

The fictional world of *Up* (Pixar, 2009) in 3 stages and 3 diagrams

Stage 1

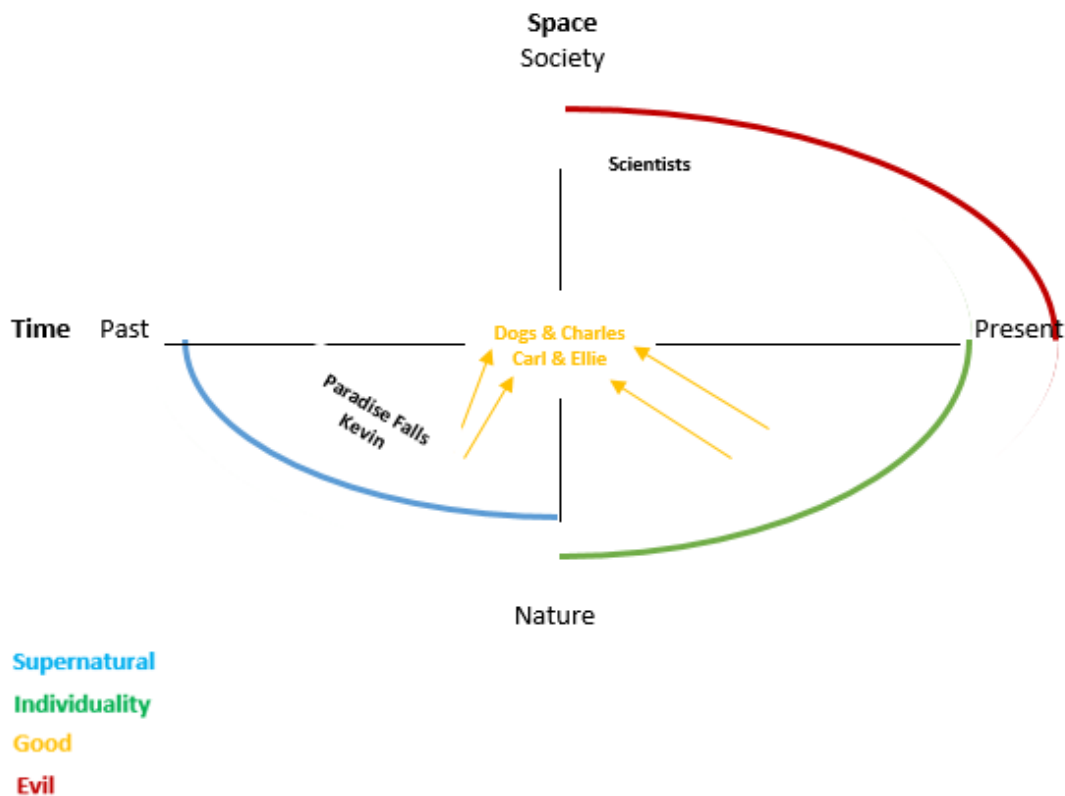


Figure 1

At the centre of the movie *Up* lies the juxtaposition of two old men, apparently antagonists, yet quite similar: Charles Muntz, a once famous explorer, and Carl Fredricksen (notice the similarity of the names), a grumpy man who has recently lost his beloved wife. From the beginning of the movie we see how the two characters are connected by one shared value: their “spirit of adventure”.

The film starts with an essential flashback that informs on the characters’ present. It shows Charles Muntz when he was still that famous explorer, admired by “civilized humanity” because he went on an expedition to “a lost world in South America” called “Paradise Falls”. The antagonism between ‘civilization’ and the ‘lost’ ‘paradisiacal’ world is that between society and nature, institutionalism and a primitivism with supernatural overtones. People’s admiration for Muntz shows that he is different from the society he belongs to, as he is the only one who dares to brave nature and go on the expedition. This emphasizes his individuality with regard to society, and even suggests a kind of supernatural aura surrounding his personality which matches that of Paradise Falls. Muntz’ special status is strengthened by the technical know-how which allows him to build the zeppelin which takes him to Paradise Falls. At the same time, he employs his knack for technology for the well-being of the dogs who accompany him and who

he loves, and in doing that he creates secondary links with nature and establishes himself in the semantic field of the affective bond. When fellow scientists call his newest discovery, the skeleton of “a monster of Paradise Falls”, a fraud, Muntz’ expedition to Paradise Falls to find the living monster, an enormous bird, and thus clear his name again sets him apart from society, as he leaves to prove society wrong. While Paradise Falls is thus situated in the primitivist and society and its scientists in the institutionalist field, Muntz moves between the emotivist field and the affective bond.

Muntz’ rise and fall is presented in the form of a movie which a little boy, Carl Fredricksen, is watching. Later we see Carl clumsily imitating Muntz’ adventures as he plays, until he meets Ellie, a girl who is also fond of Muntz’ adventurous spirit. Carl marries Ellie, and we see their peaceful and happy life pass by in a matter of minutes until Ellie dies, leaving a devastated Carl. Though unadventurous, their life together has its own peaks – trying to have children and saving money for a journey to Paradise Falls, both of which prove impossible – and is still reminiscent of Muntz’ exploits: they both work at the zoo, Carl as an ice cream man, Ellie in the zoo’s South America section, wearing an explorer’s suit, an exotic bird perched on her finger. Compared to Muntz, who inhabits the present, Carl looks back towards the past, as he displays both primitivist and traditionalist traits: his lack of sophistication and his clumsiness attest to the former, and as to the latter, he wears glasses, looks un-athletic, and his black-wearing family is very serious and unapproachable. Ellie, on the other hand, is much more lively, talkative and daring – as a kid she even ripped a page depicting Paradise Falls from a library book. Within marriage, the position Muntz holds with regard to Carl – present vs past, emotivism vs traditionalism / primitivism – is doubled by Carl’s wife Ellie.

Stage 2

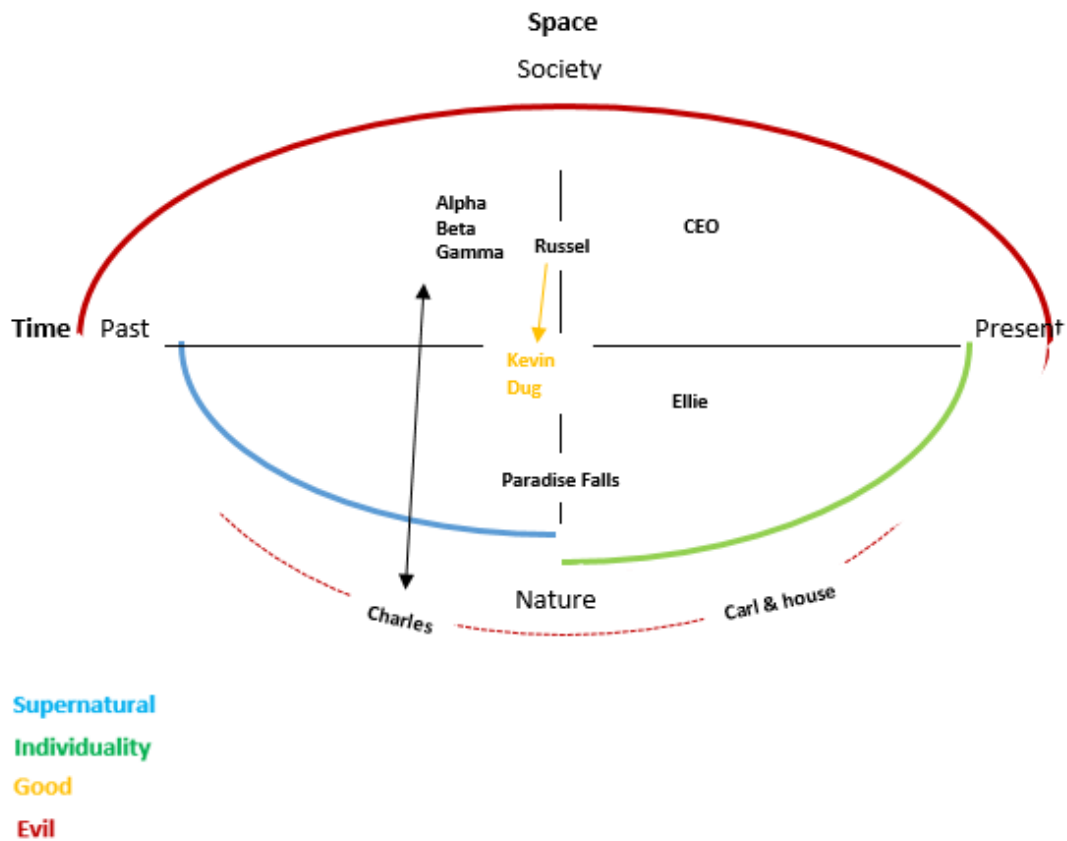


Figure 2

Once the spectator has been shown Charles' and Carl's past, the movie settles in the present, presenting the following scenario: Carl lives alone in the house that he once shared with his wife Ellie. He is a lonely and grumpy old man who likes living his own routine without being disturbed, develops odd habits and lives in the past. Superficially, he thus seems to shift to a kind of traditionalism informed by individualism. However, deep-down he is out of touch with reality, for Carl really only cares for the house and all the elements inside, which he keeps in such a way as to preserve his wife's memory. Carl's attachment to the rules of his past, his grief and consequent bond with the house and his dead wife place him in the semantic field of impossibility. This may manifest itself as a combination of traditionalism plus individualism, but these are no more than appearances.

These appearances do, however, count for the 'modern' world outside, which has evolved, so that the once peaceful suburbs in which Carl lived are turning into a booming city, with stores and skyscrapers. Carl is offered money for his house by a CEO from a building company, but turns it down, as his life is tied to the house. When Carl hits a builder for accidentally breaking Ellie's mail box, modern institutions such as the police and the law court intervene and decree that Carl is to abandon Ellie's house and go to a retirement home. The modern world, with its money, business, police and law courts represents a future-oriented institutionalism and opposes what superficially counts as Carl's old-fashioned traditionalism.

In between, Carl's routine is broken by the arrival of a new character who reminds us of Ellie and Muntz: Russel is a young boy scout – Ellie wore an explorer's uniform, Charles was an explorer – whose need for adventure is reduced to the acquisition of a badge, which he will earn if he helps an elderly person, regardless of whether this person needs help or not. It later turns out that Russel only has a father who cannot see him very often and is really in need of parental love and attention. Russel is thus the third 'explorer' who crosses Carl's life, a potential candidate for Carl's reassigning of affection and thus an aspiring 'pseudo-son' who could take the place of the real child Carl and Ellie never had. At the beginning, however, his chubbiness, gullibility – Carl gets rid of him temporarily by making him look for a 'snipe' – helplessness – he carries an impossible backpack from which all kinds of boy scout gear hang down and loses the GPS which he desperately needs at one point – textbook wisdom – his knowledge about nature is theoretical – and need of social recognition make him look more like a town kid who's never been out on a real adventure, thus occupying a variety of semantic fields, but not emotivism, wherefore he is placed in an indefinite deontic position.

Meanwhile, to escape from eviction and the retirement home, Carl emulates Muntz, attaches Ellie's house to an immense quantity of balloons – we have seen Carl run around with balloons since he was a kid, and they somehow represent his dreams and ideals – and flies away to Paradise Falls on his mock dirigible to fulfill Ellie's last dream. Inadvertently, he takes Russell, who has spent all night looking for the Snipe – birds link all characters together – with him, and thus their adventure starts. With the help of Russell's GPS at first, then by sheer luck, they arrive near Paradise Falls, Russell intent on assisting Carl to get his badge signed, and Carl talking to Ellie and suffering Russell's presence, even as he needs Russell to take Ellie's house to Paradise Falls. During their journey, Carl softens somewhat towards Russell as he learns that Russell wants to get his badge not because of social recognition, but because his father, who is always away, has promised him to come to his "Explorer Ceremony to pin on [his] Assisting the Elderly Badge". Through his affection towards Kevin and his need for affection from his father Russell is thus moving towards the affective bond.

On their journey, Carl and Russell find Muntz' monster bird, which Russell names Kevin, although it is a female bird and has got chicks. True to his explorer's motto, which says that an explorer is a friend of all nature, Russell befriends Kevin, whereas Carl dislikes the bird because it distracts him from getting to Paradise Falls. The three also meet Muntz' dogs. Muntz now treats his dogs as slaves. The dogs' main task is to catch Kevin, and to do this Muntz has given them collars which allow them to speak and communicate with him and each other. Instead of an affective bond, they are now related to Muntz in a hierarchic relationship which starts with the strongest and most cunning dog – a mean Doberman called Alpha – and progresses downwards in alphabetical order to the most stupid but also affectionate dog, who is simply called Dug, craves for affection, and because of his stupidity and affection is often awarded the cone of shame, the typical cones dogs have on when they are ill.

Muntz' dogs take Carl and Russell to see their master. Initially, Carl is overjoyed to be able to meet his hero and enter his dirigible 'The Spirit of Adventure'. However, he soon notices that Muntz is obsessed with catching Kevin, and believes that everybody who accidentally meets him wants to steal Kevin from him: he has already killed other explorers like him, a surveyor and a botanist, and now he intends to kill Carl. Muntz' turn of mind shows he is deranged. While

superficially he seems to adopt a traditionalist stance, what with the dogs slaving away for him, he is really living a parallel reality. In this, he shares the field of impossibility with Carl, for both disregard life: Carl lives with the dead while Muntz wants to kill the living.

Kevin and Dug help Carl and Russell escape from Muntz, but Kevin is hurt, and in the end Muntz catches the bird. Carl could have saved Kevin, but when Muntz burns down Ellie’s house, Carl prefers to save the house (and continue towards Paradise Falls) than Kevin, so he opts for the dead rather than the living, impossibility rather than reality.

Stage 3

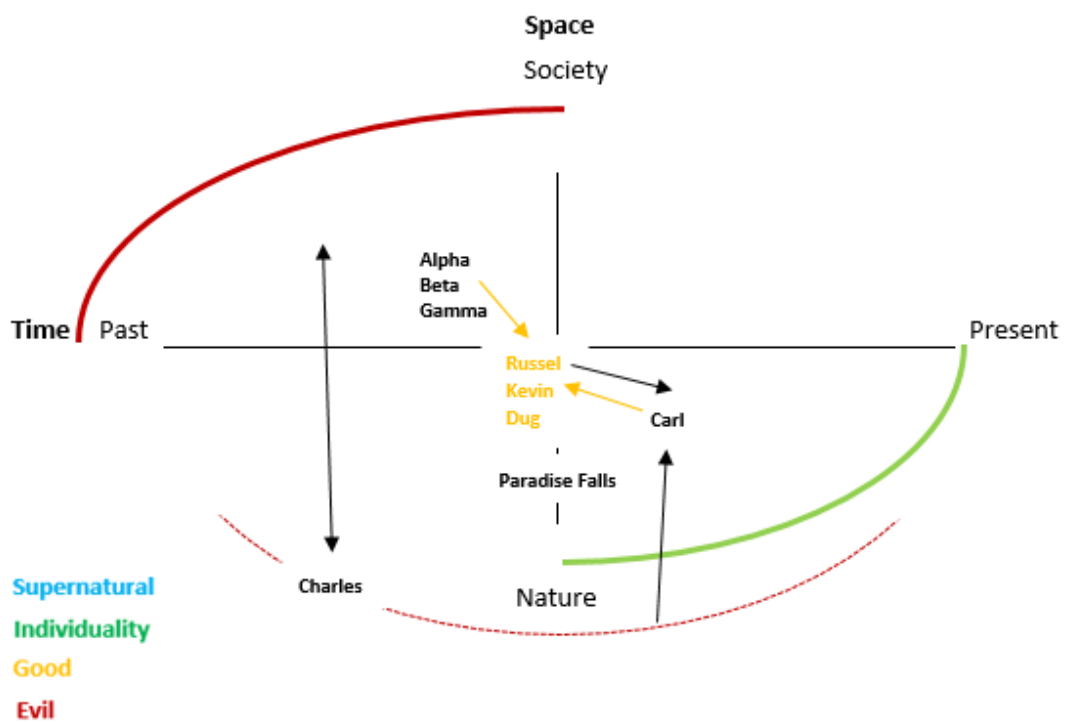


Figure 3

It is in this part of the movie that, unlike Muntz, Carl moves away from impossibility and ‘metamorphoses’ into a hero. As he sits down in his chair, having accomplished his mission, Carl sees a final note Ellie has in the adventure scrapbook she kept as a child: “Thanks for the adventure – now go have a new one.” In addition, Russel abandons Carl to try to save Kevin, in the process moving into emotivism, as he follows the dictates of his feelings and thus proves he is capable of individual action, however comic. These are the triggers Carl needs to effect his own semantic shift: he empties Ellie’s house of its belongings to allow the balloons to lift off the house so he can sail after Russell and Kevin – a symbolic act which shows he is getting rid of the past to be able to act in the present. In doing so, Carl moves into emotivism and the affective bond. This proved by the fact that when he sees Dug in the house, he accepts his love, becomes his master, and thus symbolically replaces Muntz.

Carl, Russel and Dug now strive to release Kevin and help each other as they board Muntz’ dirigible. In a symbolic end, Carl takes his newly-won three friends out of Ellie’s house (which

has landed on the dirigible) with Muntz inside it, with the result that house and Muntz disappear. In preferring his friends to the house, Carl lets go of the past and embraces the present. Then the three return home in Muntz' dirigible. Back home, Carl bestows on Russell not just his Assisting the Elderly Badge, but the Elli badge he got from Ellie when he was a kid (Muntz' dogs are also invited, which means that they too have effected a semantic shift towards the affective bond). This signals an affinity between Ellie and Russell, as well as Carl's disposition to 'adopt' Russell, which becomes clear when the movie ends with Carl and Russell sitting on a road curb eating ice cream, which is what Russell has recalled doing with his father earlier in the movie. Dug accompanies Carl and Russell, and indeed is now the new Alpha and leader of the pack, while the Doberman has been demoted to carry the cone of shame, a visible sign that he is now last in the dogs' hierarchy. The movie closes with a view of Ellie's house in Paradise Falls, and the credits show the new adventures of Carl, Russell and Dug.