

SOSC 301
Assignment #3

“Appearances are deceiving” is an old cliché, but ultimately it is at the heart of Pixar’s 2009 film, *Up*. The writers and production crew make deliberate choices that link together and transform four human characters and two animal characters in surprising ways through objects, clothing and place. Ian Woodward’s book, *Understanding Material Culture*, helps define and explain these relationships, adding depth to a seemingly light-hearted movie about adventure and aging.

Objects in *Up* come to represent the idea that an object is always something more than itself over the course of the movie. Sometimes deliberately, sometimes not, these objects deceive the audience and other characters by shaping appearance. Simply put, a constant theme is developed where many objects are "intrinsically a lie" and act as "a proxy for some other social meaning" (Woodward 57). As animals, Kevin and Dug are considered possessions and commodities (Woodward 103). Kevin, a goofy looking flightless bird with showy plumage, confuses Russell, who identifies her as a male. Earlier, when he thinks that Kevin is a snipe, he calls "Hi boy" quietly into the bushes. It is Dug who outs Kevin’s sex, revealing that she has chicks. Russell is stupefied. "Kevin's a girl?" he wonders out loud. Kevin's sex and gender is as elusive as her species, which has become an object of desire for adventurer Charles Muntz.

Dug’s values and intelligence are also disguised. Carl and Russell initially mistake two “coincidental” rock formations as a man¹ who has lost his dog. Carl passes Dug off as

some “weird trick”, but Dug is authentic in his goodness. His heart is as pure as the colour of his coat, which makes him stand out visually from Charles Muntz’s other dogs. Dug loves Carl and Russell from the moment he meets them, and politely begs Kevin to allow him to be his prisoner. However, Dug is constantly made to feel like a bad dog. Carl blames Dug for the loss of his house, and Dug faces sanctions when Alpha discovers that he lost Kevin. Dug must wear the Cone of Shame, which causes all the other dogs to laugh as his social status slides past Omega. However, their roles are reversed when, during a showdown on the blimp’s bridge, Dug cleverly claps the Cone of Shame on Alpha. The dogs then recognize Dug as pack leader. In Dug’s case, the underdog...is a dog!

Much of the time, however, these symbolic objects turn out to be clothing. Ellie and Carl first meet while imitating their hero, Charles Muntz. Their aviator helmets and goggles signify concepts that they value, namely heroism and adventure. It is quite obvious from his first moment on screen that Muntz is coded as “good”. Muntz is clothed in an aviator jacket and sailor’s sweater. He has a powerful chin and is surrounded by faithful dogs. He is the living embodiment of his blimp, the “Spirit of Adventure” and clearly someone to be looked up to as good and heroic. Muntz gets an A+ in impression management for being able to “socially place” (Woodward 114) himself in the public eye. He even has a catchphrase, “Adventure is out there!”

Russell is also coded as “good”, except he turns out to be bad in a different way. He literally wears all his possessions as a Wilderness Explorer, but the ease of decoding

him reveals that he is just as emotionally complex as the other characters. Russell's scouting gear becomes visual shorthand for preparedness, honour and service. This is how he likes to think of himself and how he would like others to see him. His camping gear carries a mystical quality that Russell uses to create his self-identity and find meaning. However, once out in the wild, Russell can't hide his lack of skill, especially when he sends a tent careening into the darkness. "Wait, aren't you 'Super Wilderness Guy?'" Carl asks and Russell has to confess - he has never made a tent before. He is really just a little boy with little boy wants and needs, and all his gear and badges can't make up for the fact that he needs a father figure in his life.

The audience knows that Carl is a crabby old man not just by his actions, but by his heavy tweedy clothing that closes his posture and warns people away instead of inviting them in. Appearances don't really fool Carl, and he sends the earnest Russell off on a snipe hunt. Carl's attack on a construction worker convinces the state that he is a public menace (although Officer Edith is sympathetic when she says "You don't seem like a public menace to me"). Carl is crafty though - he uses his appearance to fool the orderlies that come to take him away to Shady Oaks. Like Muntz, Carl uses his clothing to as a sort of personal brand to "affirm, identify or express [his] social status" (Woodward 114) as a grump.

Ellie is ever present in *Up* despite being on-screen for about twenty minutes. She lives on as her body and spirit are transformed into the house and her belongings, particularly her arm chair. At one point in the movie, her smiling portrait seems to gaze

out the window. Carl often looks up at the house and refers to it as Ellie too. Russell catches on and cheekily asks Ellie if he can keep Kevin. Carl catches himself when he replies to Ellie, “But I told him no”. Ellie has undergone a kind of “materialisation” (Woodward 107) where Carl can’t see just the house as a house². The house and objects become sacred as Carl takes great pains to preserve everything in order to fulfill his promise of taking her to Paradise Falls. The garden hose attached to the front of the house appears enough times to symbolize Carl’s inability to let go of the relationship and becomes a demented sort of lifeline to the past that weighs him down despite being airborne.

On a larger level, the house and the blimp come to have narrative qualities, becoming “site[s] for articulating an individual’s values and beliefs” (Woodward 152). The differences in taste between the two spaces signify Carl and Ellie’s middle class lifestyle compared to Muntz’s adventurer image. Compare Carl and Ellie’s mass made kitchen chairs to the exquisite striped pattern on Muntz’s, or the size of their dining tables. Muntz strives to present himself as a man of high class taste. The run-down house that was a blimp in Ellie’s imagination becomes one through Carl’s bricolage efforts (Woodward 66). A house speaks to domesticity and femininity and Ellie had a large part in decorating and painting the house where she expressed her own style while presenting herself as “decent, respectable and reliable” (Woodward 160) through modest furnishings. Muntz’s blimp, which has become a tomb within a tomb, is very masculine and phallic. It’s an extension of his adventuring persona, home wherever he lands, with only the briefest glimpses of the inside shown. Carl and Ellie can only

imagine what the rest of it looks like, and Carl is in awe when he is invited in and gazes at the artefacts and splendour. Russell had the same reaction when Carl begrudgingly lets him into his house - "Look at this stuff!" he gleefully exclaims, and then goes about trying to touch everything. Until this moment, Carl's house has been relatively private, even to the viewer - no one gets in. The colourful house, like Carl's old man duds, is a "public face" he chooses "to present to others" (Woodward 156), even if they wildly contrast. The porch serves as a "liminal space" between private and public worlds (Woodward 156) where Carl can remind others that he still exists and can keep an eye on construction outside. The blimp's gangway serves this purpose for Muntz as well as he uses the blimp as a prop and a stage for his greatness. These boundaries delineate and blur where their selves begin and end (Woodward 145) and it becomes hard to imagine either man without his airship as the narrative emphasizes their "mutuality and commonality between person and object" (Woodward 152). Muntz's collection of skeletons comprises a sort of biography for his life in the same way that the house represents the story of Carl and Ellie's life together (Woodward 103) and repository for their hopes and dreams. The difference is that Muntz has allowed himself to become a relic in his museum of the past. The blimp is grounded in the same way that Muntz's "sprit of adventure" has lost all verve and desire.

Clearly Muntz comes to believe that he's the hero in his own villainous story as he shows off the gruesome trophies of people who stumbled across his lair and reveals that he even sacrificed the lives of many dogs in search of the bird that will restore his status in the National Explorers Society. Muntz has been trapped for decades in the

acquisition phase of the consumption cycle, "effectively displacing genuine human needs - relatedness, creativity, brotherliness, individuality and reason" (Woodward 46) and draining his mental energy to possess a bird like Kevin. Carl is so horrified that he tells Russell "This is crazy. I finally meet my childhood hero and he's trying to kill us! What a joke." After coming face to face with Muntz, Carl wants to get away as fast as possible.

Carl and Russell share more than they realize as they grow closer physically and emotionally as they spend more time together. Both are members of groups that are often marginalized - children and seniors³. Both lack power and agency to control their destiny at times. Initially, Russell's motivation for helping Carl was to earn his badge for assisting the elderly. It is the last one he needs for his sash in order to fulfill his dream of becoming a senior scout (and he secretly hopes his dad will be there for him at the ceremony). The sash represents his accomplishments *and* his values. When Carl chooses saving his house over saving Kevin, the sash loses all meaning and Russell discards it before taking off on a balloon assisted leaf blower. It could be said that Russell has become disenfranchised and decides to "be" his values instead of "have" them (Woodward 46) as his need to protect Kevin overcomes any desire for the badges. Yet the sash moves Carl to change his mind and spontaneously enter the disposition phase of the consumption cycle so the house can lift off again. It is also at this point that Carl accepts Dug as his dog. Dug, who sat on the steps in a display of submissiveness, is overjoyed to possess a master and becomes decommodified as a result (Woodward 103).

The cast of *Up* blend together in many different ways, reflecting different facets of each other at different times. It is probably not an accident that even their names have special meaning. Dug backwards is “good”. Kevin sticks even though she is not male. “Ell” is a part of Russell and Russell shares the same bold and adventurous spirit. Ellie’s zookeeper uniform comes close to resembling Russell’s scout uniform too. When Russell discards his sash, it ends up on Ellie’s chair. Both are “friend[s] to all”, particularly birds⁴. Speaking of birds, it is not clear when Ellie first appears on screen, much like Kevin, that she is a girl. Muntz does not undergo the same amount of materialism as Ellie, but it is there as both are inseparable from their homes. Even Carl can find his name in “Charles”, and more importantly, comes to see if he continues to favour objects over relationships, as well as the past over the present, he will end up old, bitter and hurting others in the process. That part of Carl literally dies when Muntz falls to his death and the house disappears into the clouds. Both men were possessed by a mistaken belief that objects could liberate them (Woodward 42) or bring true happiness. Russell and Charles share more than just a desire for adventure, they both need to gain a missing badge. Carl ends up re-gifting his grape soda badge, a token from Ellie, to Russell instead of the official badge that he had sought. The sash carries a lot of weight for a flimsy article. Not only does it signify Russell’s accomplishments and values, it allows Carl to quietly mend his broken promise to Russell. He throws it on and launches the house, literally taking control of the situation and living up to not only Russell’s values, but the “spirit of adventure”.

Carl's change of heart is just one of many ways the characters also experience transformation in *Up*. For example, Carl becomes less dependent on the trappings of old age as he discards his coat, hat and cane during the adventure. He goes from relying on a chair lift to climbing the side of a blimp like a young boy again. As mentioned earlier, Ellie transforms into a house and Charles Muntz slowly transforms from charming hero to a scoundrel. Dug's loyalty and bravery reward him with leader of the pack. Kevin morphs from a pile of bones to a fully fleshed out living fossil. Lastly, Russell earns his scout badge, but learned a little humility in accepting his imperfection.

Carl, Ellie, Russell, Charles, Dug and Kevin are all actors within a performance. Their social lives are enriched by their objects, and exploring the relationships between the character and objects creates deeper meaning. It is easy to pick out themes that appear on the surface, such as friendship, loyalty and aging, but it is more difficult to separate the characters from their possessions or roles that their possessions symbolize. Examining the details and exploring what is connoted as opposed to denoted enriches the characters and narrative and brings an increased appreciation for all the thoughtful and careful ways the Pixar crew used objects, clothing and place to enhance *Up*.

Notes

1. I like to think that the two halves of the rock formation represent the duality of the public and private self or dual identities - together they form a "whole" picture of a person.

2. Ellie as house continues to provide shelter in the second act, when the group huddles under her for the night.
3. Dug and Kevin are also vulnerable in the same way as commodities.
4. Russell and Ellie also share poofy hair when they take their hats off.