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# "I am no longer afraid": A Case Study on the Musical Communication of Trauma in Narrative Film and Television

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## Introduction

In Hollywood film and narrative television, we often see filmmakers bestow narratives of personal tragedy, trauma and loss upon their protagonists. Whether or not this is seen as a time-tested and efficient literary device or as a hackneyed and superficial representation of trauma, it is undeniably one of the most recurrent tropes of characterization in narrative film. Exploring the traumatic past of a troubled protagonist is routinely used as an attempt to enhance audiences' understanding of a character, affording us insights into their motivations, flaws and desires. Such narratives are equally used to account for the actions of unpardonable antagonists and antiheroes as Jeffrey Bullins reminds us[1] and, quite often, this "dark and troubled past" idiom simply serves filmmakers as a convenient means of narrative exposition. Pelin Başci describes this latter quality and the intersecting narrative frames it can afford a film, whereby diary entries, therapy sessions and other filmic devices enable characters' traumatic pasts to be "propelled by events in the present."[2]

Damon Lindelof's nine-part limited series *Watchmen* furnishes us with an intriguing example of this idiom which both conscribes to its conventions and departs from its many clichés. Taking Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's influential graphic novel as its starting point, HBO's *Watchmen* continues the narrative of Moore and Gibbons's comic and explores the possible consequences that their retelling of twentieth-century US history could have borne for politics and society in America thirty-four years later. The series' handling of trauma sits somewhere outside these more conventional representations that we more often see in film. This is especially apparent

[1] Jeffrey Bullins, "The Meme of Escaped (Male) Mental Patients in American Horror Films," in *Mental Illness in Popular Culture*, ed. Sharon Packer (Santa Barbara, California: Praege, 2017), 14.
[2] Pelin Başci, *Social Trauma and Telecinematic Memory: Imagining the Turkish Nation since the 1980 Coup* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 256.

in *Watchmen*'s nuanced engagement with complex themes of generational trauma and, perhaps most notably, the way that music is deftly employed to articulate characters' experiences of trauma and post-traumatic stress.

This paper examines how *Watchmen* uses music to generate its potent commentary on our processing of traumatic memories, a phenomenon prominently facilitated by the series' innovative reworkings of pre-existing musical material. I will primarily focus on one episode, "Little Fear of Lightning": an hour-long character study and a compelling example of *Watchmen*'s use of music to communicate its characters' struggles with trauma. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how Lindelof's *Watchmen*, in its potent sublimation of real-world ties between traumatic memories and musical experiences, enables our vivid entry into its troubled protagonists' subjective realities.

**Music in *Watchmen***

It is perhaps unsurprising that music should be used to such complex ends in *Watchmen*. From the outset of its nine-part narrative, the series conspicuously attempts to establish a prominently stylized engagement with music. The soundtrack for the series might be quite accurately categorized under Kevin Donnelly's definition of a *composite score*, a scoring trend succinctly summarized by Holly Rogers as "a quintessential postmodern composition of disparate pre-existing pop, rock and art music."[3]

Yet the use of music and its role in *Watchmen* is more diverse and complex still: the series adapts the functions of music from Moore and Gibbons's original comic; it establishes the use of atypical and extreme cover versions as a recurring feature of its soundtrack; an explicit extratextual analogy with the musical *Oklahoma!* persists throughout the series; and, perhaps most memorably, the composers of *Watchmen*'s original soundtrack — Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross — establish the rearrangement of pre-existing music as a prominent stylistic feature of their idiosyncratic score. All these diverse interactions of music and narrative share one common thread; that is, they all involve some form of rearrangement, remixing or reworking of pre-existing material that was once familiar to us, just as Lindelof's *Watchmen* has itself been described as a remix — not an adaptation or sequel — of the original comic's narrative.[4] I believe that, like the narrative itself, it is this spirit

[3] K. J. Donnelly, "Performance and the Composite Score," in *Film Music: Critical Approaches*, ed. K. J. Donnelly (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 152–66; Holly Rogers, *Sounding the Gallery: Video and the Rise of Art-Music*, The Oxford Music/Media Series (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23.
[4] Farokhmanesh, Megan. "Damon Lindelof's Watchmen Will Be a '*Remix*' with Original Characters, Not a Remake." *The Verge*, 23 May 2018. https://www.theverge.com/2018/5/23/17383826/damon-lindelof-watchmen-remix-original-characters-remake.

of remaking and remixing pre-existing material which most characterizes the *Watchmen* soundtrack: what we might broadly categorize as the series' eclectic modes of musical remaking. Indeed, while each of *Watchmen*'s varied approaches to pre-existing music could individually form the basis of a conference paper in their own right,[5] I believe the most convincing evidence of *Watchmen*'s musical engagement with narrative can be uncovered by examining the soundtrack's articulation of trauma through the reworking of pre-existing musical material.

**Narrative context**

Before broaching this interaction**,** it is of imperative to provide some background for *Watchmen*'s quite peculiar dystopian narrative context. To briefly summarize, the climax of Moore and Gibbons's original *Watchmen* narrative sees a gigantic squid-like creature teleported to Manhattan on the 2nd of November 1985, killing three million people. This event — later referred to as the 11/2 attack — is consequently revealed to have been part of a secret "altruistic" plan formulated by the character Adrian Veidt, who sought to engineer a catastrophe so great that world governments would become distracted from their rivalries, Cold War conflicts would subside and, ultimately, a nuclear holocaust would be averted.

While this plot point serves as the denouement of the original *Watchmen* narrative, Lindelof's series instead adopts 11/2 as a starting point for a far more human narrative. Rather than depict 11/2 in any extensive onscreen detail, Lindelof adopts this event as a convenient means of engaging in a nuanced exploration of the human psyche, examining the psychological and sociological impact that such a devastating catastrophe might have hypothetically borne for the next generation of New Yorkers in the intermittent years between Moore and Gibbons's original narrative and the events of the HBO series.[6] Lindelof's series thus adapts 11/2 — the most supernatural and absurd plot point from the original comic — as a hypothetical traumatic event, the exact circumstances of which, in his series (and indeed in this paper), are quite inconsequential. Instead, 11/2 is treated as a prompt to generate a three-dimensional psychological profile of a character who has taken a traumatic childhood memory into their adult life. Crucially, Lindelof's series relates this trauma to audiences through the complex network of musical remakes that populate the series' fifth episode, "Little Fear of Lightning."

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[5] These other facets of *Watchmen*'s distinct musical identity are addressed in more detail in my forthcoming chapter '"The Adaptation of Narrative and Musical Source Material in *Watchmen* (2019)," which will appear in the edited collection *After Midnight:* Watchmen *After* Watchmen (forthcoming).

[6] Lindelof, Damon. "*Watchmen*: Damon Lindelof Explains the Whole Squid Thing." Interview by Adam Chitwood, 17 November 2019. https://collider.com/watchmen-squid-explained-damon-lindelof/.

**"Little Fear of Lightning"**

"Little Fear of Lightning" is an episode-long examination of human trauma. It follows the character Wade Tillman who, in the episode's opening flashback, is seen visiting the nearby Hoboken on the eve of 11/2. The episode goes on to examine Tillman in the present (now a detective nicknamed "Looking Glass") and comprises several vignettes which depict the impact of Tillman's childhood trauma on the fearful and paranoid way he leads his day-to-day life. While the episode largely explores Tillman's troubled relationship with his traumatic past, we also see clear evidence of Lindelof's aspirations to portray the wider economic, cultural and sociological impact that a disaster of 11/2's magnitude might have left in its wake: for example, Tillman is seen to facilitate weekly support group meetings for others who are fearful of future attacks. The episode's various vignettes ultimately culminate in Tillman's discovery of the true conspiracy behind 11/2: that it was a hoax engineered by one culpable individual. In this way, the challenging focal point of "Little Fear" is its stark portrayal of a man who discovers that his entire adult perception of the world is founded in lies, as we watch him uncover the vast conspiracy which precipitated his traumatic past.

Pre-existing music is the most important vehicle through which *Watchmen* establishes and reinforces Tillman's experience of trauma. Diegetic source music heard during 11/2 is continually quoted throughout the soundtrack, garnering a leitmotivic association with trauma and inviting comparison with music's real-world capacity to enmesh itself with traumatic memories: a phenomenon vividly described by James R. McDonald.[7] More specifically, it is the reworking of pre-existing music which enables our perception of this trajectory, temporalizing and charting Tillman's struggle with trauma from the episode's initial flashback to the catastrophe in 1985 to his present-day attempts at rehabilitation in 2019. The music subjected to this treatment is George Michael's 1984 track "Careless Whisper," which is heard on no less than five occasions throughout the episode, whether in its original recorded arrangement (by Wham!), pre-existing cover versions, furtively rearranged in Reznor and Ross's original score or reworked through various editing and post-production techniques. It is in this way that *Watchmen* capitalizes on pre-existing music's oft-acknowledged capacity to temper our reception of a narrative, playing on the deep-seated tendrils of prior knowledge that the adaptation of familiar music so often uproots.

[7] James R. McDonald, "Rock and Memory: A Search for Meaning." *Popular Music and Society* 17, no. 3 (1993): 1.

The first time we hear "Careless Whisper" is notable in that it is the only time we hear George Michael's original recording. The song first appears during the episode's introductory flashback to 11/2, where we see a young and distressed Tillman reluctantly accept the sexual advances of a teenage girl, Roxy. Roxy had earned Wade's trust by protecting him from the taunts of other teenagers, yet ultimately does so only to trick and humiliate him, steal his clothes and leave him naked and ashamed in a disused fairground attraction. As this takes place, the 11/2 disaster occurs outside and kills millions of civilians. It is at this point that the refrain of "Careless Whisper" is established as a signifier of Tillman's horrific childhood experience of 11/2, serving as both a narrative sign for *Watchmen* audiences and consequently facilitating the series' portrayal of Tillman's subjective experience of the world as an adult PTSD sufferer. Crucially, it is in the way the music is reworked and manipulated that we are afforded our most complex insights into Tillman's subjective experience of trauma.

The first reworking of "Careless Whisper" occurs at the exact moment of the attack on New York. The song is slowed to half speed, resulting in hauntingly distorted vocal qualities. Furthermore, the sound design in the scene boasts distinctly musical characteristics and interacts with the recording of "Careless Whisper" in ways which appear compositionally motivated. High-pitched sustained sonorities — which we might initially perceive as a loud diegetic "ringing" in the young Tillman's ears at the moment of the explosion — soon become more explicitly musical and is audibly pitched at the same E-D descent of the famous "Careless Whisper" sax hook. The music of George Michael is thus adapted and intermeshed with sound design which is discernibly musical, even tonal: what we might call "hyperorchestral" sonorities, as per Sergi Casanelles's definition.[8] Given the apparent dual-significance that "Careless Whisper" now garners, serving both to sonically conjure the deafening diegetic sonority of the blast and metadiegetically reinforce young Tillman's terror and confusion, this first thematic statement of "Careless Whisper" sets the precedent for the reuse and leitmotivic variation that this musical material undergoes throughout the episode. In the four distinct reworkings of "Careless Whisper" that follow, the song retains its indelible link to the traumatic experience endured by Tillman as a teenager, convincingly reinforcing Kathryn Kalinak's view of the musical score as "one of the most potent of the textual operators for conveying altered states of consciousness."[9]

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[8] Sergi Casanelles, "Mixing as a Hyperorchestration Tool," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Sound Design and Music in Screen Media*, ed. Liz Greene and Danijela Kulezic-Wilson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 57.
[9] Kathryn Marie Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film*, Wisconsin Studies in Film. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 178.

What is notable about the recurrence of "Careless Whisper" throughout the rest of the episode is how, through *Watchmen*'s use of distinct rearrangements and cover versions, incredibly specific aspects of Tillman's relationship with trauma are communicated in a multitude of different contexts. The second time we hear "Careless Whisper," the song takes the form of an existing acoustic guitar cover by Alexandr Misko, first popularized in a 2017 YouTube video. This sparse and melancholic rendition non-diegetically accompanies a scene in which Tillman meets his ex-wife, Cynthia. Though seemingly innocuous at first, the narrative rationale behind this rearranged recapitulation to "Careless Whisper" is soon revealed in the scene's dialogue, as Cynthia implies the reason for their divorce was Tillman's failure to process his traumatic memories. Intriguingly, the scene implies that his adult trust issues have more to do with his teenage humiliation by Roxy than the monumental disaster he witnessed from Hoboken. Cynthia curtly reminds Tillman how "for seven years I tried to convince you I wasn't going to run off with your clothes and leave you naked," with no mention of the 11/2 attack. In this way, the leitmotivic intentions we might interpret from Misko's guitar reworking are reaffirmed, especially given the original scene's synchronization of the quoted saxophone glissando with this exact moment of betrayal being described by Cynthia.

At this point, we have heard a diegetic iteration of the original "Careless Whisper," a metadiegetic reworking of the recording to communicate young Wade's experience of 11/2 and the song's non-diegetic use in Misko's acoustic cover. The next time we hear "Careless Whisper" is particularly significant, as it is the first time the song is newly rearranged in Reznor and Ross's original score. We hear this arrangement during a scene depicting Tillman chairing his weekly support group for 11/2 survivors: a setting consistent with the more conventional onscreen depictions of trauma noted by Başci.[10] The extent of the insight that this scene affords us into Tillman's complex adult struggle with trauma is quite remarkable, as an array of very specific facets of Wade's relationship with his past are charted and musically reinforced.

Before "Careless Whisper" is reintroduced, the scene is prominently unscored as the group listens attentively to one of their members discussing the idea of genetic trauma. The young man describes the sense of pain he feels that he inherited from his parents' experience of the disaster, despite 11/2 having occurred ten years before his birth. Here, we are previewed to explicit dialogic reinforcement of the themes of trauma that the episode has already established in its soundtrack. The scene that follows becomes the expositional epicenter of the narrative arc concerning

[10] Başci, *Social Trauma and Telecinematic Memory*, 256.

Tillman's trauma, in which the rearranged restatement of "Careless Whisper" serves a central role. Prior to the song's re-entry, a short montage exposes the fears that Tillman quite literally conceals from the other support group attendees, showing us the hidden EMR-blocking lining of his baseball cap. Thereafter, as he responds to the young man, we follow Tillman's genuine confrontation of his traumatic memories and genetic trauma, epitomized in his sincere attempts to rehabilitate these other sufferers and the candor of his incantation, "I am no longer afraid…"

The soundtrack's use of solo piano music to accompany Tillman's candid monologue is significant, especially given piano music's long-established associations with Romanticism, emotivity and even touch-sensitivity. Yet, in addition to the sincerity and emotional development this piano music seems to quite conventionally reinforce, the fact that the musical cue is a version of '"Careless Whisper" which *has been specifically rearranged* for *Watchmen* is vitally important. Although the intentions underpinning *Watchmen*'s repeated harkening to George Michael should be quite explicit at this point, the presence of an originally scored rearrangement reaffirms a leitmotivic intentionality that the episode's other "Careless Whisper" covers cannot.

The group therapy scene and the complex narrative ramifications of its "Careless Whisper" rearrangement represent perhaps the most convincing evidence of this episode's highly structured repetition and leitmotivic variation of the George Michael song, both as a non-diegetic theme and meta-diegetic reinforcement of Tillman's direct association of 11/2 with his tarnished childhood memories of the song. Two further iterations of "Careless Whisper" successfully appropriate the song to represent other facets of the protagonist's psyche and ongoing relationship with his traumatic memories. While sharing a drink and 11/2 stories with another of the support group's attendees, Renee, another rearrangement based on the previous scene's "Careless Whisper" is heard as Tillman exposes his vulnerability with a peer for the first time. The final rearrangement of '"Careless Whisper," an existing cover by Nataly Dawn, accompanies a montage of Tillman's daily goings-on after his discovery of Veidt's 11/2 conspiracy and the carefully planned events that precipitated his life-long struggle with trauma. This short montage sequence, accompanied by Dawn's understated leitmotivic development of "Careless Whisper," seems to consciously reinforce the transformed personal narrative that Tillman's revelation has imposed on his life. 11/2 was not the result of a freak and inexplicable natural event, but the work of one culpable individual. Although he ambles through the same routine, his perception of the world and his trauma are altogether transformed.

## Conclusion

The *Watchmen* episode "Little Fear of Lightning" cogently demonstrates the complex relationship that can be cultivated between music and trauma in film and television, showcasing a selection of innovative ways that this relationship can be harnessed to profound effect. This stylized, narratively engaged approach to music and trauma is not unique to this episode of *Watchmen* and was a clearly a central consideration in creating some of the series' other vivid character studies. In a later episode, for example, the exact same association is forged between diegetic music from a flashback sequence and a protagonist's present-day struggles with traumatic memories. In this case, the character is William Reeves (portrayed by Jovan Adepo). Music heard during Reeves's childhood survival of the 1921 Tulsa Massacre is continually reused and reworked throughout the episode, linking scenes concerning his future as a police officer with the tragic events that inspired his career choice. Most tellingly, the music is almost always seen to be performed by a spectral vision of his deceased mother, metadiegetically audio-visualizing his experience of trauma.

In this sense, the role of music is continually renewed in *Watchmen*, as the series charts its many troubled characters' evolving relationships with traumatic memories. As I have argued throughout this paper, this is most often achieved through the rearrangement of pre-existing music and other eclectic processes of "musical remaking." By elevating the narrative role of pre-existing music in this way, *Watchmen* visibly strives to enable our all-encompassing sensory experience of its protagonists' struggles with trauma, as the soundtrack's diverse array of musical sources and eclectic modes of rearrangement enable our vivid entry into its characters' subjective experiences.

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