

The Score Opens the Window to Personal Desire.

How is the jazz-score in Disney Pixar's 'SOUL' (2020) an integral narrative component in conveying the idea of personal aspiration, as well as respecting the historical context of the genre?

INTRODUCTION:

Within the landscape of film, the score is often overlooked and undervalued- usually perceived as the backdrop to enhance the intended reaction from the on-screen visuals- and yet Disney Pixar's 'SOUL' (2020) transcends the notion that the score is purely 'background music', instead becoming an essential narrative component that carries the relationship between the idea of personal aspirations and also respecting the historical context of the genre, whilst simultaneously remaining an effective backdrop that effectively and cleverly enriches the visual experience.

The score to 'Soul' consists of 42 tracks, 16 of which are original jazz compositions by 'Jon Batiste', a well-known artist and composer for the genre. This means that roughly 38% of the score is a jazz composition, and it is within these tracks, in conjunction with the narrative being unfolded within the film, we find the deep running connection between the themes of aspiration and the score unravel.

The other 62% of tracks by co-composer's 'Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross', directly contrast the various styles of jazz played when we are on Earth, instead opting for ethereal and atmospheric sounds, using various synths and strings. These tracks are not the core focus of the thesis and will not be covered.

Joe Gardner is the protagonist of this story; he is absolutely enthralled by jazz, setting his dream to be a professional jazz player. As it currently stands, he is a jazz-teacher who despite having found some personal success, wants to shoot higher, not settling for his current position. After some-time, he finds himself having the opportunity of a lifetime, performing alongside a famous jazz quartet. Unfortunately, this is where the inciting event occurs, plummeting down a manhole, into an unknown environment: 'The Great Beyond'...

Presumably dead, yet still very-much alive, he does not accept his situation and breaks out, into the 'The Great Before', a plane in which the soul is prepared for life. Gardner has broken free from the inevitable passing into the afterlife and instead has found himself in the stages before life, despite having lived a life before; and it could be argued he is still living, with his passion for jazz only growing stronger by the second- he must fulfil his goal and "start living". It's from here that he meets his new companion, '22', a soul who hates the idea of life, personal growth and ambition, a juxtaposition to the beliefs of Joe Gardner in all aspects. This film centres around their dynamic, and touches upon many philosophical concepts such as the profound 'meaning of life' and the very nature of 'passion'- Jon Batiste's contribution to the score aims to display this above all else.

Within this essay, various scenes within Pixar's 'Soul' will be dissected and taken-apart. Specifically, the scenes in which our protagonist is on Earth and Jon Batiste's jazz-score take centre stage, applying film theory with concepts such as: Barthes' Semiotics, Christian Metz's 'Codes of Cinema', and Freud's ideas of Psychoanalysis to prove its awe-inspiring ability to convey growth, as well as highlighting respect to the historical context of the genre in relation to the African American experience.

THE OPENING TEN MINUTES:

Jazz occupies Joe's every waking moment, and the opening ten minutes spotlights that more than any other in the film. There are **three** stand-out tracks within the opening ten minutes that mirror the importance of jazz to Joe, as well as the varied range of emotions he experiences.

As the ever-iconic 'Pixar' logo fades to black, we hear Joe as he conducts his school-band to play a rendition of Mercer Ellington's swing jazz classic 'Things Ain't What They Used To Be'. *All of this is on-screen, and therefore diegetic audio, like a lot of the jazz-tracks used within this film.* However, unfortunately they are playing very poorly; missing instruments, playing out of tune, or even off-beat, and Gardner's face expresses his desperate attempt to grasp what little enthusiasm this class has perfectly.

From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, in Sigmund Freud's 1899 book "Die Traumdeutung" or "The Interpretation of Dreams", Freud discusses the idea of the 'unconscious mind', in which our desires and repressed thoughts are stored. Whilst spoken in the context of dreams specifically, it can also be attributed to the unconscious mind, Freud stated "[t]hey simply and

undisguisedly realizations of wishes” (*Freud, 1994*). This scene and more so the accompanying score gives us a valuable glimpse into Joe’s psyche and his deepest desires. By continuing to conduct and enthuse the class, it shows his unrelenting dedication to his craft, and so the chaotic nature of this track reflects his struggle to navigate the uncertainty of life.

Furthermore, by choosing to take the smooth, rhythmic qualities of the original song and distort them to become unenthusiastic, chaotic, and utterly dissonant, it not only represents the mundane and out-of-touch portion of his life; aspiring for more, trying to reach new heights, but it also represents Joe’s unwavering commitment to his aspirations; ambitious and yet struggling to maintain control. This track not only sets up the narrative, but also speaks for itself as a representation of where Joe is at currently within his aspirational journey.

As the film continues, Joe answers his phone and to his surprise, it’s an ex-pupil of his. He answers, and he’s offered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, playing a gig alongside a famous quartet. This brings Gardner to a state of many emotions: joy, surprise, but most notably excitement. The next track ‘Born to Play’ realises this shift in emotional state masterfully.

The track begins with a 20 second drum solo, accompanying a scene in which Gardner is rushing with excitement and eagerness for his upcoming potentially life-changing gig. This drum solo contains an improvised quality, featuring an allegro tempo, using a range of percussive sounds found on a drum set.

This short portion of the track not only works effectively as an accompanying backdrop to the visuals, as the rhythmic instruments are a strong reflection of the percussive, rushed, and sporadic footsteps as Joe scurries through the bustling city- but it also stands on its own as a track that portrays the progression of where Joe is within the narrative; closer to realizing his desire and aspiration established in the opening track/scene. Despite the improvised nature of the audio, it remains sounding less dissonant and more coherent, which strongly contrasts the opening track, thus strengthening the idea that the score is an essential narrative tool to displaying the idea of personal aspiration.

Revisiting our psychoanalytic viewpoint of the unconscious mind, the score directly correlates with Joe’s shift in perspective towards his subconscious desires and personal aspirations. As the background music shifts to become

coherent, therefore more in-control, so does Gardner's direction in life; he's on his way to what should be a 'life-changing' gig.

Once this 20 second drum solo fades out, Joe walks into the quiet venue, with nothing but the sound of a distant, offscreen saxophone. As he walks closer to the source of the melody, the music gets louder and closer. He stands in awe, eyes widening as the saxophone player continues to belt out an improvised, yet beautiful blues melody; Joe is in a trance, and it is here we start to understand as to why our protagonist loves jazz.

This scene sets off the demonstration of the interplay between the visual and sonic codes; the visual and audio design are working in tandem to clearly establish the relationship between jazz and Joe Gardner. Within Christian Metz's book "Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema" (Margrit Tröhler and Kirsten, 2018) he introduces two key concepts: the 'paradigmatic' and the 'syntagmatic' regarding film as a 'language'. Whilst initially a linguistics relation first spoken about by Ferdinand De Saussure in his book "Course in General Linguistics" (*De Saussure, 1916*), Metz was the one to apply it to film, and so the paradigmatic describes the deliberate audio, visual or spoken choices thoughtfully made by the filmmakers to display and enhance profound themes and ideas within cinema. The syntagmatic describes the shot-by-shot sequence of a film to influence and serve the narrative, which is not quite as relevant as it doesn't discuss audio elements.

Reviewing *Soul* through the lens of the paradigmatic, primarily focusing on the score- as Joe hears this distant, improvised saxophone solo- he's drawn in, following it until he is met with the source. The paradigmatic within this scene would be the deliberate choice to use a beautiful, improvised blues instrumental, and so in conjunction with the shot of Joe's eyes widening, this use of score speaks to Joe's fascination with the beauty of the unknown nature of jazz. An improvised track that sounds both dissonant and coherent, predictable, and entirely unpredictable. Derek Bailey's book "*Improvisation: It's Nature and Practice in Music*" (Bailey, 1993) discusses various aspects of improvisation, including the appeal of it from an audience's perspective. To quote Bailey, he states "improvisation has a degree of intimacy with the music that is not achieved in any other situation." Which holds very true within this context. This is a very intimate moment within the narrative, and the score almost entirely creates this; both Joe and the audience are challenged by the music that is being played onscreen, embracing the unpredictable nature of the art.

Now as the scene continues, Joe is given the opportunity to play, to prove himself for this gig, in front of the player who left him starstruck. As he begins his improvisation, he starts out dissonant, disorganised and behind time- but as he continues to listen to the music around him and feel the rhythm, he finds his timing and starts playing chords that fit the instrumentation around him, eventually finding himself in what the film describes as 'the zone'; it could be argued that within this scene, Joe is free. This is arguably the most important scene within the film, let alone the first ten minutes, for multiple reasons.

As the background fades into an ethereal, dream-like landscape, simultaneously the other instruments within the quartet are muffled to lower frequencies until eventually becoming silent, pinning focus on the piano Joe plays. Gardner is entrapped within his own personal bliss, both losing himself within the music but also becoming one with it; he's in a state of personal freedom that's only replicated through the scenes in which he is improvising a melody. In these moments, he is providing homage to the African American experience through a powerful metaphor. Albert Murray's book *Stomping the Blues* (Murray, 1976) provides excellent insight into connecting the dots between the African American experience of slavery and how that reflects into the birth and progression of jazz, more specifically 'blues jazz' as a genre. To paraphrase his words, he believes that improvisation was created as an essential tool to survive and act resiliently through slavery; the ability to act freely and creatively within a structured framework. Looping back to the score within this scene in *Soul*, with the knowledge that the entire quartet is African American- there's a very intentional paradigmatic code here, and the decision to have the African American characters improvise a beautiful blues melody, and be visually portrayed as 'free' to enhance the score, shows a deep respect to the historical context of the genre.

CONCLUSION

Disney Pixar's '*Soul*' offers an incredible reflection of where our protagonist finds himself within the narrative regarding his personal aspirations, whilst simultaneously immensely respecting the historical context of the genre. Whilst this score enriches the onscreen visuals perfectly, matching the tempo of actions taken to create energy, it can also be argued that it transcends the idea that it needs to purely act as 'background' music. Instead becoming an essential narrative component in conveying how Joe's journey to fulfilling his unconscious desires and personal aspirations can be reflected through sound

entirely. From the intentionally dissonant and poor rendition of a smooth jazz piece being indicative of Joe's unwavering commitment to his aspiration to shoot higher, to the improvisational qualities of the coherent tracks indicating Gardner's transition from discord to harmony and peace.

This score also profoundly respects the historical context of the jazz genre. It pays homage to the African American experience and the history of jazz that originated during the height of slavery. This respect is demonstrated through intentional paradigmatic choices that influence the reading of the film. Jon Batiste's compositions without a doubt embodies the spirit of improvisation and adaptation that were key for survival during that time. He also provides a modern, accessible platform to explore themes of aspiration and self-fulfilment.

And all of this is within the first 10 minutes of the film.

'Soul', to me, is one of the most important films of recent times. It not only engages audiences with its mesmerizing score but also acts as an extremely accessible reminder that the pursuit of our desires can truly be a beautiful and fulfilling journey worth experiencing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. Freud, S. (1994) *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Barns & Noble.
2. Tröhler, M. and Kirsten, G. (2018) *Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema: Film Semiology and Beyond*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
3. De Saussure, F. (1916) *Course in general linguistics*. London: Duckworth.
4. Bailey, D. (1993) *Improvisation: It's Nature and Practice in Music*. Da Capo Press.

5. Murray, A. (1976) *Stomping the blues*. London: Quartet Books C.