

[Streams|Watch@] “2020 Soul” [ONLINE] @hd

(Update: March 2, 2021)



If Disney’s animated-movie formula relies on tales of heroes and princesses, of villains destroyed and personal freedom achieved, then Pixar’s formula is far more mundane. For decades, the computer-animation studio has made movies that portray transcendent feelings and experiences as the products of ordinary jobs, performed diligently by strange little beings behind the scenes. *Monsters, Inc.*, in 2001, revealed that our fears were created by cuddly, blue-collar creatures. *Inside Out*, in 2015, personified our emotions as brightly colored sprites pressing buttons and pulling levers. Now, *Soul* imagines how our personalities are created at a cartoony summer camp, where smiley blobs and squiggles convene to generate human souls.

All three of these movies were directed by Pete Docter, the man who is also behind *Up*. One of Pixar’s foremost auteurs, the filmmaker is enamored of using animation to conjure worlds rooted in abstract metaphor. *Soul*, which debuts today on Disney+, is his most conceptual film yet, largely set in a realm known as “the Great Before,” a cloudy land where human personalities are created and zapped into our bodies upon birth. The ambition of Docter’s world building is laudable. And the smaller, human narrative he tries to tell within that universe—about a jazz pianist who finds himself stuck in the Great Before after a

near-death experience—is sweet and charming. But given its vast canvas, *Soul* sometimes struggles to focus on that more intimate story.

Joe Gardner (voiced by Jamie Foxx), the musician who launches the plot of *Soul* after he falls into a manhole, is the first Black protagonist of a Pixar movie. Beyond that, he's an adult with fairly ordinary problems, a far cry from the many Pixar heroes who are animals, robots, superheroes, and the like. A passionate musician, Joe teaches band at a middle school while waiting for the big break that might never come. Just as he's invited to play with an all-star jazz act, a seemingly fatal mishap jolts his soul out of his body, and he spends much of the rest of the movie as a fuzzy blue creature, trapped in the Great Before and looking for a way back to his (comatose) human form. *Soul* has the aesthetics of a whimsical adventure, but its themes are very raw. In death, Joe is tangling with the thought that he's left his life incomplete, without fulfilling the artistic obsession that always drove him.

Docter has wrestled with “grown-up” themes before and managed to cram them into an easy-to-understand story arc. Up began with the emotional hammer blow of an aging character losing his wife before he embarked on a new adventure. *Soul* sets an even tougher challenge for itself by apparently killing its lead character within minutes. But Docter finds clever ways to travel between the heavens and Earth, using the odd, nonphysical world Joe finds himself in to teach valuable lessons about finding joy in life even as it disappoints us.

In the Great Before, Joe befriends 22 (Tina Fey), a soul in line to receive a human form who has a dim view of Earth, preferring to wait for eternity rather than enter our mortal coil. It's the opposite existential crisis of Joe's—he's worried he didn't do enough on Earth, while she's disinterested in doing anything there at all. But despite strong vocal performances from both Foxx and Fey, their characters' comedic interplay never quite hits the mark. Joe is so focused on trying to get out of the Great Before, and 22 is so exhausted by the mechanics of their spiritual way station, that the movie doesn't take much time to enjoy the universe Docter designed.

That unusual world has the vibe of a hippie retreat from the 1980s, where encouraging, anything-goes affirmations about mental wellness and balance have been merged with a vaguely corporate business structure. The Great Before is administered by two-dimensional scribbles with names like Jerry (Richard Ayoade) and Terry (Rachel House), unfinished-looking motivational beings goading soul blobs into self-actualization before their one-way trip to Earth. While the 3-D animation of Pixar films often feels samey and bland, Docter plays with the medium to lend a sense of genuine chaos and unpredictability. On top of the more grounded animation of the real world, the abstract

fluffiness of the Great Before, and the wiggling doodle forms of Jerry and company, Soul also portrays the afterlife as a giant inkblot, a mysterious void that the dead enter and never return from.

Docter's vision is staggering to consider, even if it's arguably too much for a 100-minute movie aimed at children. Soul eventually turns away from the boundless possibilities of its celestial concepts and tries to focus on Joe, who needs to learn the value of existence beyond achieving his wildest hopes. The film flits back to Earth on occasion and engineers plenty of magical antics (for a chunk of the movie, Joe's mind is stuck in the body of an obnoxiously furry cat), and there are lovely moments of real profundity as he realizes, It's a Wonderful Life-style, how much he meant to people even without being a jazz superstar.

At times, I struggled to understand the message of Soul and its metaphysical conception of our emotional genesis. We are all born with dreams, Docter seems to be saying, bubbling with ideas and personalities that are created even before we come into the world, but Joe's story proves that there is more to life than that. Essentially, Docter has made a Pixar film for kids that tries to run at the nature-versus-nurture question and ends up splitting the difference. Compared to Pixar's recent spate of sequels to past hits, Soul is a loftier project—a messy but expansive story worthy of its director's grand ambitions.

It's also now available to watch on some VOD platforms, meaning you can watch it wherever you are in the world.

Soul Is Getting Two More Sequels

Here's all the info on how you can watch Soul and whether it will be on Netflix.

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