing in a particular way and Higgins as overhearing Eliza’s singing and being influenced, with greater or lesser degrees of consciousness, by her more lyrical and formally coherent vocal utterances. Due to the indeterminacy surrounding how much of “Just You Wait” Higgins overhears, we could either regard him as consciously appropriating some of Eliza’s melodies or regard these similarities as authorial commentary.

Interpreting fantastical numbers as diegetic allows for explanations of their musical features that are grounded in the characters’ actions and intentions rather than merely those of the filmmakers, thus endowing characters with more agency. Given the importance of agency to characters that are worth watching, and thus narratives that are worth watching, regarding even fantastical numbers as diegetic may increase one’s appreciation of the stories musicals tell.42

There are, however, cases where it is not reasonable to regard characters as intending or perceiving all of the meanings their performances may have for us. In *The Music Man* (1962), for instance, Marian’s “Goodnight, My Someone” and Harold’s “Seventy-Six Trombones” are revealed to have the same melody when they are combined near the conclusion of the film. Since Marian sings her song before she hears Harold’s, and Harold does not hear the first instance of her song, this similarity cannot be attributed to the characters exerting an influence over one another. To explain the affinity between their respective songs, we need to take an external perspective to the narrative, regarding it as representing the characters’ underlying similarity. But

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external explanations are still available to the viewer pursuing diegetic interpretations of fantastical numbers.

Since diegetic interpretations afford the viewer greater interpretive flexibility and increase character agency, I propose that the default assumption in watching film musicals is that the characters sing and dance consciously and have perceptual access to the performances they and others make, including their accompaniments, whether or not they have a plausible fictional source. In other words, virtually all numbers, whether realistic or fantastical, are diegetic in both of Souriau’s senses. They are part of the film’s fictional world as well as its story. Possible exceptions would include instances where the number, in whole or in part, is framed as a character’s dream, imagining, or hallucination (e.g., the imagined ballet at the end of An American in Paris [1951]), or as authorial commentary (e.g., “Razzle Dazzle” from Chicago [2002]).

Replacing the Diegetic/Nondiegetic Distinction

Due to the disjuncture in use of the terms diegetic and nondiegetic in scholarship on film musicals as compared with other areas of cinema studies, and the impoverished interpretive possibilities open to those pursuing nondiegetic understandings of fantastical numbers, I propose that we abandon the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction as a means of classifying film-musical


44 I say “possible” on account of divergent conceptions of the “diegesis” in film. If it is understood as comprising only intersubjectively accessible properties of the fictional world, then dreams, imaginings, and hallucinations would be nondiegetic. But if one understands it as the totality of facts about the story, dreams and imaginings should be regarded as diegetic but subjectively inflected or saturated. On these terms, see George M. Wilson, Seeing Fictions in Film: The Epistemology of Movies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 149–54.
numbers. That is not to deny that there are relevant distinctions to be made between numbers like “Dancing in the Dark” and those that make up Tony and Gaby’s fictional Broadway show “The Band Wagon,” but merely to suggest that it is misleading to characterize these distinctions in terms of diegetic status.

In a study of Busby Berkeley’s career, Martin Rubin proposes two alternative sets of oppositions. In addition to the distinction between “realistic” and “unrealistic” numbers, Rubin proposes distinguishing between “performance” and “narrative” numbers. The former refers to “numbers taking place in a formal performance situation (e.g., on a theatrical stage or a bandstand)”; the latter to “numbers intruding themselves directly into a fictional situation (e.g., two lovers, in the midst of a romantic scene, burst into a song affirming their love for one another).” As the oeuvre of Busby Berkeley amply demonstrates, the category of formal performance does not precisely map onto that of realistic performance. Since the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction conflates these categories, Rubin’s model constitutes an improvement in sophistication. Nevertheless, there are a few problems with his categories.

Rubin’s choice of the terms realistic and unrealistic establishes a binary opposition when a scalar concept more aptly describes the range of behavior on display in film musicals. Additionally, his performance and narrative categories are only vaguely defined. Based on his categorizations, domestic music-making or dancing, either by amateurs or professionals, falls under the narrative category. Rubin’s categorizations are based on an overly narrow construal of “performance,” one that fails to accord with general linguistic use. The use of “narrative” as an opposition to “performance” also suggests that formal performances are invariably

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46 Ibid., 146.
superfluous to the narratives in which they are a part. Although this may be true of Busby Berkeley’s films, it fails to hold true for the genre as a whole. In *The Music Man*, when Harold sings “Seventy-Six Trombones” at the town meeting, he is undoubtedly performing, but his performance is integral to the narrative. It excites the imaginations and inherent musicality of the townsfolk, constituting a significant development in his plot to con them into buying band instruments.

Instead of Rubin’s opposition between realistic and unrealistic numbers, I propose a spectrum ranging from extreme realism to extreme fantasy. At the former end lie the numbers of *Cabaret*, which all take place in realistic situations by characters with realistic levels of skill.47 At the latter lie the visual components of “I Only Have Eyes for You” (Reprise) from *Dames* (the aural components are more or less realistic). The realism–fantasy spectrum would also be a means of differentiating numbers that have a realistic fictional source for their accompaniments (e.g., the numbers of the fictional show “The Band Wagon”) and those that do not (e.g., “Dancing in the Dark”).

Tracking where numbers fall on the realism–fantasy spectrum is of relevance to understanding the musical’s tendency to represent an idealized or utopian vision of the world. Jane Feuer and Rick Altman have interpreted the musical’s characteristic distinction between its musical and nonmusical segments as mapping onto the distinction between reality and dreams, or

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the real and the ideal. Not all numbers are equally idealistic, however. As an illustration of the different associations and expressive effects of realism and fantasy, let’s compare the two reprises of “The Sound of Music.” One is moderately fantastical, the other entirely realistic.

The first, more fantastical one occurs immediately after the Captain dismisses Maria from his service. Like a deus ex machina, the children’s performance of the song for the Baroness wafts its way onto the terrace where their conversation is taking place. At first, its aural characteristics are entirely realistic, but as the Captain follows the sound to its source and stands transfixed at the door, its realistic guitar accompaniment is replaced by an orchestra. By the time he joins in, a harp glissando leads into the final chorus, flutes take over the descant line, and horns support the final crescendo. After a moment of rapt silence, the Captain shows his children the first gesture of affection depicted in the film, the first, one assumes, since the death of his wife. The song’s ability to magically heal old wounds and knit the family back together appears to be related to its fantastical character. By contrast, the children’s mournful reprise after Maria has returned to the abbey remains entirely realistic and is unable to provide them solace.

Instead of Rubin’s performance and narrative categories, I propose a gradational concept that tracks the performance’s degree of formality as well as its intended function. At the formal end of the spectrum, there are numbers with a strict separation of performers and audience members, where the performance is intended primarily for aesthetic appreciation or entertainment. Unlike Rubin’s “performance” category, my category of formal performance includes domestic music-making or dancing by amateurs, such as the children’s sad performance

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49 Altman, American Film Musical, 62–74, has coined the term “audio dissolve” to describe this phenomenon.
of “The Sound of Music.” On the other end of the spectrum are spontaneous performances that are intended primarily for communicative or expressive purposes, which often have no fictional audience aside from the performers. Soliloquies (e.g., Maria singing “The Sound of Music” on the mountain) and love duets (e.g., “Dancing in the Dark”) fall into this category as well as sung conversations like “Can’t Say No” from Oklahoma! and “Maria” from The Sound of Music. In between these extremes lie communal performances, in which audience members tend to become performers in the course of the number. Such songs and dances are intended as much for community building or cheering loved ones as for aesthetic appreciation or entertainment. After the unmitigated disaster that was the initial performance of “The Band Wagon,” Tony and the songwriters attempt to lift the spirits of the rest of the cast by singing a silly song called “I Love Louisa,” inviting their colleagues to join in. Although the children’s performance of “The Sound of Music” for the Baroness begins formally, the Captain’s spontaneous decision to join in, as well as the social function the song performs, suggests that it lies more toward the communal middle of the spectrum than the children’s sad reprise.

The most common combination for show musicals is realistic and formal. Examples include all of the so-called diegetic numbers of The Band Wagon (except for “I Love Louisa”) and all of the numbers Sally performs at the Kit Kat Klub in Cabaret. Non-show examples include the sad rehearsal of “The Sound of Music” and, in The Music Man, the women’s dance club’s “Grecian Urn Dance” and the children’s band’s performance of “Minuet in G.” On the more fantastical side are numbers with implausibly elaborate accompaniments but which are realistic in terms of the performers’ skill levels (e.g., “So Long, Farewell” from The Sound of Music). More fantastical are the visual effects in “I Only Have Eyes for You” (Reprise) and the
miraculous improvement in skill as well as the spontaneous glamorization of the costumes in the final performance of “Seventy-Six Trombones” in *The Music Man*.

In folk and fairytale musicals, the most common combination is spontaneous and fantastical, a category that encompasses all the numbers of *My Fair Lady* (except the realistic-communal “Embassy Waltz”), *Oklahoma!* (except the fantastical-communal “Kansas City” and “The Farmer and the Cowman”), and *West Side Story* (except the fantastical-communal “Dance at the Gym” and “America”). On folk and fairy tale musicals, refer to ibid., chaps. 7 and 8. 50 Numbers that are spontaneous but entirely realistic are the least common. Even show musicals rely on a degree of fantasy in their accompaniments and the tendency for shows to come together without rehearsals. Realistic-spontaneous numbers may be found in some early all-Black musicals, which aimed at a high degree of realism but played into the stereotype of the inherently musical African-American (e.g., “St. Louis Blues” and “Goin’ Home” from *Hallelujah* [1929]). With the increasing anxiety surrounding the realism of the musical, postclassical musicals featuring professional performers or keen amateurs are another good source for realistic-spontaneous numbers (e.g., “Is It Okay If I Call You Mine?” from *Fame* and “Next to Last Song” from *Dancer in the Dark* [2000]).

Realistic-communal numbers (e.g., “Tomorrow Belongs to Me” from *Cabaret* and “Columbia, Gem of the Ocean” from *The Music Man*) are more common than realistic-spontaneous ones, but fantastical-communal numbers are even more prevalent. Examples in which the accompaniment is the only fantastical component include Esther’s attempts to lift her sister’s spirits with “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” from *Meet Me in St. Louis* and the children’s attempts to cheer themselves up by reprising “My Favorite Things” in *The Sound of Music*. Fantastical-communal numbers are also frequently unrealistic with respect to the level of realism.
skill and unrehearsed coordination among the participants (e.g., “I Got Rhythm” from An American in Paris, “Kansas City” and “The Farmer and the Cowman” from Oklahoma!, and the reprise of “I’ll Cover You” and “Seasons of Love” at Angel’s funeral in Rent [2005]).

As we have seen with the children’s performance of “The Sound of Music” for the Baroness, a number’s status with respect to both axes can change. As part of the musical’s tendency to lift the everyday into a more ideal, utopian, or enchanted plane of existence, the most common shift is for a number to become progressively more fantastical. A formal example would be “Under the Bamboo Tree” from Meet Me in St. Louis, which begins with realistic piano accompaniment provided by Esther’s sister, but by the time Esther and Tootie are performing the cakewalk with their hats and canes, the sound of the piano has been replaced by that of a brass band. The shift from a realistic mode to a more fantastical one is also common in communal examples like “I Love Louisa” from The Band Wagon and “Do-Re-Mi” from The Sound of Music. The children’s progression from not knowing how to sing to singing in multiple parts makes the latter particularly miraculous.

Especially in folk musicals, which center around themes of community building, formal numbers tend to become communal numbers. The Captain’s spontaneous participation in the first reprise of “The Sound of Music” is one such example. A larger-scale example would be the first instance of “Seventy-Six Trombones,” which begins as a solo performance by Harold and ends with the entire town singing and dancing down the street.

Multiple simultaneous categorizations are also possible in numbers combining multiple distinct songs or parts. In “Piano Lesson”/“If You Don’t Mind My Saying So” from The Music Man, Amaryllis’s piano playing is realistic and relatively formal, while Marian’s conversation with her mother is fantastical and spontaneous. From the same film, the barbershop quartet’s
performance of “Lida Rose” is moderately realistic and spontaneous, while Marian’s “Will I Ever Tell You” is fantastical and spontaneous.

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how the axes would work together to analyze an entire film. I chose *The Music Man* for the diversity of its numbers. The realistic-fantastical axis is represented vertically, the formal-communal-spontaneous one horizontally. Changes in categorization are indicated by arrows. The heavier lines indicate numbers combining multiple songs bearing different categorizations.
Figure 1: Analysis of *The Music Man*

**FANTASTICAL**

- Seventy-Six Trombones (Reprise)
- Goodnight, Ladies
- Shipoopi
- Sadder but Wiser Girl for Me
- Gary, Indiana (Reprise)
- Being in Love
- Wells Fargo Wagon
- Seventy-Six Trombones (Reprise)/Goodnight, My Someone (Reprise)
- Till There Was You
- If You Don't Mind My Saying So
- Will I Ever Tell You
- Iowa Stubborn
- Ya Got Trouble
- Sincere
- Piano Lesson
- Goodnight, My Someone

**REALISTIC**

- Lida Rose (Reprise)
- Lida Rose
- Grecian Urn Dance
- Minuet in G
- Dance/Band Practice
- Columbia, Gem of the Ocean
- Two to Tango

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**FORMAL** ----------------- **COMMUNAL** ----------------- **SPONTANEOUS**
Conclusion

Since the publication of Claudia Gorbman’s *Unheard Melodies*, the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction has become one of the most widely used tools in the analysis of film music. However, its utility has been called into question from various perspectives. The usage history provided above raised the additional concern of whether clarity is well served by terminology that implies a false derivation from classical sources. Nevertheless, in the context of nonmusical films, there is at least a consensus about how this distinction ought to be understood.

Unsurprisingly, the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction has also become increasingly important to scholarship on film musicals. With the rising profile of film music within music studies more broadly, it has encroached on discussions of the stage musical and opera. In these contexts, it has accrued yet different meanings due to a prevailing assumption that the fictional worlds of such works operate according to more or less the same laws, norms, and conventions as our own. The diverse purposes to which musical-theater scholars have put the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction suggests that the various ways musical and dance numbers may differ from one another cannot be encapsulated by any single opposition. The alternatives offered in this paper—the realism-fantasy spectrum and the distinction between formal, communal, and spontaneous performances—have been inspired by the most common usages of the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction but are by no means imagined to exhaust all salient distinctions between film-musical numbers.

Abandoning the diegetic/nondiegetic distinction as a means of categorizing musical and dance numbers would constitute a major revision to the scholarly discourse on the musical, but one that carries several benefits. Regarding even fantastical numbers as diegetic supports more coherent understandings of the fictional worlds of musicals and the role musical and dance
numbers sometimes play in advancing the narratives of such works. It also allows for a wider range of interpretations of situations when characters share musical material, including those that are grounded in the characters’ actions and intentions. The proposed alternatives provide the beginnings of a more precise set of tools with which to analyze film-musical numbers. Finally, bringing discourse on the film musical into closer terminological alignment with the rest of cinema studies will facilitate more effective dialogues across film genres and may help in rendering the film musical less of a niche topic within cinema studies.