Post Wagnerism's Metalanguage
in Modern Film Music

Dr. Marwan Ali Fawzi*

1.Prolouge

As we are reaching the completion of the 1st quarter in the 21st century, film music is still a topic of great ambiguity. Not just in relation to its obvious Wagnerian roots, but also, in the relation to the aesthetics of the composed absolute music, and all other aspects of connecting sound to image. Varying from the very personally subjective to the strictly methodical. What started as a pure and direct influence from Wagner's music in the early days of cinema developed and blossomed into what looks like something very different. Yet this difference can also be perceived as a byproduct of the Wagnerian influence. Alternatively, to be more accurate the post Wagnerian tidal waves.

Whether the early scores of the talking movies or at the height of commercial success of blockbusters in 80s and 90s till the present day as well. You can spot the "W" effect everywhere, orchestral triumphant passages, borrowed harmonic formations, usage of certain instruments in the orchestra. Even thinking of composing with that Grande architectural.

It is in the interest of this paper to dive through this ambiguous relationship through analyzing key cinematic productions that happened in the late years of the 20th century. This kind of ambiguity were still in process, not obvious as we can know articulate it.

1.1 Problem of the Research

This hypothesis states that post Wagnerism is a revolt sharp reaction towards the creative doctrine of Richard Wagner, yet this paper is going to try proving that post Wagnerism, at least in the most loud and visible medium of composing, Film music is nothing but a creative recycling to the same doctrine.

1.2 Objectives of the Research

1- Identifying post Wagnerism in Film Music.
2- Analyzing the concept of plot and it's scoring in the three movies of the sample.
3- Illustrating the concept tracing still frames with music scoring in the three movies of the sample
4- Identifying the metalanguage used in the three movies of the sample.

1.3 Importance of the Research

For all music history, film and art in general scholars the potent impact of Richard Wagner's stylistic works film music is undeniable. Yet, more studies are needed to define that connection with criticism and analysis, to be able to form new paths in film music scholarship. The paper also going to try proving that post Wagnerism, at least in the most

---
* **Assistant Professor, Theories and Composition Department, Faculty of Music Education, Helwan University.**

loud and visible medium of composing, Film music is nothing but a creative recycling to the same doctrine.

1.4 Questions of the Research

1- What is post Wagnerism in Film Music?

2- How was the concept of plot and it's scoring in the three movies of the sample?

3- What is the concept tracing still frames with music scoring in the three movies of the sample?

4- What are the specifications of metalanguage used in the three movies of the sample?

1.5 Methodology of the Research

This paper combines analytical content methodology with criticism methodology to achieve best results.

1.6 Sample of the Research

The movies: Cast Away (2000), Atonement (2007), and at the Manchester Sea (2017)

1.7 Limitations of the Research

1.8 Terminology of the Research

- **Metalanguage:** Language used to describe or analyze language. Linguistics can be seen as a metalanguage (a 'second-order' language) for describing natural language. : a sign system referring to another sign system1. The paper extends the understanding of the term beyond the absolute philosophical meaning to how significant it is when two or more creative alphabets meet in a structure of art and their projections on each other. The paper also interpret the term via understanding lingual dynamics from theories like Nadel's supernatural language

- **Gesamtkunstwerk:** Unified work of art. Wagner's term for a dramatic work in which drama, music, poetry, song, and paintings should be united into a new and complete art-form. [2]

- **Semiotics:** the study of signs, symbols, and signification. It is the study of how meaning is created[3]

- **Dualism (Binarism):** the paper uses this term referring to intentionally using two central creatively strong points in any given work of art instead of one

- **Semiotic Triplets (semiotic triangle):** the paper uses this term referring to the basic mechanism in understanding how signs work in Semiotics via a triangle consisting of the sign, the interpretant and the object

- **Flying Dutchman Curse:** the paper uses this term referring to Wagner's stylistic composing technique having its own seed the potential to be followed or avoided

---

[1] Oxford Refernces, https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100152860
[2] Oxford References,
https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095850425
[3] University of Vermont, https://www.uvm.edu/~tstreete/semiotics_and_ads/terminology.html

strongly in both cases, for artistic and ideological reasons noting the musical and also the ideological contexts surrounding Richard Wagner's life

- **UFA:** initials for the title (Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft), German film production house established 1917, and was strongly involved in the German expressionist films. [1]
- **Postmodernism:** set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyper-reality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning.[2]

2. Historical & Theoretical Framework

2.1 introduction

The historical and thermotical framework is divided into these main sections. Firstly, a literature review of most important related papers that dealt with music for film and the Wagnerian effect. Secondly, providing background information about two specific perspectives on film music post Wagner.

2.2 Literature Review

- Audissino, Emilio. "Film music as a film device : a neoformalist approach to the analysis of music in films." Thesis, University of Southampton, 2017. https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/414097/.[3]

Abstract:

The analytical approach here offered stems from a mix of Neoformalism – from Film Studies – and concepts drawn from Leonard Meyer's music theories. Neoformalism describes and explains the filmic system focusing on the overall form and style, not only on the interpretation of the film's contents and meanings In this audiovisual interaction, three areas of musical agency are identified in the film: music can have a perceptive function; an emotive function; a cognitive function. The findings are valuable for both the disciplines involved. To film scholars, it presents film music as a topic that can be handled with more confidence and breadth, because the musicological analysis of the musical text (the score) is not required in this approach.

---

[1] Marwan Fawzi, Psychodrama film music, Thesis, Helwan University, 2003

[2] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/

[3] https://www.grafiati.com/en/literature-selections/music-film/dissertation/

- Nagari, Benjamin. "Music as image : an analytical-psychology approach to music in film." Thesis, University of Westminster, 2013.[1]

Abstract:
Sound and music, both independently and inside film are sometimes considered to be secondary to the visual. Some disciplines wish to classify them as triggers to neurological systems while some others will emphasise their affect-inflicting capacity; in both cases these remain as secondary functions and in the case of film as nothing but accompanying elements. Yet, observed psychologically sound and music have a unique and wholesome function in the human psyche. Carl Gustav Jung's analytical psychology opens the door for the understanding of both as images, far beyond the consensual acceptance of image being of a visual faculty only. Understanding music as image puts music in a different position inside a film as well as a stand-alone phenomenon in the every-day life.

- Fawzi, Marwan, "Psychodrama Film Music: an analytical study" Thesis, Helwan University, 2003.

Abstract:
a much more semiotic and psychological approach to understand the embedded messages and hidden meanings in film music based on the descriptive powers of musical discourse in classical music itself. Starting with examining the visual potential to post romantic compositions with emphasis on Wagner, then migrating to films such as Ingmar Bergman's "Persona" and Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho". Thesis also trying to examine the aesthetic impact on Film structure, of utilizing Psychoanalysis and psychological fundamentals in screenplay and filmmaking.

2.3 The Flying Dutchman's Curse[2]

There was no doubt that Wagner's work _and later on ideology_ represented at the time a groundbreaking philosophy for many young _and not so young_ creative minds. It was the postmodernism before the postmodernism itself occurred. Yet this phenomenon had within itself the very seeds of its own twilight.

The Wagnerian effect pushed many composers whether to follow it or simply run away from it with all force in both cases. Therefore, both reactions ought to be regarded as a post Wagnerian effect.

Accordingly, Wagnerian cult composers such as Bruckner and Mahler had the effect transmitted to the "New World", especially with silent film music selections. However, French early films celebrated the unlikeliness of modern French music[3].

---

[1] https://www.grafiati.com/en/literature-selections/music-film/dissertation/
[2] The author uses this phrase referring to the decline of the clear and directly seen affection and influence by Wagner's work through time.
[3] In his films French director George Melies used Erik Satie's piano pieces, opposing the expected aesthetics to use much more grand compositions.

In addition, later on with UFA's German expressionist films one can find that the very opposing ideology to Wagnerism[1] was born since his works was born. Although UFA's films celebrated everything German, at least in the early period, the music was so different and had the urge to come up with new groundbreaking creative tools was a new must. One can argue Gottfried Hobertz's score for Metropolis was shockingly new at the time screaming new music is here, yet you have to regard it as a fresh take on an old technique. To be more specific, using the infinite melody and Gesamtkunstwerk[2] of Wagner.

2.4 The Fall of the Absolute Musical Technique

The major symptom we can spot in all film-scoring techniques in modern cinema is the "nonmusical" value of it. Using score, sound effects and soundtrack arrangements as equal and all serving a certain dramatic and nonmusical purpose. Of course, it is an aftermath of the ideological collapse of postmodernism and world war-II[3]. Yet there is an undeniable effect of semiotics and athletics new concepts utilized in films scoring. Again, this might be considered as a further literature of Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk[4] , and the visually strong attachment between cinema and semiotics. In this context, both are tools to help documenting the human condition in a much more dynamic and unorthodox way; which is film making.

One of the most vivid examples of his historical analogy[5] is Martin Scorsese's "Gangs of New York"[6] and with the opening infamous fight scene using a modern hip-hop music accompanying an old school fight that happened in the 1800s, trying to point connect and even stir up argument on the original cause for the violence in modern USA cultural scene. This very creative tool opposed the classic rule of the historical alignment of score and screen; yet, it also defied the very Wagnerian rule of dramatic alignment between drama and music on the surface level of creative structure of playing modern music with a time period scene, and went with it all the way in the same time on the core level since both elements (sound and frame) pointing to same content (violence). Defied it in form, but went with it in content[7].

---

[1] Hannu Salmi, Wagner and the north, Helsinki Uni. 2021, 3

[2] Richard Wagner, Oper und drama, 1851,78

[3] The paper uses the term "Postmodernism" in a much broader and wider sense, implying the fact that we are still living with ideological waves of postmodernism and this goes for how the paper uses the term "post Wagnerism".

[4] Wagner's golden rule of the perfectly complete art work as the one that addresses mind through language, soul through melody and body through dance and it was manifested in all of his music dramas.

[5] Thomas Sebok, Understanding semiotics, Toronto Uni. 2001, 27

[6] 2002, Miramax and others (producers), Martin Scorsese (director)

[7] Robert George Collingwood, The Principles of Art, Oxford Uni. Press, 1938 / 1958. 45

2.5 Information on the Research Sample

2.5.1 Cast Away, USA, 2000.

2.5.1.1Plot: After an airplane crash, the only passenger who could survive stays stranded alone in an island before he is successful to leave the island on a raft, then rescued and comes back to his life again.

2.5.1.2 Music composer: Alana Silvestre, born 1950, an American composer and conductor notable for the many collaborations with director Robert Zemeckis, Cast Away included.

2.5.1.3 Director: Robert Zemeckis, born 1952, an American Filmmaker, considered a pillar of the new wave of American filmmaking forming a trio with Stephen Spielberg and Martin Scorsese.

2.5.2 Atonement, UK, France, 2007

2.5.2.1Plot: After a raping accident happens in a wealthy family's summer home. It affects the love affair between the family's daughter and the son of one of the help staff. Then they later meet as a soldier and a nurse during wartime.

2.5.2.2 Music composer: Dario Marianelli, born 1963, an Italian composer, won a best original score for "Atonement"

2.5.2.3 Director: Joe Wright, born 1972, English filmmaker, heavily interested in stories that revolve around World War II

2.5.3 Manchester by the Sea, USA, 2016

2.5.3.1Plot: the sudden death of a building supervisor's brother living a simple life, forces him to leave town and live as a caretaker of his nephew. Moreover, to add to his own struggle this all forces him to deal with the guilt and memories related to the tragic death of his daughters.

2.5.3.2 Music composer, the film uses assorted pieces of music but the paper focus of pieces by the Italian composer Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) and French composer Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

2.5.3.3 Director: Kenneth Lonergan, born 1962, an American filmmaker, playwright and screenwriter.

3. The Analytical Framework of the Research

3.1 Introduction

In this section, the paper is presenting an analysis and criticism of the relationship between the music scoring and director perspective. Secondly, it presents the music score/theme and brief analysis of it. Finally, it examines this relationship in details with stills from each movie.

3.2 Cast Away[1]

3.2.1 Main Cinematic Print: Honoring and Defying the Semiotic Triplets

when it comes to cinema, the sign, the object, the interpretant[2], and other infamous semiotics concepts that goes in threes maybe are confusing, yet they are very significant and meaningful. Naturally, Mr. Zemeckis, the director of the movie, is discussing here his eternal existential question of "parallel timeline" but on a very unique way, very different from the very direct way in "Back to the future"[3].

The film's unusual structure helps to evoke this thirst for a tension release, and it happens with very closure via score. Which is highly unusual. Alana Silvestre's score for the film is just one theme, repeated with the slightest orchestral variation and it appears only three times at the very ending chapter of the film, and here is a quick inventory of the three landing spots:

1- At 01:36:50, with the protagonist leaving the deserted island, after spending 4 years there. (After more than 90 minutes of scoreless film).

2- At 01:43:21, with losing "Wilson" the totem volleyball the protagonist handmade and becoming an icon in screenplay condense symbols[4].

3- At 02:04:50, with his comeback to hometown founding he was pronounced dead and he literally came back to life.

In the previous three occurring spots, we listen to same melody, graceful, melancholic, almost like a prayer with very diatonic harmony treatment almost like a hymn theme as the following graph.


Cast Away's main and only theme

---

[1] 2000, Dream Works and others, Robert Zemeckis director.

[2] Paul Cobley, Introduction to Semiotics, McPherson's printing group, Australia, 21

[3] 1985, Universal Pictures

[4] Similar arguments are found in the writings of Serge Einstein in Film Form and Film Sense between 1928 and 1945

Moreover, with a deeper inspection for the previous process we can notice the dynamics behind insisting to replay one theme three times in a multi-million dollars production. The three times are the interpretant for the concept of losing. Losing the nightmare the protagonist had peace with, losing the hope and companionship he created, and finally losing the love of his life. In addition, all represented in this mournful mood of the melody, its paying respect and ceremonial ritual of saying goodbye to something or someone and the whole process manipulates the class semiotic triplet in many ways. However the object is the concept of losing, yet we will keep arguing where sign is and where is interpretant let alone the catalyst volcano coming out of not playing score for more than an hour and a half. As shown in the following graph.
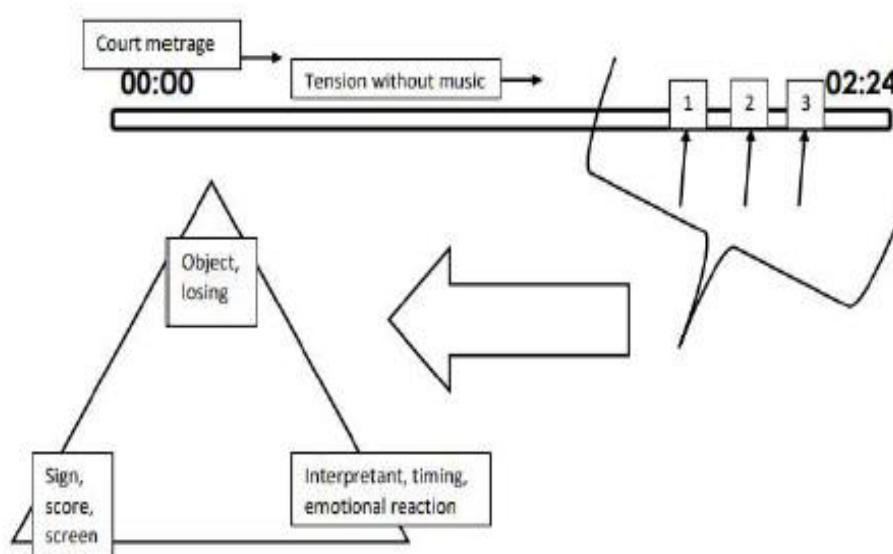
The semiotic significance of Cast Away's score and structure

3.2.2 Stills/Screenplay Analysis

Score landing spot (1)

Most accumulated dramatic and auditory tension after more than 90 minutes of score absence / another layer of tension: For the first time the sea waves and wind, ambience disappears.

Score landing spot (2) / phase 1

The disappearance of Wilson / dramatically plotting for score cue / igniting conflict for the protagonist character.

Score landing spot (2) / phase 2

Locating Wilson / trying to retrieve him and keep the raft secured by holding the rope attached to it.

Score landing spot (2) / phase 3

Losing the raft rope / not retrieving Wilson yet / dramatically cornering the protagonist to make a choice.

	Score landing spot (2) / phase 4
	Choice is made / holding the raft rope again and letting go of Wilson / dramatically justifying the protagonist shouting, "Sorry, Wilson I'm sorry" / and cueing second spot for score.

	Score landing spot (3)
	Coming back home / ironically being very close to the very one he lost / third and final emphasis on the concept of losing.

	The theme resurfaces briefly again the very ending shot, with the protagonist theatrically breaking the fourth wall of illusion, the score and frame here both serve as projecting the whole film concept on each one of the audience.

Score landing spots in Cast Away

3.3 Atonement[1]
Utilizing Dualism[2]

Here is another aspect to using an old school scoring technique, which is quoting other composers, and in a minimal fashion similar to pervious example.

Regardless of the magnificent score put by Dario Marianelli that gave him an Oscar to go home with. In this movie, we can find a very vivid example of dual structure for explaining the main dramatic essence with music quotes, so amidst this lovely musical universe made by Marianelli we find these two very meaningful musical inserts:

1- Puccini's "La Boheme" with the protagonist writing a love letter to his love interest and fantasizing her face.

2- Debussy's "Claire de Lune" with real footage from World War II (soldiers going home and smiling to camera mostly).

These are the only two incidents with quoted music in the film structure and both

---

[1] 2007, Universal Pictures and others, Joe Wright director
[2] Revise Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy definition of the term.

represents very opposing nature both visually and musically. The first is a romantic scene with high colored over saturated screen of beauty shot for the actress trying to duplicate the dreamy intimate state of the feelings. While the second is a bleak dark very real war after math accompanied by solo piano opposing the very nature of the over orchestrated segment of the Italian opera.

Dualism or "Binarism" in Semiotics and philosophy of art calls for building the essence of your artwork on two principles instead of one (focal center or master scene) derived from the ancient nature of yin-yang and the holistic understanding of the very Jekyll-Hyde nature of the human psyche. In addition, this example though these two spots are different yet they are both united with a very dynamic visual detail, everyone is smoking, the protagonist, his love interest and the soldiers in the newsreel. We listen, see and absorb all of the cinematic details within smoking, which adds more to the important core concept of the film pendulum-like movement between love and death as the graph below, then projected on film stills:
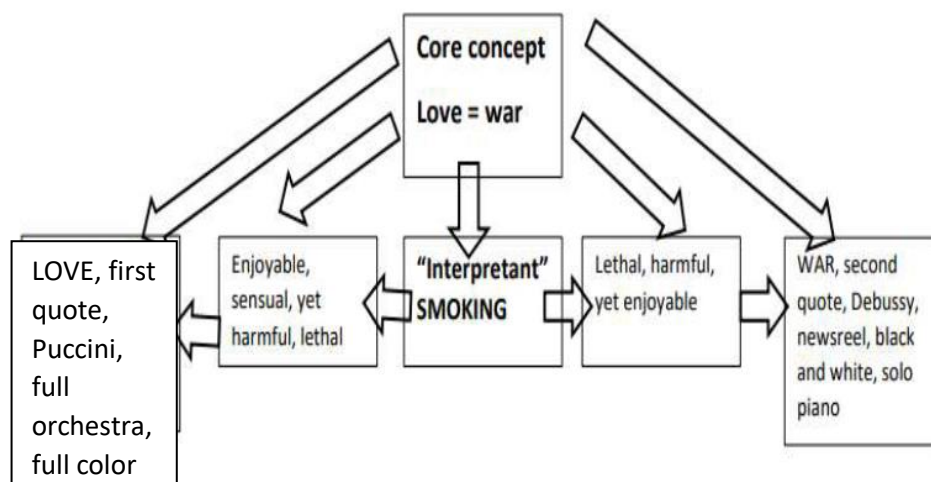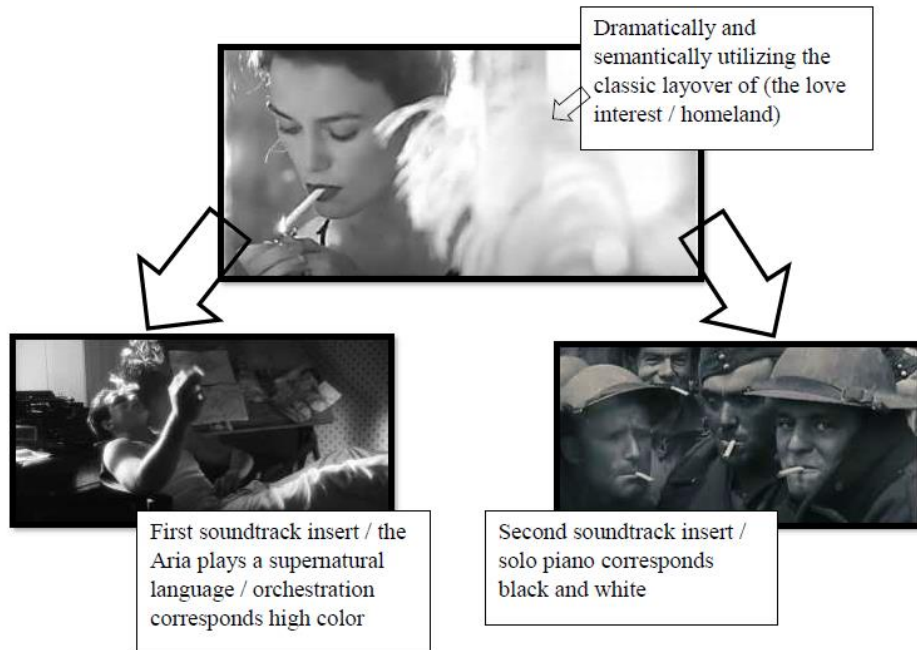
The aesthetic significance of Atonement's musical quotes

Therefore, this structure created that extra level of understanding the dramatic buildup of the film with means of visual symbolism and dual music treatment.

In the previous two film examples, we find that the music is creating a parallel logic and an extra layer of cognitive perception to the film structure. Thus creating a hidden layer of feelings and thoughts, sometimes-muted dialogue. This process of language expressing another language in much more intense and expressive way commonly referenced in semantics as metalanguages a further usage of Spencer's theory of the emotional speech (regarding music as a pure emotional context of language) and Nadel's theory of supernatural language (regarding music as a non-understood, foreign spoken language)[1] also using the cross modal associations[2] trying to bond more than one sense in the very process of receiving mood in film watching which is nothing but a Grande revisit for the Wagnerian concept of Gesamtkunstwerk.

Both techniques are calling to this aesthetics use of music as language, yet in a very subtle way. However, in the following example we will find a very direct lingual use of the musical text.

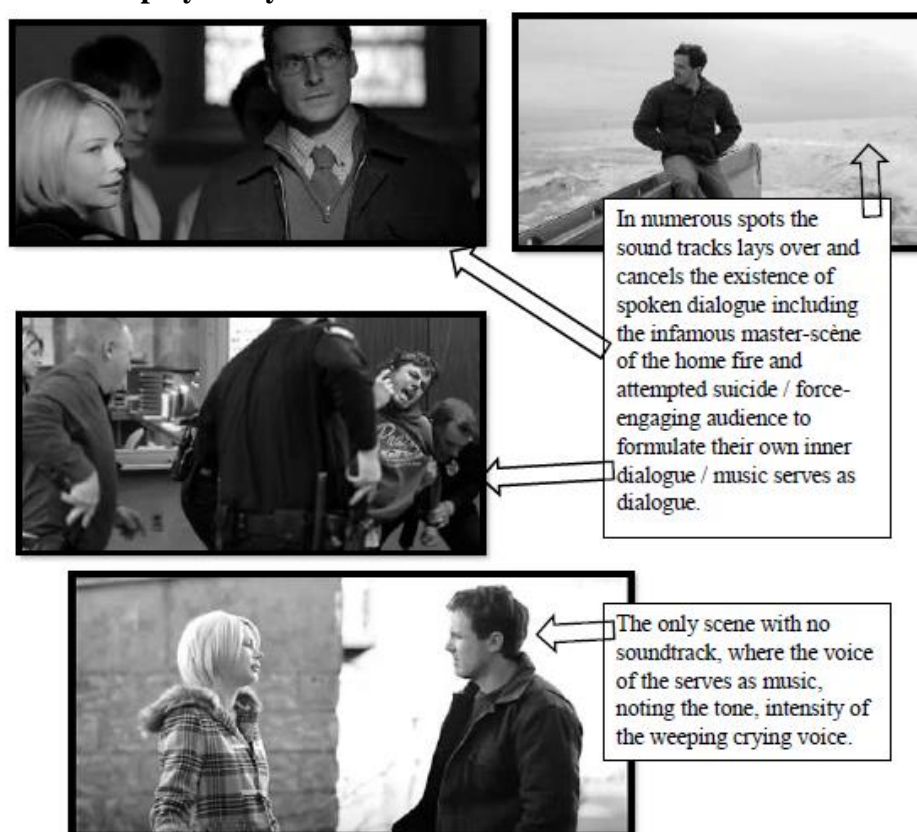[1] Glenn Wilson, Psychology for performing artists, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 1994
[2] Ibid.

3.3 Manchester by the Sea[1],
the Meta-Metalanguage

This movie deliberately covers all of the important dialogue moments with music, once there is an intense moment and audience are eager to listen to dialogue the music will simply cover it.

With a series of Baroque and classic pieces, ever intense moment is covered with music which will result at the very end the audience creating their own dialogue. All this except for one important scene with the film closure (the protagonist receiving a crying apology from his accusing wife after being wrongfully guilt tripped for the death of their daughters) there is absolutely no score coverage here.

3.2.2 Stills screenplay analysis

In numerous spots the sound tracks lays over and cancels the existence of spoken dialogue including the infamous master-scène of the home fire and attempted suicide / force-engaging audience to formulate their own inner dialogue / music serves as dialogue.

The only scene with no soundtrack, where the voice of the serves as music, noting the tone, intensity of the weeping crying voice.

The significance of scoreless scene in Manchester by the sea

We find here some sort of role reversal, which music score plays the role of dialogue for the majority of the film and in master scene (usually the height of score coverage), there is total absence of music and lingual dialogue plays the role of music. Addressing the lingual nature of music and addressing the musical nature of language calls for receiving both as metalanguage in structure and content as well[2].

---

[1] 2016, Amazon MGM and others, Kenneth Lonergan director.
[2] Revise Susan Sontag and Fredric Nietzsche's writing on the nature of language and music

4. Conclusion & Results

1- Post Wagnerism practice did not necessarily exist in film music in a clear Wagner influence of writing music, it also existed in a much deeper philosophical way of connecting drama to music.

2- With each screenplay in the paper's sample films the score a very different aspect to play a significant dramatic, not musical role.

3- Since film is a visual medium, connotation of score to screen, frame by frame is an essential tool to decipher the score dramatic role.

4- Score created a level of metalanguage differently in each of the film in the paper's sample whether by minimal treatment, quoting or even by totally absence in certain scenes.

Richard Wagner's legacy is represented in the modern world of musicianship with revolutionary procedures in both form and content of the musical discourse in any given composition. In film score, there was a massive wave of Wagner's influence on the level of form until mid-20th century, and then the influence reached much deeper levels of musical content. Techniques like symbolism, dramatic significance, utilized by the means of holistic aesthetic design of film form. Which calls for a multi-disciplinary correlation between all of the creative literature in the film structure, all of them as combined languages creating one mega, metalanguage.

In the case studies in the paper, metalanguage is created in three different ways. By minimal score treatment in composition and placing in "Cast Away". By using very different musical discourse insertions at certain spots in "Atonement". And by silence and totally absence of score treatment in "Manchester by the sea"

References

Berry, Wallace (1987)   *Structural functions in music*, Dover Publications, New York.

Cobley, Paul (1994)   *Introduction to Semiotics*, McPherson's Printing Group, Australia.

Collingwood, Robert G. (1938)   *The Principles of Art*, Oxford Uni. Press, UK

Dahlhouse, carl and others (2010)   *The New Grove Wgner*, Macmillan, UK.

Salmi, Hannu (2021)   *Wagner and the North*, Helsinki Uni., Helsinki

Sebok, Thomas (2001)   Understanding Semiotics, Toronto University, Toronto

Swain, Joseph P. (1997)   *Musical Languages*, W W , Norton Co., USA

Wagner, Richard (1913)   *Oper und Drama*, London W Reeves, UK

Wilson, Glenn (1994)   *Psychology for Performing Artists*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Concise

The paper is trying to link modern film scoring technique, specially quoting and minimal scoring to the critique of classical Richard Wagner influence on film score composing. With the means of semiotics and screenplay analysis, embedding three examples from the American cinema released starting 2000.

ملخص البحث

ما بعد الفاجنرية و اللغة الماورائية في موسيقى الفيلم المعاصرة

*د/ مروان علي فوزي

يحاول البحث التجسير بين تقنيات كتابة موسيقى الفيلم المعاصرة و النظرة النقدية المعاصرة لتأثير ريتشارد فاجنر الطاغي على حرفية الكتابة الموسيقية المعاصرة. و بخاصة تقنيات مثل أدنوية المعالجة الموسيقية في البناء الفيلمي و الاقتباس النصي الموسيقي داخل البناء الجمالي للفيلم. يستخدم البحث أدوات علمجمالية لتحليل النص الموسيقي و علاقته بسيناريو الفيلم تطبيقاً على ثلاث أمثلة من السينما الأميريكية يبدأ إنتاجها من العام ٢٠٠٠ . يتبع البحث منهجيتي النقد و تحليل المحتوى و ينطلق من إشكالية أن تأثير التقنية الفاجنرية في الكتابة الموسيقية على موسيقى الفيلم المعاصر تحول من التأثر المباشر إلى إعادة النظر و نقد هذة التقنية و لكن هذا يعد أيضاً تأثراً و ساعد ذلك على وجود كيفية جديدة للنص الموسيقي داخل البناء الجمالي للفيلم ينتج لغة جمالية موازية للبناء الدرامي تعد جمالياً لغة ماورائية و هو مايظهر في نتائج البحث اللتي تصل إلى ظهور اللغة الماورائية نتيجة إما للأدنوية الصارمة في وجود النص الموسيقي أو لتعمد الإقتباس الموسيقي في مناطق بعينها في البناء الفيلمي أو أحياناً لإنتفاء الوجود الموسيقي من الأساس و التعامل مع الصمت باعتباره معادلاً جمالياً للنص الموسيقي .

*مدرس بقسم النظريات والتأليف – كلية التربية الموسيقية – جامعة حلوان.