

Creating an emotional impact without dialogue: the case study of Pixar's *Up*

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ABSTRACT

"In every art form it is the emotional content that makes the difference between mere technical skill and true art." (Thomas and Johnston 1984, p 473) The essay explores the relationship between form and meaning in animated feature film, focusing in particular on the ways in which emotional impact can be achieved without using dialogue. It analyses 'Married Life', the opening sequence from Pixar's *Up* (2009) to demonstrate how different aspects of mis-en-scene are carefully constructed to convey both explicit and implicit meanings, and to invite an emotional response in the viewer.

Bordwell and Thompson define 'form' as an overarching system of elements that we can perceive in an artwork: "...the viewer makes sense of the film by recognizing these elements and reacting to them in various ways... form and style participate in the spectator's experience" (Bordwell and Thompson 1997:66) The form of the film engages our senses and affects the way we perceive its content. How a line is delivered, the body language of a character, or the placement of props within the shot – all can influence the way we feel about the content. The authors distinguish between the notions of 'explicit meaning', where a viewer can easily ascertain what is being conveyed, and 'implicit meaning' which is suggested through the use of symbolism, expecting the audience to make associations from the visual cues on screen.

One of the ways in which implicit meanings can be suggested, is through the use of 'iconic moments' which are "emotionally heightened because they are at once natural and familiar to the audience" (Sullivan et al. 2008, p86). These 'everyday' moments can make the scene feel more significant to the viewer: "The spectator's emotional response to the film is related to form. [...] Cues in the artwork interact with our prior experience" (Bordwell and Thompson 1997:72). As I will demonstrate later, this is certainly achieved in the 'Married Life' sequence which uses several iconic moments, from the couple cloud-watching during a picnic, to decorating a room.

As part of the film's overall form, it is important to consider the use of leitmotifs, or recurrent images that are significant to the overall meaning of the piece. Repetition is an important structural device which amplifies "the significance and symbolic power of the object at each appearance" (Boggs and Petrie 2012:60). Mercado (2011) introduces the notion of 'image system' underpinned by the patterns of repeated compositions, motifs and symbolic images. He explains that "the visual recalling and comparison is inherent in the way audiences extract meaning from images to understand a story, constantly making connections between and within shots" (Mercado 2011:21). These patterns bring a greater sense of depth to the piece, not only through repetition but also through the moments of disruption which intensify the emotion felt from the visuals.

Before moving on to the analysis, it is important to briefly consider the part that dialogue usually plays in a story. Sullivan et al (2008) present several functions of dialogue. Firstly, dialogue can set or alter the mood through the words and the tone in which they are spoken. Secondly, dialogue can reveal qualities, thoughts and growth in a character. Thirdly, it can provide clues or reveal the theme of the piece. Finally, it can create subtext, but the authors argue that this last aspect is not wholly successful through dialogue and that implicit meanings can be communicated more powerfully through non-verbal elements. The 'Married Life' sequence uses visual techniques and musical sound to accomplish all the above functions without relying on dialogue. The director's commentary to *Up* (2009) explains that the 'Married Life' sequence was intended to seem like a memory (Docter 2009), and as we shall see, this has been achieved through controlling various aspects of mise-en-scene.

ANALYSIS.

Mood chart. To aid the analysis, I have created a full breakdown of the sequence [See Appendix 1], describing the visual and aural content in each segment, and noting down the emotion conveyed as a result. On the basis of this breakdown, I developed a mood graph depicting the rise and fall of emotion throughout the sequence, adapting different examples of mood graphs described in Furniss (2008).

As can be seen from the graph in Figure 1, the mood tends to be generally happy, but when it does drop into sadness, it does so quite significantly. My next step was to isolate the shots within the sequence that seemed particularly significant in relation to the emotion graph, and to analyse the aspects of the mise-en-scene, such as cinematography, composition, lighting and colour, settings, props, character posture, expression, movement and soundtrack. I have then considered the conveyed explicit and implicit meanings and identified patterns of imagery and how they contributed to creating the intended emotional impact.

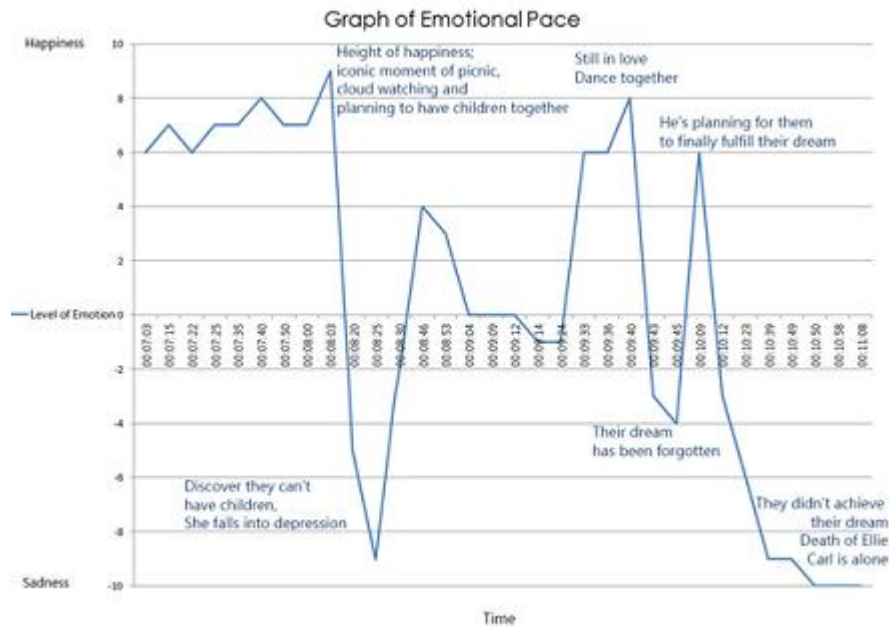


Figure 1. The mood chart of 'Married Life' (created by Michaela Wozny)

Shape. Shape is essential for character design. In *The Art of Up*, Hauser (2009) discusses 'simplicity': the idea of simplifying an image down to its essence and building upon it again with complex design: "The secret to simplicity is that every shape is a symbol" (Hauser 2009:19). Similarly, Beiman (2007) discusses foundation shapes and the way in which certain shapes have acquired symbolic meanings through conventional use over time, for example associating a square with 'steadfast' and a circle with 'open' and non-threatening characteristics. These foundation shapes are clearly reflected in the character design of Carl and Ellie, but also translated in the settings and props throughout the sequence. In their



Figure2. Carl and Ellie in Pixar's *Up* (2009)

clothes, chairs, end tables, lamps and even their choice of mug "pictures of Carl are in square frames, while pictures of the two together are in square frames with an oval matte" (Robertson 2009). The reliance on the conventional use of shapes creates a recognisable visual language, and enables the viewers to form a bond with the characters and interpret the surroundings on a subconscious level.

Colour. Colour is very important in this sequence, and we can clearly see the variations in the palette and the saturation to convey the changes in the mood; when there is happiness, the saturation is intense and when there is sadness the colour palette becomes muted (Figure 3) . Ellie is the colour in Carl's life; this is expressed in her energetic and expressive demeanour and quite literally, when she is depicted painting on three occasions.

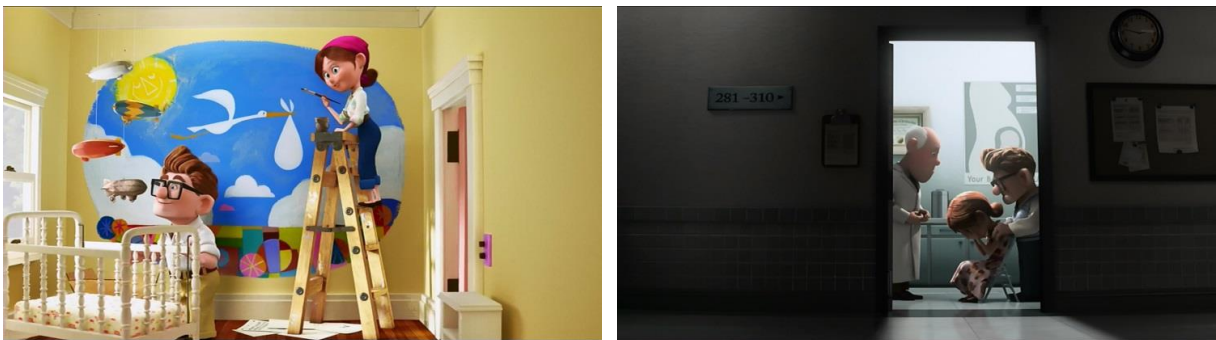


Figure 3. Contrast in Colour Pixar's *Up*

According to the director's commentary to *Up* (2009), it was the intentional creative choice to represent Ellie symbolically by colour, mainly magenta (Docter, 2009). Her funeral in particular is inundated with magenta, and even when Ellie dies, the pinks fade from the shot to an almost monochromatic palette (figure 4)



Figure 4. Carl entering his house after Ellie's funeral Pixar's *Up* (2009)

Why then, go to such lengths to add this barely noticeable detail? It is because our subconscious mind is able to grasp very subtle information and make it resonate through us, stirring strong emotions. Glebas explains that “color may be silent but powerful emotionally. Each character can have his or her own colour theme that signals his or her presence” (Glebas 2008:315). This echoes Thomas and Johnston's (1984) point that colour carries an idea and can “control the mood completely”; colours have their own energy and contribute to the way in which characters and situations deliver personality and emotion (Thomas and Johnston, 1984:268).

One of the ways in which colour is introduced is *Up* (2009) is through balloons, an object that features frequently in the 'Married Life' sequence. At the level of 'explicit meaning' they are an important part of the storyline but they also carry a symbolic significance in terms of Carl and Ellie's relationship. A balloon has bonded them, balloons were part of their livelihood and their personal message to one another. They were present at Ellie's funeral, again signifying her. Carl takes home a blue balloon, the same colour as when they first met as children, and the same colour that he gave to her in the hospital. It is clearly cyclical and symbolises their love. Love, that is the overarching theme in the entire story.



Figure 5. Balloon Image System Pixar's *Up* (2009)

Light. Not only is Ellie represented by colour but she is also the light in Carl's life. Many shots show her in bright sunshine and Carl in darkness, often looking to her. Glebas (2008) explains the importance of lighting and contrast for guiding the viewer's gaze, which tends to focus on the area of greatest contrast. Elements of dominance and contrast within the shot claim the attention of the audience and suggest revealing something of importance (Glebas 2008:188). Because Ellie does not feature in the rest of the film, we are only able to see her character in this brief introductory sequence. As is evident from Figure 6, light and contrast are used to focus our attention on Ellie. This allows us to form a relationship with the character and to respond to her on emotional level, whilst also confirming her significance in Carl's life and the narrative that follows.



Figure 6. Illuminating Ellie in Pixar's *Up* (2009)

Sound. Thomas and Johnston explain that music is the most vital addition to a piece of film, giving it *"integrity, style emphasis, meaning and unity, [stronger] than any other single ingredient"* (1984:285). Glebas (2008) adds that music can evoke emotions in the absence of dialogue, as well as signifying the characters: *"Music [...] can imply the characters' state of mind; [it] allows the filmmaker to refer to characters even when they are not presently onscreen"* (Glebas 2008:315). As the 'Married Life' sequence involves no dialogue, the soundtrack is vital to expressing the atmosphere of each scene. A musical theme is easily

discernable throughout this sequence, and is repeated throughout the entire film, with variations on the same melody; the music of Ellie. The way that this music is performed is dependent on the mood of the scene in which it is played, from sweetly upbeat as they grow together, to dropping in tempo when upsetting or unexpected incidents occur.

However, the part where the music demonstrates its power most strongly, is the almost unbearable moment when Ellie falls down whilst climbing 'their hill', followed by the camera pan to her lying in hospital, and the transition to her funeral and Carl sitting alone in the same church where they were once married. The music is quiet, delicate and incredibly poignant. It is heart-breaking. The soundtrack adds dramatically to the sensual experience that is 'Up' and I believe it to be one of the most important aspects of conveying emotion in this sequence. This illustrates the point by Thomas and Johnston, that we associate music with all of the major events in our lives and so it becomes '*the soul of our memories*'. Music can express the feelings that cannot be easily expressed through animation alone: "Feelings of isolation, rejection... hope, of devotion... all inner emotions that are difficult to show" (Thomas and Johnston 1981:286).



Figure 7. Carl's 'look' in Pixar's *Up* (2009)

Recurring images. The image system of *Up* (2009), including the 'Married Life' sequence, is based on a number of recurring images. They captivate our subconscious, resonate with us, and suggest specific associative meanings between characters in addition to the literal meaning. These leitmotifs can be "very subtle, repeating certain shot compositions, colours and imagery in ways that are not easy to notice at first but are nonetheless internalized by the audience on a subliminal level" (Mercado, 2011:21). These details contribute to creating a richer, more meaningful experience.



Figure 8. Kisses' in Pixar's *Up* (2009)

One such example within the 'Married Life' sequence is a kiss, which happens on three significant occasions throughout the sequence. First, at their wedding, Ellie energetically kisses Carl on the mouth; it is the beginning of their new life together, which is young and filled with possibilities. The second occasion is when they have grown much older, Ellie once again kisses Carl, this time on the cheek, and the kiss is reflected in the mirror. This contrasting shot emphasises the passage of time through the aged appearance of the characters and the mirror itself, the location of the kiss and the mirror showing them looking at themselves at present, still as a whole. In each of these two shots, they are standing slightly off centre, towards the right, Ellie on the left and Carl on the right. Even though she is older, she still cocks her leg up with the same gusto, reinforcing the idea that she is Carl's light, colour and life. The third kiss comes when she is close to death (Figure 9),



Figure 9. Kisses' in Pixar's *Up* (2009)

this is further accentuated by creating a contrasting shot to create the sense of disruption and shock (Figure 9). Ellie is laid in bed, they are both now positioned in the left third and it is Carl who is kissing her tenderly on the forehead. We absorb this visual language and our mind interprets discomfort, making this all the more emotionally upsetting for the viewer.

Another recurring motif is working on the house. Every time they make a change to their house, it indicates a change in the story. Beginning their life together, planning to have a baby, saving money for their dream 'adventure' and the promise of the desired journey that can never happen. In these shots, Ellie tends to be the one dominating the frame. She is either closer in perspective and therefore larger in scale or she appears higher than Carl in the frame; commanding the focus. As we have learned that this is supposed to be Carl's memory, it is again reasonable that the main subject of attention is going to be Ellie and his love for her. I find the most interesting shot is the last. Although the eye is drawn to Ellie's face, the composition has changed. She appears very small and with her aged appearance this makes her seem very vulnerable. Carl has to take charge and continue the story rather than Ellie's usual driving force. Again this disruption brings discomfort to the viewer, subtly indicating that the next change is going to be an unhappy one,

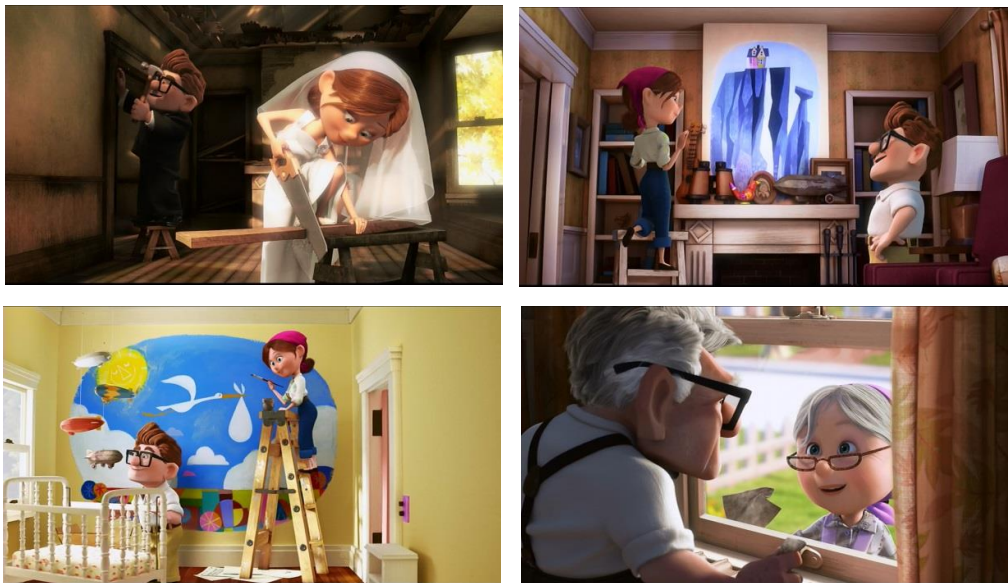


Figure 10. 'Next Chapter' Pixar's *Up* (2009)

One of the powerful recurrent images within the sequence depicts the 'iconic moments' at their hill. The composition is very strong, with a tree in the upper right third of the frame and the contours of the town in the left, creating a striking, asymmetric layout. Ellie and Carl are positioned in the sweet spots of the frame and their silhouettes are clear and recognisable. Both use rich colour palettes, however the first image is showing a young day that is bright and fresh, whilst the second shows a deep orange hue of the dusk sky, with a greater contrast and deeper shadows. In the first image, young Ellie is dominating the frame; the sun is high, making her glow. In the second, the light is less intense and the sun is low in the sky. The day is coming to an end, indicating that Ellie is also reaching her demise.



Figure 11. Carl and Ellie at 'their hill' in Pixar's *Up* (2009)

it is important to mention the function of the long shot, which is typically used to establish the surroundings and the relationship between the characters and the environment. In addition to this, "the long shot can be used to suggest narrative and thematic dynamics between characters, through... placement and relative scale" (Mercado, 2011:60) We can observe how the placement of this shot indicates a change in the characters' situation and the reversal in their roles. Once the driving force in the couple's life, she is depicted on top of the hill with her hands on hips, waiting for Carl who is still only half way up the hill. Then it is she who is struggling at the bottom of the hill. This departure from the familiar roles creates the feeling that something is wrong, which is soon confirmed as she falls. Despite the focus on the situational context and the role reversal, there is a feeling of love indicated by the posture and composition. In both images they are facing towards each other and Carl is reaching out to Ellie.

Structure. Thomas and Johnston (1981) argue that if a story is well designed and the characters are well-rounded, then the emotions of these characters will be conveyed to the audience with little effort. If “everyone in the audience has a lump in his throat...this is all due to careful story work that has proceeded this point in the picture.” (Johnston and Thomas 1984:478). Careful story structure allows for more powerful events within the animated narrative.

The most emotionally charged events in this sequence are the characters' realisation that they can't have a child, and the scenes leading onto Ellie's death (see the mood chart in Figure 1). The structure is crucial in building up emotion for both of these events. We only have 1 minute and 17 seconds to care about these characters before the first incident occurs. During this time we watch them marry, build together, cloud watch and work together. A familiar scene of a picnic where they watch clouds and give each other a knowing look instantly changes to a shot of them painting a baby's room together for mere seconds, before the camera pans across to Ellie crying in a clinic room. We see only snippets of their life leading up to this moment, but they are crucial for building a relationship between the characters and the audience. These clues help us fill in the gaps about their life together and love for one another. In the final scenes, the emotion is most powerful as we grieve alongside Carl. The careful build-up of the narrative enabled us to gain an insight into their lives and bond with them. We know they wanted children which they couldn't have, we know they wanted to fulfil their dream of visiting Paradise Falls and we recognise their hill on which she finally collapses after coming so close to having their adventure together.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by this brief analysis, the 'Married Life' sequence uses numerous formal devices to create an emotional impact. The reason why this sequence works so well without dialogue is because all aspects of the mis-en-scene have been carefully considered and executed in a way that enabled us to smile with Ellie or shed a tear with Carl. The sequence manages to establish a believable imaginary world and uses symbolism to enhance the narrative. The use of colour, light, recurrent imagery and music helps to convey the context, emphasise the relationship between the characters, and strengthen the overall meaning, which provides the motivation for the main story arc of the film. The

story structure brings these elements together in a coherent way, allowing the audience to see the events in a particular order, that the director believed to be the most productive for the emotional build-up.

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Appendix 1

Time	Description of shot/scene	Additional Information	Emotion Conveyed	Recurring Image
00:07:03	Old camera flash wedding	She jumps onto him and kisses him. She's bathed in light.	Joy/Love	Kiss/Light
00:07:15	Old house 'sold' Carries bride in	Both working on house in wedding clothes. She's bathed in light.	Joy/bliss/Love	'New Chapter' Light
00:07:22	Each have own chair	Personalities expressed in design of chairs.	Sense of togetherness/Love	Chairs
00:07:25	He watches her paint. A picture transitions to reveal actual house.	Bright colours.	Sense of togetherness and Love	Watching her
00:07:35	Climb hill together. She's at the top waiting, he's slow and tired.	They look a little older. Very sunny and bright.	Joy/Love	Their hill
00:07:40	Hands held lying down. Finding shapes in clouds.	He's smiling watching her.	Bliss/Love	Picnic/Watching her
00:07:50	Balloon business.	She's in explorer clothes.	Happiness/Love	Balloons
00:08:00	Sat in chairs together, hand held & reading.			
00:08:03	Picnic, both look for shapes in clouds this time. 'Babies' both smile.	Bright and sunny.	Happiness/Love	Picnic
00:08:20	Painting baby room. Pans to hospital room.	Full of bright colour.	Happiness and optimism/Love	'New Chapter'
00:08:25	She's crying in chair he's stood with hands on her.	Muted colour; greys.	Deep sadness/Love	Muted colour palette
00:08:30	He watches her sat in the garden with her eyes closed. Goes to her with 'My Adventure book'. Both smile.	He's in the darkness looking out at her in the light.	Sadness/Hope/Love	Light/Watching her
00:08:46	Painting living room (paradise falls).	New, fresh blue colours against warm palette of room.	Optimism/Love	'New Chapter'
00:08:53	Start saving money for trip to Paradise Falls.	Time passing.	Optimism/Love	-
00:09:04	Tire blows. Have to use savings.		Optimism/Love	-
00:09:09	He breaks his leg. Have to use savings.		Optimism/Love	-
00:09:12	Storm causes tree to damage house. Have to use savings.		Optimism/Love	-
00:09:14	She helps him with his tie – multiple times, gradually changing each time showing passage of time.		Happiness/Love	-
00:09:24	Camera looks up and	He's watching her.	Happiness/Love	Watching her

	they're both much older.			
00:09:33	Look in the mirror together.	She 'jump' kisses him, he laughs.	Happiness/Love	Kiss
00:09:36	Continue little balloon business.	Colour.		Balloons.
00:09:40	Dancing together.	Lighting and palette is warm, soft and hazy.	Love	-
00:09:43	Paradise Falls savings forgotten on a bookshelf.		Some sadness. /Love	-
00:09:45	Cleaning/housework. Cleaning window. He sees childhood picture of her. Looks up at Paradise Falls painting. Smile drops; looks at her. Idea sparks shown on his face.	Window – he looks out of darkness to her in light. He watches her.	Happiness/Sadness/ Love	Light/Watching her 'New Chapter'
00:10:09	Buys tickets at travel agent.		Hope/Love	-
00:10:12	Climbing their hill. He's at top waiting. She struggles. Stops. Falls. He runs to her	Colours of dusk – coming to an end.	Shock/Sadness/ Love	Their hill
00:10:23	Pans to hospital bed she's in. Looking at her book. Balloon flies in. He looks to her in doorway, sad face. She holds hand out, fragile. He puts hand on her.	Bright but muted colour palette	Sadness/Love	Balloons/Light/ Watching her
00:10:39	She gives him her book. He looks up with sadness. She touches his face.		Sorrow/Love	-
00:10:49	Holds her hand and kisses her head.	Dusk colours – coming to an end	Sorrow/Love	Kiss
00:10:50	He's sat on steps of church, holding balloon.	Warm but dark colours.	Deep sorrow and grief.	Balloon/Light
00:10:58	Gets up and walks up steps that transform into the porch of their house.	Washed out, worn, dark.	Deep sorrow and grief.	Balloon/Light
00:11:08	Shuts door. Fade out.	He goes into the darkness with her balloon.	Deep sorrow and grief.	Balloon/Light