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Remembering My Friend and Rehearing Two Films

Elsie Walker

Abstract: *This article revolves around two soundtracks Walker has admired along with the person to whom this issue of* Alphaville *is dedicated: Danijela Kulezic-Wilson. The soundtracks come from* Soul *by Pete Docter and Kemp Powers and* Nomadland *by Chloé Zhao, both released in 2020. The films are sonically worlds apart:* Soul *is dominated by jazz music by Jon Batiste and contemporary electronic music by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross, while* Nomadland *features modern classical music by Ludovico Einaudi and Ólafur Arnalds. Ironically, despite sounding profoundly different, both films draw from true stories in order to teach audioviewers about living well, even in the midst of death. Or, to reapply Danijela's words about* Waking Life *(Richard Linklater, 2001), these films emphasise "the dualistic nature of human experience, the pleasure of being alive and the implicit proximity of death." Walker combines cinematherapy with sound studies to make a case for the wisdom of both films that have helped her cope with the grief of Danijela's death, in the hope that this might resonate for those readers who find similar comfort in their own film-to-person relationships.*

> The more times we watch a film, the more equipped we become to understand its secrets and hidden depths. What might have been an initial attraction—certain aspects of the narrative, actors, the score, a sensuous audiovisual style—becomes just one element of the whole that is only revealed in an intimate relationship with someone (or, in this case, something). (Kulezic-Wilson, *Sound Design* 124)

This article is about my coming to terms with the death of my friend, Danijela Kulezic-Wilson. I focus on two films that we talked about in her final two months of life: *Soul* by Pete Docter and Kemp Powers and *Nomadland* by Chloé Zhao, both released in 2020. Though very different, both these films helped us talk candidly about what Danijela was facing and the perspective she had before dying. Now that she has entered the Great Beyond, I continue "talking" to Danijela by revisiting the films and listening most carefully to what their sound tracks tell me. I draw inspiration from an article by Sarah Penwarden titled "Crafting Order and Beauty from Loss: Using Found Poems as a Form of Grief Therapy."

Penwarden describes her "thera-poetic" practice of writing "found poems" as follows. She takes the words that a client speaks about someone they have lost and turns those words into "rescued speech" poetry. With her client's permission, she sifts through their recorded sessions for potent details to quote verbatim. Her found poetry therefore "involves four distinct practices: attuned listening, selecting/privileging particular expressions, arranging them on the page, and offering them back to the client" (16). Similarly, I have replayed the films I talked about with Danijela, pulled out key ideas from her work that resonate with my readings of the soundtracks,

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arranged these ideas into an analytical shape, and now offer them to the reader as an example of a positive grieving process.

By Penwarden's permission, I reprint an example of the poetry she created from one of her client's words of remembrance:

"Carrying him"

At the club,
they have two fields.
Everyone,
all the males,
carried his coffin around both the fields.
It was after midnight.
They said,
so now *whanau*[1]
we're going to take the brother and walk him around his fields.
He's the only person to this day that I know of
that had that privilege.

(Penwarden 19–20)

I admire the complete lack of pretention in this poem. For me, its distinctive beauty stems from Penwarden's representing her client's words, feelings, and memories without imposing her will on the content beyond giving it a poetic shape. She explains that "arranging an experience in poetic form on the page, with white spaces, line endings, and title, organises an experience into a particular form. In this way, poems can bring shape to loss, through compression and composition on the page; they craft it" (19).[2] If death can close everything down—the body ceasing to move, the breath and speech ended—Penwarden shows how poetically representing grief can open things up by illuminating what matters, regenerating memories, and continuing conversations in honour of the deceased. In short, her found poetry brings "into focus that a lost loved one can still contribute to a person's life" (15). Parallel to Penwarden, I explore how the soundtracks of *Soul* and *Nomadland* symbolically communicate different forms of opening up that affirm life even in the face of death, and I honour Danijela's ongoing influence on me by interpreting these soundtracks in relation to some of her groundbreaking work. Like Penwarden, I make something out of grief that is restorative in its clarity of purpose.

I watched Danijela's funeral in America, via live streaming from Ireland. It was a surreal experience to see her closed coffin lifted by pallbearers. I felt no connection to her. This article is about carrying her and her memory differently, around a virtual field of cinema that she knew and loved. This is how I liberate her from the coffin along with healing myself. Despite this being an intensely idiosyncratic personal process, I recognise that using cinema as a form of healing is not new. Back in 1990, Linda Berg-Cross, Pamela Jennings, and Rhoda Baruch first defined cinematherapy as "a therapeutic technique that involves having the therapist select commercial films for the client to view along or with specified others. The film may be intended to have a direct therapeutic effect or it could be used as a stimulus for further interventions within a session"

(135). Cinematherapy is an outgrowth of modern bibliotherapy, the longstanding use of literature to help clients "acquire new insights into their difficulties", broaden their "base of self understanding", enable their catharsis and/or emotional release, and feel a new sense of connection to others who have understood their suffering (136). While Berg-Cross, Jennings, and Baruch explain that present-day clients might be more inclined to reach for self-help books than works of literature, they argue that there is something intrinsically important about reading a story and engaging with characters with regard to the effectiveness of bibliotherapy. Indeed, they argue that storyline and character are "the most potent" therapeutic aspects of literature and cinema alike (137). Cinematherapy typically places goal-oriented focus on narrative and character trajectories, much like bibliotherapy, at the expense of close attention to the formal and stylistic techniques of the given film. For instance, a client watched *Barfly* (Barbet Schroeder, 1987) to help her stop being a "problem drinker" (Berg-Cross et al. 142), and a married couple watched *The Accidental Tourist* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1988) to cope with some of their shared trauma that had made conversations and intimacy between them strained (144). In applying my knowledge of cinematic style and especially my emphasis on soundtracks to my own grief, I present an unorthodox approach, especially in this formal context of printed publication for my peers. Most of the research on cinematherapy to date comes from psychologists reporting on qualitative data and individual experiences of therapy (Grobler). I make no claim to psychological authority, nor do I speak for anyone else, but I authorise myself to decode the films and especially their soundtracks on poetic terms. I exercise my skills of cinematic and sonic analysis to reunderstand how Danijela lives after life in a self-consciously personal way, within the safety of a language that I share with the reader.

The specifics of my analytical approach match the uniqueness of my friendship, but my terms of engagement are malleable enough for two wildly different films. I use these disparate examples to make the case that combining cinematherapy with sound studies can be fruitful across genres, whether we are talking about an animated family movie or a road movie about actual nomad experiences. Ironically, both films draw from true stories in order to teach us all about living well, even in the midst of death. Or, to reapply Danijela's words about *Waking Life* (Richard Linklater, 2001), they emphasise "the dualistic nature of human experience, the pleasure of being alive and the implicit proximity of death" ("Tango" 10). *Soul* is inspired by the legacy of Peter Archer (1961–), a middle school music teacher from Queens, New York. The film adapts Archer's real-life journey from aspiring to be a solo concert performer to loving what he could do for others by teaching. He found his "spark" through teaching students to "find their spark as well" (Kacala). Within the film, finding a spark is about having a reason to live that goes beyond vocational ambition and it is a prerequisite for being born. *Soul* begins with Joe Gardner (the protagonist based on Archer) teaching students enthusiastically but longing for greater success. He aspires to playing jazz with a living legend named Dorothea Williams.[3] On the day that his professional dream is coming true, after he has successfully auditioned for Williams, Joe falls down a pothole and enters an unearthly realm where he rediscovers the value of his own life. A big part of Joe's journey is helping a soul named 22 (Tina Fey) find her spark in order to be born, even though this goes against her long-standing resistance to joining life on earth. *Nomadland* is based on the memoir titled *Nomadland: Surviving American in the Twenty-First Century* (2017) by Jessica Bruder. The book focuses on older Americans who lost their regular jobs and homes during the Great Recession from 2007 to 2009 and who travel around America from one job opportunity to another. The story of *Nomadland* originates from Bruder's two years of research while living with real-life nomads. Although the main character, Fern (Frances McDormand) is fictional, she is a

representative creation based on actual experiences of many. As the film begins, Fern's workplace has folded and her husband, Bo, is recently deceased. The film focuses on Fern's ability to keep moving after his death, both literally (by van) and metaphysically.

Soul and *Nomadland* feature soundtracks that are empathetic to the protagonists but which also relay perspectives beyond their comprehension. In both films, the dominant music lacks lyrics but still "speaks out" strongly. Each soundtrack communicates a comforting "filmind", to use Daniel Frampton's term for the agency, direction, and will that is unique to a given film.[4] Danijela was fascinated by how music, in particular, can relay a "filmind" that draws an audience into complicity with understanding more than any of the characters can. As Danijela would have me do, I have invested serious time in both films to form "intimate relationships" with them. By replaying them many times, I have found the patterns in their unique sonic logic that lead me to conclusions about what their filminds say.

Through the rest of this article, I analyse the soundtracks of *Soul* and *Nomadland* separately and from an individualistic perspective, but my interpretations of both films are governed by the same broadly applicable questions: How can a film's music represent grief as well as some answers to handling it? How can soundtracks give an audioviewer solace, perspective, and meaning in the face of losing a loved one? And how can I personally combine the language of film soundtracks with the language of therapeutic possibilities in ways that will hopefully resonate for my readers? In lieu of answering these questions with standard conclusions, or any kind of big finish that would belie the fact of grief as an open-ended process, I close my analysis of each film soundtrack with a poem inspired by Penwarden's therapeutically driven poetry of "rescued speech". I therefore end each analysis with an example of creativity that grows from my personal relationship with each film's generative form. The "secrets and hidden depths" I find in *Soul* and *Nomadland* in particular might not be the same for anyone else, but I hope that through my examples of analysis and poetry the reader/audioviewer will feel empowered to delve into their own intimate relationships with the films they love. Harkening back to Danijela's affirming words about finding intimacy with cinema, I urge the reader to consider why their own film relationships matter in lasting, self-sustaining, and self-revelatory ways.

My Relationship with *Soul*

The soundtrack of *Soul* is uncommonly important for giving shape and meaning to the film. The music features extremes that correlate with Joe's shifting self as he moves through several earthly and unearthly places. On earth, Joe is a tall, thin African American man with distinctive features, but in the Great Beyond (after life) and Great Before (pre-birth), he is a simple blue shape with a face and accessories (hat and glasses). The consistent voice of Jamie Foxx as Joe makes his changing visual state less worrisome than playfully sensical, while the music relays his emotional journey *and* how we should feel about every part of it. Because the main character is not given a fixed physical form, *Soul* urges me to think of identity and being beyond the body. *Soul* enabled Danijela and I to talk about death and the possibilities of her life beyond her physical presence without having to be any more dogmatic than the film is. By revisiting the film, I not only extend this conversation with Danijela: I expand my understanding of what a cinematic soundtrack can affirm for me.

Many characters of *Soul* are surprisingly abstract, from the pre-born people of the Great Before (simple rounded shapes with limbs and no distinguishing features) to the spectral beings who guide human beings before and after their lives on earth (two-dimensional faces and bodies, like moving silhouettes of Picasso sketches). Unlike other Disney features that show painstaking attention to minute details of form—the chipped trim mouldings in Andy's home for *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995), the individual follicles of fur on Sully in *Monsters, Inc.* (Pete Docter, Davide Silverman and Lee Unkrich, 2001), or the textured insides of coconuts in *Moana* (Ron Clements, John Musker, and Don Hall, 2016)—*Soul* gives me an experience of comparative visual unmooring. This places uncommon weight on the repetition of musical patterns and the consistency of certain voices—most notably Joe's and 22's—as anchoring presences.[5] The film makes me listen more carefully than usual to every part of music and speech that drives everything forward and in relation to which I understand the images more fully. If the dominant voices stay mostly consistent, the near wall-to-wall music changes shape often, challenging me to accept a process of almost-perpetual adaptation. This musical changeability reflects the extremity of the Joe's and 22's transformative journeys through the film: from losing life (Joe) and resisting life (22), to re-entering life (Joe) and beginning life (22). The near-constant sonic flux within *Soul* makes me align myself with these characters as I must keep adapting to the changes I hear through the film. Like Joe and 22, I make a journey from death to life: from listening to *Soul* again as an act of remembrance, to reunderstanding how Danijela lives in the way I choose to hear it.[6]

The music of *Soul* is hard to predict in its variety: this is a humbling and crucial part of the film's expansive form. First, there is the electronic music by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross. This music features free rhythms, delicate timbres, and subtle textural variety. For instance, there is the airy lightness and languid feel of the cue "Flashback", with its synthesised reverberations, digitised echoing voices, and soft piano line at high pitches. This cue is a sonic balm, giving time for me to take in the sight of Joe looking crestfallen at his lowest point in the film, staring at his own reflection on a subway train while everyone else around him is on their cellphones and oblivious to his presence (1.17.11–1.17.38). Crucially, this cue returns nearer the uplifting end of the film, as if the music not only bears witness to Joe's pain but also anticipates the hope that is coming. "Flashback" returns after Joe rescues 22 from becoming a "lost soul," and while he successfully persuades her that she is ready "to come live" (1.25.49–1.27.19). This cue is representative of the filmind as I hear it in *Soul*'s music, providing a perspective of benevolent and overseeing hope: this reflects Reznor and Ross's goal to create a more "optimistic" score than they ever composed before (Jacobsen and Beachum).

Most of Reznor and Ross's music communicates a relatively free sense of time without metric rigidity, in keeping with the film's frequent shifting among different spaces and forms of existence—from Joe's original earthly life, to the Great Beyond, to the Great Before where he meets 22, and back to Earth where Joe gains a second unexpected chance to live. "Terry Time" is the only prominent rhythmically rigid cue. It matches the dogma of a spectral character named Terry who insists on counting the positions of souls with abacuses. Terry will not tolerate Joe's unexpected movement back to earth and away from death, and her music relays her indefatigable strictness about how the order of the world should be. This cue is reminiscent of Ross and Reznor's music for *The Social Network* (David Fincher, 2010) in that it communicates relentless motion without much patience for mercurial human feelings, paralleling its characterisation of Mark Zuckerberg as a steamrollering presence of focused ambition without lasting personal attachments.

The rest of Ross and Reznor's score for *Soul* is in much looser and more playful forms. For instance, "Portal/The Hall of Everything" starts with mechanistic, primarily rhythmic sounds that give way to a light melody, evoking both the planned and the unplanned. The cue first plays when 22 and Joe are in the Great Before where little souls are finding their sparks. 22 tells Joe, "You can't crush a soul here, that's what life on earth is for" (25.57–28.07). In pushing beyond the constraints of familiar formal structures, strict tempos, or predictable harmonic and melodic development, Reznor and Ross's music stresses the freedom Joe gains through his unearthly, near-death experience. In turn, the music gives me a freeing sense of limitless possibility, pulling me into realms beyond the limits of my earth-bound grief.

The other dominant music of *Soul* is acoustic jazz music by Jon Batiste. This music is connected to Joe's professional life and ambition. Batiste's music is frequently upbeat and catchy, as in "Collard Greens and Cornbread Strut", the underscoring for Joe's triumphant stride through city after his successful audition for Dorothea Williams. When he whoops on the street ("Yes! Whoo-hoo!"), his voice is part of the music, signifying that the cue is an extension of the diegetic space and merged with his very being (8.43–9.18). Batiste's cues show how well Joe musically converses with his new jazz ensemble, and how music carries him into "the zone", which 22 defines as "the space between the physical and the spiritual". When Joe auditions for Williams, he joins the piece titled "Bigger Than Us". He presses piano chords unsurely at first but then becomes fully part of the ensemble (6.28–8.15), harmonising with the rest of the quartet: saxophone, double bass, and drum kit. Eventually, he closes his eyes through a solo and the movie visually transports him into an abstract space of blue and shifting lights. The literal environment around him is gone because he has become one with the music. The mise en scène takes a subsidiary role to the transformational power of the jazz.

By entering the zone, Joe can reach a transcendent level of self-actualisation through playing. He also "speaks" and connects with others most confidently through music. Batiste's cues for Williams's ensemble have a conversational aspect that is common to jazz. The instrumentalists swap and/or share melodic and harmonic roles, in an interdependent act of perpetual engagement that is typical of jazz collaboration, leading us where we cannot predict through advanced yet free-sounding musical logic. For instance, "Space Maker" is a skittish jazz number featuring a joyful call-and-response between saxophone and piano. This cue is the jubilant start of Joe's successful first gig with Williams's quartet (1.14.05–1.14.40). "Looking at life" is another playfully "conversational" piece for quartet, featuring lightly hit high hat, piano chords with damper pedal, and a surprising melody that pops up effortlessly on muted saxophone. We hear this track after Joe and 22 are working together to get him ready for a successful audition, starting with a trip to the local barber shop. 22 is proud of her philosophical musings at the barber shop, which she calls her own form of "jazzing" (57.03–57.59). Though Joe argues emphatically that "jazzing" is "not a word", this scene marks their newly playful relationship, as affirmed by Batiste's music.

If Reznor and Ross's music stresses the unrestricted scale of unearthly spaces, Batiste's music stresses the freeing possibilities of jazzing on earth. If Reznor and Ross's music expresses the excitement of perceiving there is more than we can literally know, Batiste's music reminds me of the joy in our earthly bodies and our earthbound connections to others that can also bridge the gap between the physical and the spiritual, lifting us into the zone. Because *Soul* shifts between these markedly different forms of music frequently, it could feel overwhelming, and impossible to

assimilate into sensical coherence, but it is very emotionally accessible when I hear that every musical choice clearly relates to Joe's personal journey. This gives the overall soundtrack of *Soul* tremendous cohesion as a film that revolves around the internal growth of its protagonist. Moreover, both forms of music communicate unending possibilities, albeit through two markedly different styles, inspiring my open-mindedness in turn. The musical culmination of *Soul* happens when the two styles of music merge in Reznor and Ross's cue titled "Epiphany" (1.17.44–1.21.27). This is the time when Joe finally comprehends the full value in his own life as part of the entire world, including all that is earthly and unearthly. This is the cue through which the filmind speaks most strongly to me in my grief, especially because of its huge implications.

"Epiphany" begins with Joe looking defeated at his piano, then his staring at several quotidian objects that trigger his memories from earlier scenes of the film. He replaces some sheet music on the piano before him with these objects in a row: a helicopter seed, a pizza crust, a piece of bagel, a lollipop, a spool of thread, and a metro card. Looking at these objects, Joe begins to improvise a tune with just two notes on the piano, and these notes are then "answered" by Reznor and Ross's nondiegetic scoring that frees him up from needing to play while he remembers various scenes from his life worth cherishing. It is as if we can hear everything in his mind's ear, or the music that he imagines, along with seeing his mind's eye through the montage of his memories. Through some of this montage, we hear the piano line without Joe playing onscreen (as if nondiegetic) but some shots show Joe playing. What Robynn Stilwell calls "the fantastical gap" closes here: even if Joe is not playing the entire piano line, the repeated cuts back to his face suggest that the whole music cue comes from his consciousness, dissolving the division between his world and ours looking in. The montage includes clips from earlier scenes of the film showing ordinary-but-extraordinary moments shared by Joe and 22, such as her enjoying pizza for the first time or her relishing the wind from a subway grate. The montage also includes some memories that are new to us and that precede the film action, such as Joe being bathed by his mother as a baby and his listening to a record with his father. At the beginning of the cue and at its culmination, the acoustic piano line sounds more improvised then scored, ironically echoing Batiste's earlier scoring for Joe. The texture thickens with airy synthesised sounds that connect the cue with all of Reznor and Ross's other music as well. "Epiphany" therefore gives us a memorialising climax of invention to match Joe's newfound love of his own life. As the cue builds around the piano line, Joe shifts into the zone once more. This is signified by the mise en scène transforming into a colourfully open space around him at the piano. He closes his eyes with joyful surrender to the experience (Figure 1). His entering the zone here parallels his solo auditioning for Williams, and I feel transported in kind. Indeed, I feel such an intense audiovisual alignment with Joe and his memories that I leap into precious recollections of my own. I think of how much Danijela admired films that dwell on the value of quotidian details, much like the objects that led Joe to make this new music. She argued that, in *Wings of Desire* (Wim Wenders, 1987), "small earthly pleasures—drinking coffee, taking a pull of a cigarette and rubbing your hands on a cold morning—might even lure an angel to abandon a purely spiritual existence in eternity" ("Tango" 10).



Figure 1: Joe enters the zone through playing "Epiphany".
***Soul* (Pete Docter and Kemp Powers, 2020). Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2021. Screenshot.**

The "epiphany" montage cuts from Joe's memories to show cityscapes of New York, and then views of planet earth and the galaxy around it, showing me the ambitious outlook of *Soul* that exceeds all individual human subjectivities. I perceive the filmind of *Soul* through this macrocosmic vision along with the music that combines styles, which leads me to recognise the fullness of its all-encompassing, nondogmatic perspective. By combining the two forms of dominant music through *Soul*, "Epiphany" urges me to be more open to and accepting of the hugeness of life that I can never fully understand. With benign ambition, the music invites me to perceive the earthly and unearthly, the quotidian and the transcendent as part of one unified whole. Following this logic, I think of Danijela as part of the Great Beyond rather than simply dead. I feel my own smallness in the scale of the world in which no precious memories or lives are necessarily gone but just positioned differently within it. The film prompts me to fill out the contours of what I can literally see, especially because it musically fills out the abstractness of seeing Joe enter and re-enter the zone. It pulls me into an experience of life and time that is bigger than what can be reduced to an earth-bound existence, a literal understanding, or a realistically detailed mise en scène.

Long before *Soul* came out, Danijela wrote about having a "spark" with a film in the metaphorical sense of feeling chemistry with it. She argued that if an audioviewer feels the "spark" of a film they might develop an intimate relationship with it over time (*Sound Design* 124). My initial spark with *Soul* has deepened into my fuller relationship with it, which includes my hearing the word "spark" yet another way. I realise that my own spark is in lovingly writing and teaching classes about films like this, in ways that personally matter to me and hopefully to others. In reapplying Danijela's words to the film, as well as accepting the film's vision of an entirely integrated world, I no longer feel Danijela is lost to me. I recognise that the conversation we had and the film music we absorbed together are permanently part of my life, and I can replay them both at will. Replaying the music of *Soul* brings back details we discussed to me, in an infinite loop of rehearing and entering the zone that leads to my reconnecting with Danijela by returning to and reunderstanding what she wrote.

I return to Penwarden's example of a found poem, having written a poem about what *Soul* has given me because I hear it anew after Danijela's death. The poem is a distillation and preservation of the process I have described above.

"My spark, my friend"

There is earthly music
and music of the Great Beyond.
I am in one
while you have become the other.

These two kinds of music coexist
and mean the most together.

I didn't know this when you died
but now I hear it clearly.

This is my epiphany.

My Relationship with *Nomadland*

Nomadland begins with a notable absence of music, in keeping with its emphasis on what Fern has lost from the start. Instead of establishing music, a most familiar way to begin a film, there is the sound of heavy wind, a signifier of massive and unstoppable change. This goes with the first explanatory text that tells us, "On January 31, 2011, due to a reduced demand for sheetrock, US Gypsum shut down its plant in Empire, Nevada, after 88 years." The next explanatory text is "By July, the Empire zip code, 89405, was discontinued." The facts are plain but the wind is an emotively suggestive form of response. The wind sutures a cut to the first image and sound of Fern lifting the heavy door of a storage facility. She is checking boxes and loading objects onto the back of her van in preparation for her move away from Empire. As ordinary as it is, the sound of a big object opening prepares me for how Fern will open up to other characters (and to me, by extension) over the course of the film. Several characters vocally open up to Fern, sharing stories of their losses that turn to new resolve—from her friend Swankie (Charlene Swankie), who is diagnosed with terminal cancer and who tells Fern of her resolve to die on her own terms outside a hospital, to her potential love interest Dave (David Stathhairn), a father who has been estranged from his son and who follows Fern's advice to make amends by being a good grandfather. These friends trust Fern to hear them fully, while the film demands that I hear Fern's actions first and foremost. Fern's demeaner, no-nonsense speech, and hearty laugh remind me of Danijela, so my relistening to her character after Danijela's death has become a surprisingly sacred act of remembrance.

Nomadland revolves around Fern's necessary movement away from her long-time home. Sometimes her encounters with other nomads inspire her emotional responses and embraces, but her presence is often restrained. Her opening up is more private than explicit: in a few scenes, the music of Ludovico Einaudi or Ólafur Arnalds communicates remarkable growth within her, but

this feels like privileged access to me because the music comes from a nondiegetic space. There are many examples of diegetic music that are crucial for showing how some other characters work things out overtly and onscreen. For instance, a grizzly old man (Paul Winer aka Sweet Pie) sings "Next to the Track Blues" at the old-timey "Longhorn Saloon," accompanying himself with a honky-tonk piano (43.42–44.46). His lyrics pay tribute to "the friends who had to depart, the friends in our heart", which resonates for Fern and all the other nomads who have mourn the departed along with trying to move on with their lives. Toward the end of the film, Dave plays an improvised piano duet with his son, signifying their newly harmonious connection in life. Fern observes them playing softly together late at night, bearing witness to the trust and reciprocity that now defines their relationship as represented by the ease of their dueting (1.28.49–1.29.47).

In other scenes, the nondiegetic tracks by Einaudi and Arnalds carry more weight as revelations of Fern's inner growth and the filmind urges me to bear witness to that. For instance, after the scene with "Next to the Track Blues", the film gives us a montage of Fern's aloneness that turns into her renewed engagement with the world. Einaudi's "Petricor" works alongside the montage as follows (44.47–46.19). First, Fern stands alone outside the Longhorn Saloon, and she slowly walks past the building in her white nightdress, as if looking for other people but without a clear purpose. The camera slowly tracks Fern's solitary movements along the street, with a light wind around her, and a single car driving by without stopping. The montage then emphasises Fern taking control over her continued journeying without waiting for anyone else: the film cuts to her driving, then shouting out to rocks, then watching a buffalo in the wild, looking at a stream, wading through the stream, lying naked in a pond, driving through expanses of landscape, and then moving through a campervan site with her lantern at sunset. This montage represents several patterns of the film: showing different angles on Fern and her travelling van, her engagement with multiple forms of nature, and her movements across the country. The music sutures all of this, giving everything a sense of connectedness and cumulative meaning. "Petricor" begins with a lightly played ostinato on piano and harmonics on strings. A soft melody of two-note phrases emerges, with a through-line shared among violins and cello. A low bass guitar slowly comes in and offsets the melody, as if the two lines of music exist to mediate each other and gain mutual strength. The cue gradually builds and crescendos before it fades out along with the fading light of the sun around Fern. The piece is in A minor, which gives everything potential poignancy, but the strength of the gathering texture, patterned phrases, and relatively slow tempo communicate something steady as well. For me, this music is about Fern deciding to live her life with increasing sureness, even in the face of grief. The immediate narrative context leading up to this music is Swankie's departure and Fern listening to Nat King Cole singing "Answer Me, My Love" as she looks over old photographs, including one of Bo as a young man. If Fern is waiting for an answer, as the song's lyrics suggest, "Petricor" offers one, through peacefully connecting various patterns of her life. In its fuller narrative context, then, "Petricor" is about finding strength after acknowledging loss. This leads me back to Danijela and the bravery she showed me in her confrontation with death. Along with reminding me of her strength, the film helps me feel my own capacity for strength as something newly amazing.

Nomadland begins with an emphasis on the coldness with which human lives can be seen as dispensable by a company, a capitalist system, and a changing economic landscape. That said, the film is fascinated with Fern and the indispensability of her life in particular. The Foley mixing stresses virtually every move that Fern makes and her different ways of walking—stepping

confidently into the large echoing space of the Amazon warehouse, smoothly pacing through a van campsite and striding, almost running, and leaping around rocks in the West. The sound mix places many ordinary sounds she makes at the top of the aural hierarchy: packing boxes at the warehouse, cleaning or preparing food at her other jobs, eating, making coffee, smoking, breathing, crying quietly, and sitting in silence. If a company like US Gypsum forgets about Fern, *Nomadland* tells me about what makes her wonderful without expecting me to perceive her as an extraordinary being. The fact of her living is enough, which is essentially what *Soul* communicates about Joe. This is a form of unconditional love, and this is how I felt about Danijela. *Nomadland*'s sonic care for Fern's every move reminds me of how carefully I listened to Danijela's sounds when I was with her after her terminal diagnosis. I heard every one of her subtly alarming coughs and stumbles, along with enjoying the steadier sounds of her typing at the computer or making a pie with feta cheese and puff pastry. I paid attention to the value of all these sounds as they signified her continuing to exist. Until I developed my intimacy with *Nomadland*, I did not realise that a film could communicate that level of care for a human life.

Nomadland's care for Fern's every move makes me understand how much I loved my friend without ever needing to catastrophise what she was going through or what her death meant. Having talked about the film with Danijela at some length, and having learned that she felt emotionally merged with it, I return to its sounds and music to feel reconnected with her. This leads me to reabsorb and take new delight in lines of dialogue that help me come to terms with her passing. For example, in an early scene one of Fern's Amazon coworkers shows off the tattoos on her arm, including some lyrics from "Rubber Ring" by The Smiths: "when you're laughing and dancing, and finally living, hear my voice in your head and think of me kindly." This leads me to replay conversations with Danijela in my head, and to think of her lasting sonic presence through that. In a much later scene from *Nomadland* (1.00.40–1.01.46), Fern and Dave stumble on a group of people looking at the night sky through a telescope. A guide explains that the star they see—Vega—is "twenty-four light years away, so what that means is the light you are looking at left Vega in 1987." A woman exclaims, "and it just got here." The guide affirms with repetition: "and it just got here." He gives a bigger astronomical context as follows: "stars blow up, and they shoot plasma and atoms out into space. Sometimes land on earth. Nourish the soil. They become part of you. So, hold out your right hand, and look at a star. Because there are atoms from stars that blew up eons ago that landed on this planet, and now they're in your hand." The group of people gathered around the guide stand in a state of collective awe and pleasure. There is a quiet, beautiful smile on Fern's face in the well-lit night scene (Figure 2). The guide's words make me stop in my own tracks, and I imagine time compressed as the guide leads me to perceive it. I hold my own arms out and imagine my friend within a universe and a scale of time that is not so much linear as all-encompassing of the then and the now. By replaying and rehearing lines of dialogue this way, I fold myself back into the time when Danijela was still alive, remember how she responded to the film and that its sonic details were in her living body and are in mine now, connecting me to that time and experience we shared. This leads me to some other lines of the film, as spoken by Bob Wells, a guru for "RV living". Bob tells Fern about the death of his son by suicide, the pain of living with that loss, and the decision he has made to never say goodbye: "One of the things I love most about this life is that there's no final goodbye. You know, I've met hundreds of people out here and I don't ever say a final goodbye. I always just say, 'I'll see you down the road'." I remember Danijela excitedly telling me that the man playing Bob Wells was representing himself and his true story in the film (*Vulture* Editors). Even the big scene where he describes the death of

his son was largely improvised because he had trouble following the script. Wells says, "It wasn't words I was saying on a script. It was a world I was living" (Wiley). Danijela was exhilarated by the level of honesty of Bob's speech, and her engagement with him revealed her optimism that her death was not a true ending.



Figure 2: Fern smiles while hearing about the stars.
***Nomadland* (Chloé Zhao, 2020). Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2021. Screenshot.**

These days, I recall lines from *Nomadland* frequently and I live with its music playing through my own life. I most frequently play Arnalds's "Epilogue", a piece that enters the film nondiegetically as Swankie is speaking to Fern about how well she has lived (39.31–41.25). Instead of chewing the scenery with a bombastic or melodramatic speech lamenting her own terminal diagnosis—an all-too-familiar trope of Hollywood cinema—Swankie speaks of the wonders she has witnessed while kayaking around America. For instance, she describes seeing "hundreds and hundreds of swallow nests" and swallows flying all around her, "reflecting in the water so it looks like I'm flying with the swallows […]. It was just so awesome, I felt like I'd done enough. My life was complete. If I died right then, in that moment, it'd be perfectly fine." As Swankie speaks, "Epilogue" sneaks in quietly as underscoring. The cue starts with very lightly played strings, as if unsure of its own footing, but then builds itself up through harmonies and increasingly smooth, legato phrasing. The music quietly contributes a sense of gradually gathering resilience and an active will to recognise that everything Swankie says will linger after her life is over. "Epilogue" sutures a cut to show Swankie looking at a sunset and touching a stone with Fern, and then giving her few possessions away to other nomads, suggesting that the gift of her life will continue to reverberate for others after she has said her final goodbyes. For me, the music communicates a sense of grand acceptance, beauty, harmony, patience, and even peace, especially as the cue builds toward with Swankie's lines to Fern about imagining her friends might "toss a rock into the fire in memory of me" and "I see something neat" (about the sunset). This reflects the ultimate kindness of *Nomadland*'s filmind, and its attitude toward the people it shows with honesty and love. At Danijela's memorial, I played "Epilogue" along with a montage of quotations from her books: I used the music to remind everyone in attendance that the gift of her writing could not be lost.

After Danijela died, I took up running to help me manage my grief. Having played "Epilogue" at the memorial, I frequently run along to that music and look at the signs of nature around me, remembering how Fern looks up at the trees, the rocks, the sea, and the buffalo. I think of the star guide's speech about atoms and remember that my friend is not gone so much as existing in a different form. I recall Fern's delivery of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 to a young, impressionable nomad who has yet to fully express love to his girlfriend, and the closing line especially: "So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." I close with a new poetic summary, harkening back to Penwarden, and paying one more tribute to my friend:

"No final goodbye"

I took in what you said.
I heard your silences.
I replay the music you loved.
I remember how quietly you moved.
I quote your words and I've written them down.
You cannot be lost to me.

But when I *feel* alone,
I reach my hand out, like I'm back in *Nomadland*.

And I'm holding something precious,
like the atoms of a star.

Notes

[1] "*Whanau*" is a Maori word meaning "family" in a permissive way, whether biological or not, immediate or extended.

[2] The creation of meaning from grief is widely recognised as a significant part of death acceptance. For more on this in relation to cinematic examples, see Niemic and Schulenberg.

[3] Dorothea Williams is a fictional character, but Angela Bassett (who voices her) drew inspiration from real-life jazz performers, notably Betty Carter and Dorothy Donegan (Perine).

[4] Danijela applied Frampton's concept of the "fimind" to her analysis of Mark Korven's music for *The Lighthouse* (Robert Eggers, 2019) at her final conference presentation for the Music and the Moving Image Conference ("Sonic Demons").

[5] In just one unnerving scene, 22 explains to Joe that she could have any number of voices since her identity is not yet determined. When she takes on different voices for demonstration, and Tina Fey's familiar voice is replaced by several others in quick succession, the sonic montage makes me long for a return to being able to rely on the character having a stable voice.

[6] For more on the importance of adaptation as a necessary part of grieving, see Sandler, Wolchik, and Ayers.

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