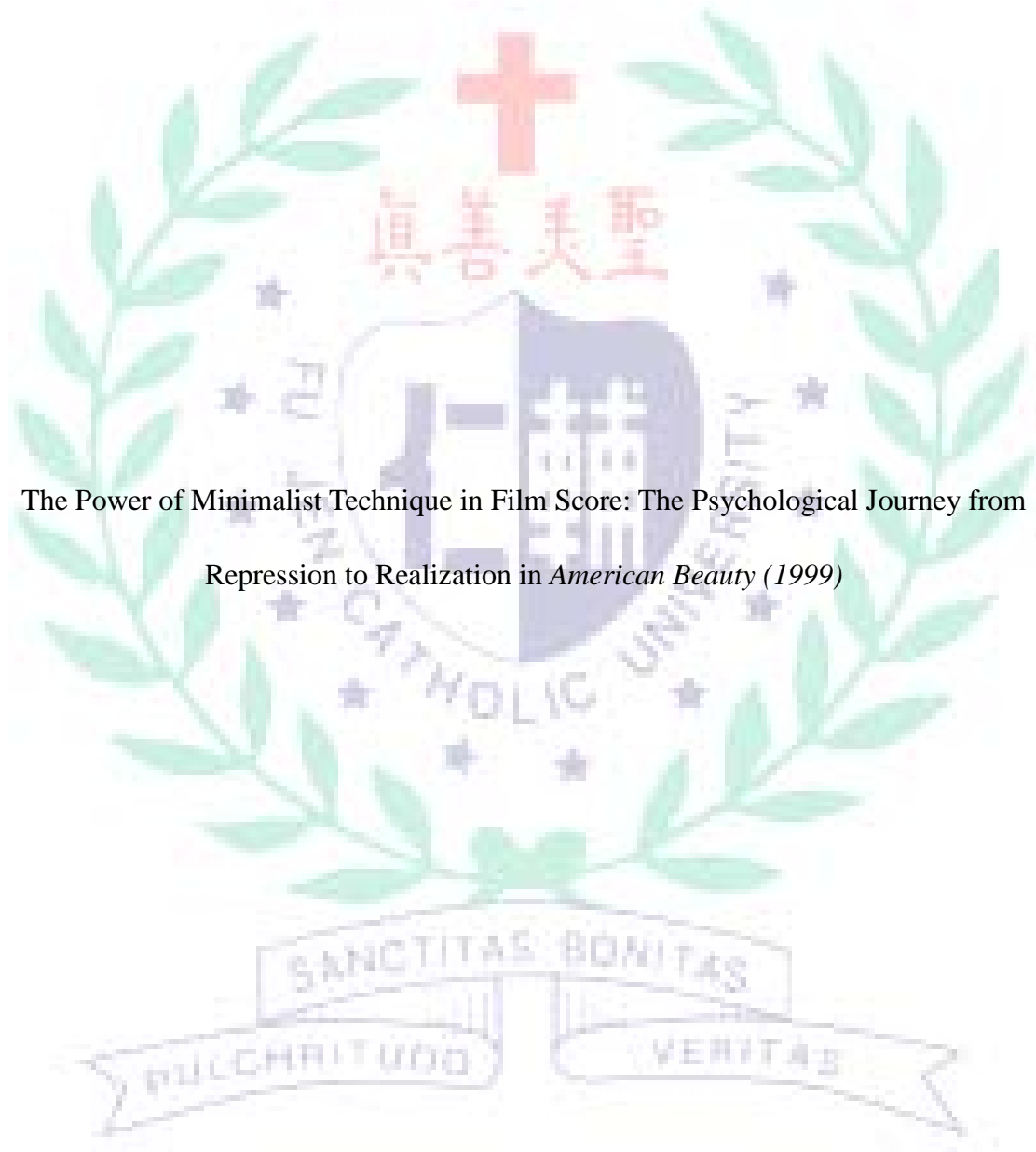


Fu Jen Catholic University



The Power of Minimalist Technique in Film Score: The Psychological Journey from
Repression to Realization in *American Beauty* (1999)

Erin Liu 405110648

Composition & Conversation III – Section A

Prof. Patrice Yang

June 25 2019

Outline

I. Introduction

Thesis statement: Although minimalism has been argued to effectively present the inhuman aspect in science fiction, through examining Newman's minimalist film score to see its significance to suggest the protagonist Lester Burnham's changing state of mind, the film score of *American Beauty* (1999) can, in fact, serve as a good example to reveal the expressive capacity and potential of minimalist music to support the emotions and atmosphere required in the drama film, thereby further proving minimalism's ability to apply in various film genre.

II. Minimalism: Characteristics

III. Arguments between scholars

- A. Minimalist music: inhuman, unemotional aspect
- B. Minimalist music: timelessness, theme of humanity

III. *American Beauty*: Lester the protagonistIV. Minimalist film score in *American Beauty*: Repetition

- A. Monotonous life: repressed state
- B. Subconscious anxiety: sexual desire

V. Minimalist film score in *American Beauty*: Drone harmony

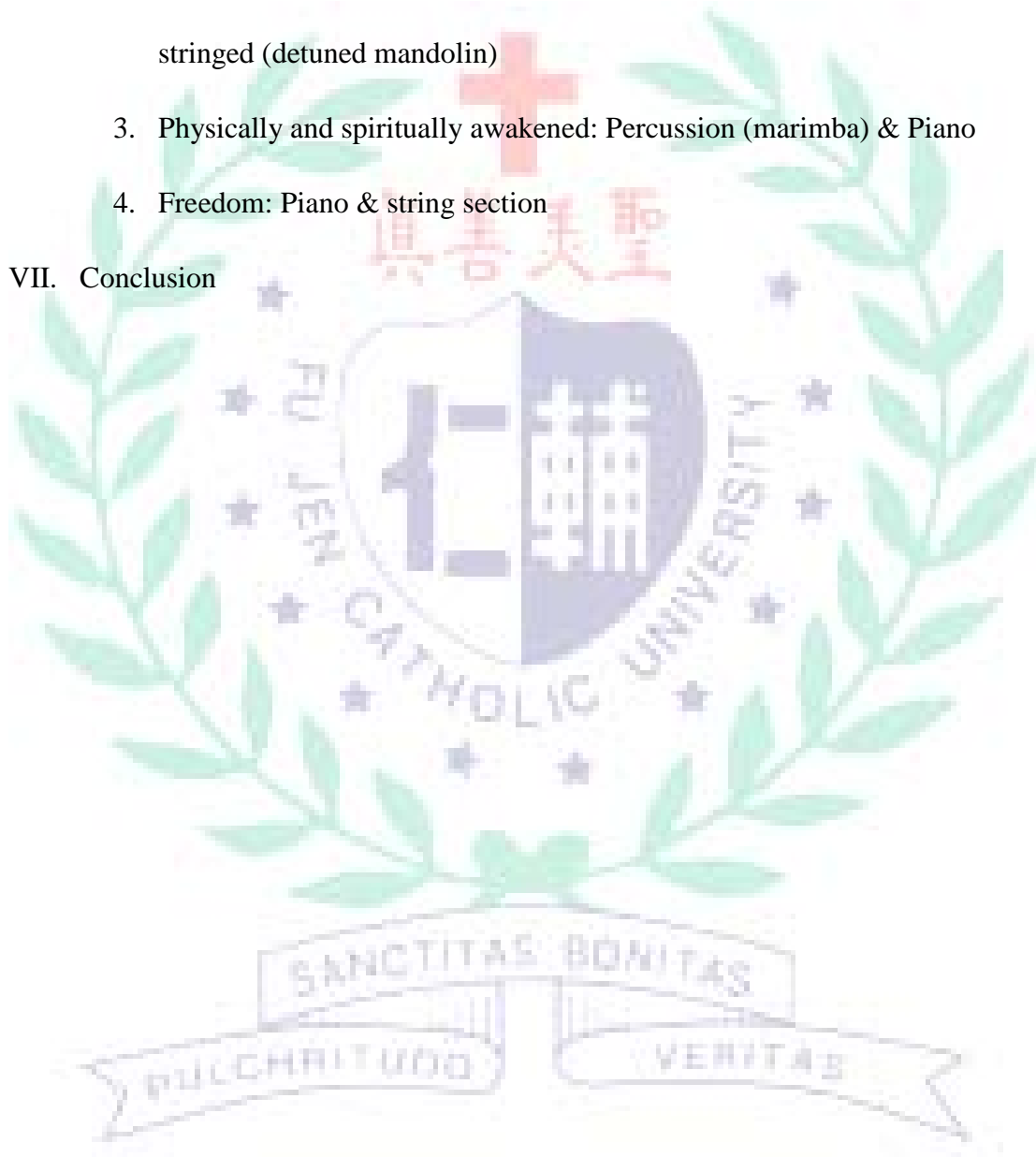
- A. The arguments from scholars
- B. Depiction of the psychological aspect:
 - 1. Physical disengagement
 - 2. True beauty: Lester's epiphany after death

VI. Minimalist film score in *American Beauty*: Static instrumentation

A. The change of motif from percussion to piano: Implication of Lester's psychological changing from uneasiness to enlightenment

1. Repression: Percussion (marimba, tabla) + Plucked stringed (bass)
2. Anxiety: Percussion (cymbal, metal drum, chime, tabla) + Plucked stringed (detuned mandolin)
3. Physically and spiritually awakened: Percussion (marimba) & Piano
4. Freedom: Piano & string section

VII. Conclusion



The Power of Minimalist Technique in Film Score: The Psychological Journey from
Repression to Realization in *American Beauty* (1999)

Despite the actor's acting, cinematography, and the screenplay itself, music is, in fact, one of the important elements strongly dominates the storyline and plays a conspicuous role in the narrative. It is said that film score is considered as the aural extension of the visual world as it suggests the unspeakable emotion to bring empathy to the viewers. That is to say, music is a strong psychological power by itself since it deals with the unseen implication and state of mind of the characters. As a result, in order to reach the completeness of film analysis, the interaction between music and the narrative space should not be neglected.

It is said that before the 1980s, Hollywood's film score was largely composed in classical style, which utilizes lush orchestral scoring to present dramatic expressionism and dynamic feeling. However, because of the invention of synthesizer¹ during the 1970s, which reveals an astonishing and experimental array of music style, the Hollywood film score is gradually minimized after the 1980s. In general, minimalist music is characterized by the use of drone, repetition, regular pulse, and a lack of real melody (Eaton 34). Comparing with the classical style, minimalist music has a less complete musical structure and dramatic effect. Because of its repetitive and static features, this compositional style is argued to suitably fit into the film genre of science fiction since it creates a sense of lacking humanity. For example, in "Unheard Minimalisms: The Functions of the Minimalist Technique in

¹ Synthesizer can be a hardware or a software. It is an electronic musical device which generates electronic signals that are converted to sound through amplifiers. It is said that synthesizer can either imitate traditional musical instruments or generate novel electronic sounds

Film Scores”, Rebecca Marie Doran Eaton emphasized some science fictions such as *The Terminator* (1984) and *Solaris* (2002) whose minimalist film scores successfully depict the theme of machine and Otherness. It is said that because of the repetition and static characteristic, the technological elements and artificial atmosphere are effectively portrayed in *The Terminator* to vision a mechanical nature that accompanies the theme of cyborg; because of its steady pulse and sustaining drone, the theme of alterity on the alien planet is greatly reinforced in *Solaris*.

However, although the minimalist music has been argued to suitably present the unemotional aspect in science fiction, can this music style be alternatively argued to use in drama film that usually explores the emotion of the characters? In fact, in the drama film *American Beauty* (1999), its success of indicating the theme of human nature is, in fact, attributed to Thomas Newman’s minimalist film score which well suggests the characters’ unspeakable feeling. As a result, although minimalism has been argued to effectively present the inhuman aspect in science fiction, through examining Newman’s minimalist film score to see its significance to suggest the protagonist Lester Burnham’s changing state of mind, the film score of *American Beauty* (1999) can, in fact, serve as a good example to reveal the expressive capacity and potential of minimalist music to support the emotions and atmosphere required in the drama film, thereby further proving minimalism’s ability to apply in various film genre.

To begin with, the history of minimalist music can be traced back to the pioneers La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass who led the cultural

movement as a reaction against the complexity of serialism² in classical music (Rivera 4). Minimalism by its definition is a reductive style of modern music employing simple and repetitive structure to reduce the orchestration complexity. Basically, the use of repetition³, drone harmony⁴, static instrumentation⁵, and a lack of real melody tend to be the most salient traits to signal minimalism. Just as John Adams, who is a well-known American composer and conductor, has stated in his autobiography, “building large, expressive structures by the repetition of small elements – that was the essential technique of Minimalism in music” (qtd. in Rivera 4).

Because of minimalist music’s static and repetition-based feature, some scholars argue that minimalist music, which limits dynamic contrast, can suitably present an inhuman teleology to support the attributes of technology, thereby being commonly used in sci-fi movies (Eaton 100). For instance, it is said that minimalist techniques have often been interpreted as “an outright loss of subjectivity” as minimalism’s “undifferentiated riffs” can suggest something “will-less” or “automatized” (Leydon). Also, according to *Repeating Ourselves*, Robert Fink indicates that minimalist repetition may simply portray the occurrence outside the normal human time-scale which prevents a sense of “moving forward”. That is to say, minimalist music is “constantly imagined as the music of machines, androids, and cyborgs”.

² A method of composition using series of pitches, rhythms, timbres or other musical elements.

³ A rhythmic recurring patterns which constructs a music.

⁴ The use of sustained chords with relatively slight harmonic variations throughout a piece of music.

⁵ Comparing with the classical compositional style, which uses lush orchestral scoring and dynamic arrangement, the use of instruments within a piece of minimalist music is lack of inner changing. That is to say, since minimalist music focus on the repetition and internal additive process, the music’s texture is developed through instruments playing more or less continuously to either increase or decrease music’s layers rather than emphasizing various usage of instruments.

Although the use of minimalism can suitably depict the theme of technology, this compositional style can, in fact, be alternatively argued to portray the theme which is close to human nature. According to other scholars' perspective, though minimalism's lack of obvious melodic differences may result in a sense of boredom, the music's remarkable consistency over long periods of time actually creates a feeling that has "no beginning and end", which seems endless (Shelley 163). In addition, if closely examining the progression of minimalist music, the repeating cells within the music are actually slightly transforming, such as adding or subtracting notes, as the music moves forward. Therefore, minimalism's feature of "working in progress" marks its importance of manifesting the internal process in time. Based on this interpretation, minimalist music can actually depict the spiritual yet philosophical aspect of human experience. In terms of the endless feeling, it can symbolize the duration of people's lifetime which in some sense does seem perpetual and hard to imagine an end; as for the minor transformation within the piece, it can represent the gradual inner processing of people's state of mind as encountering different events throughout life journey. As a result, the answer to the question should be definite, that the characteristics of minimalist music can deal with the unspeakable mental experience which is related to the theme of humanity.

Connecting this interpretation with *American Beauty's* minimalist film score, the repetitive feature of the score is, in fact, suggesting the protagonist Lester Burnham's monotonous daily routine and subconscious anxiety. Besides, the use of sustained drone harmony highlights the tranquil eternity and true beauty which Lester has experienced after his death. As for the static instrumentation with slight

transformation, Lester's gradual changing state of mind from repression to realization is actually symbolized. Hence, through closely observing the interaction between the minimalist film score and film context, surprisingly, the obscure psychological state of the protagonist can be well suggested.

In general, *American Beauty* shines light on the meaning of life. Through portraying the life of two American suburban dysfunctional families, it indicates the reality of the idealistic "American Dream" is actually hollow. Focusing on the protagonist Lester Burnham, he is a man from suburbia who suffers from midlife crisis, having a sexually frustrating relationship with his wife and a distant relationship with his daughter. Strongly infatuated with his daughter's friend Angela Hayes, Lester found himself at a turning point to awake from the paralyzed state. He regained his enthusiasm for life through building up his muscles in order to impress Angela; he smoked illegal marijuana supplied by his neighbor Ricky as a way to release from the social norm. Also, he rebelled against his overly controlled wife and boss to retrieve his masculinity, as if fighting against the suffocating social norm under the repressed society. After a series of rising actions as Lester witnessed his wife's love affair, being kissed by Colonel Fitts as he misunderstood Lester as a homosexual, and nearly having sex with Angela but giving up eventually because of a sudden moral concern, Lester confronted his last minutes of life while looking at a photo of his family: He was shot by Colonel Fitts because of Fitts's despair at exposing his homosexual identity. Although being killed, instead of being hateful, Lester's spirit gained his epiphany to realize the beauty of his "stupid little life". Just as the director Sam Mendes has pointed out, *American Beauty* is "a rite of passage

film about imprisonment and escape from imprisonment” (qtd. in Morell 5), the whole story is a process of embracing the renewal, the actual liberation of life.

Through the summary that has provided, the psychological journey of Lester namely from the repressed suburban life in the first place, his sexual fantasy served as a mental expression of freedom as transition, the following physically and spiritually awakened state, and eventually his spiritual realization is revealed.

However, the unspeakable mental state of Lester and its gradual transformation cannot be successfully conveyed without Thomas Newman’s film score. With his application of minimalist style, the distinct features such as repetition, drone harmony, and static instrumentation together suggest the psychological condition of Lester, highlighting the presence of intricate human nature. To begin with, just as the typical characteristic of minimalist music, the scores in *American Beauty* utilize the repetitive rhythm, which suggests Lester’s monotonous daily routine and subconscious anxiety. Lester’s repression is presented at the beginning of the film when he delivered an opening monologue to the audiences via a voiceover to inform his lifeless state. As the plot moves forward, surprisingly, it is actually his wife Carolyn drives him to work with him sleeping at the back seat instead. Therefore, Lester’s failure and loss of masculinity are obviously revealed in the first place. At this point, a repetitive marimba sound in a long-short-long-short pattern accompanies the monologue to create a fragmented yet endless feeling. As fragmented melodic cells build into larger structures through multi-repetition, it gradually contributes to the effect which seems hypnotic. With this invariable texture of repetitive phrases, it seems that the fragmented sound pattern is echoing Lester’s condition as he is also becoming

“fragmented” under the repressed society, losing his self-identity. When it comes to the scene when Carolyn is driving Lester to work, the repetitive marimba gradually merges with guitar and bass to enhance the layer of delightfulness. The combination of the repetitive structure, which symbolizes Lester’s repression, and lightweight melody generates a contradictory effect as if satirizing Lester’s failure. This unique sound design indicates the distance between Lester’s powerlessness and the so-called American dream he desires for. In brief, the fragmented rhythm precisely suggests Lester’s endless paralyzed state under the suffocating social structure, implying the rising anxiety hidden beneath his conscious.

Besides, the unconscious anxiety Lester suffers from is also presented through the repetitive percussion rhythm when Lester first encountered Angela at his daughter’s cheerleading exhibition. Paralyzed under the social norm and having a frustrating sexual relationship with his wife, Lester’s sexual desire, which was repressed for a long time, is yelling for liberation. As he watches the cheerleading exhibition performed by Angela, Lester falls into his sexual fantasy to immerse into the scenery of Angela’s provocative dance. At this point, a quick paced repetitive cymbal, bell effect, and steel drum signify Lester’s transition from the normal conscious state to his subconscious, suggesting the endless uneasiness in his mind. Unlike the previous marimba repetition which depicts the overall condition of Lester, namely his endless monotonous daily routine, the erratic percussion repetition concretizes the abstract struggle which he suffers from, signifying the urging intensity of sexual desire. Without the use of forceful repetition, Lester’s mental condition cannot be clearly revealed.

Moreover, drone harmony, which is a typical characteristic of minimalist music as well as Thomas Newman's recognizable compositional feature, is used in *American Beauty* to suggest a sense of ethereality, portraying Lester's spiritual realization in the end and the true beauty which he has finally understood. After Lester is shot to death, his spirit delivers a monologue to the audience about his feeling towards life and his memory towards his family. Instead of feeling hateful towards his destiny, Lester is enlightened and feels grateful for the life he has experienced. Basically, Lester's realization in the end probably results from the events he has experienced before his death to make him realize the universal fragility of humanity and further relate these events to his life and family. For example, being kissed by Colonial Fitts and witnessing his tears, Lester figures out the vulnerable side of this man who always presents his masculine power in front of people; feeling impetuous to have sex with Angela but giving up eventually because of the sudden moral concern that she is just a teenager, Lester relates Angela to his daughter and understands how long he has ignored her feeling for those years. Through all the events, Lester experiences his epiphany in terms of realizing the inferiority which is universally existing in people's mind including himself. Therefore, he starts to see things in a poetic yet thankful way, turning the frustration in the first place into love and gratitude. However, it is because of the usage of drone harmony, so that Lester's obscure epiphany can be implied.

In the past, especially during the 1960s, drone harmony was once assumed as an inexpressive technique which showed the "impersonal" and "dehumanized" character. Nevertheless, being argued by some scholars, the unobtrusiveness of drone sound can in fact smoothly immerse into the background of listeners' auditory realms as an

atmosphere, thereby giving a sense of physical disengagement and promoting a space for introspection (Szabo 330). Linking this idea with the score accompanies Lester's realization, the use of sustained drone harmony indeed effectively depicts Lester's spirit and creates a contemplative space to portray the main idea in *American Beauty*, namely "the true beauty in life". On the one hand, since the drone harmony has generated a sustained effect, it creates a sense of "floating in the air" as if imitating the movement of the remained consciousness after one's death. As a result, Lester's process of the physical disengagement after being shot is portrayed because of that "sense of floating" which suggests his spirit to reach the eternal tranquility; on the other hand, the ethereal sustained drone sound can portray the "true beauty" in life which Lester has realized to reach his epiphany. Generally, the "true beauty" portrayed in the film is defined by the simple things in the world which can generate emotional connection and sympathy. At the beginning of the film, Lester suffered under the corporate society and had a dispute with his over control wife who always focuses on the happiness defined by reputation and commodities. However, this ethereal and peaceful drone harmony accompanying Lester's spirit in the end is actually giving clue to his epiphany, symbolizing the true beauty which he had experienced is not defined by the earthbound and material happiness but, instead, the simple things in the world that embody spiritual wealth. In brief, through the use of drone harmony, Lester's tranquil eternity and realization after death are well implied.

In addition to the repetitive feature and drone harmony which indicate Lester's mental stage, the static instrumentation also successfully suggests Lester's state of mind. Through examining the instrumentation of each score accompanying each

psychological state of Lester, his gradual mental transformation from repression to realization is actually symbolized. Generally speaking, Lester's psychological state can be divided into four different stages, namely the repression, anxiety (sexual fantasy), physically and spiritually awakened state, and his final freedom. Surprisingly, it seems that the usage of instruments in Newman's score accompanying each specific state is gradually progressing from percussion and plucked string to piano and string as if echoing Lester's internal changing from uneasiness to enlightenment. In the very beginning as Lester is paralyzed under his daily routine, the percussion instruments marimba, tabla, and plucked stringed instruments bass together represent Lester's mundane existence to satirize his lack of enthusiasm and masculinity. As for Lester's subconscious anxiety which is presented through his sexual fantasy in dreamy imagination, the distinctive usage of other percussion instruments such as cymbal, metal drum, chime, and tabla together create several layers which dig into Lester's inner struggle, namely his hidden sexual desire. The exotic timbre of percussions creates a forceful texture as if portraying the urgent calling and weirdness of human's primitive desire. In another sexual fantasy scene which Lester dreams about Angela sitting in his bathtub full of rose petals, the percussion instruments especially with a detuned mandolin together indicate the sense of "out of ordinary" to accentuate Lester's psychological distortion since his consciousness is on the edge to violate the morality, feeling eager to have sex with a teenager.

In terms of Lester's physically and spiritually awakened state after experiencing the sexual fantasy to regain his youth and rebel against his wife and boss to retrieve his dignity as a man, the minimalist score is no longer specifically characterized by

the percussion sound but lets the piano to merge with the marimba. At this point, the marimba, which symbolizes Lester's repression in the first place is now becoming the sub-role underneath the delighted piano melody. Therefore, this sound design is actually giving clue to the fading frustration in Lester's mind since the repression embodied by the marimba is gradually replaced by the piano, which brings the notion of freedom. While the plot moves forward to Lester's final realization, the percussion sound disappears and is totally replaced by a peaceful piano with string section. As this tranquil and peaceful piano with the string continue to the end of the film, though Lester is physically dead, the music, in fact, implies that the spiritually dead Lester in the first place is now spiritually awakened, reaching his enlightenment. In brief, through the changing in instruments from percussion and plucked string to piano and string, Lester's changing state of mind from repression to realization is suggested.

In conclusion, through analyzing the minimalist film score of *American Beauty* in terms of the three aspects, namely the repetition, drone harmony, and static instrumentation, Lester's changing psychological state from repression to realization is clearly revealed. Therefore, this result does prove that minimalist music also has a strong capacity to deal with the theme of human nature, portraying the emotion and atmosphere which are required in the drama film. As a result, the example of *American Beauty's* film score does suggest that the interpretation of minimalist music as the common presentation of the inhuman and unemotional concept by some scholars is, in fact, narrow and incomplete.

Word count: 3149

Works Cited

American Beauty. Directed by Sam Mendes, scored by Thomas Newman, 1999.

Eaton, Rebecca Marie Doran. "Unheard Minimalisms: The Functions of the Minimalist Technique in Film Scores." *The University of Texas at Austin*, May 2008. repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/3839.

Fink, Robert. *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice*. University of California Press. Sept. 2005.

Leydon, Rebecca. "Towards a Typology of Minimalist Tropes." *A Journal of the Society for Music Theory*, vol. 8, no. 4, 4 Dec. 2002. www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.02.8.4/mto.02.8.4.leydon.html.

Morrell, Brian. "The Deft Touch of Subtlety." *How Film & TV Music Communicate*, vol.1, 2013. www.brianmorrell.co.uk/book1/06defttouchofsubtlety.pdf.

Rivera, Luis C. "A Repurposing of Orchestral Chamber Works for the Modern Percussion Ensemble." *The Florida State University College of Music*, 2012. diginole.lib.fsu.edu/islandora/object/fsu:183088/.../citation.pdf

Shelley, Peter. "Rethinking Minimalism: At the Intersection of Music Theory and Art Criticism." *University of Washington*, 14 Nov. 2013. hdl.handle.net/1773/24092.

Szabo, Victor Louis Franco. "Ambient Music as Popular Genre: Historiography, Interpretation, Critique." *University of Virginia*, May 2015. www.academia.edu/12613072/Ambient_Music_as_Popular_Genre_Historiography_Interpretation_Critique

www.academia.edu/12613072/Ambient_Music_as_Popular_Genre_Historiography_Interpretation_Critique