

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

When someone mentions the word “sign,” a person usually relates it to visualization. It is usual for a person to conclude that way since they can find visual signs everywhere. Road signs, for example, are spread out all around the world and contain different contents. A road sign with a drawing of a person crossing the street will definitely get its meaning across. However, there are many sources of where signs can come from, not only from visuals. Sound is another source of a sign. The “ding!” sound of a phone or elevator, for example, signifies the arrival of something. In music, the trumpet fanfare signifies either royalty or the military.

A sign is also a familiar element in film music. When people hear an ascending semitone, they can relate it to the eerie scenes in *Jaws* (1975). When the string family plays a surging melody, listeners associate it with something highly emotional or dramatic and, most of the time, romance. However, if the same instruments play dissonant harmonies in tremolo, listeners become wary because they recognize it as something scary.

The motif of *Jaws* is an example that belongs to what Claudia Gorbman calls *cinematic* musical codes. This code applies when the music’s signification

derives from the film itself, whether verbal or visual.¹ In the case of *Jaws*, the music links to the visual of the shark. Meanwhile, the way the string family plays to signify romance or fright belongs to Gorbman's *cultural* musical codes. Films utilize this code because the music has been culturally encoded, consciously or subconsciously, making the picture's narrative easier to understand. Gorbman gives another example of cultural musical codes by how people can imagine the sound of "battle music" and "Indian music" in films.²

Many film music signs that people recognize are written in the romantic style, specifically in Hollywood films. This style has been used since the silent film era when the film composers were trained in the nineteenth-century style.³ It already came into the film world with its signification⁴ since it was used in opera. To mention one of opera's many significations that film music borrows is implying excitement by presenting fast passages in loud dynamics. Furthermore, the romantic style uses the Wagnerian *leitmotiv*, a technique where a musical material is assigned to a narrative context such as character, place, situation, or emotion. Cinematic musical codes are usually the result of this technique, just like the motif of *Jaws*.

However, the romantic style is not the only kind of music that can work as a signifier in film. On the other hand, minimal music has also been used in

¹ Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: BFI Publishing, 1987), 3.

² Ibid.

³ Kathryn Kalinak, "Film Music: A Very Short Introduction (Google EBook)," 2010, 64, <http://books.google.com/books?id=aHpUxeOcb5kC&pgis=1>.

⁴ Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert, eds., *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2007), 52.

films for many decades. It started at the beginning of 1960 by American composers including La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Philip Glass, and Steve Reich as a response to expressionism. One of many examples is Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* (1914-22), which was the most celebrated musical style at that time. As it is against the complexity of expressionism, minimalism promotes "simplicity, clarity, and regularity"⁵ by reducing the use of material and simplifying its procedure. Its signification in films has been analyzed in some studies that will be mentioned and elaborated on later.

In films, the techniques of minimal music are not foreign to the ears of the audiences. Ever since minimalism grew in art music in the 1960s, its technique's appearance also increased in avant-garde film and the world of Hollywood film especially after the popularity of *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), which music was composed by Philip Glass. Even further, the seemingly "reserved" style was no longer exclusive to those minimalist music composers. Instead, many non-minimalist composers also considerably employ minimalist techniques in their music. John Williams, for instance, who usually composes in the romantic style, applied minimalist techniques in *A. I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001). James Horner and Cliff Martinez, who mainly applied romanticism in their film music, managed to employ minimalist techniques in *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) and *Solaris* (2002).

⁵ J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 9th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 975.

There are many studies about film music and the technique of minimal music separately, but rarely about the connection of both topics (Siôn, 2012). It might be because classical music scholars think of minimal music as “too ‘highbrow’ for the popular musicologists, too mass-market for classical music scholars.”⁶ It is even rarer to find studies about the signification of minimalist techniques in film music (McClary, 2007; Eaton, 2008; Eaton, 2014). In her essay *Minima Romantica* from the book *Beyond the Soundtrack*, Susan McClary has analyzed minimal music as a signifier of “Romantic signs of hope and yearning.”⁷ In 2008, Rebecca Marie Doran Eaton categorized minimalist technique as three main signs: Otherness, mathematical mind, and dystopia.⁸ In 2014, she released another study with the already encoded signs of minimalist techniques in multimedia music: machines and mathematics.⁹

Eaton divides the signification of Otherness into two in her 2008 dissertation, one of which is the sign of alien. She writes that science fiction films with an alien character, such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *E. T.* (1982), often utilize music with dissonant harmony which can invoke a feeling of dread in the listeners. On the other hand, the film music in *Solaris* (2002), composed by Cliff Martinez, applies minimalist techniques which do not invoke the same feeling as the two previous films mentioned. In *Solaris*,

⁶ Rebecca Marie Doran Eaton, “Unheard Minimalisms: The Functions of the Minimalist Technique in Film Scores” (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2008), 13.

⁷ Goldmark, Kramer, and Leppert, *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, 57.

⁸ Eaton, “Unheard Minimalisms: The Functions of the Minimalist Technique in Film Scores.”

⁹ Rebecca Marie Doran Eaton, “Marking Minimalism: Minimal Music as a Sign of Machines and Mathematics in Multimedia,” *Music and the Moving Image* 7, no. 1 (2014): 3, <https://doi.org/10.5406/musimoviimag.7.1.0003>.

minimalist techniques are applied to work as a signifier of the alien character by repeating a motive and using consonant harmony.

A similar situation happens in the science fiction film *Interstellar* (2014), which plot is set in outer space. Many outer space science fiction films, even without the alien characters, also frequently use atonal as well as the romantic style to signify the moving picture. The film *Gravity* (2013), for instance, uses many dissonant harmonies to evoke the feeling of fearfulness of the unknown. In *The Midnight Sky* (2020), the music uses surging melodic lines to signify the dramatic happening in space. Meanwhile, Hans Zimmer in *Interstellar's* film music uses minimalist techniques that lack atonality and surging melody for the film's dramatic and suspenseful plot. Zimmer's music in this film primarily applies a limited number of diatonic chords and pitch classes and lacks real melody because of its fragmented and short pattern. These two materials create patterns that repeat throughout one or more scenes. Therefore, this research uses this film. Not to mention, I have not found another outer space science fiction film from the Hollywood film industry that also utilizes minimalist techniques in many of the film's scenes so far.

This scientific research aims to investigate the application of minimalist techniques as a signifier in the film music of *Interstellar*. This research analyzes which minimalist techniques are used and how it signifies and affects the scene. It also analyzes the way each technique signifies its respectful signs.

Because of its need for in-depth analysis and detailed narration, this research uses the qualitative method. The analysis provides a structured film

timeline, its detailed plot, and transcription of the music, all of which are taken from the scenes with minimalist techniques in its music. It is also supported by data collected from primary sources obtained from audio and audiovisual materials and secondary sources in the shape of published books and research that bring up topics about minimal music and its techniques, film music, or the association of both topics. Chapter II and Chapter III will elaborate on these topics.

1.2 Research Questions

What are the significations of minimalist techniques in the film music of *Interstellar*? How does the minimalist technique signify the scenes?

1.3 Purposes of Research

This research aims to investigate the application of minimalist techniques as a signifier in the film music of *Interstellar*.

1.4 Scope and Limitations of Research

This research does not mention, compare, or take examples from films published outside of Hollywood because I want to focus on the country where it originated. Even if this research uses foreign film, it needs to be considered a historical turning point in minimal film music or very distinctive. Therefore, it cannot be excluded because of its importance.

This research uses the album soundtrack titled *Interstellar (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack) [Expanded Edition]* from the digital platform Spotify. This decision comes from the consideration that it provides the whole track of the existing film compared to the *Standard Edition*. This album soundtrack provides an easier transcription for the analysis because it is not compressed by diegetic sound (actual sound that has not been added in, such as dialogue and footsteps), sound effects, or voiceover.

1.5 Significance of Research

1. Theoretical significance: to expand the application of minimal music's technique as a signifier in film.
2. Practical significance: to provide a reference for composers interested in both film music and minimal music and who wish to write minimal film music in the future.