

"IT FLOWS THROUGH ME LIKE RAIN"
MINIMAL MUSIC AND TRANSCENDENCE IN *AMERICAN BEAUTY* (1999)

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1. INTRODUCTION

Minimalism in film scoring may seem like a contradiction in terms. When Hollywood cinema began to draw on composers like Max Steiner or Alfred Newman in the 1930s to write original film scores, they established a late-Romantic maximalist soundtrack of 'wall-to-wall' scoring, overwhelming audiences with lush melodies, symphonic instrumentation and catchy leitmotifs. Yet during the second half of the 20th century, a different style of music began to shape a number of films that was characterized by simplicity and repetition and drew inspiration from the art of minimal music. Focusing on an influential example of this tradition, *American Beauty* from 1999 directed by Sam Mendes with a film score written by Thomas Newman, this essay will explore how minimal music and film may be interrelated and how they interacted, in this case, at the borderline of mainstream and art cinema.

A brief initial section will revisit the discourse on music in film as an intermedial constellation and elaborate on Nicholas Cook's metaphor model of musical meaning. The discussion of *American Beauty* will then revolve around two basic issues: on the one hand, how minimal music interacts with the film's themes, and on the other, to what extent minimalism may be seen to represent an American idiom of film music. Although from its inception Hollywood cinema was a globalized industry transgressing national boundaries of style, I argue that, beginning in the 1990s, minimal music came to be coded as a musical vernacular distinct from the European leitmotif tradition on the one hand, and the pop and rock song tradition on the other. In a number of significant productions that belong to the category

of 'network narratives,' minimal music began to interact with issues and images of contemporary American society. Generally, the thematic implications were varied and open, yet in some cases like *American Beauty* the music came to signify the desire for an idealized American community by shaping a style of dehierarchized musical relations that projected as one of its features a sense of equality and connectedness.

2. FILM MUSIC AND MUSICAL MEANING

In the introduction to his study *Analyzing Musical Multimedia*, the British musicologist Nicholas Cook emphatically states that "music is never 'alone'" (23). Cook is sketching his argument that the interaction between music and other media should be seen as a metaphorical relationship, and he explains why an interest in questions of multimedia is crucial (3–23). In order to investigate the potential of music as a source of meaning, the notion of multimedia is important because this meaning hardly ever emerges from music alone. As Cook suggests, listeners and spectators hardly ever encounter a musical piece as music only, i.e. as a form of aesthetic experience in complete isolation from other semiotic systems. The meanings that music may create are therefore usually entangled with the meanings suggested by the combination of music with images, lyrics, visual sequences, texts, sounds, actions on a stage, program notes, and much more. Instead of dealing with music only, we are thus dealing with "instances of multimedia" (100), as Cook calls them for lack of a better term. As a consequence, the investigation of musical meaning should begin by thinking about the synesthetic as well as relational nature of these instances.

When dealing with the specific case of film music, one might object that the mediated character of music has always been a focal point of classic studies by authors such as Hanns Eisler and Theodor W. Adorno. Yet Cook's renewed emphasis on the 'never aloneness' of music, i.e. on its specific contribution in hybrid multimedia

constellations, allows us to approach film music as one of the crucial, if not constitutive instances of multimedia of the 20th and 21st centuries. Beginning with the scathing aesthetic critique by Eisler and Adorno in the 1940s, and supported by a plethora of anecdotes about the lack of musical sophistication in the Hollywood establishment, film music in the United States has had a long struggle of being accepted as a legitimate art form. Following Cook's suggestion about the cultural significance of music as an irreducible part of multimedia constellations, this lack of appreciation may be reframed: in an age of technological reproduction, and drawing on a long history of music theater, film music becomes an exemplary site for the creation of complex and manifold interrelations of music, sound, and visual sequences. In the United States, but also at a global level, it represents the cultural 'benchmark' for instances of multimedia which all subsequent media constellations have had to confront.

This essay will therefore approach film music as a major field of multimedia innovations, yet a few initial observations on its treatment as lacking in complexity or cultural prestige may frame the following discussion. As a musical practice, film music developed under the conditions of industrial forms of cultural production. It was shaped by the division of labor, a logic of standardization and the efficient use of resources as well as the goal of profit maximization. In the early 1930s, after the transition to sound cinema had been completed, a pattern was established that saw film scores being added in the final steps of postproduction. Composers had to work under enormous time pressure, often composing, orchestrating, conducting, and recording the music in eight weeks or less. Stories of frustrated composers are legion, recounting how directors or producers with no musical education wanted to use film music without appreciating its intrinsic qualities or its value as an art form (cf. Cooke, *History* 69–93; Darby/Du Bois 184–97).

From this angle, as a last minute addition intended merely to increase the entertainment value of the visual narrative, film music was traditionally assigned the low status of functional music

(*Gebrauchsmusik*) as opposed to the higher status of autonomous or art music. For Adorno and Eisler, writing in the 1940s, it was contaminated by the commercial organization of the culture industry relegating music to an inferior position *vis-à-vis* the image track and limiting its role to creating the illusion of unity (cf. Adorno/Eisler 3–19). The contested value of film music in relation to other forms of music was thus deduced from the various ways in which industrial as well as artistic practices combined music and image, and from the degree of dependence or autonomy that these practices attributed to the music.

In this sense, the mode of production often contributed to the impression that the relationship between visual sequences and music had been established in hierarchical terms in the cinema—with the image track as superior and the music as inferior. As Cook argues, this traditional view led to a relative paucity of models analyzing the relationship between image and music, while the dominant model of parallelism versus counterpoint was insufficient to grasp the complexity of creating meaning in instances of multimedia and thus failed to adequately appreciate the contribution of music in these instances (cf. Cook 57–97). Academic research of the last twenty-five years, however, has amply demonstrated that film music has always been a core element of film narration as well as a sophisticated stylistic device: film music produces emotional effects, projects moods and interior states, guides the viewers' attention, establishes generic traits, and announces plot points. It provides atmosphere and local color, identifies and characterizes individuals, provides continuity, constructs space, punctuates storylines, creates suspense, and much more (cf. Kalinak; Cooke, "Film"). And yet, Cook's point is well taken; in order to better appreciate the contribution of music to the production of meaning in complex instances of multimedia, more elaborate ways of grasping their hybrid, synesthetic quality are needed.

In *Analysing Musical Multimedia* Cook proposes a metaphor model of multimedia relations based on interactive processes of attribute

transfer that informs the following discussion. In the course of his argument he posits two important premises: first, the relationship between music and pictures is seen to be dynamic and shaped by semiotic difference. As he puts it, “the music signifies in a manner that is qualitatively different from the pictures” (67). Second, music does not reproduce a meaning that may be unproblematically presupposed for images or words, but rather music constructs and projects meaning in its own right (cf. 57–97). Again, the interrelation is dynamic, based on “the reciprocal transfer of attributes that gives rise to a meaning constructed, not just reproduced, by multimedia” (97). Indeed, this notion of a “transfer of attributes” (81) lies at the heart of Cook’s metaphor model. In order to create meaning through the process of interrelating music and images, an ‘enabling similarity’ between music and images is needed. This similarity becomes a precondition for the applicability of the metaphor model, in which the experience and understanding of something is achieved through expressive means of another medium (cf. 70). Yet Cook emphasizes that the notion of similarity should not be seen as the end result, but rather as a way of initiating the interactional process.¹ The construction of musical meaning thus becomes just as important for instances of multimedia as the creation of meaning via the visual and sound tracks.²

1 He writes: “The metaphor model [...] invokes similarity not as an end, but as a means. Meaning now inheres not in similarity, but in the difference that similarity articulates by virtue of the transfer of attributes [...]” (Cook 81).

2 In subsequent chapters, Cook suggests that their respective contributions may be analyzed along the lines of a new terminology of conformance, complementation, and contest; for a discussion of this terminology, cf. Gorbman. A general overview of models dealing with the interrelations of film and music is provided by Buhler, Neumeyer and Buhler, and Kalinak.

3. MINIMAL MUSIC AND FILM

Minimalism in film music may be defined in very broad terms as a musical style characterized by reductionism and simplification, both in harmonic as well as melodic registers (cf. Potter). Due to the varied and hybrid nature of film music, precluding, in most cases, the stylistic and generic coherence or ‘purity’ of autonomous music, the minimalist character of individual scores needs to be discussed on a case-by-case basis.³ Minimalism in film is usually one musical element among others, particularly in mainstream narrative cinema which freely mixes musical styles, sonorities, and preexisting classical or popular pieces.⁴ Following Timothy A. Johnson’s suggestion for minimalism in art music, it therefore seems useful to conceptualize minimalism in film scoring not so much as an autonomous aesthetic or a coherent style but rather as a technique with specific features, among them “a continuous formal structure, an even rhythmic texture and bright tone, a simple harmonic palette, a lack of extended melodic lines, and repetitive rhythmic patterns” (Johnson 751). How many of these features derived from minimalism in art music need to be fulfilled may certainly be a point for discussion, yet film scores

3 In the discourse on minimalism in art music, many authors point to the difficulties of trying to establish clear-cut definitions and to the great variety of different sub-styles. They also mention the rejection of the fuzzy label ‘minimalism’ by many composers. A common strategy has been to find a number of similar stylistic features but to refrain from trying to define an overarching minimalist aesthetic. Johnson sees “simplicity” (748) as a common feature of many works, while Heisinger points to recurring “practices of restriction and reiteration” (435). Following Heisinger, the notion of ‘artistic redundancy’ consists of certain stylistic elements: “It features reiteration [...]—long sustained tones, repeated rhythmic, melodic, and/or harmonic patterns, cells, or phrases, or the like—that creates relatively static ‘drawn-out’ qualities” (434). Bernard discusses the interrelation of minimalism in the plastic arts and music as well as the more recent ‘resurgence’ of tonality in American music; cf. “Minimalist Aesthetic” and “Minimalism.”

4 However, some directors and composers working in an art cinema tradition such as Peter Greenaway and Michael Nyman have aimed for more ‘pure’ instances of minimalist scores.

drawing on some of them for extended narrative sequences may rightfully be called minimalist in character.

According to the historical overview provided by Mervyn Cooke, minimalism in film scoring established a 'middle-ground' between the traditional forms of orchestral scores, electronic music, and pop tunes. Based on the repetition of intricate yet simplified musical patterns it was an avant-garde inspired departure from the classical tradition of symphonic scoring and its post-Romantic, leitmotif-based technique. Yet at the same time, adjusted to the needs of film narratives, it was more accessible than the autonomous minimalist pieces by composers such as Steve Reich, Philip Glass, LaMonte Young, or Terry Riley (cf. Cooke, *History* 478–483). Due to its specific character, minimal music in films represented two major differences vis-à-vis the leitmotif tradition: from a technical point of view, it appeared to be highly efficient and functional. It was easily adjustable according to the needs at hand such as the length of the passage or the balancing of music and dialogue. Yet at the same time, it also posed new challenges for the creation of narrative meaning. As Cooke points out, minimal music seemed to be a good match for passages of emotional neutrality and distance, yet for more conventional narrative requirements it appeared to be too static and inflexible (cf. Cooke, *History* 478–483).

Despite these ambiguous qualities, Cooke suggests that, with jazz having become a global phenomenon, minimal music in film was developing into an "understated nationalism" (*History* 478). It was seen to express an American national musical idiom, even though, judging from the various influences shaping its aesthetic, film music in the United States may be regarded as a prime example of American popular culture's hybrid, transnational and global character. Historically film music had mixed different kinds of musical traditions and styles, drawing on European music initially but gradually extending its range to include indigenous symphonic styles (e.g. Aaron Copland) as well as high or low, experimental or mainstream, symphonic or popular forms. From this perspective, then,

the “Americanness” of film music in the United States lay in the way of using music to create a specific kind of aesthetic experience, i. e. a mode of interrelating image, sound and music, rather than in shaping a national musical idiom.

And yet with the arrival of minimal music in film scoring, this situation seemed to change. As a radical counterpoint to the leitmotif tradition dominated initially by the European school of composers such as Max Steiner, Erich Korngold, or Franz Waxmann, it introduced a musical style capable of creating new metaphorical connotations for the sound of American culture and society. Early examples of the minimalist tradition represented by composers such as Thomas Newman, Philip Glass, or Mark Isham were written for “network narratives” (Bordwell 29) and attempted to find new ways of interrelating heterogeneous slices of American life. *Short Cuts*, Robert Altman’s film from 1993 based on Raymond Carver’s literary tradition of minimal realism, established an influential model.⁵ It used Mark Isham’s score as a richly suggestive glue connecting and holding together the fragments of a larger kaleidoscopic image, and it presented the music as a metaphorical construction of a community emerging from the nodal points within the network.

Several characteristics of minimal music support this potential. It is characterized by a sense of openness in terms of its musical structure as well as its cultural and narrative meanings. The ‘spatial’ organization of minimal music implies that it is not structured in a linear fashion, not driven by melody but by minimal variations of tapestry-like melodic and rhythmic patterns which support the notion of horizontal expansiveness. Furthermore, due to this formal organization of expansiveness and semantic indeterminacy, it is also less attached to a single individual or location than the traditional leitmotif.

5 Just as in musicology, the concept of minimalism in literature is an equally contested issue which has been discussed along the lines of the maximalist tradition of postmodernism and the parallel tradition of minimal realism or neorealism epitomized by Raymond Carver; cf. Leypoldt.

Minimal music seems to be the ideal musical idiom evoking a trans-individual, even transcendent notion of community.

Both characteristics are present in this essay's case in point, *American Beauty*, where minimal music is metaphorically projecting and creating a notion of communal cohesion. It achieves this through a double movement: by shaping a style of dehierarchized musical relations based on a sense of equality and dynamic exchange of its constitutive elements, and by showing, at the same time, that it represents an idealized or 'imagined' notion of communal cohesion that is constantly challenged by the gendered and generation-specific popular music. As the following sections shall demonstrate, minimal cues and popular tunes are vying for attention in *American Beauty*, creating the sense of a musical 'war' and invoking the desire for a less pathological and less corrupted idea of community.

4. MINIMAL CUES AND THE MUSICAL WAR IN AMERICAN BEAUTY

Thomas Newman, who wrote the music for *American Beauty* and who is a prolific composer of minimalism in film scores,⁶ developed his distinctive style through the creative use of a relatively limited set of instruments, a strong compositional base in percussions and rhythmic arrangements, and, as Newman himself states, intricate patterns of repeating musical phrases that shift the focus away from harmonies (cf. Cooke, *History* 478–483; Clemmensen, "Newman"). To be sure, all of these characteristics were present in the long history of film scoring—one of the early masters of enigmatic ostinato patterns is without doubt Bernard Hermann—, yet with composers like Thomas Newman the narrative and metaphorical potential of minimal cues took on a new force in the 1980s and 1990s. One of the crucial films shaping the transitional period of the 1990s in this regard was indeed

6 The score of Robert Altman's second influential film from the early 1990s, *The Player* (1992), was written by Newman.

American Beauty with Kevin Spacey and Annette Bening in the title roles, a film which has been subjected to numerous interpretations focusing on questions of sexuality, gender, or the suburban malaise, but not on the music. Newman's score uses a wide variety of instruments including xylophones, marimbas, bongos, cymbals, guitars, piano, banjo, detuned mandolin, or steel guitar.⁷ It shifts from multilayered, hypnotically paced percussive sections to short melodic cues relying primarily on the piano, and it contrasts these minimalist passages with strategically placed and cleverly selected source music drawn primarily from rock songs and big band tunes, among them "All Along the Watchtower" (Bob Dylan), "All Right Now" (Free), "The Seeker" (The Who), "Call Me Irresponsible" (Bobby Darin), "Where Love Has Gone" (Bobby Darin), and "Something Grand" (Hilton Ruiz Ensemble).

This musical 'war' between Newman's minimalism and the gender-, class- and generation-specific popular songs becomes the structuring principle of the musical constellation in *American Beauty*. Yet the film is primarily seen to have established and legitimized the minimalist idiom as a forceful tradition in its own right. Ironically enough, however, it also seems to epitomize the difficulties of dealing with the aesthetic of minimal scores in the first place. As one critic pointed out: "There are, from time to time, film scores that are an absolutely perfect match for the content of their overarching production, but which, for whatever reason, largely fail when heard on album. *American Beauty* is perhaps one of the most vivid examples of such a score" (Clemmensen, "American Beauty"). Since the score did not include a theme song, this critic observed that, on its own, "it risks becoming a dull and unremarkable listening experience" (Clemmensen, "American Beauty").⁸ The score's distance from a tra-

7 This list is taken from the analysis of Clemmensen, "American Beauty."

8 Clemmensen even suggests to disregard the score in favor of the collection of popular songs: "This is one of the rare occasions when a score collector might be better off purchasing the popular song album for *American Beauty* and hearing seven of the very best minutes of Newman's

dition of using theme songs and musical leitmotifs, then, was seen to be at the same time its greatest strength and, to some critics and collectors at least, a weakness of the movie.

Many of Newman's minimalist cues in *American Beauty* are used to situate and frame specific scenes such as the sequences where the young 'romantic' Ricky (Wes Bentley) is observing the sadness or beauty of everyday life through the viewfinder of his video camera, the satirically inflected attempts of Carolyn (Annette Bening) to succeed as a real estate agent, or the dream sequences in which Lester (Kevin Spacey) envisions the sexually tempting Angela (Mena Suvari) as an object of desire.⁹ The source music, on the other hand, propels the narrative in a much more direct and visceral sense. When the Burnhams are listening to Peggy Lee's rendition of "Bali Ha'i" (1949) over dinner, the teenage daughter Jane (Thora Birch) objects to the music by calling it "elevator music," thus highlighting the fact that the question of which music should be played in which scene becomes a contentious issue, a culture war separating the characters along the lines of generation, gender, subcultural belonging, and musical taste—the scene is mirrored at a later stage, when the 'remasculated' Lester violently protests against Carolyn's preference for a style of music that he calls "Lawrence Welks shit."

score along with a more enjoyable collection of songs" (Clemmensen, "American Beauty").

- 9 Following Erving Goffman and James Naremore, we can distinguish between two basic levels of performances in audiovisual narratives: first, acting in social situations to define, influence and control the situation; second, consciously shaping and presenting one's alignment in a scene as a way of reflecting on the scene and/or the strategic nature of performances (cf. Goffman 13–82, Naremore 9–96). Performances as bodily acts are based on the fuzziness of analogous forms of semiotic signification. Musical scores help to delimit and sharpen the possible meanings of gestures. To be sure, this is not the only, and probably not the most important, function of film music, but it represents what shall be called the musical framing or situatedness of performances in this essay. One of the initial questions may therefore be to what extent minimal music establishes a more open framing of performances, i.e. a more fluid and mobile form of situating actions and interactions.

American Beauty is thus characterized by various intricate combinations of music and performance defining the film's metaphorical projections that shall be discussed by concentrating on three key moments: the exposition, the middle section including the often discussed 'plastic bag sequence' and the concluding montage of Lester's death. One of Newman's most well-known cues titled "Dead Already" on the CD of the film's soundtrack appears right at the beginning in what shall subsequently be called the "exposition sequence."¹⁰ Here exemplary everyday situations, played out visually, are combined with the hypnotically rhythmic marimba and percussion patterns at the musical level, and the voice-over of the main character Lester Burnham commenting retrospectively, from an 'impossible' postmortem position, on his earlier life. This intricate constellation, reminiscent of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), immediately establishes an atmosphere of distance and meta-fictional reflexivity on the character's lives and the performative dimension of their behavior, their feeling of having to act specific roles. It creates a heightened sense of witnessing what James Naremore has called a "performance within performance" (cf. 68–82), i.e. a representation of performative codes that are explicitly addressed at a higher, second level.

5. SETTING THE TONE

After a brief, videotaped prologue, in which Lester's daughter Jane comments disparagingly on him, the "exposition sequence" opens the narrative of *American Beauty*. An excellent post-classical example of providing the audience with a highly condensed exposition of story material, it defines the setting as white American suburbia and identifies the main characters: the angry teenager, the nagging wife, the middle-aged male "gigantic loser," and their neighborhood. It

¹⁰ All subsequent references to the titles of Newman's cues are taken from the CD, cf. "*American Beauty*. Original Motion Picture Score."

looks forward to the future death of Lester Burnham and it looks back, nostalgically, to a life when the couple was happier than in the present, thereby introducing key themes: the importance of outward appearances, the drive to succeed, sexual frustration, the routine of everyday life, and the determination to win back what was lost along the way. Moreover, the “exposition sequence” establishes the style and tone of the narration, a deadpan, ironical mode full of sophisticated observations and insights. Lester Burnham reflects upon himself and his family from the distance of postmortem hindsight, yet the tone of his voice has an informal, intimate quality, while voice-over and visual focalization together create a dense network of interrelations resulting from acts of observing and evaluating others, and likewise, of becoming their object of observation and evaluation.

In this intricate narrative as well as social network, the first and probably most famous cue of Thomas Newman’s film score “Dead Already” sets in with a simple pattern of three diatonic harmonies played by marimba. The jazzy pattern is repeated a number of times, but it is clearly a repetition with a difference as the rhythm is picking up speed and new instruments as well as sounds are added. Closely aligned with the action, the music helps to punctuate and structure the scenes and the voice-over. Yet its aesthetic form also shares elements with the action. Its sense of repetition points to the routine and everydayness of getting ready to go to work, while its lack of complex melodies or leitmotif-like themes establishes a sense of ordinariness. Although this becomes clearer as the narrative unfolds, at this early point in the story the music already interacts with the visual scenes and the voice-over by introducing the rhythm of life’s small steps, repetitions, and variations in an abstract, yet playful form. In this opening sequence, then, the music establishes two core functions of Newman’s score in the film as a whole. First, in a quickly changing, elliptically condensed array of scenes and locations, minimal music

establishes a sense of continuity.¹¹ Second, it signifies at the level of metaphor. It helps to create the image of a transindividual community, a vision of interconnectedness that evokes and eventually attempts to uphold the ideal of communal belonging.

At this early point in the story, however, the visionary connotations of the minimalist cues are not yet evident. Rather, *American Beauty* sets out as a social satire on the aspirations and self-delusions of the white, suburban middle-class that permeate the spheres of family, work, and sexuality. It registers a profound feeling of frustration and disappointment at the core of this lifestyle and tells the story of this crisis through Lester Burnham's "attempt to recapture his youth, his freedom from authority, and his sexual attractiveness" (McKittrick 5). Thematically and musically, Lester's energies are channeled in two opposite directions: the nostalgia of a lost past full of promise and vitality, and the desire generated by the spectacular fantasy of a sexual encounter with his daughter's friend Angela. Both directions are fuelled by the longing for a different life built on the notion of innocence—the innocence of youth not yet corrupted by the pressures of adulthood, and the (presumed) innocence of a precocious sexuality.¹²

American Beauty may therefore be seen not just as a social satire but also as a melodrama centering on Lester's sense of victimization—a melodrama of white middle-class masculinity.¹³ In the sphere of work Lester feels victimized as a 'whore' for the advertising business and blackmails his way into a severance package that

11 This function of creating continuity is, of course, not unique to minimal music but a very common and traditional way of combining different styles of music with visual sequences (cf. Cooke, "Film Music").

12 On the ambiguous implications of Lester's fantasy transgressing the taboos of incest and pedophilia, cf. McKittrick; Karlyn.

13 As numerous critics have pointed out, the film participates in the 'crisis of white masculinity' discourse characteristic of American cinema in the 1990s (cf. Karlyn; Nungesser). Focusing on questions of religious ecstasy, Leonard discusses *American Beauty* and its relation to the history of melodrama. For a more extended discussion of the melodramatic mode and its relation to American cinema in the 1990s, cf. Decker.

is based on a fictitious sexual harassment charge for which he fantasizes himself as the victim of forced homosexual acts. At home Lester regresses to a stage of adolescent behavior reminiscent of the rebellious counterculture of the late 1960s, yet this behavior does not lead to his liberation, it merely speeds up his decline. After losing his job, Lester continues to follow a logic of self-abasement by seeking a job with the least amount of responsibility—selling burgers in a fast-food chain. Self-abasement and a sense of humiliation, then, underlie many scenes related to work but also to sexuality. In the “exposition sequence” Lester is seen masturbating in the shower, later, during one of his incestuous fantasies, his wife catches him masturbating in bed. Humiliating revelations such as this and the frustration of being an object of ridicule for young women mark him as sexually inadequate and incapable of prevailing in the power relations of gender.

The final irony for Lester is that, even though he is clearly coded as heterosexual, he is mistaken for being homosexual. His refusal to reciprocate the advances of the “repressed homosexual” (McKittrick 5) Colonel Fitts (Chris Cooper) seals the fate of his death. Lester has to die as a stand-in for the Colonel’s self-hatred and his shame of having been discovered as a ‘faggot-hating’ homosexual.¹⁴ Clever and sensitive as Lester’s meta-fictional observations and comments are from the first moments of the “exposition sequence” onwards, he is singled out as the pathetic victim of a hostile and corrupting workplace, the power of women, and the lethal consequences of masculine aggression. If Newman’s “Dead Already” cue, relying on the repetition and variation of rhythmically dense but simple melodious patterns, conjures up an egalitarian ethos of democratic cultures,

¹⁴ Potkay observes that the character of Colonel Fitts plays on “suburban gothic’ clichés” (84); however, the question of homosexual relations, including homosexual desire and incest, has been discussed as a marginalized, yet crucial aspect of *American Beauty* complementing questions of heteronormativity (cf. McKittrick; Karlyn). In a Lacanian reading, Hausmann critiques the film for its “denial of Otherness in homoerotic and homosexual relations” (115).

treating every character with the same kind of detached compassion and respect, the malaise at the heart of *American Beauty*'s suburban culture is the relentless production of differences in the spheres of work, gender, and sexuality. While this is only alluded to in the "exposition sequence," it takes center stage as the film develops and begins to inform the musical 'war' between minimalist cues and popular songs. One sequence from the middle of the film featuring the rock song "American Woman" may serve as a case in point for how popular songs support the production of cultural hierarchies and how, following suggestions by Adorno and Eisler, they gain their force by drawing on music's power to animate the image and, by implication, the body.

6. ANIMATING THE BODY

In *Composing for the Films*, Adorno and Eisler argue that, in the cinema, images and music had been brought together through technology, not through an intrinsic logic of their respective and distinctive developments. This premise is crucial for them to claim that, at heart, the combination of images and music is antithetical and should not be masked by an illusion of unity. Accordingly, one of the 'magical' functions of music has been to animate the images, which, on their own, appear to be ghost-like—at the same time "living and nonliving" (75). Due to this ghost-like status, Adorno and Eisler conclude, music is needed to make the images come alive:

The photographed picture as such lacks motivation for movement; only indirectly do we realize that the pictures are in motion, that the frozen replica of external reality has suddenly been endowed with the spontaneity that it was deprived of by its fixation, and that something petrified is manifesting a kind of life of its own. At this point music intervenes, supplying momentum, muscular energy, a sense of corporeity, as it were. (78)

This notion of music being a “stimulus of motion, not a reduplication of motion” (78) points to the unique role of music helping to animate visual sequences that, by themselves, appear to be overdetermined by the markings of technological reproduction. Put differently, in the relational model of Adorno and Eisler bodily gestures are not expressed by music but rather activated or justified through the music (cf. 78). This potential of activating movement, of making the images more animated, more ‘alive’ is shared by the music in *American Beauty*. Pop and rock songs as source music not only have a special capacity to capture the nostalgic memory of a specific historical period, they also trigger an intensified bodily reaction.¹⁵ They animate the bodies and initiate passionate, explicitly theatrical or posed actions. In short, they highlight the performative character of animated bodies and thus raise awareness for the presentation of a ‘performance within performance.’

This becomes most obvious in the “American Woman’ sequence” which is placed roughly in the middle of the film and marks a major turning point in the story. Lester Burnham changes from being a passive “loser” and “whore for the advertising industry” to becoming an active agent, if mainly regressing to attitudes of independence and toughness modeled on his adolescence. Carolyn, on the other hand, begins an affair with Buddy Kane (Peter Gallagher), the King of Real Estate. While Lester starts working out to enhance his body shape, she is taking shooting lessons. Both seem to be getting ready for a final confrontation that is also played out at the level of diegetic music. In her car, Carolyn sings along to the big band music of Bobby Darin, while Lester seems to relish the aggressive power of “American Woman” by The Guess Who from 1970, a song based on heavy drums, bass and rock guitar, a simple three-chord riff and high-pitched vocals. The misogynist lyrics (written, albeit, by a Canadian band) echo the allegorical tone of the film’s title *American Beauty* by

¹⁵ On the history of pop music and film cf. Cooke, *History* 396–421 and Lack 213–23.

channeling Lester's aggressive energies not just against his wife but rather against the kind of emasculating power that Carolyn represents to him.¹⁶

In this way, the presence of generation-specific source music and the nostalgic desire it evokes in *American Beauty* becomes an important instance of framing and situating performances by musical means. As Lester sings along to "American Woman" at the top of his lungs, the irresistible pull of the music triggers the body's desire to perform, culminating in his mimicking of the lead guitar solo and thus highlighting the 'performance within performance' mode. Source music in *American Beauty* is often used in this way like a classical leitmotif to identify and flesh out the characters, yet due to its musical characteristics, in particular its reliance on clichés as well as its time and technology-bound sound design, it seems to narrow the characters down, to make them less rather than more complex. Source music is thus needed to evoke the nostalgia of the character's lost past, but it also represents the nightmare of a musical memory perpetually arrested in a kind of fake rebellion.

Both forms of this 'rebellion' encoded by the diegetic music—Lester's retreat to adolescent masculinity and Carolyn's stylized image of toughness and commercial success—are ultimately doomed

16 In this sense, the female characters in *American Beauty*, though anchored in the fictional universe of white middle-class suburbia, represent allegories of femininity at a higher level. Indeed, "American Beauty"—the name of a rose—is one of the most conventional symbols of femininity that visually links both, the young woman and the middle-aged wife, turning them into ideologically coded allegories of 'America': on the one hand, the young, seductive all-American girl Angela, Lester's object of desire who turns out to be a virgin, and on the other, the domineering, emasculating wife and aggressive business woman Carolyn. Envisioned and narrated by Lester, both allegories are imaginary objects, one of desire, the other of fear, created to mask his self-loathing and feeling of impotence. Cf. Karlyn for a critique of Carolyn as the 'castrating mother' (82–85). Karlyn comments pointedly on the final scene between Lester and Angela: "*American Beauty* tells the nymphet's story as male fantasy: she exists for the man, the power she holds over him is illusory, and under the surface of her assertiveness or sexual forwardness is a helpless little girl" (87).

to failure. Foreshadowing this outcome, their musical worlds, made up of his rock tunes and her big band music, are both presented as another version of entrapment. Just as Lester and Carolyn, as representatives of a general lifestyle, are locked in their cars, suburban houses and gardens, the musical subcultures to which they retreat are one more indication of their mental and emotional limits. Thus, source music in *American Beauty* is a symbol of imprisonment, while the way out lies in Thomas Newman's nondiegetic minimal cues. In the "American Woman" sequence the rock music is juxtaposed with the "Lunch with the King" cue, in which small, simple melodious piano parts are built on a rhythmic foundation of bongos and other percussive instruments. With ease and grace the cue connects all scenes: Lester's "I'm just an ordinary guy with nothing to lose" stance, Buddy's advice "to project at all times an image of success," Ricky's filming of a dead bird because he thinks it's beautiful, and, finally, Carolyn's pleasure of "getting nailed by the King". As with the scenes at the beginning, the minimal cues create a sense of temporal continuity, yet they also establish more subtle and complex reverberations among the scenes. In their movement from repetition to variation, from simple patterns to surprising shifts and sounds, they manage to bridge and connect what seems to be divisive and fragmented at the level of source music, establishing a higher, transindividual notion of connectedness and attachment that will only be fully realized by the characters at the moment of irrevocable loss—the concluding sequence of Lester's death and the memories as well as reactions it evokes.

7. AURAL VISIONS OF TRANSCENDENCE

In contrast to the limitations of popular music and to the cultural distinctions of class, gender, race, or taste that it produces, minimal music in *American Beauty* may be seen as a signifier of the film's imagined American community. Its metaphorical implications as well as musical connotations help to project the desire and nostalgic longing

for a different, better, more beautiful and harmonious America at the heart of the film. If, following Nicholas Cook's suggestion, an enabling similarity between music and pictures is needed to speak of metaphorical cross-media references, then in *American Beauty* it seems to lie in a notion of equality *vis-à-vis* the rigid and destructive hierarchies of gender, work, and age. In this sense, the metaphorical implications of minimalism are a leveled musical playing field, its repetitive character, the horizontal, spatial organization of its rhythms, and cues and, finally, a dehierarchized yet dynamic overall structure full of internal, relational tensions. To be sure, these musical meanings are only realized in the hybrid combination of music and images. Yet in the case of *American Beauty*, the indeterminacy or openness of minimal music becomes the precondition for a vision of transcendence that goes beyond the realm of the visible to privilege the sound of the human voice and the connotations of a simplified yet richly suggestive musical universe.

Two key sequences establish the importance of musical minimalism for this visionary power; in one (placed almost immediately after the "American Woman" sequence), Ricky shows Jane his most precious videotape, a plastic bag circling in the air together with dead leaves against the background of a red brick wall; in the other (at the end of the film), Lester is shot, his voice-over sets in and he recalls the images and memories from the moment of his death, while it is simultaneously revealed who shot him. In the first sequence, as Ricky and Jane are staring at the low-resolution video image of the dancing plastic bag, Ricky describes the moment as the epiphany of an "entire life behind things" with a "benevolent force" signaling to him not to be afraid. Like other videotaped scenes recorded by Ricky to be able to 'remember,' the plastic bag alludes to, but does not reveal the overpowering "beauty in the world" that he confesses to feeling at times. In the final sequence of Lester's death, both the images of the circling plastic bag as well as the confession to a jubilant feeling of beauty are echoed in Lester's recollections, thereby linking his quest for happiness with the sensitivity and joy of the younger, romantic outsiders

Ricky and Jane.¹⁷ Indeed, since the dancing plastic bag is included in Lester's visual memories even though he has not *seen* the videotape before, the film leaves behind notions of plausibility to invoke the fantasy of transgenerational connections and to conjure up a transcendent vision of community.

Scholars commenting on this vision have critiqued the notion of transcendence in *American Beauty* as a "New Age spirituality" (Karlyn 78). Others have seen it more positively as a "feeling of interconnectedness" (Leonard 825) that leads up to "a transcendent meta-narrative of cosmic order and moral justice [...]" (Leonard 836). Similarly, Lester's final thoughts are seen to share a romantic, Wordsworthian vision of beauty and joy that communicates the lesson "of seeing one's relation to the wider circles that radiate outward from one's own egocentric sphere" (Potkay 84). Spirituality, interconnectedness, joy as "a de-individuating passion" (Potkay 78)—the final moments of *American Beauty* zooming out of middle-class suburbia seem to suggest the overcoming of the rampant, destructive individualism at the heart of the film, a shift from disappointment and depression to acceptance and joy. And yet, these readings fail to acknowledge some of the ambiguities inherent in the ending, the most obvious being that the vision of transcendence is not realized at the visual level but rather at the level of the music.

If the sequences of Ricky's videotape and Lester's recollections are connected through the images of the revolving plastic bag and the overpowering feeling of beauty, they are also linked through Newman's cue "American Beauty" playing alongside the videotape of the plastic bag and reappearing, in a slightly reworked and extended version, as "Any Other Name" at the end of the film.¹⁸ At its core, the

17 Cf. Karlyn on the strategies of mirroring and pairing different characters in *American Beauty*.

18 As one element of this reworking, the piano parts intersperse and echo the distinctive marimba pattern from the initial "exposition sequence" in subdued and less rhythmical but still recognizable form (cf. the cue "Blood Red" on "*American Beauty*. Original Motion Picture Score").

cue consists of a simple diatonic six note melody in C sharp major, built on the foundation of the tonic C sharp in low strings (or synthesizers) and moving in half and full notes around the dominant G sharp at its center. It is played, softly, on the piano and eschews the rhythmic percussiveness of the earlier cues. Yet it still moves with rhythmic and melodious variations along the basic circular pattern shifting the emphasis from one note to the next, adding and dropping variations, developing in an almost improvisational manner. Together with Ricky's comments on the epiphany-like moment of watching the revolving plastic bag, the "American Beauty" cue creates its own pattern of moving around in circles but it clearly projects the beauty of the "life behind things" that Ricky discovered and that the blurry images of the videotape recall but fail to reveal. It is the beauty of simplicity and of a repetition with a difference that both the bag as an indexical sign of the wind and the animated gestures of musical variations share—the breath of life.

In Lester's final montage of mnemonic images and scenes, the plastic bag sequence similarly emphasizes the visual act of remembering and of discovering beauty. Yet even though the cinematic quality of Lester's visual memories—the boy lying on the grass, his grandmother's hands, his daughter, his wife—surpasses the video footage in visual detail and splendor, they, too, in the end do not reveal the 'life behind things.' Rather, relying on the aesthetics of advertising cinematography, they primarily offer the superficial beauty of 'pretty images,' or the nostalgic black-and-white glimpses of the past. The powerful vision of transcendence, of going beyond the confines and entrapments of the material world, of being able to experience beauty and joy, then, is not realized at the level of visuality, it manifests itself at the aural level of Newman's minimal music.

While the reworked "American Beauty" cue reappears at the end, Lester's voice-over recounts that it is sometimes too much for him to *see* all the beauty at once. As his visual sense overloads, he stops trying to hold onto his impressions: "And then it flows through me like rain and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment

of my stupid little life.” Like Ricky’s epiphany of the wind animating an inanimate object of human waste, Lester at this point expresses the joy of being transfused by rain water, thereby linking beauty with nature and its corporeal experience. If beauty and transcendence are thus partially placed into a Romantic tradition, the final metaphor of beauty flowing through the body like rain may also be read as the experience of a musical piece. In this sense, the vision of beauty at the brink of death, unfathomable as it ultimately may be, is displaced from visuality to aurality, from images to music where it does not manifest itself as cognitive possession but as corporeal animation. With Thomas Newman’s minimalist cues, this experience revolves around simplicity and repetition, variation and interconnectedness to project a vision of beauty and community that builds on internal tensions but, by taking improvisational turns, eventually gives equal value and weight to its individual musical elements.

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