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“Down Kerouac’s Road to Pixar’s *Up*”

By Walter Metz

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Introductionⁱ

This essay seeks to understand the startling yet bizarre image of Carl Fredricksen (voiced by Edward Asner) launching his house into the air using children’s helium balloons in Disney/Pixar’s animated feature film, *Up* (2009). Most obviously, this is a voyage for Carl, to Paradise Falls, South America, as an escape from a death sentence. After Carl accidentally hits a construction worker on the head while protecting his mailbox from the urban gentrification encroaching upon his yard, an anonymous judge forces him to enter a retirement home. However, because the cinephilia-obsessed creators at Pixar (Pete Docter, who also directed 2001’s *Monsters, Inc.*) are at the helm, I believe the images invoke canonical filmic treatments of the familial aspects of the American Dream, principally via *The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1928) and *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). Because of its interest in Carl’s journey, the film defines its interrogation of success via the figure of the road, both in its literary manifestation in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) and cinematically, via *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939).

Paradise Falls itself, like Oz before it, is a letdown just like the “sad paradise” of *On the Road*. Carl loses faith not only in his boyhood movie hero, the travelogue adventurer Charles Muntz (Christopher Plummer), but the cinema itself. *Up* is the first truly great Pixar film because it returns to the roots of Disney feature-length

animated cinema, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937): unlike any of the prior Pixar films, *Up* features central characters who are not toys, nor cars, nor animals, nor robots, but actual human beings whose successes and failures in love directly correlate to our own.

Carl, like the creators of all of the Pixar films, is first and foremost a movie lover. The eponymous robot in Andrew Stanton's *Wall-e* (2008) builds his whole life around the actions of the singing lovers in *Hello, Dolly* (Gene Kelly, 1969). The toys in *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995) are literally movie characters come to life. But Carl is merely, like his creators, a human cinephile. He begins his film in close-up, enraptured with the image of Muntz on the silver screen. He ends in a real-life deadly aerial dogfight with Muntz, in which the movie star tries to drop a young boy scout off of his zeppelin to his bloody death. When Carl comes to realize that saving Russell (Jordan Nagai) has completely replaced his desire to "adventure" like Muntz, his emotional maturation as a character is complete. When Carl sits to eat ice cream with his adopted son in the film's final frames, an image of maturity has come to completely replace a fantasy of cinematic adventuring. The implications of this, of course, completely invert academic critiques of Disney fantasy, in which the successful coupling of the lovers is derided as simplistic fantasy. **{Images 1 & 2}**

Up Paradise Falls, Down Kerouac's Road

In the past fifteen years, film studies scholars have intensely debated the road movie. Two works—Cohan and Hark's *The Road Movie Book* (1997) and David Laderman's *Driving Visions* (2002)—define the thematic arguments within the

genre. Laderman explores a political debate, where the conservatism of static American life conflicts with the progressive possibilities of the road. By the mature development of the form, this binary political opposition would strain, revealing the inherent contradictions in the concept of the road itself: “The road movie’s overt concern with rebellion against traditional social norms is consistently undermined, diluted, or at least haunted by the very conservative cultural codes the genre so desperately takes flight from” (20). *Up* further fouls the air, deconstructing the road movie conventions, to use the very progressive mobility inherent in the genre to reinforce traditional familial configurations, in effect rebelling against the countercultural values of the road movie itself.

In “The Road to Dystopia,” Barbara Klinger discusses the contradictions implicit in *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1968), between its purported anti-Establishment narrative, endorsing the Southwestern countercultural values of the road against the intolerance of the Deep South, and its aesthetic values, a celebration of the American landscape in concert with Cold War patriotic conservatism. *Up* figures a similar aesthetic crisis, as its beautiful high-tech CGI animation belies a story of a film spectator’s disillusionment with movie heroes.

In “‘Hitler Can’t Keep ‘em That Long’: The Road, The People,” Bennet Schaber uses Frank Capra’s disgust at Hitler’s love of his foundational road movie, *It Happened One Night* (1934) to detail the differences between pre- and post-World War II road movies. Schaber argues that the pre-war road movies—*The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940) and *The Wizard of Oz*—celebrated the notion of community via the Biblical intertext of Exodus, while the post-war variations—*Easy*

Rider and *The Road Warrior* (George Miller, 1981)—emphasize alienation and isolation via apocalypse.

In a remarkable dislocation of the actual road, Schaber studies the river in *L'Atalante* (Jean Vigo, 1934) as a communitarian antidote to Hitler's airplane journey that begins *The Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1934). Such an observation informs my reading of *Up*, also a dislocation of the road, but this time into the sky; Carl's aerial journey results in his re-integration with family life, not alienation and isolation. *Up* is a post-TSA film about refusing commercial airline travel and a consequent popular reworking of the nexus between traveling, freedom, and the American way of life. Like *L'Atalante*, *Up* is a road movie with no road; the Pixar film, however, replaces French poetic realism with a populist commercial animation style which has come to dominate the American film marketplace, often crassly, although rarely in Pixar's elegant films.

As a popular Disney film, *Up* finds a way of transgressing the pessimistic, "beat" language of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). This statement about the film's relationship to the iconic post-World War II American road novel, of course, begs the question of just what sort of road movie *Up* might be, seeing as it has no road. Christopher Morris covers similar terrain, deconstructing the concept of the road movie: "Each new road-work reveals earlier works to be ungrounded, after all, and made up of the same signs as the narrative-in-progress. For a brief moment, while one reads, new works may appear to be utterly original, until the outlines of earlier dead-ends emerge slowly, as if from a temporarily forgotten palimpsest" (9). Such is the case with *Up*, a cinephilia-driven film, obviously quoting *The Wizard of*

Oz, but doing so in a way which activates less obvious road narratives, such as Kerouac's novel. **{Images 3 and 4}**

When I first saw *Up*, I immediately imagined its vertical translation of Kerouac's road. However, I assumed that *Up* merely revised the geography of *On the Road*, moving from north to south instead of the exhausted east to west. After all, the famous passages in *On the Road* concern the travel from New York City to San Francisco, either through New Orleans (home of William S. Burroughs, a.k.a. Old Bull Lee) or Denver. However, the end of *On the Road* anticipates the travels to the Southern hemisphere in *Up*. Toward the end of the novel, Sal reflects:

I looked over the map: a total of over a thousand miles, mostly Texas, to the border at Laredo, and then another 767 miles through all Mexico to the great city near the cracked Isthmus and Oaxacan heights. I couldn't imagine this trip. It was the most fabulous of all. It was no longer east-west, but magic south. We saw a vision of the entire Western Hemisphere rockribbing clear down to Tierra del Fuego and us flying down the curve of the world into other tropics and other worlds. "Man, this will finally take us to IT!" said Dean with definite faith. (265)

The movement in *Up*, from an unnamed North American city to South America's Paradise Falls is clearly in the same geographical register: rather than be carted off to a nursing home, Carl takes flight to find Dean's "IT" in the "magic south."

While *On the Road* is a literal road novel, about driving cars to and fro, *Up* refuses the road, instead giving primacy to the metaphorical possibilities of flight. And yet, *On the Road*, by labeling Dean a bird, is interested in framing his powers similarly, via flight. Allen Ginsberg-as-Carlo Marx asks Sal in New York City while he is getting ready to go to San Francisco again:

"Sal—how comes it you've fallen on such sloppy days and what have you done with Lucille?" He adjusted his bathrobe and sat facing us all.

“The days of wrath are yet to come. The balloon won’t sustain you much longer. And not only that, but it’s an abstract balloon. You’ll all go flying to the West Coast and come staggering back in search of your stone.” (130)

In this remarkable subtext from *On the Road*, *Up* orbits the road movie, in the tradition of *The Wizard of Oz*. But unlike Dorothy’s film, which features both a house in flight and an actual (yellow brick) road, *Up* eschews any road at all in favor of flight as the only metaphor of escape. Both Dorothy and Carl fly to their fantasy worlds in the very domestic spaces in which they live. The Boy Scout, Russell explains the simple logic of this choice: “You know, most people take a plane, but you’re smart, you’ll have your TV and all your clocks and stuff.” While the boy enthusiastically endorses the joys of a house that can hit the road, Dean merely submits to air travel when his ill-advised road quest leads nowhere. The last we hear from Dean, he is driving his jalopy all the way back to Louisiana, but it finally breaks down. Sal reports: “So he wired Inez for airplane fare and flew the rest of the way” (303). The disappointment that is Dean Moriarity becomes the central lesson of Sal Paradise’s narrative.

In her chapter in *The Road Movie Book*, Ina Rae Hark captures the slippage between air and road travel in modern America. In “Fear of Flying: Yuppie Critique and the Buddy-Road Movie in the 1980s,” she argues that films like *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* (John Hughes, 1987) and *Midnight Run* (Martin Brest, 1988) return to the road because the luxuries of air travel have been deregulated away by the Reagan administration:

For the previous elite cadre of air travelers, deregulation had curtailed much of their former convenience and comfort, while at the same time expanding access to those of the [working] class. [James] Poynter [in *Corporate Travel Management*] describes nostalgically the pre-

deregulation experience of the frequent business flyer: “If a passenger flew frequently between cities, he knew the schedules... and he knew his baggage would probably arrive at the final destination with him. Service was excellent and so were the meals.” (217)

Up presents air travel as central to its expression of American freedom. But in his choice to fly to South America in a house lifted by helium balloons, Carl responds to an even later decimation of the joys of flying. *Up* is indeed an important post-TSA film—along with *The Terminal* (Steven Spielberg, 2004)—acknowledging that the horrors of flying are so egregious in the United States, that it is better to try to re-enact Dorothy's journey to Oz in her house than it is to try to board an American jetliner. Carl bought tickets to fly to South America in the days before deregulation, but he and his wife Ellie (voiced only as a child by the director's daughter, Elie Docter), because of family obligations, never get to use them. After Ellie's death, Carl finally flies to Paradise Falls, but not aboard Howard Hughes' TWA or Pam Am or their post-9/11 equivalents, Northwest-cum-Delta. Furthermore, *Up* radically presents the kluged airship, Carl's balloon-lofted house, as far superior to its professional antithesis, Muntz' zeppelin. In the battle between the two crafts, Carl's house proves victorious, as did Dorothy's over the wicked witch.

Cartoon Cinephilia

Up forwards a radical cinematic reworking of 20th century cultural analyses of the American Dream, an investigation reliant on both cinematic intertexts, such as *The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1928), *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Citizen Kane*, as well as literary texts such as Kerouac's *On the Road*. *Up* begins with what will surely stand the test of time, a masterpiece of short cinema, a twenty minute pantomime melodrama

about the life of Carl, who as a boy meets and falls in love with an adventurous spirit, Ellie. Within minutes, we see Carl and Ellie fall in love as kids, get married, work as entertainers at a zoo, miscarry their only baby, and grow old together. When Ellie dies, Carl is left alone to carry on their dream of traveling to Paradise Falls in South America to pursue their childhood love of the movie travelogue.

For the rest of the film, Carl enacts what he and Ellie only dreamed of, when, instead of being carted off to a retirement home, he floats his house into the air using helium-inflated children's balloons. In a wonderful riff on *The Wizard of Oz*, Carl's house is buffeted in the air by a massive thunderstorm; when the weather-related chaos subsides, Carl finds his house has landed in the mysterious, Oz-like Paradise Falls. Unlike Dorothy's house, which has flattened an evil witch, Carl's house has gained a traveler, Russell, a young wilderness enthusiast who came to Carl's door to earn his "Assisting the Elderly" badge, but got swept up in Carl's aerial escape.

The very first sequence of *Up* is a movie within a movie, "Movietown News: Spotlight on Adventure," a newsreel detailing the life of professional adventurer Charles Muntz (voiced by Christopher Plummer) who has discovered a monstrous bird at Paradise Falls while traveling in his zeppelin, "Spirit of America," placing him above the orbit of a more famous aerial conveyance, the Spirit of St. Louis. The film cuts to a close-up of a Depression-era little boy, Carl, enraptured by the cinematic image of Muntz, dreaming of adventuring in the footsteps of his Lindbergh-like hero. When the newsreel announces scientists' accusations that Muntz is a charlatan because the bird's skeleton does not measure up, Carl gasps. Undaunted, Carl leaves

the movie theatre carrying his blue balloon, "Spirit of Adventure," practicing his outdoors skills while walking home.

Thus, *Up* begins with the same gesture as the most critically-acclaimed Hollywood film ever made, *Citizen Kane*. At the famous film's opening, a newsreel relates the life and death of Charles Foster Kane, a newspaper magnate. After the short film ends, a shocking 90 degree cut reveals that the newsreel has not been screening in a movie theatre, but instead in the editorial office of a newspaper, where the creators of the film are critiquing a rough cut before its commercial release. They are disappointed because the film does not explain Kane's life coherently. They become convinced that if they could only figure out the meaning of Kane's last word, "Rosebud," then all would become clear. They send the reporter Thompson off on an epic quest to discover the lexical enigma. Kane's word, of course, is the name of his childhood sled.

Up turns upon a similar discovery from childhood, this time Ellie's adventure book, which Carl believes to be empty because of her death, but in fact is filled with reminiscences of their life together. The furnace which burns Kane's sled along with his other worldly possessions finds no heat in *Up*: Carl and Ellie's lives together dance in his memory as he eats ice cream with Russell, looking forward to as many new adventures with the boy as fate will allow the elderly man.

Like *Citizen Kane*, *Up* believes the secret to humanity lies in childhood, but it is also oppositely a film that celebrates the ordinary American life, not the one which reaches for the heights of fame and fortune. For *Up* indicts its Charles Foster Kane, the adventurer Charles Muntz, as a mean-spirited, ruined man. Of course, so

does *Citizen Kane*, abandoned by all who once cared for him, isolated in his steamy Florida pleasure palace, Xanadu. However, *Up* is not Charles Muntz's film, but Carl's.

Carl's experience with life is profoundly more Utopian than Kane's. This is best demonstrated by the two films' very different representation of marriage. In a brief opening montage sequence, we see Carl and Ellie marry and grow old together. The hallmarks of their relationship are their two armchairs, in which they sit, hold hands, and read. These chairs do not move throughout the film until Carl has to let them go, in order to save Russell from Muntz; initially, the chairs serve as a tender reminder of Carl's love for Ellie, even after she has died. This is in direct contrast to *Citizen Kane's* famous marriage sequence, in which Kane and his first wife come to loathe each other, as Welles shows them literally growing farther apart, until they sit at opposite ends of their breakfast table, not even acknowledging each others' existence.ⁱⁱ **{Images 5 & 6}**

In the sense of its familial politics, *Up* is far more akin to another classical Hollywood masterpiece, King Vidor's late silent melodrama, *The Crowd* (1928). In that film, we meet Johnny Sims, born on July 4, 1900, to a proud father who tells him he can be just like Lincoln. However, fate will not allow Johnny to scale such heights. The untimely death of Johnny's father means that the boy must travel to New York City to make his own way. There, the only height he is allowed to scale is a massive skyscraper filled with drudge-like actuaries who spend their workdays sitting within a huge array of desks totaling endless columns of figures.

After work, Johnny Sims goes on a date to Coney Island with Mary, with whom he falls in love. After a honeymoon at Niagara Falls, they start a family. Johnny

comes to realize that all there is to life is the petty domesticity that comes to envelop him. At first, he suppresses his discontent, channeling his artistic talent into an advertising contest for a magazine, developing a slogan and a cartoon for a dry cleaner. The winnings for the contest, however, prove to be a curse: as Johnny waves to his daughter out the window the bicycle he has bought for her, the insensate, enthusiastic child runs across the street without looking and is run over and killed by a truck. As with the other 95% of parents who lose a child, Johnny and Mary's marriage slowly but surely collapses.

In one last gesture at the very end of the film, they save their relationship. Johnny takes Mary to a vaudeville show at a massive downtown theatre. There, they laugh riotously along with the other thousands of spectators. Johnny shows the man next to him his ad campaign, which is printed in the program. The man pats him on the back, impressed with the talent of his neighbor. The ending is thus cuttingly bittersweet. Johnny finally has a small bit of fame, but it is ironically housed in the loss of his individual story into the vast sea of humanity laughing at the comedy show. Vidor's camera tracks out from the laughing Johnny, finally reducing him to one dot among thousands in the very last image of the film. In short, the point of the film is that you are always just a part of the crowd, but if you are lucky, you will accomplish some small things that will matter, at least to the people in your close proximity.

In the balance between *Citizen Kane*, about the pathetic lives of important Americans, and *The Crowd*, about the pathos of an insignificant man, *Up*, a populist Disney film, indicts the charlatan Kane's and Muntz' of the world, and glorifies the

common American men like Carl and Johnny. Carl is an atypical American hero, though: he almost never speaks, has a square face like a loaf of bread, and has the grumpy voice of Ed Asner, channeling his role as Lou Grant, a kind hearted yet gruff patriarch to Mary Tyler Moore. But *Up* is, like *The Crowd*, a sublime film of complexity as it engages the potentials and impossibilities of charting a life of fulfillment within the mythos of the American Dream.

Up features a shockingly near identical opening tone poem as *The Crowd*, dedicated to the hardships of ordinary life in these United States. Unlike *The Wizard of Oz* and *Citizen Kane*, to which the creators of *Up* are clearly paying direct, referential homage, the relationship between *The Crowd* and *Up* is more subtle. As a film about the ordinariness of the American Dream, *Up* inhales the very stuff of popular American cinema history, its ability to fuse intellectual, literary social critique with the engaging storytelling of classical Hollywood narration. In short, *The Crowd* and *Up* are accidentally similar films, dressed up differently, and with very little direct knowledge of one another. An imaginative intertextual reading will reveal *Up* in the light of *The Crowd's* indictment of modernity's deleterious effect on the American Dream.

The opening title card of *The Crowd* establishes the film's connection between the individual story of Johnny Sims and the grandiose pretensions of epic American life: "The nation on holiday! Fireworks! Parades! Picnics! Celebrating America's 124th birthday!" The exclamatory prose is belied by the film's first image, a staid, rectilinear framing of a white, three-story house. In the foreground, the parade passes in front of the camera. The film fast-forwards in time a bit, a new title

card telling us: "Johnny Sims reached the age of twelve. He recited poetry, played piano and sang in a choir... so did Lincoln and Washington!" The image accompanying this paean to presidential American possibilities replicates the film's opening shot: Johnny sits in a line, perpendicular to the camera axis, with his friends, all of whom dream of their futures. One boy wants to be a preacher, another a cowboy, while Johnny Sims merely speaks in grandiose banalities: "My Dad says I'm goin' to be somebody big."

However, another 90 degree shock cut reveals that emotional chaos has arrived to destroy the staid composition. An ambulance races diagonally across the image, turning to thrust straight toward the camera. Johnny's father is dying. Echoing the play of light and composition of a Rembrandt painting, Johnny timidly walks directly into the camera axis, up the stairs of his house, framed through a wide-angle lens by the black receding diagonal walls of the staircase, illuminated only from behind by light streaming into the house over the crowd of people milling in front. Thus die Johnny's father's dreams to give his son "every opportunity." Abandoned as a twelve year old, Johnny will now have to make it on his own; he struggles, but the best he can do without his paternal angel is work as a lowly drudge in a ghastly skyscraper. **{Images 7 & 8}**

For its part, *Up* condenses far more of Carl's life, and more quickly, but the similarities with *The Crowd* are remarkable. Upon leaving the movie theatre, Carl walks perpendicular to the camera axis, down the street, jumping over rocks, cracks in the sidewalk, and stumps. The film's voice-over narrator, in a parody of the narration featured in the newsreel Carl has just been watching, frames the boy's

banal childhood activities as the work of an epic adventurer: these actions become the climbing of Mount Everest and the fording of the Grand Canyon.

Up relies on the same vector analysis as *The Crowd*. The film begins with rectilinear presentations of suburban life, with diagonal chaos looming threateningly. Thus, *Up* reprises the opening shot of *The Crowd*, an extreme long shot from across the street, framing a similar three-story house as that of Johnny Sims. A parade unto himself, Carl walks perpendicular to the camera axis, carrying his balloon, caught in a reverie of adventurous air travel. As Carl falls down on the sidewalk, the camera pans and tilts diagonally upward, to reveal a sky onto which is printed the two letters, UP, also diagonal to the camera axis.

Like Johnny and Mary before them, Carl and Ellie meet, fall in love, and get married. As kids, Ellie leads the quiet Carl into a life of sensation. In a comic reworking of the ambulance that announces Johnny's father's death in *The Crowd*, an ambulance has to come to heal Carl's broken limbs when Ellie dares him to walk across a rickety board to retrieve his lost balloon. Then, in a stunning combination of the two traumatic deaths which propel the narrative of *The Crowd*—that of Johnny's father and later his daughter—the chaotic terror of death is sublimated into one wordless sequence in *Up*. Carl puts together a mobile of zeppelins above a baby's crib while Ellie paints a mural of a stork in flight in the baby's nursery. A rectilinear pan right through a wall shockingly reveals, without warning, in extreme long shot and silhouette, a doctor informing Carl and Ellie that she has lost the baby. This moment is one of the most moving experiences I have ever had in a movie theatre, capturing almost perfectly the head spinning shock of going into a doctor's

office to learn that one of the happiest experiences of your life has, without warning, turned into one of life's worst nightmares. Carl uses Ellie's adventurous spirit to pull her through, presenting her album, "My Adventure Book," filled with family photos, but also a page, "Stuff I'm Going to Do," as a reminder that they still have a life of dreams ahead of them, even if the pain of losing the baby will forever scar them.

It is *Up*'s sensitivity to the emotional register of everyday life which favorably compares the film to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, an important American novel about youth and pain. After Ellie dies, and Carl is sentenced to death by nursing home, he takes flight to fulfill Ellie's dream. Kerouac's paean to the road is the principal text in the American literary canon through which we might understand this journey.

Up is an anti-Beatnik manifesto. The logic of critiquing the Beats' Bohemianism is well established, perhaps most clearly articulated in Richard Hofstadter's classic study, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*:

The beatniks today constitute... a formidable symptom of our cultural malaise.... The beatniks have let their playfulness run away with them.... They have walked out on the world of squares and for the most part have abandoned that sense of vocation that is demanded both by serious intellectual achievement and by sustained social protest. In their own way, the beatniks have repudiated the path of intellectualism and have committed themselves to a life of sensation. Not surprisingly, the beatniks, as even their sympathetic commentators are apt to concede, have produced very little good writing. (420-421)

The central mythos of the Beatniks revolved around constructing American family life—particularly its women and children—as stifling. At the end of the canonical Beat film, *Pull My Daisy* (Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie, 1959), the central character

Milo flees his wife and child, to the rhythms of Kerouac's voice-over narration, "go, go, go," the Beatnik mantra.

Carl quite simply does not childishly abandon his family. Instead, he lives an entire lifetime with Ellie, only to salvage another family in his second, more adventurous life. Carl befriends Russell, however reluctantly, ending the film by serving as the little boy's surrogate father, celebrating the awarding of his "assisting the elderly" badge at the Boy Scout ceremony, and sitting on the curb with him eating ice cream as the film ends. Russell articulates the film's anti-Kerouac position when he observes: "The wilderness is not what I expected." Russell recalls his absent father, who once took him to eat ice cream and sat outside the shop on the curb: "I like that curb. It might sound boring, but I think the boring stuff is what I remember the most." Quite simply, Carl is a better human being than the characters in *On the Road* because he behaves like a responsible adult, and Russell sure as hell knows it.

To be fair, the theme of familial responsibility is mournfully presented in *On the Road*. The journeys Sal Paradise takes lead him to the conclusion that his Beatnik hero, Dean Moriarty, is a false prophet. It is here that the interests of *On the Road* and *Up* intersect. The novel's first sentence, like the opening of *The Crowd*, begins with a complete collapse of narrator Sal Paradise's home life: "I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead" (1). Coupled with the traumatic death of his father—a real life event in Kerouac's life which motivated the writing of

On the Road in the first place—Sal begins his story where Carl’s and Johnny’s begin, adrift and without purpose, bereft of family relationships.

On the Road is about lost fathers through and through. The quest after the lost father is the central motif that unifies Sal, Dean, and the other Beatniks. Sal narrates toward the end of the novel: “I saw he was fleeing his grandfather. Here were the three of us—Dean looking for his father, mine dead, Stan fleeing his old one, and going off into the night together” (267).

Like Carl and Ellie’s always forestalled plans to travel, Sal, too, was paralyzed by stasis: “With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road. Before that I’d often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off” (1). Dean thus motivates the novel at the beginning in a positive sense. However, Sal naively and foolishly deifies Dean:

For a mad moment I thought Dean was understanding everything he said by sheer wild insight and sudden revelatory genius inconceivably inspired by his glowing happiness. In that moment, too, he looked so exactly like Franklin Delano Roosevelt—some delusion in my flaming eyes and floating brain—that I drew up in my seat and gasped with amazement. In myriad pricklings of heavenly radiation I had to struggle to see Dean’s figure, and he looked like God. (284)

Carl, too, is susceptible to such hero worship, but only as a young boy, influenced unduly by Depression-era cinema.

As the novel progresses, however, Sal comes to consciousness gradually but steadily, as he realizes Dean is a false idol. In the middle of the novel, Sal states: “I looked out the window at the winking neons and said to myself, Where is Dean and why isn’t he concerned about our welfare? I lost faith in him that year. I stayed in San Francisco a week and had the beatest time of my life.” (171). As Kerouac scholar

Ann Charters analyzes, “Sal chases the dream back and forth on the highways between the East and West coasts, and finds that the dream has little staying power, that it’s merely a ‘sad paradise’ when he finally catches up with it in New Orleans, Denver, San Francisco, Chicago, and New York” (xxi).

In *Up*, Paradise Falls is the object of the mythic quest. There, Carl brutally learns that his and Ellie’s boyhood hero is not only a charlatan, but a diabolical monster who imperils the life of Russell, Carl’s ward. Carl has to slide on his cane across the zeppelin’s skin, thousands of feet above the ground, to rescue Russell from falling to his death at the hands of Muntz. The matinee idol imperiling a little boy’s life produces the bitterest moment in the film, when Carl laments: “I finally meet my childhood hero and he turns out to be nuts. What a joke.” The film becomes literally about the fall of cinematic heroes, as Carl and Russell watch Muntz tumble to his death from the zeppelin.

For its part, *On the Road* inspires this allegorical reading of *Up*. Late in the novel, Sal reflects upon the star wattage of Dean Moriarty: “It was like an old-fashioned movie when Dean arrived” (260). *On the Road* was indeed written as a kind of movie. Charters explains its composition: “Kerouac taped together twelve-foot-long sheets of tracing paper, trimmed at the left margin so they would fit into his typewriter, and fed them into his machine as a continuous roll” (xix). Thus, like the contents of film canisters, the novel as sprocketed pages unspooled onto reels off of the typewriter on which Kerouac composed it.

The novel actually features a movie theatre sequence, but with a bleaker tone than the cinephiliac opening of *Up*. Sal goes to the movies in the middle of the night in inner-city Detroit:

The people who were in that all-night movie were the end. Beat Negroes who'd come up from Alabama to work in car factories on a rumor; old white bums; young longhaired hipsters who'd reached the end of the road and were drinking wine; whores, ordinary couples, and housewives with nothing to do, nowhere to go, nobody to believe in... The picture was Singing Cowboy Eddie Dean and his gallant white horse Bloop, that was number one; number two double-feature film was George Raft, Sidney Greenstreet, and Peter Lorre in a picture about Istanbul.... [W]e were permeated completely with the strange Gray Myth of the West and the weird dark Myth of the East when morning came. (245-6)

Whereas Carl as a young boy goes to the mythic movie palaces of the past, where a Hollywood show included a travelogue, Sal arrives at a movie theatre in which the fantastical Hollywood fare is serving as a razor-sharp counterpoint to the "beat" African-American and poor people who attend the real movies of the 1950s.

By the middle of the Paradise Falls sequence of *Up*, Muntz' horrific behavior, coupled with an entire lifetime's worth of sorrows, has forced Carl into a far more pessimistic relationship with his cinema-watching past. Carl is quite simply exhausted by the 20th century. He is "beat" in the original sense of the term inherited by Kerouac. Paradise Falls has been revealed to be a false Eden. Such is the thematic stuff of *On the Road*. The name of Kerouac's narrator himself indicates the ironic nature of paradise in 20th century America. As American Studies scholars from R.W.B. Lewis to Leo Marx have indicated, the complex pastoral of the American Dream, part natural Heaven and part industrial Hell, is the material *On the Road* and *Up* confront. As Charters describes:

Kerouac's standard response to [reporters'] questions... was to define the term "Beat," which he'd first heard more than a decade before, used by a Times Square hustler named Herbert Huncke to describe a state of exalted exhaustion, but which was also linked in Jack's mind to a Catholic beatific vision, the direct knowledge of God enjoyed by the blessed in heaven. This line of thought was obscure to most interviewers, who wanted a glib quote rather than a religious derivation of a hip slang term. (viii)

Carl's arrival in Paradise Falls is a similar kind of beatific vision. The Falls is shrouded in mist, and furthermore, it would make perfect sense given the tumultuous storm in which his balloon house was caught, that the elderly Carl did not survive the trip. However, Carl does survive, and he is forced to confront the reality, rather than his Edenic myth, of this actual Paradise Falls. Taking his house literally on his back, like Atlas, he drags it across the canyon to the place where Ellie long ago imagined it to sit, next to the eponymous waterfall. Kerouac captures such a beatific vision in his novel as well. On the way to New Orleans, to visit Old Bull Lee (William S. Burroughs), Sal observes: "It was drizzling and mysterious at the beginning of our journey. I could see that it was all going to be one big saga of the mist.... We were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, move. And we moved!" (134). I can think of no better way to describe the foggy, mysterious Paradise Falls, and the narrative events which take place there, than "one big saga of the mist."

Like Dean, Ellie has very little voice in *Up*. Instead, these narratives are devoted to their lovers, Sal and Carl. Ellie and Dean serve the same function in their respective texts, their wanderlust inspires the main characters to the heights of adventure, culminating in both narratives' road journey to South America, literally

in the case of *Up*, figuratively in *On the Road* (Sal and Dean drive to Mexico, but abandon their dream to drive all the way down to Tierra del Fuego).

Furthermore, at one point, Sal describes Dean as a tragic bird: “Poor, poor Dean—the devil himself had never fallen farther; in idiocy, with infected thumb, surrounded by the battered suitcases of his motherless feverish life across America and back numberless times, an undone bird” (189). This observation allows some consideration of the ecological project of *Up*, in which Russell the wilderness scout places the life of Kevin, the lost bird lusted after by the rapacious Muntz, above his own life.

In this alignment, Russell becomes associated with Dean, an idea borne out by further discussions of fathering in *On the Road*. For both Dean and Russell are themselves traumatized by the loss of their fathers, not literally like Carl and Sal, but figuratively. Dean’s father has become a hobo, and thus has not guided his son away from a life of petty crime. Sal reports on Dean’s discussion of his father:

He almost slowed down. “You see, I never know whether my father’s there or not. I never know whether to ask. He might be anywhere.” We drove on. Somewhere behind us or in front of us in the huge night his father lay drunk under a bush, and no doubt about it—spittle on his chin, water on his pants, molasses in his ears, scabs on his nose, maybe blood in his hair and the moon shining down on him. (233)

Russell’s father is more likely not a hobo, but a corporate businessman who has refused to take time out of his busy schedule to get to know his boy. Nonetheless, both Russell and Dean are scarred by the absence of their fathers. *On the Road* has no solution to this crisis: a boy himself, Sal is not capable of fixing Dean’s ennui any more than he is able to fix his own. Carl, on the other hand, with a lifetime of sorrow, is ready to step up to the plate. His intervention in Russell’s life forges the Utopian

steel of *Up*'s ending. The ending of *On the Road* is famously a paean to stasis and defeat:

So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast... and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry... and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rages of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty.
(307)

The endings of *Up* and *On the Road* are remarkable in their division. In "We're on a road to nowhere: Steinbeck, Kerouac, and the Legacy of the Great Depression," Jason Spangler argues that "Kerouac's work serves as a memory bank and moral conscience for victims of Depression trauma" (308), comparing the despair in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* with its 1950s road novel counterpart. He argues, "Ultimately, Kerouac's objective is, like Steinbeck's, a critique of the modern condition. These authors delineate cultural roads that lead at best to ennui and discontent, at worst to utter demoralization and the likelihood of psychic (or even literal) starvation" (310). Thus, Kerouac inherits the pessimistic ending of *The Grapes of Wrath* because at the spiritual level, he finds no consolation in the post-Depression consumerist 1950s.

However, *Up*'s historicity is quite different. Like Kerouac, Carl begins in the Depression, watching fantasy entertainment as a way of staving off the real and severe effects of the Depression. However, Carl endures both the decades of the Depression itself, as well as the lifetime of Kerouac, who died in the late 1960s. Emerging on the other side, Carl finds his second life in raising Russell, an

opportunity denied him by Ellie's tragic miscarriage. This chance was denied to Kerouac both by his anti-family Beat ideology as well as his untimely early death.

Conclusion: Fantasy and the Road Movie

Up reworks the cultural pessimism of *On the Road*, demonstrating how Carl's cure of his cinephilia leads him up into the air to confront his nemesis Muntz, and then back onto the ground to guide Russell, whose father has mysteriously abandoned him.

With *Citizen Kane* as the pivot point, *Up* becomes a fantasmatic reworking of a different brand of filmmaking, that of Martin Scorsese, whose 2004 film, *The Aviator*, also grapples with the nexus of flight, cinephilia, and the American Dream. In Scorsese's film, Howard Hughes (Leonardo DiCaprio) struggles throughout his life to make engaging action cinema (1930's *Hell's Angels* and 1943's *The Outlaw*) while at the same time building bigger and bigger airplanes, culminating in the eight-engine behemoth, the Hercules (a.k.a., the Spruce Goose). Unlike Docter, Scorsese has neither an interest in curing cinephilia, afflicted as he is by the dread disease of all film scholars and enthusiasts, nor does he allow the comic vision to triumph over the tragic.

In the film's most impressive sequence, Scorsese borrows from Stan Brakhage's *Blue Moses* [1962] (in which film is projected onto the narrator's naked back), revealing a writhing Hughes, struggling to overcome crippling obsessive-compulsive disorder, the footage from *The Outlaw* projected onto his naked body, horribly scarred from his days as an airplane test pilot. *The Aviator* ends in the late 1940s, with Hughes having saved his beloved TWA from ruination by a corrupt

senator, but we know that many years of insane isolation awaits Hughes until his death in the 1970s.

Scorsese thus constructs *The Aviator*, a direct heir to *Citizen Kane* (they both were scandalously denied Best Picture Oscars, for example, despite being clearly the most artistically complex and accomplished films of their respective years), as a testament to the threat greatness poses to American culture. Both Welles and Scorsese use metaphors of the cinema to explore this thematic material, and thus end their films where *Up* begins. *Up* proposes, scandalously for a film with artistic ambitions, that leaving behind cinephilia will result in happiness not attainable to Charles Foster Kane, Charles Muntz, and Howard Hughes. When Carl sits with Russell, happily on the stoop, eating ice cream with the boy, after having dispatched Muntz, he attains that which evaded Welles, who died trying to make a film as great as *Citizen Kane*. Hughes fared no better, isolated in his manic phobia of germs.

The question is what to make of *Up*'s fantasy resolution on the stoop in front of the ice cream shop. Indeed it is most certainly a fantasy. In his psychoanalytic approach to the bizarre Hollywood road movie, *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997), Slavoj Žižek argues that narrative is driven by "the big Other," a fantasy of a controlling moral force from which characters rebel: "Precisely because you know that you are as it were 'covered' or 'absolved from guilty impulses' by the official story line, you are allowed to indulge in dirty fantasies; you know that these fantasies are not 'for real,' that they do not count in the eyes of the big Other." (5). *Up* features a fantasy narrative in which its spectator, Carl, has broken free of the fantasmatic control effected by the cinema; he has murdered his Oedipal controller,

Muntz, and in so doing recreated a more healthy real-world relationship free from Muntz, the big Other. Carl now sits with Russell and his dog, able now to reinvent the world of paternity via the eating of ice cream. **{Images 9 & 10}**

Common academic logic would position *Up's* fantasy as an ideological offense, offering that such happiness is a palliative, given to us by Disney in order to have us forget the suffering of the world, so that we will buy more tickets to Pixar films. As this essay makes clear, I do not believe this to be the case. *Up* questions both the fantasy of emancipation offered by the road, but also the life of creative greatness celebrated by the movies, even if ironically by *Citizen Kane* or *The Aviator*. I offer this critique as a challenge to both cultural critics who believe in counter-cultural road narratives, but also to those who believe in the inherent superiority of ironic, interrogating art cinema over popular Hollywood melodrama.

As one final contrast, consider once again *Up's* concluding fantasy, the consumption of ice cream by a delighted Carl and Russell. I believe this to be not a cynical representation of conventional morality, but the apotheosis of what mature people learn by making mistakes during their lives, one great moment of simple joy shared by two people who love each other. *Up* is not the only recent Hollywood movie to end with an ice cream eating fantasy. In the otherwise completely disparate *Monster's Ball* (Marc Forster, 2001), prison guard Hank (Billy Bob Thornton) goes to the store to buy chocolate ice cream, bringing back two white plastic spoons. In the meantime, looking through Hank's photos, his African-American lover, Leticia (Halle Berry) discovers that Hank is the guard who executed her ne'er-do-well husband. She frantically beats her fists into the bed.

The next time we see her, she appears in a catatonic state. When Hank suggests that they sit out on the stoop and eat their ice cream, she follows, blankly. Outside on the steps, she looks over at the three graves: Hank's mother's, his wife's, and his son's. When Hank feeds her some ice cream, she eats it thoughtlessly. Hank tells her, "I think we'll be all right." We cut from a frontal two shot of them to a reverse angle directly behind their heads. The camera tracks forward slightly, then tilts up to the stars above their heads.

The ambiguity of the scene is overwhelming. On the one hand, this is a hopeful moment: all of the secrets are now out of the closet, and perhaps these two people, who desperately need each other, can build a relationship from here. On the other hand, we have not heard Leticia speak yet about how she feels about spending her life with the man who executed her husband. And finally, the question of race has not even begun to be dealt with in their relationship. Since Hank was raised by a vicious, racist father, we have no idea whether he can maintain a loving relationship with Leticia.

Out on the stoop, Leticia eats the ice cream that Hank offers on his white plastic spoon, but with indifference. As she is still trying to process what it means that her new lover is her husband's murderer, she has not been given her own tub of ice cream. As she looks at those gravestones, she ponders whether she is the next one to be buried over there. If Hank continues in his racially significant ice cream eating ritual, just what is the meaning of their relationship for him? With its breathtaking tilt up to the stars over the two lovers' heads, the film refuses to say.

That is to say, the fantasy of ice cream eating serves as an ironic coda to the ambiguity of *Monster's Ball*. Forster builds his film's thematic significance around this vision of the incompleteness of the American project. *Up* uses this same image to far less ironic effect, but this makes the film no less artistically accomplished. Like Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), which uses a friendship between white Huck and black Jim to demonstrate the transformational power of the road, *Up* features a similar pedagogical arc. While not about the thorniness of race relations as is *Monster's Ball*, *Up* grapples with the much less studied, but no less important, issue of aging. Carl is confronted with the central challenge of the American Dream, to continue living when his wife dies, and his life-long hopes of movie "adventure" are dashed. His geriatric achievement with Russell, overcoming Muntz in the air over South America, is not the stuff at which we should scoff. When Carl shares his ice cream with Russell, he has found his true humanity—unlike the suspended stasis of Hank and Leticia—in the sharing of a simple moment of happiness in the company of our loved ones. That this simple truth eludes Charles Foster Kane, Howard Hughes, Dean Moriarity, and Sal Paradise should not allow us to miss the triumphant achievement of *Up*.

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ENDNOTES

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ⁱⁱ My sincere thanks to Steven Alan Carr for suggesting the odd coincidence between the family montage sequences in *Up* and *Citizen Kane*.