



HAL
open science

Diegesis

John Pier

► **To cite this version:**

John Pier. Diegesis. Thomas A. Sebeok et al., eds. Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics, 1, Mouton De Gruyter, pp.209-211, 2009, Approaches to Semiotics, 978-3-11-014229-5. hal-03939873

HAL Id: hal-03939873

<https://hal.science/hal-03939873>

Submitted on 3 Feb 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Diegesis

As a semiotic concept, the English term *diegesis* comes from French *narratology. It is the equivalent of two expressions in French: (1) *diègèsis* (διήγησις), as opposed to *mimèsis* (μίμησις); and (2) *diégèse*, referring to the spatiotemporal universe designated by the narrative *text. It is important, therefore, that caution be exercised when employing the English translation.

Diegesis in its first sense is derived from *The Republic* (392c–398b). *Plato, in distinguishing between *logos* and *lexis*, maintained that the latter can be either in the pure narrative mode (as in the ancient dithyramb) or in the mimetic mode (as in the theater), the mixed form appearing in the epic. *Aristotle (*Poetics*, 1448a) subordinated both the narrative and the dramatic to mimesis as two forms of poetic imitation. In both cases, however, the two forms remain opposed to each other.

During the 1960s, the French structuralists adopted the diegesis vs. mimesis dichotomy as the equivalent in narratology of the telling vs. showing concept of Anglo-American criticism (cf. Lubbock 1921; Friedman 1955b). This principle, manifested particularly in narrative summary and scene, has appeared in narrative theory under various names: e.g., panoramic vs. scenic presentation (Lubbock 1921:67); *eigentliche* vs. *szenische Darstellung* (Ludwig 1891:202ff.); *berichtende Erzählung* vs. *szenische Darstellung* (Stanzel 1955:22, 1964:11–16); *dire* vs. *montrer* (Pouillon 1946:136). However, the structuralist position is distinguished from other approaches in that it avoids visual *metaphors. It has been pointed out, for instance, that in *natural language narrative, *nonverbal events can be mediated only through verbal events and that mimesis remains subordinated to diegesis (Genette 1966:152–56). Similar positions, related to *Benveniste's linguistic criteria for discourse and story (1966:237–50), appear in Todorov's "narration" vs. "representation" (1966:144) and in Weinrich's "erzählte" vs. "besprochene Welt" (1971). One observer has suggested that Genette's use of the diegesis vs. mimesis principle corresponds to Stanzel's modal opposition between narrator *functions vs. reflector functions (Cohn 1981:160, 170–71; cf. Stanzel 1979:189ff.; 1981).

Genette's narrative model, where this principle accounts for the relations between the narrator's and the characters' discourses, incorporates summary and scene as variables which are dependent upon the speed of narration and the degree of presence of the narrator's voice (1972:184–203; cf. Debray-Genette 1971). Accordingly, the term *distance* is used to cover the two aspects of this narrative category: (1) narrative of events (cf. diegesis) and (2) narrative of words (cf. mimesis). The latter aspect consists of the various types of characters' discourse: (1) narrated, (2) transposed (in indirect style), and (3) reported (in direct style). (This use of the term is therefore not to be confused with *distance* in Booth's sense [1961a:68–73; 1961b:155–59], or with the temporal distance separating narrated event from narration.) Distance, together with perspective, constitutes mode: the "regulation of narrative *information" (cf. Todorov 1966:141–46; Lintvelt 1981:51–52; for an author who rejects the diegesis vs. mimesis principle, see Bal 1977:26–28).

In its second sense, *diegesis* is the spatiotemporal universe in which the story is situated. Theoreticians (even those writing in French) frequently employ diegesis as a synonym for story – a practice which partly originates in the misleading identification of diegesis with Todorov's narrative as story (vs. narrative as discourse) (Genette 1972:72, n.1; cf. Todorov 1966). Actually, the expression *diégèse* comes from *film theory, where

it designates the spatiotemporal relations within the represented world, as opposed to those to which the signifying *medium (or film) is subject (Souriau 1948; 1953b; cf. Metz 1968, 1972. For the use of this term in the semiotics of *theater, see Souriau 1956:11 and Issacharoff 1981). *Diegesis* in this sense, while a necessary ingredient of story, clearly does not cover *actions and their *actants, and it should therefore not be used interchangeably with *story*.

Once this aspect of diegesis appears in narratology, it is subject to two sets of determinations (Genette 1969:201-03; 1972:238-59). The first – person – concerns the absence vs. the presence of the narrator in the narrated world: heterodiegetic vs. homodiegetic (autodiegetic, when the narrator is protagonist). The traditional grammatical criteria (third person vs. first person) is thus dropped, as all narration is seen as “virtually” in the first person. (See the commentary in Cohn 1978 [272-73, n.35]; for the use of this terminology in the study of autobiography, see Lejeune 1975.)

The second determination – narrative level – is based on the contextualization of narrative discourse: (1) the extradiegetic level is external to the events of the primary narrative; (2) the (intra)diegetic level is that of the events situated within the primary narrative; (3) the metadiegetic level is that of the events situated within the secondary narrative. Given the dynamic relations which link these levels one to another, the narrative instance of the primary narrative is extradiegetic, just as that of the secondary narrative is diegetic. However, various forms of infractions of these levels are possible (e.g., when an extradiegetic narrator intervenes in the diegesis), and they are grouped under the term *metalepse*. Finally, the intersection of person and the first two narrative levels results in four categories which constitute the status of the narrator.

The prefix **meta-*, as used in this context, has provoked some controversy. Genette stipulates in his study that metadiegesis (and metanarrative) are to be taken in the opposite sense of the logico-linguistic **metalanguage* (cf. *Jakobson 1960:356): rather than a level *about* the primary level, metadiegesis is a level embedded *within* it (1972:139, n.1). One critic has argued, however, that in order to avoid terminological confusion, a hierarchy should be established in which *hypo-* replaces *meta-*: hypodiegesis (and hyponarrative) would then correspond to a level which is *inferior* to diegesis, whereas metadiegesis would correspond to a level which is *superior* to diegesis – a level at which would appear a narrative *on* narrative (Bal 1977:24, 35, 1981). But it seems that, had this critic faithfully adhered to this visual logic, she would have named the superior level not *metadiegesis*, but *hyperdiegesis*. (cf. Genette 1982.) The central factor remains (as Bal is well aware) that a distinction must be made between primary narrative and secondary (i.e., embedded) narrative and their respective levels (cf. Rousset 1973:69-70; Lintvelt 1981:209-14). This is not to say, however, that this distinction does not prove problematic in the analysis of some kinds of texts (cf. Rimmon 1976a:359-60, 1976b; for its use in the analysis of *mise en abyme*, see Dällenbach 1977:70-72).

Another commentator considers that the relation between the extradiegetic and the diegetic levels is subject to a metalinguistic function (Bronzwaer 1978:1-2). This scheme (similarly to the previous one) reverses that proposed by Genette, since it seeks to identify the extradiegetic level with metadiscourse. One can, of course, speak of a metalinguistic function in **literature*, insofar as literary texts contain **indices* which point to their own paraphrase and/or interpretation (cf. Hamon 1977; Heuvel 1977; Prince 1977; Rossum-Guyon 1980-81). As for Genette, he does include among the five functions of the narrator a metalinguistic (or metanarrative) one — *fonction de régie* ‘control

function' — which serves to organize the text internally (1972:261–65). It is on the basis of these and other criteria that we must conclude that extradiegesis — unlike metalanguage — is not “about” or “on” diegesis, but rather that it is a narrative level which is *external* to that of the world represented in the primary narrative. J. Pi.