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Amsterdam University

**Sonic Sensing and Signification: The
Phenomenological Experience of Newman's
Film Scores for *American Beauty***



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Eva Dekkers – 12667854

evalucia.d@gmail.com

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Supervised by Christian Olesen

Abstract

American Beauty's (Mendez 1999) film scores by Thomas Newman sonically signify the movie's deeper meaning to our senses. The audience can experience the 'beauty of the world' as the music builds a bridge between, image, sound and a 'spiritual awakening' that drives the film's plot. This paper analyses how Newman's scores for *American Beauty* influence our phenomenological experience of the film while also transcending it. Thereby contributing to a new, more independently and comprehensive treatise of scores within film studies. Analysing the workings of non-verbal language in sound-image dynamics becomes increasingly relevant in today's mediated world. Vivian Sobchack (1992) considers film as both, a sensorial object and sensing subject, her semiotic phenomenology allows an analysis of the 'lived body experience' in Newman's scores. Additionally, Michel Chion's (1994) reduced mode of listening and approach to sound analysis, will be used to perform audio-visual experiments with Newman's scores and scenes from *American Beauty*. Altogether, this has led to the production of an audio-visual essay that lays bare the continuous dialogue between our eyes and ears, as well as sonic and aesthetic elements within the film, illustrating how Newman's soundtracks establish a sensorial experience of the movie's deeper layer of feeling.

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Preface

The quest underlying this bachelor's thesis stretches beyond what will be discussed. It originates not from a mere academic interest but from a desire to understand the deeper layers of our human existence and experience. In specific, non-verbal universal meaning and language in the medium of film, as it reflects and shapes culture. Of course, this grand philosophical inquiry had to be boiled down to a manageable BA level research project. It rapidly became more focussed on sensing film and started taking shape through my interest in film music, which I had not extensively studied before. This asked me to let go of the aspect of cinematic universal communication that I love so much. Nevertheless, I feel it should be outlined briefly to situate the research at hand.

Existence, from my personal perspective, becomes visible through creative expression. Humans are communicative beings, no matter where they are located on planet earth, different forms of self-expression and language emerge from an inherent wish to take commune. The vehicles and modes of expression might differ but the practices of capturing, storing, and sharing information are the same. We mostly distinguish a diversity in mediality as different cultures. The inherent communicative wish and act underneath this phenomenon drives all media inventions that in turn shape cultures. Because “we are conditioned by the conditions we condition” (Peters 2015, 51), and “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1967). Within the field of media studies one can analyse media objects like literature, film, music and so forth, to understand culture as well as the structures and individuals within it. This brought me to audio-visual language as a means of communicating experience without words. Something we can grasp with our hearths, not fully comprehend with our minds alone. This is what brought me to the philosophical method of phenomenology since it in part entails experiencing a phenomenon before naming it. Since a significant part of the research generated here stems from my personal experience of watching and hearing American beauty, I will share with you a few words that underpin the deeper layer of experience I attempt to connect with:

How becomes the rose, see how the rose is beautiful.

Not trying to rationally understand this sentence invites us to fully open all of our senses.

“More than any other medium of human communication, the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience”.

- Vivian Sobchack 1992

Introduction

Film music can touch our hearts profoundly, resonating on a sensorial level of experience that is induced by the composer. For me, this feeling occurred when I first listened to Thomas Newman’s scores for *American Beauty* (Mendes 1999). My father played the album during a long car ride when I was eleven years old. In that moment, time seemed to dissolve and I experienced a heightened sense of awareness. This was even before I had seen the film but through the music, I felt an immense love for this beautiful earth, seeing the landscapes we were passing through anew. After watching *American Beauty*, I realised that this is exactly what the film is all about, waking our sedated senses and perceiving the true beauty of the world. The experience sparked my research into the intangible phenomena of cinematic, sonic language that inherently speaks to our senses. This paper should contribute to a discussion in film studies on how to analyse scores within but also outside of the visual narrative.

Film sound and music is generally less researched even though it is of equal importance to the visual aspect of film. The study of sound is more fragmented and “has been neglected in relation to visual imagery” (Moore 2000, 148-149). Moreover, the sense of listening is in turmoil today as it is “least trained and thus the least defended. We must learn to listen” (Chion, 2016, 242). Theorist and composer Michel Chion rightfully points out that when our perception is sharpened, “our relation to the world is changed” (Chion, 2016, 241). We could analyse film music beyond its influence on a film’s visual meaning because scores also stimulate new sensitively attuned perceptions and change how we experience our environment. Film music’s invisible storylines enter our lives and signify their ‘hidden’ messages in a sensorial rather than rational way. In general, this discourse is relevant in today’s online society where our eyes and ears are continuously targeted since most of our communication takes place through audio-visual means. The research question at hand asks: ‘How do the non-verbal sonic elements in Thomas Newman’s film scores influence and transcend our phenomenological experience of *American Beauty* (1999) and signify audio-visual meaning to our senses?’

Since *American Beauty* has a simple plot and recognisable sceneries of everyday family life, the attention can be drawn to how audio-visual dynamics communicate beyond it. A simple example can be found in the film's use of roses that silently signify a deeper ethereal meaning to the audience. A flowering rose commonly symbolises beauty, yet the roses are also used to transmit higher senses of love, purity, and divinity where words lack substance. Newman's music amplifies these higher senses, and they resonate with us because we subconsciously recognise them. William Shakespeare's famous phrase from *Romeo and Juliet* offers a perfect example of words trying to touch this higher meaning: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet (Shakespeare 1597, Act 2, Scene 2)." ¹ Music can be considered as a language of the heart because one must feel it to understand it. By phenomenologically reflecting on the sensorial experience of *American Beauty's* scores, one can analyse how such sonic meaning is signified (encoded) by composer Thomas Newman. This thesis deliberately investigates more exclusively how sound influences image rather than how image influences sound. It might seem no different but in fact it changes the point of departure and the theory at hand.

Michel Chion's work *Audio-Visions: Sound on Screen* (1994) will be used to dissect and analyse Newman's music by investigating different modes of listening and conducting experiments inspired by his approach. For example, Chion's method of reduced listening allows for determining the source of a sound and isolating it without thinking in terms of meaning (1994, 29). This offers a 'clean' slate for analysing our experience of a specific audio-(visual) sequence. Here Vivian Sobchack's book *The Address of the Eye* (1992) provides a methodology of existential semiotic phenomenology to describe it. She sparked a new wave in film theory, laying bare human experience, structures of communication and being. Sobchack invites us into sensing cinematic elements, but also recognising them as sensing subjects. In a way, this method of analysis strongly ties into *American Beauty's* plot, following protagonist Lester Burnham's quest to redeem his 'lived-body experience'. Applying semiotic phenomenology to Newman's scores is essential for uncovering how sound interacts with and senses the image. As a researcher, it entails being open to what is directly experienced while applying structural listening to create a basis for new arguments. In the first section I will introduce the theories that will be discussed, that of Sobchack and Chion. After situating *American Beauty* and outlining the methodological approach at hand, I

¹ This is an invitation to read, but especially feel between the lines of my thesis because the essence of the phenomenon that will be treated goes beyond deductive/inductive reasoning.

will continue with an in-depth analysis of the sound-image dynamics evoked by Newman's scores. Analysing melody and rhythm through Chion's methods of masking, characterisation, and technical comparison. Simultaneously, Sobchak's phenomenological method will guide a sensorial experience of Newman's scores. This analysis is presented as an audio-visual essay to directly exemplify my arguments and establish a more comprehensive experience for readers. Being able to hear and feel the effect of Newman's scores is inherently part of the research at hand and intentionally includes the readers as participants. Moreover, placing film music and its meaning making ability within a phenomenological perspective of lived experience could inspire a new treatise of scores within film studies.

Chapter 1.

Theories of Non-Verbal Signification in Aesthetics and Music

1.1 Addressing the Eye and Ear

We are born with senses, to navigate our environment and experience the world we are situated in. Today, communication media primarily target two of our sensing organs, our eyes and our ears. Much research has been conducted on the cognitive reception, underlying strategies, social, economic, and emotional effects and so forth. Nevertheless, research into how this ‘address’ of our senses is being experienced has generally gotten less attention. Phenomenology offers a qualitative research method to reflect on our lived experiences.² Opposed to the natural sciences that measures and quantifies, phenomenology aims to reach the pure meaning of a phenomenon subjective and intuitively.³ There is a significant amount of writing on phenomenology and its emergence. “Born almost at the same time, film and phenomenology share a mutual history” (Ferencz-Flatz et al 2016, 14). This thesis will mainly focus on one author that applies phenomenology to film. Media theorist Vivian Carol Sobchack (born in 1940) introduced a phenomenological theory of film. Her thought was strongly shaped by her time as a PhD student in the Department of Speech Communication where she dived into the Philosophy of Language. She both uses and transcends this theoretical paradigm with her book *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (1992) that followed from her dissertation. Whereas most film analysis practices are reflective; describing what cinematic elements might mean, Sobchack’s approach is pre-reflective. It focusses on what is felt while watching and experiencing film, without thinking about it, like catching a ball versus doing math. With her book, she establishes a clear position against the dominant film theory (at the time). She observed how media scholars tend to reduce film to ‘an object of vision’ and its viewers to victims of the cinematic apparatus.⁴ She embraces phenomenology, predominantly drawing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s writings. Her aim is to address the origin and significance of ‘cinematic vision’ and ‘film experience’ as well as restoring our reflection on cinema and the medium’s ‘openness’

² Some scholars and philosophers like Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze critique this method, but they still touch upon “themes that had been originally propounded by phenomenology itself” (Leoni 2019, 87).

³ Though, phenomenology is not Hermeneutics, interpretation could be a step that follows. Within philosophy, many thinkers have been concerned with determining if ‘the chair is real’, so to say, phenomenology rather asks how the chair appears to us, our senses (Research Methods and Statistics 2016).

⁴ Sobchack critically interrogates existing psychoanalytic and Marxist film theory as well as certain assumptions about the nature of film and our experience of it (1992, xvii).

in terms of viewer freedom (Sobchack 1992, xvii). She also incorporates the semiotic element of signification; “objectively projected, visibly and audibly expressed before us, the films activity of seeing, hearing, and moving signifies it’s pervasive, primary, and embodied language” (Sobchack 1992, 4). Semiotics provides phenomenology with a distinctive ground to generate and base arguments on. In a way she establishes a new theoretical structure by combining and bending existing ones.

Sobchack’s methodology is formulated as *existential semiotic phenomenology*, referring to an analysis of our intrinsic experience of film, human meaning, and semiotic representations (1992, 26).⁵ Her corpus focuses on analysing the ‘body’ in a multitude of ways. For example, the films body, embodiment though empirical observation but also sexual difference and bodily discriminations. Her corpus serves to illustrate her proposition for a film theory that incorporates subjective experience. Related concepts that appear along the way are that of hermeneutics and gestalt psychology. However, Sobchack does not cling to any existing approaches and poses a broader narrative for analysis. She argues: “Any semiotics and hermeneutics of the cinema must return to radically reflect on the origins of cinematic communication in the structures and pragmatics of existential experience (Sobchack 1992, 6). She looks through the window of film as a means of laying bare a grander phenomenology of human meaning and structure of communication and being. In other words, what the phenomenological methods entails is describing experience rather than explaining it. Vivian Sobchack’s approach serves as a cornerstone in my research but where she mainly focusses on the address of the eye, I will primarily focus on the address of the ear. Marian Dura explains that “when German and French phenomenologist philosophers of the mid-twentieth century attempted to describe all of human experience in terms of its ‘essence,’ [...] a new view of aesthetic, and specifically musical, experience began to emerge” (Dura 2006, 25). Within the last six decades, more scholars have started examining “the music-listening experience from the point of view of phenomenology” (Dura 2006, 25). Especially within film studies, a phenomenology of sound and music is indispensable.

⁵ “This relation between existential phenomenology and semiotics is first made ex-plicit and recognized as a ‘semiotic phenomenology’ in Richard L. Lanigan, *Speaking and Semiology: Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Theory of Existential Communication* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), pp. 51-96. This relation is summarized: ‘Existential phenomenology posits the sign as given, not as the synthetic product of a phenomenism (or objective principium) or the synthetic product of an existentialism per se (or subjective principium)’” (Lanigan 1972, 75 in Sobchack 1992, 7).

1.2 Listening to a Movie

Our ears are constantly addressed by all kinds of sounds, we cannot close them like eyes. We might not notice the orchestrated nature of this constant interaction with sound as it occurs through the medium of film. Claudia Gorbman points out that “music has its own purely musical signification, creating tension and resolution through highly coded structure and syntax”, but it often goes unheard, “in order to signify”, people should listen more closely (1987, 2). Sonic non-verbal language, that might not immediately be understood as language, can be specifically well observed in film scores. It can be experienced in how our emotions are moved. Nevertheless, we hardly just listen to film sound, our experience is coloured by its interaction with the moving images. Our general understanding of film is mostly visual. We say we ‘watch’ a movie, the hearing part is left out so it might be time to change the slang. For this thesis, we will not be watching clips from *American Beauty*, we will be ‘sensing’ them. Phenomenology facilitates an analysis of how we experience Newman’s scores, but it also has limitations when it comes to formal characterisation, as it lacks “descriptive rigor” (Ferencz-Flatz et al 2016, 52). Therefore, I embrace a second approach in studying film sound.

Michel Chion’s book *Audio-Visions: Sound on Screen* (1994) provides a solid theoretical basis to analyse sound in relation to image that complements Sobchack’s approach. Chion (born in 1947) is the most recognised theorist on film sound, he is a composer of *musique concrète* and also produced several short films. He studied music and literature. After finishing, he decided to become a composer and enrolled in a multidisciplinary school founded by Pierre Schaeffer. This is when he got in touch with the newly arrived videocassettes and started detaching film sound from its images to “look at the image without the sound, or listen to the sound without the image”, which inspired him to start writing several books (Fairfax 2017). In an interview with Daniel Fairfax, he explains: “In my books, I show that there is an ensemble of sounds and images. We are in a situation of audio-vision, of reciprocal influence, exactly the same way that, when you put several simultaneous notes together, you can produce harmonies or dissonances” (2017). In essence, Chion’s book *Audio-Visions*, points out that images and sounds are never experienced separately, instead “we *audio-view* a trans-sensory whole” (Chion 1994). This view is crucial for analysing sound-image dynamics and the meaning produced in the scope of non-verbal signification. Chion recognises sound as “the vehicle of language”, and states that “the ear analyses, processes, and synthesizes faster than the eye” (1994, 10). Hence, human beings are more intuitively attuned to aural signification and possibly, on a subconscious level, people

derive more meaning from sonic than from visual signification. Chion argues that “sound shows us the image differently than what the image shows alone” and vice versa (1994, 21).⁶ To better understand sound-image dynamics, it is necessary to acquire a compatible way of listening. In the second chapter of his book, Chion outlines three modes of listening. Starting with *causal listening*, a common mode that simply refers to how we gather information about a sound (and its source) (Chion 1994, 25).⁷ The *semantic listening* mode describes how we listen while interpreting a sound’s message (in any kind of language), this mode can blend with the previous one because we often simultaneously hear “what someone says and how they say it” (Chion 1994, 28). The final mode is that of *reduced listening*, a term coined by Pierre Schaeffer that refers to our attention focussing “on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and of its meaning” (Chion 1994, 29).⁸ This mode is something that needs attention and practice before we can accurately perceive and describe a sound’s inherent traits. Chion’s writings have been used to analyse Newman’s scores before. Nicole Oden stresses that he “seems to describe some of the very markers of Newman’s compositional style” (2016, 35). For example, in *American Beauty*’s “introspective and reflective scenes”, Newman’s music is *anempathetic* (Oden 2016, 35). A term with which Chion refers to its steady progression that “conjures up the mechanical texture of this tapestry of the emotions and senses” (1994, 8-9). Besides, *American Beauty*’s opening score even deliberately goes against the emotional tone of the scene. I agree with Oden “that this [*anempathetic*] quality of the audio-visual scene is essential to a sympathetic response in the viewer” (2016, 35). When the score does not match the imagery, the individual viewer is invited even more to authentically interpret and experience the presented scene.

One argument I would like to add to Chion’s valuable theory, is that sound-image dynamics are always at play. When we focus on just listening to film music, without watching the accompanying visuals, and still perceive our environment with our eyes are open, the music becomes a soundtrack to our immediate visual perception. We perceive our surroundings differently depending on the music we hear. Also, the music we listen to can summon

⁶ Chion also introduces the inherent quality of temporalization that characterises sounds’ influence on images and an audiences’ perception of time. He calls the sound cinema “chronographic: written in time as well as in movement” (Chion 1994, 17).

⁷ In film, causal listening, is continuously manipulated through “synchresis” (Chion 1994, 28). For example, by using foley effects.

⁸ Chion adds that “everyday language as well as specialized musical terminology are totally inadequate to describe the sonic traits that are revealed when we practice reduced listening on recorded sounds” (1994, 31).

memories, daydreams, visions and so forth.⁹ Sound-image dynamics are in a sense also simultaneously operating on an internal and utterly personal level. Everyone experiences sound a bit differently. This is inevitable since each body has a slightly different anatomy and we all build a different associative library throughout life. “When we listen to music, the meaning it takes on, the emotions that it evokes, are multiple, varied, and confused” (Nattiez 1990, 37). Indeed, one can never be certain about its definite meaning because our personal interpretation is by definition super-imposed on what we see. Nonetheless, is possible to reduce one’s perception of sound to an analytical level and Chion offers valuable methods that can be performed. The value lies in combining Chion’s theory with that of Sobchak to accommodate both aspects of listening, reducing as well as enriching the subjective perception of Newman’s scores.

⁹ There has been quite some research conducted based on “memories evoked by listening to music” (see Jakubowski and Ghosh 2021).

Chapter 2.

Audio-viewing Methodology and Semiotic Phenomenology

2.1 Analysis

To analyse the phenomenological reception and communicative value of Newman's scores, it is useful to firstly dissect the different sonic elements and their functions by drawing from Michel Chion's methods in *Audio Vision* (1994). Throughout the final chapter, he proposes a four-step approach for analysis:

1. Itemisation: Firstly, one describes the different audio elements (like noise, speech and music) and whether they are in the foreground or background.
2. Characterisation: Then characterise the general quality and consistency of the sound, looking how different audio elements interact. When a film sound is itemised as music, it can then also be categorised as *empathetic*, meaning it takes on "the scene's rhythm, tone, and phrasing" or *anempathetic*, meaning it shows an 'indifference' to the scene's content "by progressing in a steady, undaunted, and ineluctable manner" (Chion 1994, 8).
3. Synchronisation: Here sound-image dynamics come into play by analysing the sound's points of synchronisation with the image that Chion also describes as "audio-visual phrasing". For example, determining if the sound has a similar or contrasting speed.
4. Technical comparison: As a final step, one asks how the soundtrack relates to cinematographic movement and editing? The sound can be an exaggeration of or flowing along with movement in a scene. For example, Chion introduces *negative sound* as a visual calling for a particular sound or score that is purposely not produced.

(Chion 1994, 189-191)

This four-step approach blends with the phenomenological analysis and will be employed to perform a formal analysis of the following seven scores by Thomas Newman in a chronological order that I do not change: *Dead already* (3:17 min), *Mental Boy* (1:43 min), *Spartanette* (0:59 min), *Arose* (1:05 min), *American Beauty* (3:06 min), *Structure and Discipline* (3:06 min), and *Any Other Name* (4:09 min).

Step one, (Itemisation) will foremost be used to determine the different instruments used within the score, and step two (Characterisation) to describe their quality (of interaction). This method should lay bare the structure that constitutes the strong impact of Newman's scores on our viewing experience of *American Beauty*. Nevertheless, this method alone will not answer the initial research question. That requires stepping out of the reduced listening mode, into an experiential listening practice. Sobchak's semiotic phenomenology, as a research procedure, invites us to question, clarify and systematically reflect on our intimately lived experience of film. It thereby "attempts to reanimate the taken-for-granted and the institutionally sedimented" (Sobchack 1992, 28). Besides our experience, the analysis also accounts for the film's structures of signifying this sensorial meaning to the audience. Sobchack argues that a phenomenological approach should not presuppose any film experience as "meaningful", or presuppose "cinema's communicative competence", nor presuppose film as a mere "object of vision" which makes it "monologic" (1992, 50). She concludes by stating; "Indeed, all three of these presuppositions become, themselves, the focus of a phenomenological inquiry into the relations and meaning of 'being seeing', 'seeing being', and 'being seen'" (Sobchack 1992, 50). In sum, while formally analysing Newman's scores with Chion's method, I will also phenomenologically listen and feel how these soundtracks are experienced by me without the visuals of *American Beauty*.

2.2 Corpus

American Beauty is a dark comedy-drama released in the US in September 1999. The movie was directed by Sam Mendes and written by Alan Ball. The story is about a 'regular' upper middle-class family living the suburbs of a Sacramento inspired American neighbourhood. At first, the plot just seems to revolve around the main character's midlife crisis and his uprooted family life. On the surface, Lester Burnham (played by Kevin Spacey) is a forty-two-year-old man who works a boring advertising job. His wife, Carolyn (Annette Bening) is obsessed with a successful appearance and materialistic value. Their sixteen-year-old daughter Jane (Thora Birch) wants to break free from it all while her best friend Angela (Mena Suvari) maintains a conventional image of attraction and awakens Lester's primal desires. This roughly outlined narrative is not unfamiliar or revolutionary, yet the movie has sparked immense awe and contemplation amongst viewers and critics. Being the best-received title at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) and winning several Academy Awards.¹⁰

¹⁰ Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor (for Spacey), Best Original Screenplay and Best Cinematography.

What makes this movie so well received worldwide and especially with its American audiences that are in a way watching themselves—or at least a significant part of their culture.

Many writers have touched upon a deeper meaning within the film. They observed how the film triggers “a sense of wonder tinged with apprehension”, as it brings the audience “into an acute, if fleeting, awareness of the particularity and finitude of their own mortal lives” (Anker 2004, 345). In essence, *American Beauty* is a transcendental story about life, death and spiritual awakening. The deeper layer of reality lived by the characters is not communicated through special effects, strong editing techniques or provocative imagery and sound design. Instead, the simplistic nature of the visuals brings our attention to auditive and emotional sensing.¹¹ Thomas Newman’s scores build a bridge between the world we know and the world we do not know. The objective of this research is to point out the structures of audio-visual meaning making. The fact that *American Beauty* is a Hollywood production and thereby follows certain generic choices as well as containing cultural doctrine, is important to note but will not be looked at any further.

¹¹ The familiar tropes and scenery in *American Beauty* prove to be a needless fit as opposed to other films that Newman scored like Andrew Stanton’s *Wall-E* (2008) or Morten Tyldum’s *Passengers* (2016) that have many unfamiliar, futuristic and overstimulating visuals.

Chapter 3.

Sound-Image Dynamics in *American Beauty*

3.1 Newman's Beauty

Thomas Newman (1955) grew up in Los Angeles surrounded by music. His uncle and father were both critically acclaimed composers, but Newman did not consider a career in music while growing up. Only after his father passed away when he was fourteen, Newman felt a calling to learn more about film scoring. He studied composition and orchestration at the University of Southern Carolina for two years and then transferred to the Yale School of Music. His style and interest did not stick to the dominant *avant garde* techniques used at Yale, which made him feel out of place at times (Schoenberg 2010, 2). After graduating he joined a few different projects before scoring his first film at the age of twenty-nine. Since then, his distinctive work has been recognised and picked up by many. In total he received fifteen Academy Award nominations over time. In a 2016 interview with The Oxford Union, he shares that he mostly composes music with images and scenes in mind; “there is something comforting in looking at an image and the image telling you what the music should be”. As researched by Adam Schoenberg for his dissertation at Julliard, Newman’s compositional process involves conceptual composition, collaboration, and experimentation (2010, 6). Schoenberg concludes that his “sound palette utilises chords and clusters that embrace traditional aspects of tonal harmony while functioning in non-traditional ways” (2010, 65). For *American Beauty*, Newman balances two contrasting approaches to film music composition. Namely, a leitmotif-based technique and an atmospheric-based form, establishing “a monothematic atmosphere, a singular, omnipresent air that permeates the entire film” (Rothbart 2013, 79). Music scholar Peter Rothbart describes Newman’s scores for *American Beauty* as “an eclectic mixture of rhythmic ostinatos and intentionally incomplete-sounding melodic gestures [...] organized by structured improvisations as well as more conventional scoring techniques” (Rothbart 2013, 80). Newman starts composing from a feeling rather than from particular scales and chords because, in his words; “you want to stay as open to the reactive experience as you can” (OxfordUnion 2016). This encoded feeling can perhaps be decoded through formal and phenomenological analysis. At least I will attempt to do so in my audio-visual essay.

3.2 Creator's Statement

Film speaks to us through our senses, simultaneously, such dialogue also takes place within the medium itself, between sonic and aesthetic elements. Like Sobchak argues “film may be considered as more than a merely visible object”, she radically proposes that:

Filmmaker, film, and spectator all concretely use the agency of visual, aural, and kinetic experience to express experience—not only to and for themselves, but also to and for others. Each engaged in the visible gesture of viewing, the filmmaker, film, and spectator are all able to commute the ‘language of being’ into the ‘being of language’, and back again (Sobchack 1992, 21)

This non-verbal cinematic communication can be strongly observed in how Newman's film scores communicate with *American Beauty's* imagery. The audio-visual essay aims to lay bare this internal dynamic while also observing its external effects on our experience. The audio-visual work embodies the discussion part of the research and will apply some concrete techniques inspired by Chion's methods while integrating a description of my personal experience, according to phenomenological guidelines. Chion discusses a technique called “masking” which consists of listening to the soundtrack with a black screen, thereby enabling to hear without projecting onto the sound (1994, 187). A second technique I will use is that of ‘forced marriage’, switching some of Newman's scores and placing them under different scenes. I will be analysing the function and meaning of melody and rhythm by determining what instruments are used, how they interact and influence the visual storyline. For example, analysing the function and meaning of violin and piano (ostinato) melodies in relation to one of the film's characters and my own sensorial perception. Newman also makes use a few exotic instruments that are not common in traditional orchestral Hollywood scoring. I highlight the use of the Indian Tabla and will record it separately, to illustrate how a single instrument has its own ontological language that influences the myriad of sounds to create the sought-after effect. Moreover, the use of certain themes and patterns, like the motif of bells, will be brought to attention in a selection of scenes. The audio-visual essay titled; ‘Sonically Sensing *American Beauty's* Film Scores’, is divided up in five parts:

Part 1. Introduction; providing a first glimpse of *American Beauty's* sound-image dynamics and stating the general aim of the video essay as well as exemplifying the Tabla language.

Part 2. Sedated Senses; analysing the Dead Already theme, its *anempathetic* qualities and contrasting feelings in the characters versus my own lived body experience.

Part 3. Coming to Our Senses; Analysing how the Mental Boy, Spartanette and Arose scores signify an awakening with the use of different sonic elements, also introducing leitmotifs.

Part 4. Softest Climax; analysing in depth how the ‘main’ American Beauty theme embodies a release of build-up tension and signifies surrender that is immanently experienced.

Part 5. Resolution and Conclusion; Analysing the Structure and Discipline score that establishes a post climax landscape and blends elements from the other scores until we reach the end of the film where the Any Other Name score brings a new level of resolution.

3.3 Audio-Visual Essay

‘Sonically Sensing *American Beauty's* Film Scores’ can be watched on my website through the following link:

<https://evaluciadekkers.com/elements/sonically-sensing/>

Conclusion

This thesis has analysed how audio-visual language, in terms of non-verbal sound-image dynamics, is experienced in the concrete example of Thomas Newman's scores for *American Beauty*. This paper is not a scientific attempt to rectify or characterise natural laws of audio-visual communication with quantitative data. There are many other valuable approaches to analysing sound. Musicological, cognitive, and psychoanalytic methods are often used in this context, but I focussed on semiotic phenomenology as distinguished by Vivian Sobchack and combined it with Michel Chion's methods to perform an audio-visual analysis. Researching film music is generally less popular and the workings of sound considered as less important than the visuals in film. Michel Chion describes the 'added value' of film sound, referring to how sound enriches images, which can easily give the false "impression that sound is unnecessary, that sound merely duplicates a meaning which in reality it brings about" (1994, 5). Chion rightfully stresses that sound cannot be excluded from the visual meaning making scope of film since we always 'audio-view a trans-sensory whole'. The necessity of understanding this meaning making ability of sound is crucial. The functioning, as well as the subjective experience of non-verbal, audio-visual signification seems more relevant than ever and needs to be discussed by scholars within various academic disciplines.

Sobchak's perspective has significantly contributed to a new treatment of film, a more inclusive and holistic vision of our cinematic experience. Her phenomenological approach allows us to see film not as mere object but also as active subject and subjectively sensing. Since our audio-visual communication and culture keeps accelerating, her theory should be expanding and applied more broadly. Taking her valuable insights and applying them to Newman's scores, I would add that film music actively signifies meaning, not only diegetically within the film but also outside of it, influencing the way we feel and perceive our surroundings. If we open up, and not only formally but also phenomenologically analyse scores, they will show to transmit the narrative's message without the need for their accompanying visuals. Therefore, I would suggest treating film scores more independently and not automatically assume their position as 'supportive', within film studies.

Employing Sobchak's methodology within my audio-visual essay, proved insightful not solely regarding Newman's scores, but also in relation to the emotional quest of protagonist Lester, who wishes to feel more alive and experience things fully again. A process I myself also experienced during the making and research process. Yet again

illustrating the score's transcending quality. Newman's music offered me a gateway into a deeper realm of feeling.

Film is a medium that can translate a sensorial and emotional state of being into something externally observable. It becomes reflective and participatory, sometimes evoking strong emotions and realisations that could inspire us to change our behaviour. I personally feel that experiencing this phenomenon in an audio-visual essay is more powerful and comprehensive than merely reading about it. Using the approach of 'experience' to analyse music as a vehicle of meaning aims to inspire others to clarify its workings for themselves. For example, this research can be extended to how other groups of people experience film music, making use of cognitive neuroscientific research methods. It can also be extended to psychoanalytically analyse music in relation to image thinking. In this thesis' philosophical realm of research, a fixed conclusion does not exist. What can be concluded is that a combination of formal and phenomenological analysis establishes a balanced research procedure that includes our rational as well as sensorial observation, both of which are indispensable within film studies. In terms of Newman's scores, I conclude that, his music reaches us not explicitly on a rational level, but on a sensorial level where the sonic elements signify meaning to our hearts.

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Appendix 1:

This table indicates all changes made to the original footage or scenes of *American Beauty*.

Timecodes in Video Essay	Description of changes made	Timecodes in <i>American Beauty</i>
04:57:10	Shots were added of: Burnham's dining at dinner table. Family Fits watching television. Lester drinking at the bar.	07:01:22 29:42:23 31:47:15
05:42:09	Carolyn crying was added.	12:52:45
07:06:04	Whale imagery is superimposed over the original shots.	09:53:15
09:08:23	Match cut back to opening scene.	19:38:10
11:09:15	Thunderstorm footage was added.	01:02:53:10
13:59:08	Compilation of shots was added including: Carolyn and Buddy having intercourse. Ricky being hit by his father. Jane shouting at Angela. Marine in the rain, kissing Lester. Carolyn holding a gun. Lester kissing Angela.	55:49:16 01:34:00:09 01:37:47:10 01:38:58:17 01:42:01:04 01:45:36:21

Appendix 2:

Voiceover of the audio-visual essay:

Introduction:

American Beauty's scores by Thomas Newman secretly signify the film's hidden meaning to our senses. Opening a new door of 'lived' experience while reaching deep into our feelings.

How can we discuss music within film when it actually transcends it?

Influencing the way we feel and perceive our surroundings.

I am interested to lay bare *American Beauty*'s sound-image dynamics and I will use a formal and phenomenological approach to investigate the scores' workings within as well as outside of the film's boundaries.

We might not rationally understand Sonic language, but the many different, exotic instruments Thomas Newman uses strongly communicate meaning.

For example, The Indian Tabla adds an unfamiliar layer of rhythm and phrasing.

In order to decipher how Newman's scores signify meaning to our senses we need to dissect the different sonic elements and their functions. Following Michel Chion's method of analysis and reduced listening mode, we will first hear a part of the movie's introductory score *Dead Already* without the visuals, focussing purely on its instruments and compositional characteristics.

Sedated Senses

A Marimba with hall reverb enters the foreground.

It pauses now and then for a synth whistle

A deep drum introduces the Indian Tabla that enters in a call and responds with the marimba.

The darbuka adds a new percussive layer in the foreground and it leads to an upward glissando, introducing a Tabla solo.

Turkish saz strumming merges with the marimba, Tabla and drums, creating a rhythmically complex push/pull effect. It feels as if the instruments urge each other, the characters and us as listeners, into movement.

Outside the context of the film, this score brings me a feeling of hasty joy. Listening to it on my bike, brings me into synchronisation with the sound. Sharpening my awareness of the surroundings, urging my legs to cycle faster.

But the momentum that is induced with the score is anempathically ignored by *American Beauty*'s visuals, thereby establishing a strong contrasting feeling of being stuck.

Indeed, the storyline of *American Beauty* resolves around this craving to do and feel something again. The film makes clear that the character's are sedated and its plot revolves around their awakening.

When and how can we perceive the true beauty in the world? It requires our eyes, our ears, our hearths to be open but this also makes us vulnerable. The resistance yet wish to experience fully is what this film and phenomenology is all about.

Coming to our senses

There is one character in the movie who's senses do not seem sedated. Ricky, the neighbour's son, observes and reflects on the world around him through a small movie camera. Newman's use of violin and piano ostinato's are a leitmotif to signify Ricky's sensitivity and spiritual perspective on the world. His outsider presence introduces a new sensorial awareness in both the storyline and scores.

Gentle piano notes fall like waterdrops into a melancholic chord progression of strings, building a sense of intimacy. A high tuned string pad fills the background, and a tin whistle softly arrives from a distance. It awakens in me an ethereal sense of deep waters; my mind's eye projects the image of a whale.

The most visceral transformation into sensation occurs in protagonist Lester. It hits him and I feel the punch through the music.

We hear metal bowls, mechanical sounds, bells, a series of glissandos...cymbal scrapes and deliberately detuned mandolins.

An eerie feeling is established. Combined with an overpowering and tribal rhythm.

Newman's score penetrates through me like the feeling of desire penetrates Lester.

The bells imply an alarm clock, telling us to wake up!

This score confirms that Lester is waking up, he experiences a new sense of beauty, that is signified by the vibraphone, layers of swift bells and high-toned triangles. The melody, harmonized in thirds, aligns with the rose petals sailing down from the ceiling.

The visual setting hints back to the contrasting opening sequence.

Here the bells and alarm signify a similar awakening.

If we place the dead already theme under the rose scene, it creates a sense of detachment instead of fulfilment. The rose imagery becomes a sedated fantasy.

Softest Climax

The signature American beauty score brings tears to my eyes every time.

Peter Rothbart poetically describes how; “an intimately microphoned piano, gently accompanied by a drone figure in the strings that carries no rhythmic pull and is voiced with open strings to give us a sense of timelessness and endless space” (page 97).

The film and scores have been building up to something. Exactly halfway through the movie, this scene brings the softest climax I ever came across.

I can feel ‘electricity in the air’ like Ricky says.

The score offers a release of all the tension that has been building up.

Newman makes me experience a feeling of standing outside after a thunderstorm. The score transcends this scene.

I hear water droplets in the piano keys, I smell wet soil through the gentle violin strings.

Through drone frequencies, I hear the silence after a storm that is filled with substance, thick air.

It is not just Ricky’s words that signify beauty and divine love, it is the score reaching into the images on the screen within a screen that we are watching on a screen while being fully submerged in the feeling.

Amplified by the visuals, the score signifies surrendering, like a plastic bag in the wind.

Resolution & Conclusion

This score, set in a minor key, unites many individual sonic elements from the other scores. String pads, piano, drone figures and distant flutes.

All the emotional layers in the film blend together in a quiet post climax landscape.

There is a reason why we stay sedated because we are afraid of releasing what we have locked inside.

Even the marine neighbour, the most ridget character, shows his true feelings.

In the final scene of the movie, Lester is killed.

The score starts with ghostly inching sounds....

My first emotional response is shock, even though I knew it was coming. But then the music shifts, the shock and sadness fades because the leitmotif of the American Beauty score signifies to the plastic bag scene that tells us to let go and everything is okay because the world full of beauty.

Film is a multi-sensorial medium through which we can experience ‘experience’ itself in an externally observable manner. Not only does film translate this experiences of life, it also enacts it through cinematic elements that have been encoded by the director and composer. The sonic and aesthetic elements of American Beauty are mosaicked into a signifying and sensing body of being.

Phenomenology redirects us to our senses and Newman’s scores do the same, a transformation that can also be observed in American Beauty’s characters and it invites the viewer to do the same.

We open up to feeling the movie’s message through its sonic signification.

Newman establishes several rhythmic cycles and ostinato’s that are in dialogue with one another, translating the inner emotional state of the characters as well as transmitting similar feelings to the audience.

Both the audience and the film find a soft climax in the plastic bag score and scene that invites total surrender.

Our experience of life can feel sedated, by the narrative or routines we are in. Without directly addressing us,

Newman’s scores reach us not on a rational level, but on a level where the sonic elements signify to our hearts.