



HWA CHONG INSTITUTION (HIGH SCHOOL SECTION)

Project Work Written Report

Topic: Actor's Response to the Spectator's Projection: An analysis of the portrayal of characters in *Disney Movie 'Up'* and how it affects the emotions of the audience

Slant: Literature

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Declaration

I declare that this assignment is my own work and does not involve plagiarism or collusion. The sources of other people's work have been appropriately referenced, failing which I am willing to accept the necessary disciplinary action(s) to be taken against me.

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Section 1.0 - Introduction

1.1 Background - *Disney Movie 'Up' (2009)*

Disney Movie 'Up' (2009), a computer-animated comedy film produced by *Pixar Animation Studios* and released by *Walt Disney Pictures*, generated a net worth of 735.1 million USD worldwide and has been bestowed multiple awards. The film, then at the forefront of the animated film wave, managed to take advantage of the complete control over details enjoyed by animated productions to create tension and provoke remarkable emotional response from the audience. In the movie, the protagonist, Carl Fredricksen, is reduced to a shell of his former self after the death of his wife, Ellie, and the resultant void left in his heart after she passed on, which sets the premise of this film. Due to his resolve to fulfil the promise he made to his wife to go to Paradise Falls, he sets off on a journey of self-discovery, acceptance and recuperation.

1.2 Rationale

The film was an international success, earning a stunning \$293 million in the United States and Canada and \$438 million in other territories for a worldwide total of \$731 million, and even clinched the titles of Best Animated Feature at the 2010 Golden Globes, the 37th Annie Awards, and the 82nd Academy Awards. With such wide reach, it is imperative to analyse the influence that the portrayal of the characters in the film has had on audiences worldwide. Furthermore, the lack of academic research in the aspect of the correlation between the portrayal of the characters and the emotions of the audience in *Disney Movie 'Up' (2009)* emphasises the need to analyse this film.

Additionally, *Disney Movie 'Up' (2009)*, as *Disney's* first 3D animated film and one of the first mainstream films that were animated at the time, represented a breakthrough in this medium. Although an animated film, which are not traditionally seen as realistic in their depiction of life,

Disney Movie 'Up' was praised for having audiences “astonished by the economy with which specific visuals are invested with emotion throughout [the film]” (San Francisco Chronicle, 2009), indicating that audiences were deeply impacted by the film and the portrayal of its characters, thus it is imperative to analyse this critically acclaimed movie.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How does the mise-en-scene in the film affect how the characters are perceived by the audience?
2. How do these perceptions of the characters by the audience affect said characters' ability to influence the audience's emotions?

1.4 Thesis Statement

The mise-en-scene in *Disney Movie 'Up'* (2009) portrays the characters in a relatable and realistic manner, and this evokes in the audience a sense of attachment to said characters. In alignment with Melanie Klein's concept of unconscious phantasy and Bion's theory of alpha-function, this attachment to these characters allows them to influence the emotions of the spectator; this is alpha-function in its essence. Therefore, I posit that although *Disney Movie 'Up'* (2009) is an animated film rather than one acted out live, due to the realistic depictions of the characters as a result of the mise-en-scene, the characters are able to influence the emotions of the audience through alpha-function.

1.5 Scope of Research

The animation and symbolism in *Disney Movie 'Up' (2009)* will all be taken into account, with the aid of psychological theories such as Melanie Klein's concept of '*Unconscious Phantasy*' (Klein, 1923) and Bion's theory of '*Alpha-function*' (Bion, 1958), to analyse the perception of the characters by the audience and how these perspectives the audience have towards said characters affect their ability influence the audience's emotions. The mise-en-scene present in the film will also be analysed to see how the specific placement and blocking of characters and props help the portrayal of the characters and the influence they have on the audience.

1.6 Significance of Research

This research utilises classic theories of thinking, namely Klein's concept of '*Unconscious Phantasy*' (Klein, 1923), alongside Bion's classic theory of '*Alpha-function*' (Bion, 1958) which built upon and transformed Klein's theories on infantile phantasy. In this paper, these theories, which have not yet been used in investigations of animated film, are integrated into an analysis of the critically acclaimed modern computer-animated film '*Up*' (2009) in order to provide deeper insight into how these characters are able to influence the audience's emotions.

1.7 Limitations

Due to the restrictions on the length of this paper, I would be unable to completely flesh out all the major characters in this film, hence I will be mainly focusing on the characters Carl, Ellie, Russell and the house itself. The portrayal of other important characters may be mentioned during the analysis of their influence on the audience's emotions but not discussed in depth.

This research is limited to the moments of the film when the character is able to respond to the emotions projected by the audience, thus allowing for alpha-function, consequently influencing the emotions of the audience. This is due to the film not being acted out in real time, thus the actor is unable to react according to the fluctuating emotions of the audience, resulting in the scenes that I can analyse being restricted

Section 2.0 - Literature review

2.1 Projection and Introjection (Melanie Klein's Concept of Unconscious Phantasy)

This theory helps to explain the interaction between the characters and the audience and can be used to aid in the analysis of how the audience's perceptions of these characters influences their unconscious emotions. By understanding the underlying science behind this exchange, it becomes clear to see how the characters and the audience correspond with one another, along with how the unconscious phantasy of the spectator reacts to the multitude of scenes in the film where the characters are portrayed.

Take, for example, an infant who is unable to contain its fear of death. It dissociates himself from this fear and projects it onto its mother; this is projective identification in its essence. By projecting its terror onto its mother, the infant makes it into her experience and communicates with her its own distress. This projective identification has a realistic aspect that can elicit an appropriate response from the infant's mother. In cases where the mother's response is not forthcoming, this likely results in the infant's fear of death being reinforced. In the context of *Disney Movie 'Up' (2009)*, the actions, dialogue etc. of the characters in the film elicits a certain emotional response from the audience. This response, which may in the form of anxiety, fear, sadness, or other feelings as a result of the happenings on screen, are attempted by the spectator to be communicated to the character in the film, in the hope of generating an appropriate response from said character. In the event that the character's response is forthcoming, the emotions of the audience will be affirmed and reinforced, thus causing the audience to be impacted deeply by the scene.

2.2 Bion's Theory of Alpha-function

It must be established that in the animated film *Disney Movie 'Up' (2009)*, the characters assume the role of actors, similar to the actors of theatre and the like; the story revolves around these figures, hence animated characters fulfil similar functions in presenting to the spectator an experience, despite not being physically existent. Simply put, the theory of alpha-function

succinctly encapsulates the relationship between the characters in the film and the audience by illustrating the interactions between their emotions and the responses they give each other.

Alpha-function processes emotional experiences through acts of understanding. This gives said experiences meaning, but in order to be subjected to alpha-function, the emotional experience must first be manifested; a compelling dynamic between emotional arousal and understanding underpins this in its entirety. In the actor, the emotions harnessed by sensibility need to be subjected to an act of understanding. Actors may possess sensibility and understanding in different degrees, and consequently they may employ these elements in a disjointed fashion, which appears rather jarring and in these instances the actor displeases the audience. Therefore, it is necessary for sensibility and understanding to amalgamate in a constructive and effectual process, in order to fulfil their function in the actor's art. An actor who is able to influence and affect the emotions of the spectator "has both in such a degree, that while the judgement regulates the sensibility, the sensibility animates, enlivens, and inspires the understanding" (Hill, 1755). In the case of *Disney Movie 'Up' (2009)*, characters such as Carl and Ellie fulfil these criteria. The carefully composed shots that present these characters to the audience allow the audience to be more attached to the characters, which directly contributes to their influence over the audience's feelings and thoughts at any point throughout the movie. The characters are able to assimilate the emotions they intend to portray as they possess sensibility and understanding to a balance, allowing them to receive the audience's projection of emotions. Accordingly, these characters convert the emotions projected by the audience in order to give meaning to their emotional experiences.

2.3 Mise en Scene in the film

The meaningful placement of objects and characters in the film, coupled with the carefully curated designs of various items such as the house, have bestowed these objects and characters with deep symbolism, allowing them to coax the fluctuating emotions of the audience in the direction that was intended during the production of the film. In film, *mise-en-scène* achieves not only the ability to express to the audience the emotions of the characters and likely events of a scene or sequence, but also its "affecting intensity, its mode of feeling, and to invite the viewer to

feel deeply too” (Redmond, 2014). Mise-en-scene will thus aid me in my research to investigate how the composition of the scenes in the film affect how the audience perceives the characters, and a connection can hence be drawn between how the audience views the characters and the emotions they feel as a result of watching said characters.

For context, mise-en-scene is defined as the “arrangement of scenery and stage properties in a play” (Oxford Languages, n.d.). In film analysis, mise en scene refers to everything in front of the camera, including the set design, lighting, and actors. This term in film thus represents the overall effect of how everything in a scene comes together for presentation to the audience.

The general consensus is that there are 6 key elements comprising mise en scene:

1. Composition

The framing of a camera shot and the camera angles used (e.g. wide shots, medium shots, close-up shots etc.)

2. Production Design

The creation and organisation of the physical world surrounding a film story to build a visual concept. (e.g. the backdrop)

3. Lighting

The intensity of lighting in certain scenes to the colour palette used (e.g.using sharp contrasts of colours between characters and their backdrops to emphasise certain plot points)

4. Costuming

The design of the characters’ visual appearance, following certain themes. It can aid in communicating a character’s personality to the viewer, allowing them to better understand their character and behaviour.

5. Hair and Makeup

The cosmetics of the character, to complement the character’s personality (e.g. Incongruity of characters to act as comic relief)

6. Film Texture

The type of film stock or video camera selected and filters used before a final movie is screened (e.g.grainy texture to give off a certain aesthetic to the film)

Section 3.0 - Methodology

In this paper, I will take into account the mise-en-scene of selected scenes in the film, most notably the composition of shots and character designs, in order to analyse how these portrayals of the characters evokes a sense of attachment to said characters in the audience. Additionally, the animation and symbolism employed during these key moments will be referenced during analysis to provide deeper insight into how the engagement of the audience with the characters affects the characters' ability to influence the audience's emotions.. Building upon that, I will utilise Melanie Klein's concept of '*Unconscious Phantasy*' (Klein, 1923) and Bion's theory of '*Alpha-function*' (Bion, 1958) as the basis to understand and analyse how the audience is invited to experience certain emotions by the characters during selected scenes, where the audience is impacted deeply by the scene due to appropriate responses from the characters.

Section 4.0 - Discussion and Analysis

Section 4.1: How mise-en-scene shapes audience's perspectives towards characters

In *Disney Movie 'Up' (2009)*, the components Composition, Production Design and Costuming are more dominant, and I will be primarily focusing on these elements of mise-en-scene as they yield the most insight into how the audience's perceptions of the characters are thereby affected. In this section, I will be talking about how the mise-en-scene of the film, particularly the character designs and composition of shots in the film, coaxes the audience into forming certain perspectives towards the characters.

Section 4.1.1: Visual motifs presented through character designs

The film, in essence, is made up of squares and circles, which contain various visual metaphors; the ubiquity of these simple shapes in the modelling of the various characters are able to flesh out their differing personalities and characteristics, which in turn reflects the bigger motifs of the film.

Firstly, I will be analysing the contrasting character designs of Ellie and Carl. In this seemingly mundane shot, the opposition of the shapes that these two characters are modelled after gives insight into their contradicting personalities. However, their clear intimacy despite obvious differences also serves as a testament to the belief that “opposites attract”.



Fig 1.1: Ellie (left) and Carl (right) with their arms around each other

The uniqueness of the character designs in ‘Up’ are able to allow the audience to discern certain aspects of what the characters are like. As can be seen in the shot, Carl takes on the shape of a square. His box-like head is made possible by a 90-degree chin and echoed in his angular glasses; even the wrinkles adorning his forehead are cut in straight lines. The theming continues with his sharply creased trousers, rectangular belt buckle and unnervingly square knuckles. All these design choices, which are angular in nature, highlight his terseness and lack of tolerance for nonsense. His sharp nods are sharpened by his angular chin, and his staunch determination is underscored by his crisp bow tie. Through this design, it seems as though Carl’s personality is so striking that it affects his physical characteristics and apparel. However, the more important thing to note in this shot is the contrasting shapes that both Ellie and Carl are modelled after. In comparison to Carl’s angular features, Ellie has a round head and is crowned with an elegant bun, coupled with smile-lines and ovular glasses, giving the impression of her character to be one that is warm and expressive. Carl’s brows rest furrowed atop his glasses, but Ellie’s float in a constant state of curiosity and delight. Despite the unfortunately short screen time that the couple had due to Ellie’s death, the constant characterisation on the part of the creators of ‘Up’

submerges the audience into their lives. Their relationship was developed through the tiniest of details, where their distinction yet resultant intimacy is illustrated, hence causing the audience to care so deeply about the couple that it is extremely painful to see them separated by death.



Fig 1.2: An enthusiastic Russell (left) and an exasperated Carl (right) standing together. The presence of simple shapes goes beyond just illustrating Ellie and Carl's heartwarming relationship, as Carl is continually confronted with a cast of contrasting characters throughout the film. A clear example of this would be Russell, who is also modelled after circles. Setting aside the distinct difference in age, Russell's round face and soft features also serves as another contrast to Carl's angular disposition. Russell's flushed and plump features seems to serve as a continuation of the precedent set by Ellie, softening Carl's edges. In the film, Russell demonstrates the importance of loyalty and honesty, while Carl is the embodiment of grit and resilience, and the contrasts between the two only serve to emphasise these values; their obvious physical differences suggest the personalities of the two to be completely distinct, but at the same

time allows them to complement each other, creating a narrative that successfully tugs at the audience's heartstrings.

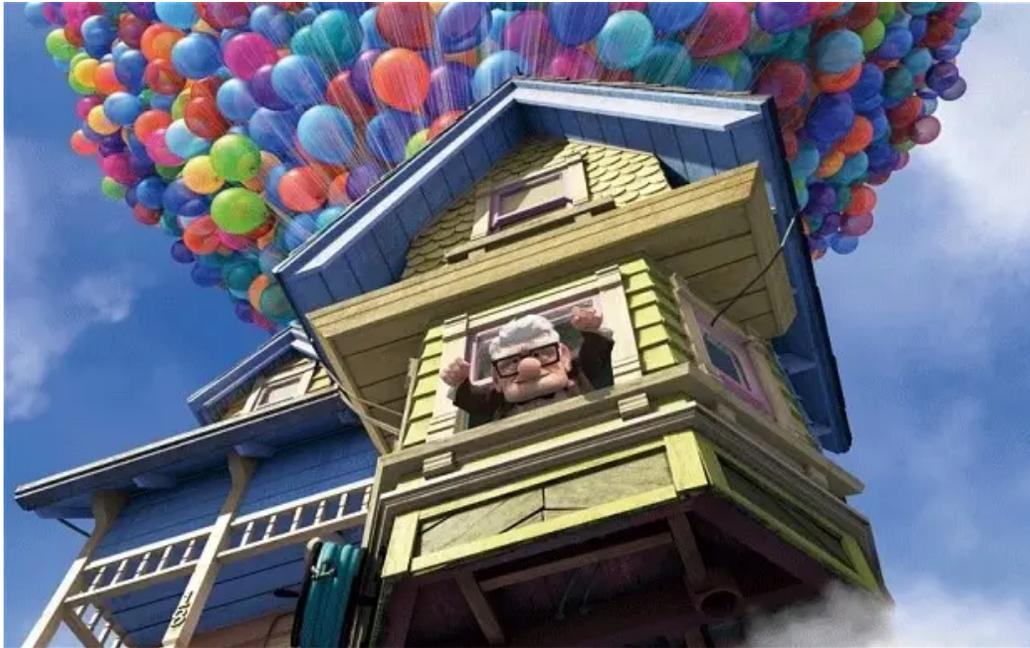


Fig 1.3: The house in which Carl set out on his journey to Paradise Falls

The house in 'Up' was one of the film's defining features, and the significance of the house in the narrative is so great that it can be considered a character itself. As can be seen by Carl's desire to retain ownership over his house in the film, it is obvious that he possesses a deep personal attachment to the abode, and this is directly linked to his relationship with Ellie. The house, as well as objects inside the house such as the chairs, mugs, lamps etc., serve as memories of the fond times that he had experienced with Ellie, thus explaining his refusal to let it go. Additionally, he decides to fly away in his house in an attempt to reach Paradise Falls, the destination that he and Ellie dreamed of going to in the past. To Carl, the house, with all its memories of Ellie, acts as a projection of her wishes, thus making the house a centerpiece of the film, something that Carl cannot do without. An important thing to note would be the realistic design of the house, intended to reflect that of one's grandparents or older relatives, giving the impression that it is flushed with experiences. This makes it more relatable to the audience due to the sense of nostalgia that it creates, allowing the audience to grow a deeper sense of attachment to the house and all that it represents in the story.

Section 4.1.2: Repetition of the composition of shots

Other than the endearing character designs that make the audience more attached to and engaged with the film, the way in which certain shots are repeated in the film builds on the bonds of the various characters with every image, and this is most notably seen in shots of Carl and Ellie's relationship across time.

In my analysis of the repeated shots of Carl and Ellie sitting together in the living room at different stages of their life, I will be talking about how this manages to deepen their relationship in the eyes of the audience, and how this in turn impacts the audience.



Fig 2.1A: Young Carl (left) and Ellie (right) holding hands while sitting on their respective chairs in the living room



Fig 2.1B: Photograph of elderly Carl (left) and Ellie (right) holding hands while sitting on their respective chairs in the living room

These shots are created through “slow lateral drifts and push-ins” (Lin, 2011), which gives the audience the impression that time is passing in a steady, mundane way. The use of color and lighting also informs its mood. The early years of their marriage are depicted through richer,

brighter colours such as blue and green, creating a more lively atmosphere, whereas the later years consist of sepia-toned images that result in a vintage look.

Taking both shots into account, a melancholic atmosphere is created through illustrating the passing of time, showing that despite the setting being the same, a lot has changed over the years. Fig 2.1A belongs to the four-minute montage sequence depicting their married life in the opening phase of the film, where Carl and Ellie hold hands in a wide shot, with both in frame. In Fig 2.1B, Carl sees a picture of them, decades later, sitting together again, with the image having the same framing and composition as the one earlier. This causes Carl to reminisce about his past with Ellie, and also brings the audience back to the montage sequence at the start of the film, thus giving them the painful reminder of Ellie's absence and the couple's tragic separation by death. Therefore, through the repetition of the composition of the shots to tie the present back to the past, the audience is inclined to feel a sense of heartbreak, achieving the intention of inciting an emotional response from the audience.

Section 4.2: The role of alpha-function in the film

In *Disney Movie 'Up' (2009)*, the realistic and relatable depictions of the characters cause the audience to be more attached to said characters, thus the actions, dialogue etc. of the characters would impact the audience more greatly. In relation to how the mise-en-scene in the film incites the audience to feel certain emotions, when the audience forms these emotional responses to a certain scene, they would attempt to communicate it to the characters. In the event that the character's response is appropriate, the audience's emotions are affirmed or reinforced, which in turn makes the scene all the more impactful to the audience. If the character's response is not appropriate, or does not conform to the expectations of the audience, then the audience's emotions will be thrown into disarray or will dissipate, which decreases the impact of the scene

and makes reception lukewarm.

In this section, I will be using the scenes where Ellie and Carl are hiking up the same hill at different stages in their life as examples to illustrate how the audience is invited to feel certain emotions, followed by how the characters respond to these emotions to make it an impactful scene in the eyes of the audience.

It should be noted that Fig 3.1 will be related to Fig 4.1, and Fig 3.2 will be related to Fig 4.2 in my discussion below.

Section 4.2.1: Emotional response from the audience

Certain scenes in the film are able to elicit emotional response from the audience due in part to the mise-en-scene in the film, but also because of the significance of said scenes.



Fig 3.1: Carl (left) tripping on his way up the hill, while Ellie (right) waits for him at the top

Take, for example, the scene where Carl and Ellie, then a young married couple, were hiking up a hill to have a picnic. In accordance with the mise-en-scene present in the film that I discussed in the earlier section, this is a wide shot, with both of them in frame. This shows the closeness of their relationship; they spend majority of their time together, and this is emphasised by the purposeful composition of the shot. There are also vivid colours of blue and green present, which in the film was typical of their earlier years of married life, symbolising their youthfulness and creating a joyful and lively atmosphere. Carl is seen tripping on his way up the hill, but the scene remains lighthearted and carefree as can be seen from the smiles on both Carl and Ellie's faces.

The mise-en-scene of the film, coupled with the jovial atmosphere, thus causes the audience to develop feelings of delight and content, in line with the intention of creating such a scene in the film. In this case, the audience is inclined to be cheerful due to the jolly atmosphere. The audience then attempts to project these feelings of joy to Ellie and Carl, in the hope that they will provide a forthcoming response, in other words confirm what the audience is already feeling, by showing that they are having a wonderful and enjoyable time.



Fig 3.2: Carl (right) rushing over to help a collapsed Ellie (left) who was unable to get up. This scene serves a similar purpose in attempting to evoke certain emotions in the audience, however the emotions that are intended to be manifested are different in this scene. In the shot, Ellie collapses on her way up the hill, and is unable to get up on her own even after multiple tries. Carl, concerned for Ellie's wellbeing, immediately rushes down the hill to support her. The scene thus becomes alarming due to Ellie's sudden fall, and the severity of this situation is exacerbated when Carl drops his hat and food basket without hesitation to help her, indicating that it was a serious mishap. The audience thus feels a sense of foreboding and anxiety over the unknown but definitely dire condition of Ellie's health, as well as intense worry for the couple that they had grown attached to through heartwarming depictions of their relationship. In the shot, the sun is shown to be setting, and this contrasts the bright blue sky during their trip up the hill earlier in their married life. The setting sun, which represents the end of a day, could also signify the possible end of the couple's time together, and Ellie's sudden collapse undoubtedly heightens the audience's fear of such scenarios. In this scene, Ellie's unexpected bout of ill health, coupled with the rather ominous setting of the sun, evokes a sense of foreboding and

anxiousness in the audience, where their worries about Ellie's fate reach a tipping point. In this case, the audience desperately transmits their feelings of unease and impatience to Ellie, in the hope that she would be alright and in good health.

Section 4.2.2: Characters in response to projected emotions from the audience

After having various emotions evoked by certain scenes in the film, the audience will attempt to project their emotional responses onto the characters, in an attempt to receive a forthcoming response that affirms or reinforces their emotions. In this section, I will be using the scenes that occur immediately after the ones shown in the previous section to analyse this phenomenon, in other words the presence of alpha-function during character-viewer interactions.



Fig 4.1: Ellie (left) and Carl (right) lying on a mat while staring at the clouds

This scene takes place immediately after the one shown in Fig 3.1. In this shot, Ellie and Carl are lying down while staring at the clouds, appearing content. The shot is a close-up of the two, with the physical closeness in the shot serving to highlight the intangible intimacy that they share in their relationship. This scene also carries a similar mood as the previous one, as can be seen in the rich, bright colours that create an exuberant atmosphere. The importance of this scene lies in the fact that it confirms the emotions of the audience. In the scene shown in Fig 4.1, Ellie and Carl remain jovial and upbeat, which conforms to the expectations of the audience of them having a delightful experience, thus affirming and reinforcing the audience's emotions through the process of alpha-function.



Fig 4.2: Ellie resting in bed as a result of her being ill

This scene takes place immediately after the one shown in Fig 3.2. After Ellie collapses on the hill and Carl rushes to support her, the scene dissolves into one that shows Ellie lying on her bed, with an intravenous drip stand by her bedside. This unfortunate scene of Ellie being ill dashes the audience's hopes of her being alright, instead confirming their uneasy suspicions that she would not recover from this situation. Due to Ellie's inability to show to the audience that she is in good health, in other words giving an unwanted response, the audience's feelings of anxiety and foreboding are worsened or reinforced, resulting in them fearing the worst for her. In this case, alpha-function is still present; Ellie's response was forthcoming, in that it confirmed the audience's uneasy emotions, but it was not the response that the audience was hoping for, thus eliciting a sense of distress and worry from them.

Section 4.2.3: Alpha-function in animated films versus live theatre

It must be acknowledged that the role of alpha-function is more restricted in animated films as compared to plays acted out in a real time due to differences on two layers:

1. The characters in animated films are evidently not real. This can be said to remove the element of realism to a certain extent, which may result in the audience not taking the production as seriously as they would a live action movie/film of the same quality. In such cases, the scenes in the animated film would not impact the audience as greatly, and the audience's engagement with the film is lessened as well.
2. The characters in animated films are unable to cater to the fluctuating emotions of the audience. This is due to the film not being acted out in real time, so the actors of said

characters are unable to gauge the reactions of the audience and adjust their production to better suit the palette of the viewer. As such, the scenes where the audience is greatly impacted and their emotions are influenced by the characters would be more limited, hence reducing the presence of alpha-function in animated films.

Thus, animated films must attain a certain standard of production in order for the characters to be able to influence the audience's emotions through alpha-function; the characters must be relatable / realistic / unique to a degree to form a connection with the audience, thereby allowing them to impact the feelings of the audience.

In the case of *Disney Movie 'Up' (2009)*, due to the mise-en-scene of the film that contributes greatly to the audience's sense of attachment to and engagement with the characters, said characters are able to evoke certain emotions in them and respond to these emotions appropriately, hence displaying the presence of the process of alpha-function.

Section 5.0 - Conclusion

The masterpiece that is *Disney Movie 'Up' (2009)* managed to pull on the heartstrings of many people across the world. The brilliant use of mise-en-scene in the film, most notably the unique and ubiquitous character designs, as well as the repetition of the composition of shots, served to deepen not only the bonds between characters in the film, but also the characters' relationships with the audience. The sense of attachment that was only strengthened as the film progressed was able to engage the audience wholeheartedly; the viewer would rise and fall with the plot, becoming fixated on the wonderful world and the endearing characters that were offered in the film. With such strong influence over the viewer's feelings, the characters were able to incite the audience into experiencing a myriad of emotions throughout the film. Alpha-function is present in the film due to the characters being able to respond properly to the emotions communicated to them by the audience, thus affirming the audience's feelings, creating blissful, heartrending, exciting scenes that impacted each and every viewer greatly.

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