

THE SOUNDTRACKS OF OUR LIVES: INTEGRATING MUSIC INTO AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

When we begin to incorporate sound into autobiographical writing, we usually add dialogue/conversation and the exterior sounds of settings (e.g., construction sounds, ocean waves crashing, airport announcements). These “exterior sounds” may be chosen by us (e.g., a beachfront vacation setting) or imposed upon us (e.g., construction sounds in a busy city, sounds of crying child in an adjacent apartment). Typically, we describe dialogue with adjectives or adverbs to set up tone so that readers can imagine what our voices (and the voices of others) may have sounded like. For “exterior sounds”, we may characterize them neutrally if they did not affect us or use descriptive words to capture the ways those sounds influenced our moods, thoughts and actions.

However, many of us surround ourselves with music throughout our day, most typically music we have chosen to listen to alone or with others and sometimes music we play or sing ourselves. In thinking about the use of sound, many writers find it useful to draw an analogy between filmmaking and writing. Filmmakers often create narratives in which music plays an important role. There are many analogies between filmmaking and writing; think about ways the definitions below can help you think about the use of sound in your autobiographical writing.

Within the narrative:

Diegetic sound; a character may sing in the shower or in an *a cappella* group, play an instrument in a musical ensemble, attend a concert or listen to music while performing surgery. The mood evoked by the music infuses the narrative. In certain film genres (e.g., musicals), *diegetic music* is essential. In other types of films, *diegetic music* may play only a minor role.

Added to the narrative/“laid over” the narrative:

Nondiegetic sound: the music editor typically chooses a series of songs (instrumental or vocal) and lays those sounds over the narrative at various points.

Clearly, the narrative could exist without the added sound, but the story would lack of layer of meaning, often a layer expected by film audiences.

A film soundtrack may be chosen to:

- *establish a mood or signal the film’s place in a genre (e.g., menacing horror film music)
- * to reinforce emotion in the narrative (e.g., “Amazing Grace” to convey mourning)
- *to help establish the context of a story (e.g., Madonna songs in a 1980s narrative)
- * to connect with the diegetic music in the film (e.g., character sings “Amazing Grace” earlier in the film and the soundtrack includes the song later).

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