

Minimalism as Cinematic Thought: Philip Glass and the Paradigms of Architecture, Continuum, and Fragmentation

Maria Grăjdian

1. Introduction: Repetition *and* Meaning, Repetition *as* Meaning

Film music has long transcended its auxiliary role, evolving into a decisive force in shaping narrative meaning, emotional depth, and philosophical resonance. In the works of Philip Glass, this evolution reaches a distinctive articulation, where minimalist composition becomes not merely an aesthetic choice but a structural principle, as through repetition, variation, and temporal modulation, Glass transforms music into a medium actively constructing cinematic reality and subjectivity. This paper investigates three distinct paradigms of minimalist film scoring as manifested in Philip Glass' work for *The Truman Show* (1998), *The Hours* (2002), and *Secret Window* (2004): while these films differ in genre, narrative structure, and thematic orientation, they collectively reveal a coherent yet multifaceted approach to film music which transcends conventional accompaniment, so that, instead, Glass' scores function as conceptual frameworks shaping the viewer's perception of time, identity, and reality.

The central argument of this study is that these three scores articulate a tripartite model of cinematic minimalism, which may be understood through the conceptual triad of "Architecture", "Continuum", and "Fragmentation": in *The Truman Show*, music operates as an architectural system of repetition which both sustains and ultimately destabilizes an externally controlled reality, enabling existential awakening. In *The Hours*, Glass' score creates a temporal and emotional continuum interweaving disparate narratives into a unified experiential field. In *Secret Window*, minimalist techniques are reconfigured to express psychological fragmentation, where repetition becomes a mechanism of obsession and disintegration. By examining these three paradigms, the current paper positions Glass not merely as a composer of film music but as a thinker in sound, whose work engages deeply with philosophical questions of identity, temporality, and perception. In doing so, it contributes to a broader

understanding of the ways in which minimalist music can function as a structural and interpretive force within cinema.

Scholarship on Philip Glass has traditionally emphasized his role as a central figure in musical minimalism, alongside composers such as Steve Reich and Terry Riley (Duckworth, 1999 [1995]; Mertens, 1988; Potter, 2000). Early studies focus on the formal properties of minimalism – repetition, additive processes, and gradual transformation –, often situating Glass within a lineage of post-WWII experimental music (Lucier, 2018; Kostelanetz, 1997; Richardson, 1999; Schwartz, 1996; Zimmermann, 2020). More recent work, nonetheless, has turned towards his contributions to film, recognizing the unique ways in which his compositional style interacts with cinematic narrative (Maycock, 2003; Wierzbicki, 2008; Russell/Young, 2000). Indeed, film music studies have increasingly acknowledged the capacity of minimalist scores to reshape traditional notions of diegesis, temporality, and emotional signification, with scholars arguing that repetition in film music can produce both immersion and estrangement, challenging linear narrative expectations. In this context, Glass' film scores are frequently cited as paradigmatic examples of music's function as a temporal and psychological agent rather than as mere accompaniment. Specific analyses of *The Truman Show*, *The Hours*, and *Secret Window* tend to focus on their thematic concerns – media control and reality, gender and temporality, and psychological fragmentation, respectively – while noting the atmospheric contribution of Glass' music (Manvell, 2021; Lucier, 2018; Harrison, 2021) – such discussions, nevertheless, often remain localized, treating each score in isolation rather than as part of a broader compositional and philosophical trajectory. This paper addresses that gap by proposing a comparative framework which reads the scores as interconnected expressions of a unified aesthetic logic, seeking, by articulating the paradigms of "Architecture", "Continuum", and "Fragmentation", to move beyond descriptive analysis towards a more systematic understanding of Glass' film music as a form of conceptual practice – one engaging with both cinematic form and philosophical inquiry.

The methodology of the current study is interdisciplinary, combining approaches from film music analysis, philosophy of art, and narrative theory. At its core lies a close reading of the interaction between musical structure and cinematic form in the selected films, which involves detailed attention to compositional elements such as repetition, harmonic progression, rhythmic patterning, and instrumentation, as well as their relationship to visual editing, narrative pacing, and character development. In addition to formal analysis, the paper adopts a conceptual framework grounded in philosophical inquiry,

as the paradigms of “Architecture”, “Continuum”, and “Fragmentation” are not merely descriptive categories but interpretive tools which enable a deeper understanding of the role of music in shaping the ontological and epistemological dimensions of the films: “Architecture” refers to the structuring function of music in constructing and regulating cinematic reality; “Continuum” denotes the capacity of music to create temporal and emotional cohesion across narrative discontinuities; “Fragmentation” captures the role of music in representing psychological disintegration and the breakdown of unified subjectivity.

In this train of thought, the comparative dimension of the methodology is essential: by analyzing three films across different genres and narrative strategies, the study identifies both consistencies and variations in Glass’ approach, allowing for the articulation of distinct paradigms within a coherent aesthetic system. This comparative perspective equally highlights the adaptability of minimalist techniques, demonstrating the ways in which they can be recontextualized to serve diverse narrative and philosophical purposes. Ultimately, the methodology seeks to bridge the gap between musicological analysis and film theory, treating the score not as a secondary element but as a central component of cinematic meaning-making.

The paper is structured around the three paradigms identified above, each corresponding to a detailed case study of one film: the first section, titled “Repetition and Awakening: Minimalism as Existential Architecture in *The Truman Show* (1998)”, examines Glass’ score through the prism of constructing a sonic framework which mirrors the protagonist’s controlled environment while gradually enabling his emergence into self-awareness. Here, repetition functions as both constraint and catalyst, embodying the tension between external control and individual agency. The second section, “Temporal Flow and Emotional Continuum: Minimalism as Interwoven Consciousness in *The Hours* (2002)”, shifts the focus to the role of music in bridging temporal and narrative divides: through its continuous, flowing structures, Glass’ score creates a unified emotional landscape connecting the experiences of three women across different historical periods, emphasizing the persistence of existential concerns. The third section, “Fragmentation and Obsession: Minimalism as Psychological Disintegration in *Secret Window* (2004)”, explores the darker potential of minimalist techniques – in such a context, repetition becomes a mechanism of compulsion, reflecting the protagonist’s fractured identity and descent into madness. Together, these segments form a triptych illustrating the versatility and conceptual depth of Glass’ film music,

simultaneously demonstrating minimalist composition's ability to articulate distinct modes of cinematic experience.

The first of these paradigms emerges most clearly in *The Truman Show*, where the interplay between music and narrative constructs a world defined by control, repetition, and gradual rupture. In this context, Philip Glass' score operates as an architectural force, shaping both the structure of Truman's reality and the conditions for its transcendence. Thus, it is the paradigm of "Architecture and Awakening" which takes the central stage now.

2. Repetition and Awakening:

Minimalism as Existential Architecture in *The Truman Show* (1998)

The Truman Show, directed by Peter Weir and featuring a score by Philip Glass, remains a striking meditation on the human condition: through the life of Truman Burbank, portrayed by Jim Carrey, the film explores identity, consumerism, authenticity, and the fragile boundary between reality and illusion. While its narrative critiques media culture and social conformity, its emotional and philosophical resonance is profoundly shaped by Glass' minimalist score, which functions not merely as accompaniment but as a parallel narrative voice.

At its core, *The Truman Show* examines the artificial construction of identity within a controlled, consumer-driven environment: indeed, Truman Burbank's life, entirely fabricated and globally broadcast as entertainment, becomes a powerful allegory for modern existence, where external forces – media, advertising, and societal expectations – shape individual identity. One of the film's most striking elements is its portrayal of love and relationships as commodities – and Truman's marriage to Meryl/Hannah Gill (Laura Linney) exemplifies itself a simulated intimacy designed for public consumption. Their interactions are devoid of genuine affection, instead functioning as scripted performances embedded with product placements: such an artificiality highlights the ways in which consumer culture can infiltrate even the most personal aspects of life, transforming relationships into transactional exchanges. In contrast, Truman's fleeting connection with Lauren/Sylvia (Natascha McElhone) introduces the possibility of authentic emotion, as unlike Meryl, Sylvia represents spontaneity, truth, and resistance to manipulation, and her attempts to reveal the reality of Truman's world catalyze his awakening, underscoring the transformative power of genuine human connection. The tension between these two relationships illustrates a central dichotomy: manufactured affection versus authentic love.

The film likewise offers a critique of traditional gender roles: on the one hand, Meryl embodies the idealized housewife, reinforcing a sanitized, 1950s-inspired domesticity, while Truman initially occupies the role of the passive, content breadwinner (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2013). Nevertheless, as Truman begins to question his reality, he subverts these roles, with his journey towards self-awareness reflecting a broader shift from passive conformity to active self-definition. On the other hand, Sylvia, as an independent and assertive figure, further challenges conventional femininity, symbolizing a modern, emancipated identity. At the same time, consumerism permeates every aspect of Truman's existence, as his world is sustained by advertising, and his daily life is meticulously curated to serve commercial interests. This omnipresence of consumer culture suggests that identity itself can become a product, shaped and manipulated for profit; Truman's gradual realization of the constructed reality mirrors an existential awakening: he begins to question not only his environment but also the authenticity of his desires and choices.

Philosophically, Truman's journey aligns with existentialist thought: his transition from ignorance to awareness reflects the struggle for autonomy in a world defined by external validation, and, eventually, the artificial dome of Seahaven Island becomes a metaphor for the constraints imposed by society, while Truman's escape symbolizes the pursuit of authentic existence (see Kimmel, 2013). His final act of defiance – choosing uncertainty over the illusion of familiar certainty – affirms the primacy of individual freedom. Moreover, the ethical dimension of the film is embodied in the character of Christof (Ed Harris), the creator of Truman's world: Christof represents authoritarian control masked as benevolence, raising questions about surveillance, consent, and the morality of exploiting human life for entertainment, while Truman's friend Marlon (Noah Emmerich) further complicates this dynamic, as his genuine affection is entangled with his role in sustaining the illusion (see Kimmel, 2013). Ultimately, *The Truman Show* functions as both a critique of contemporary society and a timeless exploration of human identity, as its depiction of voyeurism and media obsession anticipates the rise of reality television and social media, making its themes increasingly relevant, but it equally challenges viewers to reflect on their own realities and the forces shaping them, positioning cinema as both a mirror to the self and a catalyst for self-awareness.

If *The Truman Show's* narrative of constructs a philosophical framework, the music of Philip Glass provides its emotional and metaphysical architecture as it does not simply underscore the film but articulates its inner logic, translating Truman's psychological journey into sound. Rooted in

minimalism, Glass' score operates through repetition, gradual variation, and subtle shifts in texture, mirroring the controlled yet unstable nature of Truman's world.

Minimalism, as developed by Glass, is characterized by repetitive structures evolving incrementally over time (Evans, 2015; see Cooke, 2010) – and in *The Truman Show*, this compositional approach becomes a direct analogue to the main character's existence as his daily routines such as greeting neighbors, commuting to work, engaging in scripted interactions, are reflected in looping musical patterns which create and reinforce a sense of temporal suspension: the music suggests a life caught in a cycle, where change is imperceptible and freedom is illusory. Yet Glass' repetition is never static as beneath the surface, small variations accumulate, creating a subtle sense of unease, mirroring Truman's gradual awakening: at first, the irregularities in his world are barely noticeable, but over time they disrupt the illusion of stability. The music thus functions as a kind of subconscious signal, alerting the audience to the fragility of the constructed reality long before Truman fully comprehends it.

One of the most striking qualities of *The Truman Show's* score is its emotional ambiguity: unlike traditional film music, which often guides the viewer towards specific feelings, Glass' compositions resist clear emotional categorization, hovering between serenity and tension, familiarity and estrangement (Evans, 2015; Glass, 2016). This ambiguity reflects the dual nature of Seahaven Island itself – a place which appears idyllic but conceals profound manipulation – so the music invites the audience to question what they are hearing, just as Truman is compelled to question what he sees. Instrumentation plays a crucial role in shaping this atmosphere: Glass employs a combination of piano, strings, and electronic textures, creating a soundscape which is at once intimate and artificial, with the piano often carrying the repetitive motifs, grounding the music in a sense of personal introspection, while the strings introduce a lyrical dimension hinting at emotional depth beneath the surface. Electronic elements, meanwhile, subtly reinforce the artificiality of Truman's environment, suggesting an unseen technological apparatus governing his life.

As Truman's awareness grows, the music evolves in tandem, so that the earlier, tightly structured patterns begin to loosen, allowing for greater harmonic and rhythmic freedom. This shift is particularly evident in moments of realization, where the music expands beyond its initial constraints – interestingly, the effect is not abrupt but cumulative, reflecting the gradual nature of Truman's transformation, with the score thus becoming a dynamic

representation of his internal state, charting his movement from confinement to self-discovery (Glass, 2016; see Duffie, 1982, 1987). The relationship between music and silence is equally significant as Glass frequently employs sparse textures, allowing moments of quiet to punctuate the score, and these silences create space for reflection, emphasizing the isolation at the heart of Truman's experience, while equally heightening the impact of the music when it returns, reinforcing key emotional and narrative moments.

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the score is its role in the film's climax: as Truman confronts the boundaries of his world, the music shifts from cyclical repetition to a more expansive, almost transcendent dimensions, as the harmonic progression opens up, and the textures become richer, suggesting the possibility of liberation. This transformation underscores the thematic culmination of the film: the transition from illusion to reality, from control to autonomy (Evans, 2015; Glass, 2016). Importantly, Glass's music does not simply celebrate Truman's escape, but in fact complicates it, as the sense of transcendence is tempered by an underlying ambiguity, reflecting the uncertainty of what lies beyond the constructed world. In this way, the score avoids sentimentality, maintaining a philosophical depth which aligns with the film's broader concerns.

An additional crucial dimension of *The Truman Show's* music is its meta-narrative function: because Truman's life is a television show within the film, the score operates on multiple levels, emerging both as the soundtrack of Truman's experience and, implicitly, as part of the broadcast consumed by the in-film audience. This duality reinforces the film's exploration of spectatorship, blurring the line between diegetic and non-diegetic sound, as the viewer is gradually implicated in the act of observation, mirroring the voyeuristic dynamics critiqued by the film itself (Buhler, 2019; see Chion, 2009). Last but not least, Glass's score contributes to the film's temporal structure, with the repetitive motifs creating a sense of continuity, linking disparate scenes into a cohesive whole, while, simultaneously, the gradual evolution of these motifs provides a subtle sense of progression, guiding the audience through Truman's journey. This complex balance between stasis and movement reflects the central tension of the film: the coexistence of control and change.

From a broader perspective, such music can be understood as a philosophical statement in its own right: minimalism, with its emphasis on process and perception, invites the listener to engage actively with the sound, noticing small changes over time (see Cooke, 2010). In *The Truman Show*, this mode of listening parallels the act of critical awareness as, just as Truman learns to perceive the inconsistencies in his world, the audience is encouraged

to attune themselves to the nuances of the score. Ultimately, Glass' contribution elevates the film beyond a conventional narrative: his music does not merely accompany Truman's story; it embodies it. Through its repetitive structures, subtle variations, and emotional ambiguity, the score captures the essence of a life lived within constraints – and the profound transformation which occurs when those constraints are challenged.

Almost three decades after its release, *The Truman Show* endures as a powerful exploration of identity, consumerism, and freedom. While its narrative offers a compelling critique of media culture and societal control, its emotional depth is inseparable from the music of Philip Glass which, together with Peter Weir's vision, transforms the film into a multidimensional experience, where sound and image converge to articulate a profound philosophical inquiry. Truman's journey towards authenticity resonates as both a personal and universal narrative, inviting audiences to question the forces that shape their own lives – and in the interplay between story and sound, *The Truman Show* reveals itself not only as a cinematic achievement but as an enduring meditation on what it means to be truly free.

3. Temporal Flow and Emotional Continuum: Minimalism as Interwoven Consciousness in *The Hours* (2002)

The Hours, directed by Stephen Daldry and scored by Philip Glass, presents an intricate meditation on identity, time, and the emotional architecture of human existence. Drawing from *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) by Virginia Woolf and *The Hours* (1998) by Michael Cunningham, the film interweaves the lives of three women across different historical moments, constructing, through Nicole Kidman, Julianne Moore, and Meryl Streep, a layered exploration of femininity, love, and existential longing – one significantly deepened by Glass' musical language.

At its narrative core, *The Hours* presents three interconnected portraits of womanhood, each shaped by the constraints and possibilities of its respective historical context. The film's structure – moving fluidly between 1920s England, 1950s suburban America, and early 2000s New York – gradually conveys a temporal dialogue about identity, autonomy, and emotional truth (Illouz, 2012; Butler, 2024). Virginia Woolf, as portrayed by Nicole Kidman, embodies the archetype of the expansive mind in conflict with both internal and external limitations: living under the watchful care of her husband Leonard (Stephen Dillane), Woolf struggles with mental illness while attempting to write *Mrs. Dalloway*. Her existence is marked by the tension between

intellectual freedom and societal restriction, reflecting the broader constraints placed on women in the early 20th century, as her yearning for autonomy, coupled with her sensitivity to life's fragility, situates her within an existential framework in which she seeks meaning through creation while confronting the possibility of annihilation (see Kristeva, 1974). Her emotional and psychological intensity culminates in a tragic assertion of agency, underscoring the limited avenues for self-realization available to women for the largest part of history.

In contrast, Julianne Moore's Laura Brown represents the mid-century crisis of domestic femininity: trapped in the performative perfection of 1950s suburban life, Laura embodies the disillusionment hidden beneath societal ideals of marriage and motherhood. Her inability to connect authentically with her husband Dan (John C. Reilly) and her fleeting yet significant moment of intimacy with Kitty (Toni Collette) reveal suppressed desires and an unarticulated longing for a different existence. Laura's internal conflict is not merely personal but emblematic of a broader cultural condition: the suffocation of individuality under rigid gender roles (Butler, 2024; Kristeva, 1974). Her contemplation of suicide and eventual abandonment of her family constitute radical, morally complex acts of self-liberation, challenging the assumption that women's fulfillment lies solely within domesticity.

Meryl Streep's Clarissa Vaughan offers a contemporary counterpart, embodying both the progress and the unresolved tensions of modern identity: living in early 2000s New York, Clarissa navigates a life which outwardly reflects independence and success, yet remains deeply shaped by emotional attachments and unresolved pasts. Her relationship with her partner Sally (Allison Janney) reflects evolving societal acceptance of same-sex relationships, while her enduring connection to Richard (Ed Harris) – a former lover dying of AIDS – anchors her in a past which continues to define her emotional landscape (see Connell, 2005; Illouz, 2012). Richard's presence introduces themes of mortality, memory, and the persistence of love beyond conventional structures. Together, these three narratives form a composite portrait of femininity across time, as each woman grapples with the tension between societal expectation and personal authenticity, yet their struggles are neither identical nor reducible to a single trajectory of progress. Instead, the film emphasizes continuity as much as change: the same existential questions – about love, purpose, and identity – recur across decades, even as their social contexts evolve.

Thematically, *The Hours* engages deeply with existential philosophy in each protagonist's confrontation with the fundamental question of how to live meaningfully within the constraints of one's own circumstances: Woolf

channels her struggle into artistic creation; Laura confronts it through withdrawal and escape; Clarissa negotiates it through reflection and emotional endurance. Their choices illuminate different responses to the same underlying condition: the tension between the desire for authenticity and the pressures of conformity (Butler, 2024; Kimmel, 2013). Pivotaly, gender and sexuality are central to this exploration as the film challenges rigid binaries, presenting identity as fluid and contingent. Woolf's emotional and possibly romantic attachments to women, Laura's suppressed desires, and Clarissa's openly lesbian relationship collectively trace an arc of evolving sexual expression – yet the film resists presenting this evolution as linear or complete; instead, it underscores the persistent complexities of desire, intimacy, and self-understanding.

Stephen Daldry's direction reinforces these thematic concerns through a carefully orchestrated interplay of visual and narrative elements: the use of parallel editing creates a sense of simultaneity across time, suggesting that the characters' experiences are variations on a shared human condition, with recurring motifs – such as flowers, water, mirrors – serving as symbolic connectors, linking the women's inner lives while emphasizing the cyclical nature of existence. Ultimately, *The Hours* functions as both a reflection on the past and a meditation on the present, capturing the evolving roles of women while acknowledging the enduring challenges of self-definition: thus, by weaving together personal narratives with broader philosophical questions, the film invites viewers to consider their own positions within this continuum, highlighting cinema's capacity to illuminate the complexities of human experience.

The Hours' emotional and philosophical depth of is inseparable from the score composed by Philip Glass. Far from serving as mere accompaniment, Glass' music operates as a structural and interpretive force, shaping the film's temporal flow, emotional resonance, and conceptual unity, as through his distinctive minimalist language, the composer creates a sonic environment which not only reflects the inner lives of the characters but also binds their disparate narratives into a cohesive whole. As mentioned previously, minimalism, as practiced by Glass, is built upon repetition, gradual transformation, and an acute sensitivity to temporal perception (Evans, 2015; Glass, 2016): in *The Hours*, these elements become central to the film's exploration of time and consciousness as the repetitive motifs permeating the score mirror the cyclical patterns of daily life experienced by the three protagonists. Whether it is Woolf's writing routine, Laura's domestic rituals, or Clarissa's preparations for a party, their actions unfold within structures which appear stable yet conceal underlying tension.

Then again, Glass' stylistic repetition is never static as subtle variations in rhythm, harmony, and texture introduce a sense of movement within apparent stasis – a dynamic which reflects the characters' internal transformations: while their external circumstances may seem unchanging, their emotional and psychological states are in constant flux. The music thus becomes a vehicle for expressing what remains unspoken, articulating the nuances of longing, anxiety, and introspection that define their experiences. One of the most remarkable aspects of *The Hours*' score is its ability to traverse temporal boundaries: indeed, the film's narrative shifts between three distinct periods, yet Glass' music provides a unifying thread transcending these divisions. By employing recurring motifs across different contexts, the score suggests a continuity of human experience which extends beyond historical specificity, with the same musical ideas accompanying Woolf, Laura, and Clarissa, discretely implying that their struggles are interconnected manifestations of a shared existential condition (see Buhler, 2019; Cooke, 2010). This temporal fluidity is further enhanced by the music's harmonic language, as Glass often employs simple, diatonic harmonies which evolve gradually, creating a sense of openness and ambiguity, but, at the same time, these harmonies resist definitive resolution, mirroring the unresolved nature of the characters' lives, and the absence of clear cadences reflects the ongoing search for meaning, reinforcing the film's existential themes.

Instrumentation plays a crucial role in shaping *The Hours*' score's emotional texture: to start with, the piano serves as the central instrument, its repetitive patterns providing both structure and intimacy, the clarity of the piano's timbre allowing the listener to perceive subtle variations in the music, therefore fostering a heightened awareness of temporal progression. Strings, meanwhile, add a layer of warmth and expressivity, expanding the emotional range of the score, as their sustained tones contrast with the percussive quality of the piano, creating a dialogue between stability and fluidity (Kostelanetz, 1997; Maycock, 2003). Furthermore, Glass' use of rhythm is equally significant: the steady pulse which underlies much of the score evokes a sense of inevitability, suggesting the passage of time as an unstoppable force – yet this pulse is often disrupted by shifts in accentuation or tempo, introducing moments of instability reflecting the characters' emotional crises. These rhythmic variations gradually create a tension between continuity and disruption, mirroring the balance between routine and transformation in the characters' lives.

The relationship between music and image is particularly evident in *The Hours*' use of parallel editing: as the narratives of Woolf, Laura, and

Clarissa unfold simultaneously, Glass' score provides a rhythmic and emotional framework binding them together, with the music often bridging transitions between scenes, smoothing temporal shifts and reinforcing thematic connections – turning, in this way, into a kind of narrative glue, ensuring coherence within the film's complex structure (see Glass, 2016; Richardson, 1999). Silence, too, plays a vital role in the musical design, with Glass frequently allowing the music to recede, opening up spaces in which the characters' inner lives can resonate more comprehensively in their vivid vibrance. These moments of quiet are not mere absences of sound but integral components of the score's architecture as they heighten the impact of the music when it returns, emphasizing key emotional and narrative developments.

One of the most profound aspects of *The Hours*' score is its capacity to evoke a sense of inevitability while simultaneously suggesting the possibility of change: the repetitive structures imply a predetermined pattern, echoing the constraints imposed on the characters by their circumstances, yet the gradual transformations within these structures hint at the potential for agency and self-determination – a duality which reflects the central tension of the film: the interplay between fate and freedom, which, on a deeper level, engages with the film's exploration of mortality (see Russell/Young, 2000; Wierzbicki, 2008). The persistent, flowing nature of the score evokes the passage of time, while its cyclical patterns suggest the continuity of existence beyond individual lives: this perspective is particularly resonant in relation to Richard's storyline, where themes of memory and loss are foregrounded, with the music not merely underscoring these themes but generously amplifying them, offering an emotional resonance which extends beyond the immediate narrative.

Most importantly perhaps, Glass' score operates on a meta-narrative level: just as Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* serves as a connective thread between the characters, Glass' music functions as an auditory equivalent, linking their experiences across time and space, as the repetition of musical motifs parallels the recurrence of narrative elements, reinforcing the film's structural and thematic unity. From a philosophical standpoint, the score can be understood as an exploration of time itself: minimalism's emphasis on process and duration invites the listener to engage with the passage of time in a heightened way; in *The Hours*, this engagement mirrors the characters' own confrontations with temporality – whether through Woolf's contemplation of life and death, Laura's suspension between obligation and escape, or Clarissa's reflection on past and present. Ultimately, Glass' contribution transforms *The Hours* into a deeply immersive experience as his music does not simply

accompany the narrative but shapes its very perception, guiding the audience through the film's emotional and philosophical landscape. By articulating the subtle interplay between repetition and change, continuity and disruption, the score captures the essence of the human condition as portrayed in the film.

The Hours stands as a profound meditation on identity, gender, and the passage of time, exploring, through its interwoven narratives and richly drawn characters, the complexities of human existence with remarkable sensitivity. Yet its full impact emerges only through the interplay between image and sound. The collaboration between Stephen Daldry and Philip Glass elevates the film into a multidimensional work of art, where music becomes an essential vehicle of meaning: Glass' score, with its intricate balance of repetition and transformation, provides a sonic counterpart to the film's thematic concerns, deepening its emotional and philosophical resonance. As both a reflection of its time and a timeless exploration of the human condition, *The Hours* endures as a testament to the power of cinema – and music – to illuminate the most intimate dimensions of life.

4. Fragmentation and Obsession: Minimalism as Psychological Disintegration in *Secret Window* (2004)

Secret Window, directed by David Koepp and based on *Secret Window, Secret Garden* (included in the collection of novellas *Four Past Midnight*, 1990) by Stephen King, offers a psychologically dense exploration of identity, trauma, and the fragile boundary between reality and delusion. Anchored by Johnny Depp's portrayal of Mort Rainey and John Turturro's unsettling John Shooter, the film constructs the narrative of mental disintegration profoundly intensified by Philip Glass' score, composed in collaboration with Geoff Zanelli: together, in *Secret Window*, image and sound create an immersive meditation on love, betrayal, and the implosion of the self.

At its core, *Secret Window* presents a psychological study of identity under extreme emotional stress, as Mort Rainey's descent into madness is triggered by the collapse of his marriage, yet it evolves into a broader philosophical inquiry into the nature of the self, with the film positioning identity not as a stable entity but as a fragile construct, susceptible to fragmentation when confronted with trauma (see Conti, 2022; Herman, 1992; Van der Kolk, 2015). Thus, *Secret Window*'s narrative begins with betrayal when Mort discovers his wife Amy (Maria Bello) in an act of infidelity with Ted (Timothy Hutton), a moment which destabilizes his emotional foundation. The rupture is not merely relational but existential as it dismantles Mort's sense of

self, exposing the dependence of identity on emotional continuity and trust, with love, once a source of stability, turning into the origin of psychological collapse. In this context, the film subverts romantic idealism, presenting love as inherently vulnerable to transformation into resentment and despair. Mort's retreat to his remote cabin symbolizes an attempt at self-reconstruction through isolation – yet the cabin, instead of providing refuge, becomes a spatial metaphor for his mind: enclosed, repetitive, and increasingly disordered. Moreover, his writer's block reflects a deeper paralysis – the inability to re-narrate his life after trauma. As a writer, Mort's identity is tied to authorship and control over narrative; losing this capacity mirrors his loss of agency over his own existence.

Gender dynamics further complicate this psychological landscape: Amy's infidelity disrupts traditional expectations of feminine loyalty, positioning her as both a transgressive figure and an agent of autonomy as her actions challenge Mort's perception of masculinity, triggering a crisis rooted in emasculation and loss of control. Thus, Mort's initial passivity – marked by lethargy, dishevelment, and emotional withdrawal – contrasts sharply with the emergence of John Shooter, who embodies an exaggerated, hyper-masculine identity defined by aggression and dominance (see Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2013). Indeed, Shooter functions as more than an antagonist; he is a projection of Mort's repressed desires and rage, while his accusation that Mort has "stolen" his story operates metaphorically, suggesting that Mort has been dispossessed of his identity – by betrayal, by failure, and by his own inability to assert control. The eventual revelation that Shooter is a manifestation of Mort's psyche reframes the narrative as an internal conflict rather than an external threat.

From a psychological perspective, *Secret Window* engages with the concept of dissociative identity disorder, as Mort's mind creates Shooter as a mechanism for coping with unbearable emotional pain, allowing him to externalize guilt and aggression. This division can be interpreted through a Freudian lens: Shooter represents the id – impulsive, violent, and unrestrained – while Mort's conscious self attempts, unsuccessfully, to maintain coherence (see Conti, 2022; Herman, 1992; Van der Kolk, 2015). The absence of a mediating superego underscores the collapse of moral and psychological balance, with *Secret Window's* depiction of mental illness emerging as both intimate and unsettling. Unstoppably, Mort's deterioration unfolds gradually, emphasizing the insidious nature of psychological breakdown, as his increasing paranoia, memory lapses, and inability to distinguish reality from hallucination bring forth a sense of creeping inevitability. More importantly perhaps, the

film avoids reducing his condition to mere spectacle, and instead, it presents madness as a human response to overwhelming trauma, thereby challenging stigmatizing narratives around mental health.

Cinematically, David Koepp reinforces subjectivity through visual techniques: mirrors and reflections recur throughout *Secret Window*, symbolizing duality and fragmentation; tight framing and confined spaces evoke claustrophobia, aligning the viewer's perspective with Mort's psychological entrapment; the pacing, deliberately measured, mirrors the slow unraveling of his sanity, allowing tension to accumulate organically. Thematically, *Secret Window* engages with existential concerns about authorship and reality: as a writer, Mort is accustomed to constructing fictional worlds, yet he becomes trapped within a narrative he cannot control – such an inversion raises questions about the nature of storytelling and identity: to what extent are we authors of our own lives, and to what extent are we shaped by forces beyond our control?

Ultimately, Mort's transformation culminates in a chilling assertion of a new identity – one which apparently dissolves Shooter's destructive impulses, but such resolution is less redemptive and rather deeply unsettling, suggesting that the quest for coherence can lead to moral disintegration when grounded in repression rather than integration (see Herman, 1992, Kimmel, 2013). The film thus presents identity as a contested terrain, shaped by the interplay of memory, desire, and trauma: as such, *Secret Window* reflects early 21st-century anxieties surrounding mental health, masculinity, and personal failure, with its exploration of psychological fragmentation by means of cultural artefacts resonating with contemporary concerns about the pressures of modern life and the fragility of individual identity. By foregrounding these themes, *Secret Window* positions itself as both a reflection of its time and a cautionary narrative about the consequences of unresolved trauma.

The psychological intensity of *Secret Window* is inseparable from the score composed by Philip Glass in collaboration with Geoff Zanelli, as their music does not merely accompany the narrative but it actively constructs the film's emotional and psychological landscape through minimalist structures, textural layering, and subtle variation, gradually metamorphosing into an aural representation of Mort Rainey's fragmented consciousness. At the heart of the score lies Glass' characteristic minimalism, defined by repetition and gradual transformation (Evans, 2015; Glass, 2016): in *Secret Window*, these techniques are deployed to mirror Mort's obsessive thought patterns, with the recurring musical motifs functioning like intrusive thoughts, looping persistently with slight variations reflecting the instability of his mental state, and generating a

sense of entrapment, reinforcing the cyclical nature of Mort's psychological turmoil. Unlike the more meditative minimalism found in some of Glass' other works, the score in *Secret Window* carries a distinctly ominous undertone: the harmonic language often hovers in ambiguous territory, avoiding clear resolution and thereby sustaining tension. This lack of harmonic closure parallels Mort's inability to resolve his internal conflict, leaving both character and audience suspended in a state of uncertainty.

Instrumentation plays a crucial role in articulating this tension, with the piano, a central element of Glass' style, providing the structural backbone of the score: its repetitive patterns evoke a mechanical quality, suggesting the inevitability of Mort's descent. Strings add layers of unease, their sustained tones creating an atmosphere of latent dread. At times, the music incorporates darker timbral elements – low registers, dissonant clusters – which evoke the presence of Shooter as an intrusive force within Mort's psyche. Zanelli's contribution subtly enhances this palette, introducing textures which deepen the score's cinematic dimension, so that the blending of acoustic and electronic elements produces a soundscape which feels both intimate and alien, reflecting the duality of Mort's experience. This hybrid quality reinforces the ambiguity between reality and hallucination, a central theme of the film (Glass, 2016; see Richardson, 1999; Potter, 2000). Rhythm is another key component of *Secret Window's* score's psychological effect: the steady, pulsating patterns characteristic of minimalism evoke a sense of inevitability, as though events are unfolding according to an inescapable internal logic – yet these rhythms are often disrupted, through syncopation, irregular accents, or shifts in tempo, introducing moments of instability mirroring Mort's internal disintegration. The tension between regularity and disruption becomes, thus, a sonic analogue for the struggle between coherence and fragmentation.

One of the most compelling aspects of *Secret Window's* score is its capacity to externalize the relationship between Mort and Shooter: rather than assigning distinct musical themes to each identity, the music blurs the boundary between them, so that motifs associated with Mort gradually acquire darker inflections, suggesting the infiltration of Shooter's presence. This approach avoids simplistic dualism, instead emphasizing the continuity between the two identities. The music thus subliminally announces the film's central revelation: Shooter is not an external antagonist but an extension of Mort himself – amplified by the use of silence, which is equally significant, as strategic moments of musical absence lay bare space for psychological tension to intensify (see Cooke, 2010; Mertens, 1988). In *Secret Window*, such silences are not neutral; they are charged with anticipation, *a priori* compounding the

impact of subsequent musical entries: in scenes of confrontation or realization, the sudden withdrawal or reintroduction of music heightens emotional stakes, drawing the audience deeper into Mort's subjective experience. In this train of thought, Glass' musical vision plays a crucial role in shaping the film's temporal perception, as the repetitive structures disseminate a sense of suspended time, where past and present blur into one another – a temporal ambiguity reflecting Mort's mental state, in which memories, projection, and reality coexist without clear boundaries: the music discretely yet massively contributes to the film's disorienting atmosphere, reinforcing the instability of perception.

As the narrative progresses, the score evolves in tandem with Mort's transformation. Early cues, while uneasy, retain a degree of restraint, accompanying his efforts to maintain normalcy, but as his condition deteriorates, the music becomes increasingly dense and dissonant, with more pronounced textural layering and harmonic tension. This escalation mirrors the intensification of his internal conflict, culminating in a sonic environment which feels both overwhelming and inescapable. Indeed, in *Secret Window's* climactic moments, the music reaches a point of unsettling clarity, and subsequently, rather than resolving into harmony, it embraces dissonant elements, as if reinforcing Mort's acceptance of his fractured identity. This kind of "fractured resolution" is not cathartic but deeply ambiguous, aligning with the film's refusal to offer moral or psychological closure, and fortifying the unsettling nature of the narrative's conclusion, eventually leaving the audience in a state of contemplative unease (see Buhler, 2019; Duffie, 1982, 1987). On a meta-narrative level, the music can be understood as a commentary on authorship: just as Mort struggles to control his narrative, the score resists traditional musical expectations of development and resolution – its repetitive structures challenge linear progression, suggesting a model of time and experience which is cyclical rather than teleological, resulting into a compositional perspective coordinating with *Secret Window's* broader philosophical concerns, emphasizing the limits of control and the persistence of internal conflict.

From a broader aesthetic standpoint, Glass' and Zanelli's collaboration demonstrates the adaptability of minimalist techniques within a psychological thriller context: while minimalism is often associated with meditative or abstract works, in *Secret Window* it is harnessed to create tension and unease, developing into a score which feels both intellectually rigorous and viscerally affecting, capable of engaging the audience on multiple levels (Duckworth 1999 [1995]). Ultimately, the music of *Secret Window* functions as an

extension of the film's psychological inquiry as it does not merely reflect Mort's inner state but actively shapes the viewer's experience of it: through repetition, variation, and textural complexity, the score creates a sonic mirror of fragmentation, drawing the audience into the unstable terrain of the protagonist's mind.

Secret Window stands as a compelling exploration of identity, trauma, and psychological disintegration: through its intricate narrative and powerful performances, it interrogates the fragile boundaries between self and other, reality and illusion. The collaboration between David Koepp, Philip Glass, and Geoff Zanelli elevates the film into a multidimensional work in which sound and image are inseparably intertwined – thus, the score, with its haunting minimalism and psychological depth, transforms the cinematic experience into an immersive exploration of the human mind. As both a reflection of its cultural moment and a timeless meditation on the complexities of identity, *Secret Window* endures as a powerful testament to the capacity of cinema – and music – to probe the deepest layers of human experience.

5. Conclusion: From Structure to Disintegration

The exploration of fragmentation in *Secret Window* brings this tripartite framework to its most psychologically intense expression, where minimalist repetition no longer structures or connects experience but actively destabilizes it. Having traced the progression from external control to temporal continuity and finally to internal disintegration, the broader implications of Philip Glass' cinematic minimalism can now be drawn together within a unified conceptual perspective.

In *The Truman Show*, Glass' music operates as an architectural principle that both sustains and finally undermines an artificially constructed reality, with the score's repetitive structures mirroring the controlled environment in which Truman exists, reinforcing the illusion of stability while subtly introducing variations that signal its fragility. This dual function positions minimalism as a mechanism of both containment and awakening: what begins as a sonic reflection of external control gradually metamorphoses into the medium through which that control is exposed and transcended. The paradigm of "Architecture" thus reveals Glass' capacity to translate philosophical concerns – particularly those related to determinism and free will – into musical form, demonstrating the ways in which repetition can simultaneously encode constraint and enable liberation.

By contrast, *The Hours* exemplifies the paradigm of “Continuum”, in which Glass’ music dissolves temporal boundaries and forges emotional connections across distinct narrative planes: the score’s flowing, uninterrupted patterns create a sense of simultaneity, allowing the experiences of three women separated by decades to resonate within a shared sonic space. Here, minimalism functions less as a structuring force than as a connective tissue, emphasizing the persistence of existential concerns – love, identity, mortality – across time. This paradigm highlights the capacity of Glass’ music to unify disparate experiences without erasing their specificity, suggesting a model of human existence defined not by ruptures but by relational continuity and emotional resonance.

In *Secret Window*, minimalism assumes its most unsettling form, articulating a paradigm of “Fragmentation”, in which repetition becomes synonymous with psychological breakdown: the score’s looping motifs and unresolved harmonic tensions mirror Mort Rainey’s disintegrating consciousness, transforming music into a sonic manifestation of obsession and inner conflict. Unlike the architectural clarity of *The Truman Show* or the connective flow of *The Hours*, the music in *Secret Window* resists coherence, reflecting the collapse of the unified self. This paradigm underscores the darker potential of minimalist techniques, demonstrating how the same compositional principles which can structure or unify experience may also expose its inner cracks, revealing the precariousness of identity under emotional and psychological strain.

While this study proposes a coherent triadic framework, it is necessarily selective in scope, as focusing on three films limits the extent to which broader generalizations about Philip Glass’ oeuvre can be made. Additionally, the interpretive emphasis on philosophical paradigms may underrepresent other relevant dimensions, such as production context, audience reception, or collaboration with directors. As such, the findings should be understood as exploratory rather than exhaustive. Thus, future research may expand this framework by examining additional film scores by Philip Glass or by other minimalist composers, testing the applicability of the paradigms of “Architecture”, “Continuum”, and “Fragmentation” across a wider corpus, as comparative studies involving different genres or cultural contexts could further refine the model. Moreover, integrating empirical approaches – such as audience response studies – may offer valuable insights into minimalist film music’s ways of shaping perception and emotional engagement.

Ultimately, this study affirms the capacity of minimalist film music to function as a profound medium of philosophical expression. In the works of

Philip Glass, repetition is never merely decorative; it is a dynamic force that structures, connects, and destabilizes cinematic experience. By articulating the paradigms of “Architecture”, “Continuum”, and “Fragmentation”, this paper has sought to bring into the spotlight the transformative role of music in configuring not only how stories are told, but how reality, identity, and time itself are perceived.

REFERENCES

- Philip Glass Official Website: <https://philipglass.com/>
- Buhler, James (2019). *Theories of the Soundtrack*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, Judith (2024). *Who's Afraid of Gender?*. New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux.
- Chion, Michel (2009). *Film, A Sound Art*. Translated by Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities*. 2nd Edition. London/New York: Routledge Publishers.
- Cooke, Mervyn (2010). *A History of Film Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Conti, Paul (2022). *Trauma: The Invisible Epidemic*. London: Vermilion Publishers.
- Daldry, Stephen (dir., 2002): *The Hours*. DVD. Los Angeles: Miramax.
- Duffie, Bruce (1982; 1987). *Two Conversations Composer & Performer Philip Glass*. 19. February 1982 and 29. July 1987. <https://www.bruceduffie.com/glass.html>
- Duckworth, William (1999 [1995]). *Talking Music: Conversations With John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and Five Generations of American Experimental Composers*. Cambridge (Mass.): Da Capo Press.
- Evans, Tristian (2015). *Shared Meanings in the Film Music of Philip Glass: Music, Multimedia and Postminimalism*. London/New York: Routledge Publishers.
- Glass, Philip (1995). *Music by Philip Glass*. Cambridge (Mass.): Da Capo Press.
- Glass, Philip (2016). *Words Without Music: A Memoir*. New York: Liveright Press.
- Harrison, Tim (2021). *Sound Design for Film*. Marlborough: Crowood Press.
- Herman, Judith (1992). *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence*. New York: Basic Books.
- Illouz, Eva (2012). *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kimmel, Michael (2013). *Manhood in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Koepp, David (dir., 2004): *Secret Window*. DVD. Culver City: Columbia Pictures.
- Kostelanetz, Richard (ed., 1997). *Writings On Glass: Essays, Interviews, Criticism*. Simon & Schuster Macmillan Publishing.

Kristeva, Julia (1974), *La Révolution du langage poétique*. Paris: Les Éditions du Seuil.

Lucier, Alvin (ed., 2018). *Eight Lectures on Experimental Music*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Manvell, Roger (2021). *The Technique of Film Music*. [unknown location] Hassell Street Press.

Maycock, Robert (2003). *Glass: A Portrait*. London: Sanctuary Publishing.

Mertens, Wim (1988). *American Minimal Music: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass*. London: Kahn & Averill Press.

Potter, Keith (2000). *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.

Richardson, John (1999). *Singing Archaeology: Philip Glass's Akhnaten*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Russell, Mark; Young, James (2000). *Film Music*. Waltham: Focal Press.

Schwarz, K. Robert (1996). *Minimalists: 20th-Century Composers Series*. London: Phaidon Press.

Van der Kolk, Bessel (2015). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. London: Penguin Books.

Weir, Peter (dir., 1998). *The Truman Show*. DVD. Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures.

Wierzbicki, James (2008). *Film Music: A History*. London/New York: Taylor & Francis Publishers.

Zimmerman, Walter (2020 [1976]). *Desert Plants: Conversations with 23 American Musicians*, Berlin: Beginner Press/Mode Records.

SUMMARY

Maria Grăjdian

Minimalism as Cinematic Thought: Philip Glass and the Paradigms of Architecture, Continuum, and Fragmentation

This paper examines the role of minimalist film music as a structural and philosophical force within contemporary cinema, focusing on the work of Philip Glass. While previous scholarship has addressed minimalism primarily in formal or historical terms, less attention has been paid to its function as a conceptual framework shaping narrative perception and meaning. Thus, the current study aims to investigate how Glass' scores articulate distinct paradigms of cinematic experience through a comparative analysis of *The Truman Show* (1998), *The Hours* (2002), and *Secret Window* (2004), while seeking to uncover the ways in which minimalist techniques – particularly repetition and gradual variation – mediate questions of identity, temporality, and psychological coherence. Methodologically, the critical inquiry combines

close musical and filmic analyses with a conceptual framework grounded in philosophy of art and narrative theory, and proposes a triadic model consisting of “Architecture”, “Continuum”, and “Fragmentation”, corresponding to distinct functions of minimalism within each film. The findings demonstrate that Glass’ music operates beyond accompaniment, functioning as a structural agent shaping cinematic reality: in *The Truman Show*, minimalism constructs and destabilizes an artificial world (Architecture); in *The Hours*, it forges temporal and emotional unity across narratives (Continuum); and in *Secret Window*, it articulates psychological disintegration (Fragmentation). These results suggest that minimalist film music can serve as a mode of philosophical expression, offering new insights into the relationship between sound, narrative, and human experience in cinema.