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When I was writing my MA thesis on sound in the films of David Lynch, my supervisor wondered if there was a way that I could avoid using the terms "diegetic" and "non-diegetic." I felt hostile towards the idea, and decided that I would make no effort to abandon the terminology since it seemed so crucial to my discussion. Readers of this column will know that things haven't changed much; I continue to make liberal use of the terms in my current work. But the issue has returned to my consciousness recently in the form of a thread on the filmsound.org discussion list which is presently debating the usefulness of the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic sound. Reactions within the debate are ranging far and wide. There have been hostile assertions that the terms are useless relics of times past, and suggestions have been made that filmmakers don't care about these distinctions and that it is only we academics on the outside who feel the need to impose these ideas on the films from a distance. On the other hand, some have been quick to observe that many key contemporary theorists continue to draw on these terms in their ever-increasingly sophisticated analyses of film sound, suggesting that the terms have not yet outlived their usefulness. To this I would add that innumerable filmmakers seem preoccupied with the idea of the diegesis (whether they use that particular term or not), a fact illustrated by the most common response to the discussion: to offer examples of films in which the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic sound is blurred, deliberately or otherwise. This desire to illustrate how the diegetic/non-diegetic opposition has been undone is evidence enough that the binary is still very much alive and well. After all, without these two terms, how could the deconstructive nature of these examples be described?

Having said that, I very much agree that the distinction we make between diegetic and non-diegetic sound is often arbitrary and can just as often be called into question with a little thought on the subject. Indeed, there are far more cases of the grey area between these two poles than we might initially think. The existence of such grey areas was precisely the topic of this column's second edition (http://www.synoptique.ca/core/en/articles/squalid2). There I suggested that Kubrick's EYES WIDE SHUT offers an argument against the idea that there is such a thing as a separation between these two theoretical spheres. Yet his approach to blurring the distinction was based upon a very clear understanding that this distinction does, in fact, exist. Attention to the ways in which Kubrick deliberately calls attention to both the inside and the outside of the diegesis gives me a new way of understanding the film. This is an understanding that could not exist without first determining what is meant by the diegesis, and so the usefulness of the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic sound is without question in my mind. I believe that Kubrick's film deliberately depends on the conventional knowledge of the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic sound, and that the particular ways in which he explores this distinction would be lost without this knowledge. And so it is with a great many films that operate according to similar principles.

I think that what people are reacting against is not the specific concept of the diegesis as it relates to film, but rather to the idea of binary oppositions in general. In this day and age we are well beyond simple concepts like good and evil, gay and straight, night and day, or even male and female. Right? Well…maybe. The fact remains that, as much as we understand and appreciate the vast distance between any two poles, we continue to use these poles as points of reference which help us understand the areas in the middle as often as they might

distract us from them. And so reactions against binarisms are often entangled within their enemies in much the same way as Satanism is necessarily a Christian religion. In many cases the idea of a third option is really only a compression of night and day into one pole against which a new opposition is placed. It's a hard cycle to break, and I'm not sure that breaking it would do us any good. I'm certainly not setting out to break it here. Rather, I will seek to further illustrate why I think the diegetic/non-diegetic distinction is useful by way of another filmic example in which a knowledge of this distinction is a necessary factor in understanding the film as a whole.

And this time it's personal, for my example relates to the issue of cinematic representation of musical performance. I grew up on classical piano lessons, but if you've read the last edition of my column (http://www.synoptique.ca/core/en/articles/jordan_squalid3/) you can tell that I'm a huge fan of electrified music, particularly where electric guitars are concerned. I've always been sensitive to the representation of musical performance on film, being one of those types who cringes whenever I see someone supposedly playing an instrument on screen when the actor is clearly untrained (Sean Penn's performance in Woody Allen's SWEET AND LOWDOWN being a case in point). This type of sound/image disjunction has always been, for me, a close-second to bad dubbing in terms of intolerability. And yet how many other disjunctions do I let slide, or even enjoy? I have often argued that film should offer us more disjunctions between sound and image than we usually get. But what is a disjunction anyway? One person's dissonance is another person's harmony, and in the world of cinema, where almost all the sound we hear is created after the images are shot, why would we even expect some kind of "natural" connection between what we see and hear? More importantly to me, what is the substance of my personal lack of consistency with regards to what I want and don't want in terms of sound/image relationships in the cinema?

The fact that something as simple as questioning my tolerance for sound/image disjunction can lead to a much greater appreciation of the intricacies of sound's relationship to the moving image is clear in today's example: Sogo Ishii's ELECTRIC DRAGON 80,000 V (2001). There is an obvious nod here to Shinya Tsukamoto's TETSUO films (1988 and 1992) and the traditions from which they have come, concerned particularly with the blurring of distinctions between human and machine in the context of civilization's increasing distance from the world of ancient nature. ELECTRIC DRAGON removes almost all narrative pretense from the cyberpunk aesthetic and creates a space of pure electrically charged energy passing between its two main characters, each hybrids of the human and the machine, the traditional and the modern, and each engaged with the use of sound reproduction technology in ways that tamper with classic notions of what lies within and without the diegesis. In these respects, the film is a veritable exploration of the tension between binaries and their deconstruction, and it uses the diegetic/non-diegetic binary to explore a whole host of other binaries and the possibilities of their deconstruction.

What I will do here is explore how the film posits the binaries that it sets out to deconstruct by paying particular attention to the way Sogo handles scenes of musical performance in the film. For me, a mis-matched sound/image relationship in representation of musical performance has a schizophonic effect (see the second edition of my column for more info: http://www.synoptique.ca/core/en/articles/squalid2), separating me from the context of the images and sounds that I experience. Sogo is clearly aware of this, and I suggest that he presents us with differing approaches to the handling of such representation within this single film in order to make a point about the themes of binary deconstruction that run throughout. We will find that his attention to the differences between the inside and the outside of the diegesis speak not only to the importance of these categories in and of themselves, but also how they establish the importance of exploring other binaries common to Japanese cinema throughout history as well as the field of Acoustic Ecology from whence the term schizophonia arises.

What Sogo ultimately achieves is a film in which trends in Japanese cyberpunk and electric guitar fetish (of which Takeuchi Tetsuro's WILD ZERO (2000) is another potent example) are worked into a system of sound/image relationships whereby the binaries of human/machine, tradition/modernity, and original/copy are placed in the context of shifting standards. These shifting standards are exemplified in the way that music floats between the boundaries of the film's diegesis. Attention to the points at which we can recognize diegetic and non-diegetic musical representation are the points by which we can measure the other important issues at stake here. Of course, we could ignore the idea that there is a boundary demarcating the diegesis, but to do so would imply that we also ignore the ways in which the areas between various other poles are being explored. To my way of

thinking, this would entail passing over the very substance of the film's formal, aesthetic and narrative concerns. Here's why.

The film's premise goes something like this: Dragon-Eye Morrison (Tadanobu Asano) was electrocuted as a child while climbing an electrical tower. A doctor explains that this event stimulated the reptilian part of his brain, awakening the sleeping dragon of humanity's prehistoric past which he must now deal with in the context of contemporary urban existence. So, he takes on the role of lost reptile finder, searching out missing pets for lizard keepers throughout the city. One archetypical scene begins with a low-level point of view shot of Morrison scouring the gutters of back alleyways. Shortly after there is a cut to a wooded environment which stands in stark contrast to the previous shot. The point-of-view cuts to a high-angle wide shot, revealing a tiny little park space in the midst of a vast metropolis: a little island of order in a sea of chaos, a co-existence of the traditional within the modern that reflects Dragon-Eye's character. And like the metropolis, he suffers from an excess of primal energy that civilization can only contain to a certain extent. This excess takes the form of electricity, that spark which gave life to the primordial soup at the dawn of life on Earth and which now flows through the veins of the city.

Dragon-Eye sleeps with metal braces constraining his limbs so that he doesn't injure himself with electrical spasms. While awake, he deals with the energy surplus by unleashing it upon his lizard-skin electric guitar; these astounding scenes make Electric Dragon the guitar fetish movie of the century. When he plays the guitar the entire city's power consumption skyrockets and transformers everywhere spark and rattle on the edge of explosion. Indeed, the electric guitar is perhaps the quintessential example of a musical instrument bridging the traditional and the modern, subjecting the form of an age-old design to electrification. In this process of electrification, the guitar no longer needs to be an architecture of sound space within itself. The projection of sound is given over to electrical transmission, making it a sound reproduction technology with schizophonic capabilities. As we'll see, its schizophonic potential is well realized throughout the film.

While Dragon-Eye puts sound out into the world, his nemesis Thunderbolt Buddha (Masatoshi Nagase) takes it in. He wears a metal Buddha mask over one side of his face, an outward expression of his inner conflict which began when he was hit by a bolt of lightening. He stands on rooftops high above the city with satellite dish in hand and earphones strapped on, riding the soundwaves of the city in search of cell phone conversations that will lead him to evildoers whom he then promptly punishes. His ultimate goal, however, is to confront Dragon-Eye and assert his superiority, having received his power from the natural source of lightening rather than from the harnessed electrical circuits of the modern tower. They do finally confront each other, and Thunderbolt Buddha actually compares his own superior voltage to that of Dragon-Eye as an assertion of his confidence in victory. Yet in the end we don't really know if there was a winner or not. The morning finds Dragon-Eye awakening on the rooftop and all that seems to be left of Thunderbolt-Buddha is the scorched remains of his metal face-plate. Yet in the battle's climax, Thunderbolt Buddha's energy was seen transferring to a lightening rod and dissipating into the thunderclouds gathering above. So it seems that their confrontation could be seen as an analogy for the localized harnessing of a power which really exists everywhere and which we can only contain for brief periods at a time.

It is in the representations of Dragon-Eye's guitar playing that the philosophical underpinnings of the film's conclusion can be found. In the first guitar-playing sequence, used to establish Dragon-Eye's electrically charged character and explain how he manages his primitive impulses, the sound of the guitar itself is actually quite distant. Other elements of the soundtrack, like impending feedback, are foregrounded more than his playing. This is indicative of sound reproduction technology's powers to defy the expectations of physics. In general, distortion on guitar suggests loudness, but the reality is that distortion has been removed from its original status as an indicator of amplifier overload and is now an effect that can be applied at very low volume. This creates a disjunction between the sound and its reproduction in space, and suggests the possibility that the

sound is not actually diegetic despite the fact that it accompanies the image of Dragon-Eye playing on screen.

So what would be the purpose of suggesting this blur between two sides of the diegesis? I believe it is Sogo's way of calling attention to the problem of establishing polemics as the basis for an understanding of the world, a problem that will be fleshed out as the two main characters come closer and closer to confrontation, only to have the outcome of their battle be ambiguous at best. The question of whether or not the sound we hear comes from the images we see is rendered dubious in this scene, and this has ramifications for judgements about the problem of an electrified society made by the likes of R. Murray Schafer (as discussed in earlier editions of this column). Much has been made of the idea that the very quiet can be made very loud, epitomized by the intimate breath of a jazz singer crooning a soft ballad into a microphone which fills the space of a large theatre. Yet the very loud can also be made very quiet, like listening to distorted heavy metal at low volumes. There is a distance here, a clear indication that the rules of spatial acoustics are not obeyed when amplification enters the picture. Here, this spatial disorientation is put in the context of the ancient coming alive in the modern, Dragon-Eye's primitive self finding expression through a tool of modernity.

In "Earplugs," guitarist Marc Ribot discusses the bizarre situation whereby amplifier distortion no longer indicates equipment at risk and has turned into an effect that can be turned on and off at will. He sees the overuse of distortion to unnaturally extend the sonic life of a plucked string as tantamount to a "Faustian error," a fight against the natural process of decay that all life must contend with. [1] Dragon-Eye's use of the guitar can be understood in similar terms, whereby the distortion becomes a product of rebirth, a sign of the eternal existence of the past within the present, a desire to defy death through an appeal to the past. In this case, the past is represented by Dragon-Eye's reptilian nature and kinship with electricity, both of which find expression in his guitar-playing. And the difficulty with which the technology has in containing Dragon-Eye's primitive expressions suggests a line between the inside and outside of an electrical circuit, a line that he rides when displaying his simultaneous kinship to both the ancient and the contemporary through his ambiguously diegetic musical performance.

The idea of distortion acting as a symbol of rebirth is most clearly indicated in the second guitar-playing scene, which begins with Dragon-Eye returning home to find his guitar reduced to pieces at the hands of Thunderbolt Buddha. After resurrecting the instrument from its grave and piecing it back together, he starts to play. The sound starts out very quietly, with most of what we hear being the unamplified sound of the guitar itself. This reminds us that the electric guitar can, in fact, make sound in the absence of electricity, much like its traditional acoustic counterpart. Here the sound/image synch is very tight, and I imagine that location sound of the actor playing was used. Then, slowly, amplification comes in as the guitar finds its life once again. The soundtrack grows increasingly separate from the image, ultimately with other instruments coming in that bring it into the non-diegetic sphere. So we have a gradual shift from spatially contextualized unamplified sound to schizophonically removed electrified sound. For Ribot, the extension of the life of a sound through extreme amplification must come with the risks of electrical failure if it is to be justified as a noble pursuit. Ribot wants electrified guitar playing to be grounded in the physical realities of real-world context rather than being subject to representations that ultimately separate the sound from its source. In this scene the suggestion is made that the physical reality of dangerous distortion is linked to the sound's break from the diegesis, a situation that would seem to contradict Ribot.

This contradiction is of great importance. Dragon-Eye's playing is schizophonic while being grounded in the physical realities of electrical overload. When he plays, the city bursts. His source of power becomes the entire grid of the metropolis, so it makes sense that his sound should embody qualities of schizophonic transcendence that would allow it to encompass the entire metropolitan area. Ribot's argument is based on the localization of a single amplifier as the source of the sound. For Dragon-Eye, the city itself is his amplifier, and urban space becomes his stage. And so the diegesis expands from Dragon-Eye's immediate environment to cover a much larger space that he becomes a part of through the transcendental capabilities of his electrified self-expression. This idea amounts to an over-representation of Dragon-Eye's guitar sound that is much in keeping with Schafer's beliefs about the way sound operates in urban space. In turn, the over-represented soundspace is what Thunderbolt Buddha taps into, and so his connection to Dragon-Eye becomes clear: one puts the sound out, the other takes it in. It is a circle of production and consumption in which the two poles ultimately serve to contextualize one another, rendering the ambiguous result of their conflict a function of their reciprocal

relationship.

The circle of commodified production and consumption is one of the problems that critics of postmodernity like Frederic Jameson and R. Murray Schafer decry, arguing that context should be about more than just the commodification made possible by technologies of reproduction. But there is a way that ELECTRIC DRAGON suggests something deeper than simple commodification culture: each of these characters has a tie to history that lives along side them in the present, and their relationship to each other is symbolic of the circle of life and death that none of us can escape but which ultimately ensures that there is no death, only renewal. Ultimately, this idea of history living alongside the present is an extension of the boundary of the diegesis that presents itself during these scenes of musical performance. It's not so much that the two sides collapse into each other, but that they live alongside one another. They are distinct, and yet they operate together, just as the two characters do. The ancient dragon that is awakened in the contemporary world gets chased through this world and on out the other side, dragging behind it a thread that binds the inside and outside together. This is perhaps the best way to understand the poles of diegetic and non-diegetic sound: any flight between the two poles ultimately serves to bring them closer together while keeping the lines that separate them apparent. Sogo uses this threading strategy as the foundation for exploring the ways in which the ancient and the contemporary, the natural and the technological, function in similar fashion. Sogo seems to suggest that we needn't do away with the binary of the inside and the outside of the diegesis. Rather, examining their relationship can teach us about their dependence upon one another, just as sound and image are dependent upon one another in the cinema while remaining always, and necessarily, distinct.

fn1. Ribot, Marc. "Earplugs." Arcana: Musicians on Music. John Zorn, ed. New York: Granary Books, 2002:234.