Happiness as Ideology. A Comparative Analysis of The Pursuit of Happyness and Soul

La felicidad como ideología. Análisis comparado de *En busca de la felicidad* y *Soul*

Ingrid Zacipa-Infante
Universidad de Alicante
ingrid.zacipai@ua.es

Victoria Tur-Viñes
Universidad de Alicante
victoria.tur@gcloud.ua.es

Abstract:
This article aims to comparatively analyse how the concept of happiness is represented in the films *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) and *Soul* (2020), based on the theoretical model of Cabanas and Illouz (2019), who frames happiness as an ideological construct aligned with neoliberal personality traits. To this end, the study focuses on three dimensions: (1) character representation of the protagonists; (2) symbolic depictions of happiness in narrative spaces; and (3) the construction of subjectivities under consumer capitalism. The methodology employs Grueso's (2020) semiotic model of film analysis and Atlas.ti software to code expressions of emotional self-management, authenticity, and personal growth. The findings reveal that both films reinforce an individualistic and meritocratic view of happiness, although *Soul* introduces a critique of the logic of insatiability at the end. The analysis concludes that these cinematic representations legitimize a neoliberal model of well-being while silencing collective or structural dimensions of personal success.

Resumen:
Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar comparativamente cómo se representa el concepto de felicidad en las películas *En busca de la felicidad* (2006) y *Soul* (2020), a partir del modelo teórico de Cabanas e Illouz (2019), que la conciben como una construcción ideológica ligada a la personalidad neoliberal. Para ello, se abordan tres dimensiones: (1) la caracterización de los personajes protagonistas; (2) la representación simbólica de la felicidad en los espacios narrativos; y (3) la construcción de subjetividades en el marco del capitalismo de consumo. Se utiliza el modelo semiótico de análisis fílmico de Grueso (2020) y el software Atlas.ti para codificar expresiones relacionadas con autogestión emocional, autenticidad y florecimiento personal. Los resultados muestran que ambas películas refuerzan una visión individualista y meritocrática de la felicidad, aunque Soul introduce una crítica final a la lógica de insaciabilidad. El análisis concluye que estas representaciones cinematográficas legitiman un modelo neoliberal de bienestar y excluyen dimensiones colectivas o estructurales del éxito personal.

259

1. Introduction

Happiness has become a commodity coveted by 21st century societies, establishing itself as the main indicator of a successful life. *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Gabriele Muccino, 2006) "represented a generation that, through its autonomy, optimism, resilience and self-motivation" (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019, p. 17) was configured as a survivor, overcoming adversity and, with it, reaching the much desired happiness. In 2020, Pixar Animation Studios released *Soul* (Pete Docter, 2020), a film that has remarkable similarities to the 2006 feature film, both in its narrative structure and in the representation of the main character, as well as in the central idea of the story: a talented but failed middle-aged African-American man, dissatisfied with his life, who is still waiting for the opportunity to change it.

Cabanas (2019) argues that *The Pursuit of Happyness* emphasises the process of searching for it, rather than focusing on happiness itself. This narrative evidences the individualistic subjectivity that predominates in contemporary societies: an individual who, autonomously, must discover and develop his or her abilities, assert himself or herself in the face of adversity and maintain enough emotional strength to confront the judgments of others. This solitary subject pursues success as a path to happiness, managing his or her life despite failure.

In the case of *Soul*, Joe Gardner also undertakes a solitary struggle to return to life and thus fulfil his greatest desire: "playing with Dorothea Williams". Not even death can take away the possibility of living his happiest moment.

In this sense, the proposed analysis of both films is based on the idea that they represent a current model of society characterised by what Lipovetsky calls a "consumerist-emotional-individualist model, which is the same for all ages" (2007, p. 111). Thus, in both narratives we find two men who seek to transform their lives marked by failure into success stories and, therefore, to achieve happiness.

Although there is no explicit reference to happiness in *Soul*, Joe Gardner's story is aligned with Christopher Gardner's and, fourteen years later, it takes

up the discourse of individual self-improvement and personal empowerment, which is promoted by the economic dynamics of contemporary capitalism. Cabanas and Illouz (2019) point out that everything has been progressively individualised: personal projects, undertakings, talents, decisions, personal growth, etc.

We live in a constant self-evaluation aimed at personal self-improvement, where perpetual growth prevents any form of ultimate satisfaction. In this context, the pursuit of happiness becomes a continuous imperative. Being happy while being productive seems to be an ideological mandate that produces both structural fatigue and permanent dissatisfaction, as Han (2024) states. In *Soul*, when Joe achieves his dream, he does not feel fulfilled but empty. In *The Pursuit of Happyness*, the promise of fulfilment after success is what motivates the entire narrative, although what happens afterwards is never shown.

This analysis is based on the conception of happiness proposed by Cabanas and Illouz (2019), who define it as a type of personality framed in psychological dynamics promoted as a lifestyle and shaped by the market. This personality is structured around three categories: "emotional self-management, personal authenticity and constant individual growth" (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019, p. 123). These categories will be the basis for the analysis of the depictions of happiness in the two selected films.

Regarding emotional self-management, the authors state that happy people are those who are able to self-motivate effectively, which implies the constant pursuit of achievement and, consequently, success. This ideal is presented as the model of life promoted by contemporary capitalist societies.

With respect to authenticity, they argue that "each person is naturally equipped with a particular, unique and authentic set of skills, values and beliefs that are 'beneficial and energising' for those who put them into practice" (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019, p. 135). This notion of authenticity is linked to the logic of personal branding, in which the individual becomes a consumable commodity through the content they produce, for example, on social media. People who create content for different platforms, artists or

singers become referents of this individual authenticity, considered necessary for survival and success in today's society.

Depictions of individuals with seemingly perfect lives, full of achievements, who are exhibited as role models, ready to be consumed, fill social networks. Lipovetsky (2024) argues that contemporary consumer capitalism exacerbates the demand and supply of authenticity in all areas of everyday life. Hence the need to showcase everything we do on digital platforms.

As for personal growth, a logic of permanent incompleteness is imposed on the subject: something is always missing, you can always be happier. This leads to a structural insatiability, a constant demand for self-improvement that traps individuals not only in the consumption of basic goods, but in the pursuit of well-being, happiness and success. It is, indeed, the inversion of Maslow's pyramid (1954): we, as individuals, may have reached the top in terms of recognition and self-affirmation, but we keep climbing, unsatisfied, towards an ideal that recedes with every step.

2. Current status of the subject

In particular, the link between happiness and national identity is significant. As Davies (2017) argues, for centuries the state has been conceived of as having a responsibility to procure the happiness of the citizenry in line with the principles of utilitarianism, the aim of which would be to "produce the maximum happiness for the general population" (Davies, 2017, p. 21).

Among the works closest to the focus of this article is that of Barbosa-Rodrigues & Silva-Júnior (2022), who propose a distinction between well-being and happiness from the perspective of positive psychology, and analyse *The Pursuit of Happyness* in the light of the theory of well-being formulated by Seligman (2012). Although they do not directly quote Cabanas and Illouz, their approach is inscribed in a related perspective, in that they use the framework of positive psychology as an interpretative basis for the concept of happiness.

Barbosa-Rodrigues & Silva-Júnior's (2022) analysis highlights that well-being

is not reduced to the experience of positive emotions, but involves sustained effort, commitment and the development of achievement-oriented skills. Only through these conditions can a state of fulfilment be achieved. In the film, this translates into the representation of an individual who strives tirelessly to achieve his goals. Sapkota (2024) suggests that this approach may perpetuate the belief that failure is solely the responsibility of the individual, ignoring wider social factors.

This approach contrasts the perspective proposed here, according to which contemporary capitalist societies promote a lifestyle that focuses exclusively on individual well-being. Although such well-being also requires effort, it is presented as desirable and necessary due to the permanent sense of incompleteness experienced by the consumers of happiness. Through their personal brands, these individuals portray an image of seemingly accessible success, thus reinforcing a life ideal based on constant self-fulfilment.

Ciafone (2014) analyses how films represent interconnected global systems, reflecting and promoting neoliberal ideologies through complex narrative structures. Social cinema reflects and critiques individualistic practices promoted by neoliberalism, as Cankaya (2024) proved by taking the film *Sorry We Missed You* (Loach, 2019) as a case study. Zeng (2019) also explored the intersections between cinema, economics, emotions and ethics, showing how the pursuit of personal well-being is influenced by the dynamics of capitalism and modernisation.

Regarding *Soul*, Smith (2024), from the crossroads between music pedagogy and spirituality, verifies how its narrative can transform personal experiences and reconfigure pedagogical practices in music education.

Kinasih (2021) proposes that *Soul* suggests a happiness based on the appreciation of small things, the value of the present (everyday life) and human connections, rather than great achievements. Also Adriani & Nugroho (2021) show that happiness is not an easily attainable state, but the result of overcoming numerous obstacles. *Soul* finds that happiness is not only about achieving career goals, as suggested by Tanesia et al. (2021). Some films succeed in projecting the reality of life and, for that reason, stir emotions.

On the other hand, Lammon's (2022) study analyses The Walt Disney Company's animated films as a central part of family media consumption. Her research focuses on consumer reviews as an expression of popular discourse around animated films. It also proposes the need to recover shared viewing between adults and children as a significant socio-cultural practice.

This aspect is relevant to this paper, as one of its main interests is to compare *The Pursuit of Happyness* and *Soul*, two films aimed at different audiences, but with similar narrative structures and subjective representations: in both cases, it is about individuals who struggle to fulfil their dreams, even going to great lengths to avoid death. It should be noted that, at the time of its release, *Soul* was the subject of criticism from sectors that questioned the relevance of its metaphysical content for a children's audience. For example, Zacharek (2020) claimed that such ideas only contributed to making the story more difficult to understand.

3. Questions and objectives

This study takes as its starting point three central questions that guide the comparative analysis of the films *The Pursuit of Happyness* and *Soul*, based on the concept of happiness proposed by Cabanas and Illouz (2019).

Firstly, the following question is posed: What characteristics do the two male protagonists of the films share with regard to Cabanas and Illouz's (2019) concept of happiness? This question aims to identify the elements used by the two films as a representation of happiness in the characterisation of the protagonists.

Secondly, it is asked: How is the concept of happiness in Cabanas and Illouz (2019) represented in the spatio-temporal contexts of the two films, from a comparative perspective? This question seeks to understand the symbolic representation of happiness in the spatio-temporal contexts of the film narrative.

Finally, this question is posed: How is Cabanas and Illouz's (2019) concept of happiness represented in consumer capitalism in a comparative way in the two

films? This line of enquiry aims to analyse, comparatively, how the notion of happiness —as defined by Cabanas and Illouz (2019)— is articulated within the contemporary capitalist system, as well as its implications in the construction of the characters' subjectivities.

4. Methodology

The proposed methodology is based on the semiotic analysis model developed by Grueso (2020), oriented towards the study of film discourse from the perspective of semiotics and culture. This approach allows us to analyse the film character by giving him or her an identity and a specific contextual origin. In this sense, the aim is to understand the protagonists of both films in relation to the socio-cultural contexts in which they are inscribed, in order to learn how the representations of happiness are configured in the cinematographic narratives.

In addition, the analysis of the ideologeme is incorporated, understood as

any word or sign that gathers the historical and social coordinates synchronic to the moment of the emission of the message […] or, in other words, that implicitly condenses the dominant thought of a society, which conditions both the characters and their actions within the story (Grueso, 2020, p. 84).

This concept is key to understanding how the model of happiness proposed by Cabanas and Illouz (2019) is articulated in the films analysed, as well as how this representation participates in the construction of contemporary subjectivities.

The selected sample is composed of two American films: *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), directed by Gabriele Muccino, and *Soul* (2020), directed by Pete Docter and co-directed by Kemp Powers. Both productions feature African-American protagonists and address, from different approaches, themes of success, life purpose and the ideal of self-fulfilment.

The Pursuit of Happyness is based on the true story of Christopher Gardner, an African-American man who, in the 1980s, struggles to overcome poverty and secure a decent life for his son after being abandoned by his wife. The

narrative builds on his perseverance and individual effort, which helps him on the path to upward social mobility. The Oscar-nominated film grossed over $307 million worldwide (IMDbPro, 2025). Gardner is portrayed as an optimistic, resilient and determined man, whose desire to achieve the "American dream" is summed up in one of his signature phrases: "They all looked so happy to me", he exclaims, "Why couldn't I look like that?" (Cabanas, 2019, p. 233).

Soul is an animated film produced by Pixar that won two Oscars (2021): Best Animated Feature and Best Original Score. The story revolves around Joe Gardner, an African-American music teacher who dreams of becoming a professional jazz musician. Unlike Christopher Gardner, Joe's life is marked by frustration, lack of recognition and family pressure to take a steady teaching job. On the very day he is finally presented with a meaningful opportunity for his musical career, he is involved in an accident that places him between life and death. From this liminal space, Joe refuses to accept his fate, convinced that he cannot give up his "big chance".

Both films propose different but complementary representations of the contemporary neoliberal subject, focused on resilience, self-realisation and the belief that success depends exclusively on individual effort, even in the face of adverse structural conditions.

The analysis was carried out from three main methodological dimensions: signic analysis, iconic analysis and ideologeme analysis.

For this purpose, multiple viewings of both films were made, and the information was recorded in an analytical matrix. In terms of symbolic analysis, all verbal expressions that directly or indirectly allude to happiness were systematised. The voices of all relevant characters were included, with special attention to the protagonists.

The iconic analysis focused on the comparison of specific scenes from the two films representing concepts associated with happiness, personal fulfilment or everyday life, paying special attention to spatio-temporal aspects.

For the ideologeme analysis, the three categories that make up the concept of

happiness as a personality type proposed by Cabanas and Illouz (2019) were taken as a basis: emotional self-management, personal authenticity and individual growth/fulfilment.

The data analysis was carried out using ATLAS.ti v.25 software, in which 26 documents corresponding to relevant discursive fragments of different characters from both films were recorded. Each of the three dimensions of Cabanas and Illouz's (2019) model was assigned specific interpretative codes, defined as follows:

• Emotional self-management: self-acceptance, competence, optimism, resilience, meaning.

• Authenticity: self-esteem, self-efficacy, personal branding.

• Growth/fulfilment: incompleteness, insatiability. These codes provided evidence to answer the research questions, identifying symbolic and narrative patterns that underpin the representation of happiness as a subjective ideal, closely linked to the values of contemporary emotional and individualistic capitalism.

5. Results

5.1. Representation of happiness in the characterisation of the protagonists

Regarding the first objective, which seeks to identify the elements used by the two films to represent happiness in the characterisation of their protagonists, it is observed that, although in *Soul* there is no direct mention of the concept itself, Joe Gardner's character has traits consistent with the categories proposed by Cabanas and Illouz (2019) in their conceptualisation of happiness as a personality type. Likewise, special attention is paid to the main characters, based on the understanding of the narrative subject as a "simulacrum" of the real person (Pérez, 2017), which implies a specific subjective construction of the character.

In order to carry out this analysis, the *Concepts* tool of the Atlas.ti v.25 software was used, which allows for the automatic identification of relevant

semantic concepts in text documents (such as scripts, transcripts or subtitles). This functionality is particularly useful for analysing the verbal expressions of the characters, as it allows us to detect patterns of meaning without the need to establish previous codes, thus facilitating a first interpretative reading guided by the characters' own discourse.

In the case of Christopher Gardner (*The Pursuit of Happyness*), the most recurrent concepts in his expressions are *happiness*, *day*, *time*, *word*, *life*, *declaration* and *independence*. The narrative begins precisely with a question that the character asks himself: *Why can't I be happy like everyone else?*, when he observes some stockbrokers, whose happiness is associated with economic prosperity. From this concern, the film proposes a search in which employment becomes the means to achieve happiness, although the border between the two concepts is diluted: Is Christopher looking for happiness or for employment? Does employment mean happiness?

Following the methodology proposed by Pérez (2016) for the characterization of film characters, some of his categories are used in order to expand the description of the main characters analyzed. In this sense, Christopher can be considered a round character, given that he presents a clearly defined personality and psychology. He is a middle-aged, unemployed, African-American man in poverty, who dresses in a full suit constantly, in correspondence with the demands of his environment. As for the verbal dimension, an analysis of the concepts expressed through their most frequent linguistic forms has been described in the previous paragraph.

As for the personality, we can see it reflected in the fact that Christopher's daily life becomes a race against the clock, where time is a scarce resource: he must sell medical devices to earn a living, take care of his son and attend an unpaid internship at an investment firm. In this context, the concept of "declaration" refers to the Declaration of Independence of the United States, a document in which Christopher finds an ideological justification for his struggle: everyone has the right to life, freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

The notion of life acquires, in this case, an instrumental role: it is the stage for the struggle to reach a goal. Gardner does not express despair nor does he

allow himself to be defeated. Even as he acknowledges that his life is not as he imagined it —"When I was young and I'd get an A on a history test, I'd get this good feeling about all the things that I could be. And then I never became any of them"—, he keeps intact his conviction that personal effort can reverse failure.

In the case of Joe Gardner (*Soul*), semantic analysis reveals a recurrence of the concepts *life*, *spark*, *musician* and *day*. Although the film does not make explicit what exactly "spark" alludes to, it is suggested that it refers to a vital attitude: to live intensely every moment. Unlike Christopher, who pursues a job without clarity about his abilities, Joe is an accomplished musician who defines his identity solely on the basis of his vocation. He does not want to be a teacher; he wants to be an artist. In both cases, however, the protagonists believe they have the talents necessary to achieve their goals.

Likewise, Joe can also be classified as a rounded character, being endowed with a psychology and personality of his own. He is a middle-aged African-American man who works as a music teacher in a public school, in an unstable job position as he lacks a permanent contract. As for the verbal dimension, the previous section shows the frequency and type of expressions that characterize his way of communicating, which contributes to delineate his subjective construction.

In this case, a relevant element of the symbolic analysis is the wardrobe, particularly the two-piece suit with tie, symbol of the stereotype of the successful man. In both films there are scenes where this attire becomes a marker of a crucial moment. In *The Pursuit of Happyness*, Christopher and his son share the preparation to face a decisive interview; in *Soul*, Joe wears the suit inherited from his father for his professional debut. This scene reinforces the symbolic charge of costume as a generator of security and social legitimacy. Joe's mother, a dressmaker, emphasizes that the suit is made of fine wool (F1), not polyester, suggesting that the quality of the material is associated with economic status. Interestingly, the suit worn by Christopher Gardner (F1) is precisely polyester, underlining the symbolic differences between the two characters.

Joe's personality is profoundly determined by his longing to become a professional musician, a desire that shapes his identity and guides his decisions throughout the narrative. This dream manifests itself persistently in his discourse, to the point of becoming a recurring theme in his daily interactions. In the barbershop, for instance, Joe tends to monopolize the conversation with matters exclusively related to music, which prevents him from participating in other topics and establishing more meaningful bonds with those around him, as is the case with Dez, the barber, whose personal history he is unaware of until late in the story.

F1. Chris Gardner getting dressed up (Muccino, 2006, 1:07:12) and Joe Gardner on his big night in his dad's suit (Docter, 2020, 36:36).

5.2. Symbolic representation of happiness in the spatio-temporal contexts of film narrative

In relation to the second objective, aimed at understanding the symbolic representation of happiness in the spatio-temporal contexts of the film narratives, several scenarios were identified in both films that condense relevant meanings around the ideal of happiness and its link with the social and cultural environment of the characters.

In *Soul*, two spaces of dialogue are particularly significant: the Great Before and Dez's barbershop. The Great Before is a metaphysical space where souls

are prepared before their arrival on Earth. It is an allegorical representation of the origin of life, where souls receive training and inspiration from "mentors" in charge of guiding them to find their "spark". According to the analysis of the concepts, those that predominate in this space are *life*, *purpose* and *spark*. The visual configuration of the scenario refers to a factory logic: organized pavilions, mass production and classification of souls with different characteristics. This aesthetic reinforces the notion that even individuality is part of an organized system of pre-assigned values and skills.

On the other hand, Dez's barbershop is configured as a deeply symbolic space within African-American culture, especially for men. It is not only a place of aesthetic transformation, but also a stage for community conversation, where personal, political and social issues circulate. Relevant concepts that emerge in this environment are *chair*, *power*, *customer* and *barber*. In a conversation with Joe, Dez explains to him that, when his clients are in the chair, "*they have the power*" and can imagine being whoever they want to be. This space is thus constructed as a therapeutic place of identity validation and subjective openness.

In *The Pursuit of Happyness,* one of the key spaces is the basketball court, the setting for a crucial dialogue between Christopher and his son. At first, the father discourages the boy by suggesting him not to play all day long. In respond to the boy's disappointment, Christopher rectifies and tells him, "*Don't ever let somebody tell you that you can't do something, not even me. If you have a dream, you have to protect it. People who can't do something themselves, they are going to tell you that you can't do it. If you want something, go get it. Period*". This symbolic space represents the place where the central idea of the film is conveyed: happiness is a right, but also an individual responsibility that requires effort, self-determination and persistence.

In addition, two spaces common to both films were identified that reinforce the iconic representation of the urban experience: the subway and the city. The subway appears as a space of transit, but also as a symbol of social stagnation. It is associated with people who have not managed to overcome their

precarious conditions (F2 and F3), who move in a routine, tired and frustrated way (F4 and F5). In both stories, the subway does not represent upward mobility, but rather a means to survive in a daily life marked by effort and invisibility.

F2. Chris Gardner sleeping with his son (Muccino, 2006, 1:06:40).

F3. Joe Gardner frustrated in the subway (Docter, 2020, 52:10).

*F4.* Chris Gardner sleeping in the subway (Muccino, 2006, 44:50).

F5. "It's the subway, it does that to some people. It wears you down" (Docter, 2020, 40:26).

In both films, the city appears as a stage charged with symbolism, the great stage of desire and competition. It is a space of opportunity, but also of inequality, where the struggle for success is between the economic structures of contemporary capitalism. In both cases (F6 and F7), the protagonists move through it in the hope of achieving their life purpose, facing both material obstacles and existential dilemmas.

It is represented as a profoundly individualistic space, where each person is absorbed in their own thoughts, immersed in their own worries, oblivious to those around them. The streets are presented as impersonal journeys, where each individual walks looking straight ahead, guided only by his or her personal goal. The city, in this sense, embodies a logic of subjective isolation and permanent competition, in which the "other one" disappears as a significant figure. The important thing is not the encounter, but the destination: to get where one wants to go, regardless of the route or the links that may be established along the way. This portray reinforces the idea of a model of society centred on self-sufficiency, productivity and individual fulfilment, which are the cornerstones of the contemporary neoliberal subject.
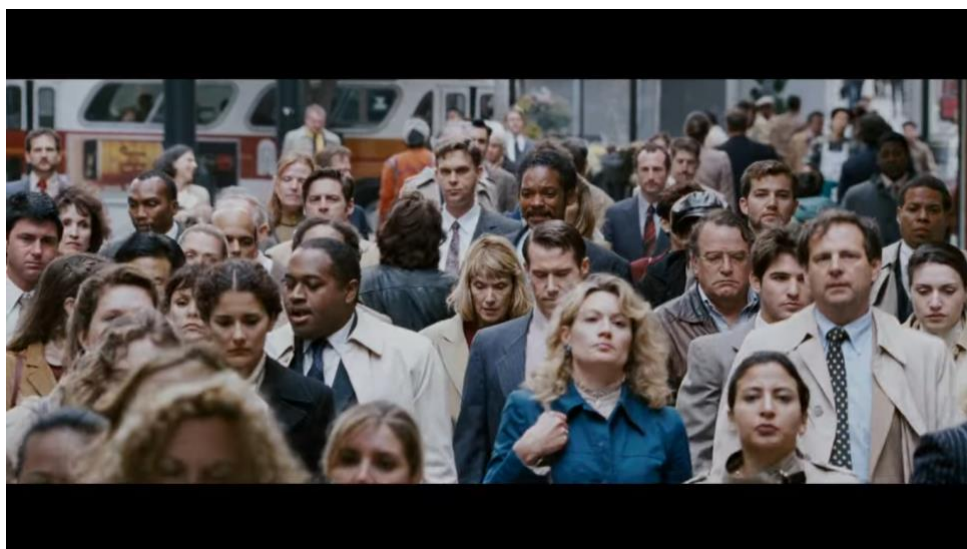
F6. The city (Muccino, 2006, 51:20).

F7. The city (Docter, 2020, 42:50).

As for the third objective, it aims to comparatively analyse the model of happiness of the films, from the socio-cultural perspective —as defined by Cabanas and Illouz (2019)— within the contemporary capitalist system, as well as its implications in the construction of subjectivities of characters, according to the methodological model of Grueso (2020) on the ideologema.

In this case, a comparative analysis of the two films is carried out using the tool "Code-document analysis" in Atlas.ti v.25 (F8). The analysis focuses on the three main categories and on the most significant characteristics that define them, which articulate the concept of happiness proposed by Cabanas and Illouz (2019).

Categories	Codes	The Pursuit (doc. 7/ 36 quotes)	Soul (doc. 18/ 101 quotes)	Totals
Authenticity				
	Self-efficacy	19	46	65
	Self-esteem			
	Personal Branding			
Emotional self-managemen				
	Self-acceptance	28	68	96
	Competence			
	Optimism			
	Resilience			
	Meaning			
Growth				
	Incompleteness	9	15	24
	Insatiability			
Totals		56	129	185

F8. Categories, codes and analysis Code-Document Atlas Ti. v.25.

5.3. Representation of the concept of happiness and the construction of subjectivities in comparative terms

The analysis by categories, carried out with the *Code-Document Analysis* tool of Atlas.ti v.25, allows us to observe how the notion of happiness is articulated, according to the model of Cabanas and Illouz (2019), in the two films studied. In total, 185 codings were recorded, with *Soul* being the film with the highest number of occurrences (129 codings), compared to *The Pursuit of Happyness* (56 codings). This result can be interpreted as a greater conceptual definition of the character's subjectivity in *Soul*, whose narrative is more focused on interiority and self-definition.

The most frequent category in both films is *emotional self-management*, with 96 appearances in total, 68 of which are recorded in *Soul*. This suggests that both narratives strongly favour this dimension as key to the representation of happiness. In the case of Joe Gardner, the most representative codes were *meaning* (22) and *self-acceptance* (21), which is consistent with his search for life purpose. Joe recognises himself as a musician, not as a music teacher, and this self-affirmation drives his desire to make his dream come true, even facing

the opposition from those closest to him: his mother, his colleagues or the precarious employment system to which he has been subjected for years.

On the other hand, in *The Pursuit of Happyness*, Christopher Gardner also fits this category, albeit less frequently (28 codings). The most recurrent codes are *optimism* (11), *competence* (10) and *resilience* (10). Christopher is shown as a subject capable of sustaining constant discipline in order to achieve his goal: to obtain a job as a stockbroker. He does so despite living in extremely precarious conditions —homeless, with no income and a dependent child—, which highlights his capacity for emotional self-regulation as the core of the narrative.

Both characters embody a neoliberal subjectivity centred on individual responsibility. There are no significant references to the collective, to support networks or community ties. Happiness, as it is represented, becomes a personal project of self-indulgence, validation and competition, deeply inscribed in the logic of the contemporary market.

The second most recurrent category is *authenticity*, with a total of 65 codifications, also predominant in *Soul* (46 appearances). Joe Gardner develops a construction of *personal branding* through the way he dresses, speaks and presents himself in key settings such as Dez's barbershop or the Great Before. His authenticity is validated not only by his environment, but also by his inner conviction: he is certain that his spark —which is what gives meaning to his existence— is music. This identity is projected through elements such as the suit inherited from his father, which reinforces his sense of belonging, pride and family legacy.

In *The Pursuit of Happyness*, although the category is less developed, Christopher also expresses traits of authenticity, especially through his perseverance and his confidence that he can offer something of value, even when circumstances do not validate it. Unlike Joe, his authenticity is not articulated as a visible personal brand, but as *self-esteem* (15), because he is confident in his personal abilities.

Finally, the growth/fulfilment category is the least frequent (24 codings in total), but it presents an important symbolic value at key moments in the

narrative. This low frequency can be explained by the fact that both films focus on the trajectory towards achievement, without showing what happens once the goal is reached, leaving the character's subsequent evolution in abeyance.

In this category, there is a notable difference between the two protagonists. In *Soul*, the most representative code is *insatiability* (10 appearances), which is manifested in Joe's attitude: he is unwilling to accept his death before he has fulfilled his dream. In contrast, in *The Pursuit of Happyness*, the dominant code is *incompleteness* (8 occurrences), expressed from the beginning of the film in Christopher's existential question: *Why can't I be happy like everyone else?*

These results reinforce the reading that both films portray, from different nuances, a model of individualistic happiness, centred on personal effort, external validation and constant self-management. The predominance of emotional self-management indicates a clear internalisation of the neoliberal ideal that each subject is responsible for his or her emotional and existential destiny, without paying attention to the structural factors that condition this destiny.

6. Discussion

The comparative analysis of the two films allows us to understand the representation of happiness from a perspective that transcends the psychological approach common in previous studies on *The Pursuit of Happyness*. In this case, the theoretical framework proposed by Cabanas and Illouz (2019) is adopted, which —although based on positive psychology— focuses on the construction of happiness as an economic logic, deeply intertwined with contemporary emotional capitalism. This perspective allows us to observe how both characters —Christopher and Joe Gardner— embody subjects co-opted by a system that imposes permanent self-management and individual self-fulfilment as an ideal.

These characters represent models of neoliberal subjectivity, in which happiness is equated with individual success achieved through effort, sacrifice

and meritocracy. The "valuable" life is one that can be managed, achievement-oriented and socially validated. Film narrative, as a cultural device, contributes to naturalising this mandate. In both films, the protagonists finally get what they want: the life-changing job in the case of Christopher, and the artistic opportunity he dreams of in the case of Joe. Thus, film acts as a vehicle for legitimising the dominant discourse of happiness by presenting success as a direct result of personal merit.

However, *Soul* introduces a relevant nuance at the end of the film: once Joe fulfils his dream of playing with Dorothea Williams, he experiences a sense of emptiness. Insatiability, as a feature of the model of personal growth described by Cabanas and Illouz, becomes evident: achievement is no longer enough, and what emerges later is the need to redefine the meaning of life. In Joe's own words, "*living every minute*" becomes a new horizon. This final reflection strains the instrumental logic of happiness and allows for a critical reading of its limits.

The figure of the ideologema —in the sense proposed by Grueso (2020)— acquires special relevance here: happiness is not only represented as an individual objective, but as a social mandate deeply inscribed in hegemonic discourses. Urban contexts, crossed by phenomena such as precariousness, competition, migration or structural inequality, become scenarios that require the individual to overcome without questioning the established order. The subway and the city, in both films, symbolise this exhausting routine, where bodies move automatically, without community or affection. Only those who manage to construct themselves as "personal brands" —in a logic of self-commercialisation— can aspire to break out of this inertial wheel.

Although both characters share the ideal of self-improvement, their trajectories differ: Christopher starts from a situation of extreme socio-economic exclusion and sees employment as a path to upward social mobility. However, it is not clear whether happiness lies in professional achievement, in the change of lifestyle or in the thrill of success. Joe, on the other hand, does not start from poverty, but from frustration: he does not want to be a simple music teacher, but a recognised artist. In both cases, their stories reproduce

the discourse that effort and talent are enough to achieve one's dreams, making invisible the structural conditioning factors that affect racialised subjects.

This racial dimension is not minor: both characters are African-American men, historically excluded from the system's promises of social mobility (Collins & Wanamaker, 2017; Freire et al., 2018; Welburn, 2016). The fact that they are the ones who must prove —more than anyone else— their worth, through talent, perseverance and resilience, reinforces a narrative that holds the individual responsible for their destiny, while silencing the historical conditions of inequality. At this point, Davies' (2017) reflection on happiness as a state promise makes sense: the right to a dignified life should be guaranteed and not depend on the ability to compete and self-validate.

Film, as a cultural technology, shapes lifestyles, emotions and aspirations. In both films, representations of a "happy life" based exclusively on individual effort are constructed. There is no room for the collective: there is no mention of support networks, community or shared projects. Happiness is self-indulgence. Even the bond between Christopher and his son is oriented towards the transmission of the value of effort, but the boy, in the end, does not share the illusion of the job achieved by his father. In *Soul*, the moment of triumph is also a moment of loneliness: Joe walks alone through the city, not knowing what comes next. Personal growth, in this model, is never complete; there is always something more to be achieved.

This analysis also calls for reflection on the kind of message these films convey to their audiences. Although they are aimed at different audiences, both legitimise the idea that dreams are achieved on their own merits, without the need for collaboration or structural justice. In the case of *Soul*, especially, it is worth asking about the impact of this story on children: what does it mean for a child to receive the message that success can only be achieved through individual effort and talent? What room is left for the collective, for solidarity, for the structural?

Finally, both films silence failure. Although the starting point is an adverse situation, throughout the narrative there is no room for fear, depression or

abandonment. What prevails is an aesthetic of success, of constant motivation, of resilience as an unquestionable virtue. This reinforces the injunction of emotional self-management and projects the idea that talent and effort guarantee access to happiness.

However, the ending of *Soul* leaves an open question: what is the true purpose of life? When Joe reaches his goal, he discovers that it is not enough. This permanent dissatisfaction challenges the spectator and introduces a crack in the discourse of self-realisation as an absolute horizon. In a world where individual achievement is exalted as the ultimate goal, these films return us, paradoxically, to the question of the possibility of being truly satisfied.

From this perspective, it is questionable whether the life models projected in these films are really desirable. Christopher struggles to be part of the traditional working system; Joe resists to be part of it in the name of creativity and artistic recognition. Both are inscribed in different logics of contemporary capitalism: one in the formal economy of stable employment, the other in the symbolic economy of culture and entertainment. In both cases, the message is clear: happiness is conquered, measured and shown. It is an emotional commodity, legitimised —and sold— through audiovisual storytelling.

7. Conclusions

The analysis of the films reveals the presence of the ideologeme of happiness as a dominant discourse, which shapes both the configuration of the characters and the narrative structure. In both cases, the protagonists portray subjects who take full responsibility for their emotional and material well-being, internalising the values of contemporary capitalism, such as competition, resilience, efficiency and productivity.

The urban contexts and everyday spaces depicted in both films —such as the subway, the city, the school or the barbershop— reinforce the individualistic logic of success by showing isolated subjects struggling against adversity without community support. These representations reinforce the idea that social mobility depends exclusively on personal effort, silencing the structural

conditions of inequality.

While both films share this ideological structure, *Soul* introduces a critical dimension by problematising the insatiability of personal growth. Joe Gardner discovers, after reaching his goal, that achievement is not enough to feel fulfilled, which calls into question the model of happiness based on the accumulation of successful experiences. This final twist opens a crack in the dominant discourse and makes it possible to imagine other ways of living that are not exclusively centred on efficiency.

The representation of two African-American men as main characters is politically significant in that it makes visible the historical barriers they face in accessing social recognition and economic well-being. However, both films inscribe their trajectories in a meritocratic logic that minimises the structural causes of their exclusion, requiring them to prove their worth through exceptional effort, sacrifice and talent.

The absence of the collective, of shared affection and mutual care as conditions for the possibility of happiness suggests an incomplete and politically problematic representation of well-being. Happiness, in these narratives, is shown as an individualised and self-referential state, detached from social or communal bonds. This raises relevant questions about the models of subjectivity that filmmaking contributes to naturalise, especially in young audiences.

Finally, this study invites further exploration of the role of film in the production of contemporary subjectivities, especially with regard to the emotional discourses and ideals of life promoted by audiovisual culture. Analysing how film represents happiness allows for a deeper understanding of how imaginaries of success, failure and the meaning of life are constructed in today's capitalist societies.

Bibliographical references

Adriani, Alya R. & Nugroho, Abdillah. (2021). Chris Gardner's Struggle Reflected on The Pursuit of Happyness Movie: An Individual Psychological Approach. *IDEAS: Journal on English Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics and Literature*, 9, 213-219. https://doi.org/10.24256/ideas.v9i2.2244

Barbosa-Rodrigues, M. & Silva-Júnior, Ernane (2022). A procura da felicidade e a teoria do bem-estar: uma visão da psicologia positiva. *Psicologia e saúde em debate*, 8(2), 111–121. https://doi.org/10.22289/2446-922X.V8N2A8

Cabanas, E. (2019). Psiudadanos, o la cosntrucción de individuos felices en las sociedades neoliberales. En Illouz, E. *Capitalismo, consumo y autenticidad. Las emociones como mercancía* (pp. 233-263). Katz editores.

Cabanas, E. & Illouz, E. (2019). *Happycracia. Cómo la ciencia y la industria de la felicidad controlan nuestras vidas*. Paidós.

Collins, W. J., & Wanamaker, M. H. (2017). African American intergenerational economic mobility since 1880 (Working Paper No. 23395). *National Bureau of Economic Research*. http://www.nber.org/papers/w23395

Davies, W. (2017). *La industria de la felicidad: Cómo el gobierno y las grandes empresas nos vendieron el bienestar*. Editorial Malpaso.

Docter, Pete (director), & Powers, Kemp (codirector) (2020). *Soul*. Estados Unidos: Pixar Animation Studios & Walt Disney Pictures.

Freire, G., Díaz-Bonilla, C., Schwartz Orellana, S., Soler López, J., & Carbonari, F. (2018). *Afro-descendants in Latin America: Toward a framework of inclusion (Working Paper)*. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

Han, Byung-Chui (2024). *La sociedad del cansancio*. Herder editorial.

IMDbPro (2025). The Pursuit of Happyness. https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0454921/?ref_=search_search_search_result_1

Kinasih, P. (2021). Semiotic Analysis of the Animation Film Soul. *Journal of English Language and Culture*, 12(1), 25–35. https://doi.org/10.46372/arts.982060

Lammon, M. (2022). Disney's Dilemma: Public Response to Pixar's Soul. J Pop Cult, 55: 1290-1313. https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.13192

Lipovetsky, G. (2007). *La felicidad paradójica: Ensayo sobre la sociedad del hiperconsumo*. Anagrama.

Lipovetsky, G. (2024). *La consagración de la autenticidad*. Anagrama.

Loach, Ken (director) (2019). *Sorry, We Missed You*. Francia: Sixteen Films.

Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. Harper & Row.

Muccino, Gabriele (director) (2006). *The Pursuit of Happyness*. Estados Unidos: Columbia Pictures.

Pérez-Rufí, J. P. (2016). Metodología de análisis del personaje cinematográfico: Una propuesta desde la narrativa fílmica. *Razón y Palabra*, 20(95), 534–552. https://doi.org/10.26807/rp

Pérez-Rufí, J. P. (2017). El género cinematográfico como elemento condicionante de la dimensionalidad del personaje del cine clásico de Hollywood: características de los personajes cinematográficos redondos y planos. *Admira: Análisis de Medios, Imágenes y Relatos Audiovisuales*, 5, 1–33. https://doi.org/10.12795/ADMIRA.2017.02.02

Sapkota, S. (2024). The Dream and Ideological Underpinnings in Gabriele Muccino's The Pursuit of Happyness. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 9(5), 47–55. https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.95.6

Seligman, M. E. P. (2012). *Florecer: La nueva psicología positiva y la búsqueda del bienestar*. Editorial Océano.

Smith, R. (2024). Intersections of spirituality, relationships, and music education: Applications of lessons from the Pixar film, Soul. *International Journal of Music Education*, 42(1), 139–147. https://doi.org/10.1177/02557614221141970

Tanesia, C. Y., Helvinsky, C., H., Sanchia, Y. K. L., & Putra, J. (6-7 July 2021). Analyzing "Soul" as a Representation of Existential Crisis. *Proceedings of the IMOVICCON: International Moving Image Cultures Conference*. Indonesia. https://ojs.uph.edu/index.php/IMOVICCON/article/view/7262

Welburn, J. S. (2016). Dual Consciousness, Social Mobility, and the Experiences of Middle-Income African Americans in the Post-Civil Rights Era. *Journal of African American Studies*, 20(2), 202–227. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44508176

Zacharek, S. (2020, 25 de Diciembre). Questions, But It's Best When It Comes Down to Earth. *TIME*. https://time.com/5923340/soul-review-pixar/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Zeng, L. (2019). Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema. *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, (59). https://ejumpcut.org/archive/jc59.2019/zeng-li/bio.html