

Empire is out there!?

The spirit of imperialism in the Pixar animated film 'Up'

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Abstract

The animated feature *Up* (Pete Docter, 2009) tells the story of wilderness explorer Charles Muntz in search of a rare species of bird in the South American valley of Paradise Falls and widower Carl Frederickson hoping to mend the pain of losing his wife by fulfilling their lifelong dream of traveling to the same valley. Both men pursue their fantasies of adventure in South America. I situate this narrative within discourses of imperialism and the Monroe Doctrine. Whereas Charles has usurped Paradise Falls in his zealous decades-long hunt the film offers an alternative to his imperial fixation by portraying the redemptive experience of Carl during his travels. As the latter learns to define adventure as a spiritual endeavor, Carl sheds his imperial obsession and rescues his South American friends from Charles. I argue that *Up* attempts to critique the damaging effects of imperialism – and by extension the ‘War on Terror’ – through the figure of the fallen hero Charles but disavows the ‘informal’ qualities of U.S. empire embodied by Carl. This disavowal of the informal features of (U.S.) imperialism in *Up* allows me to explore the persistence of the ‘tenacious grasp’ of U.S. exceptionalism, while the imagery of a queer, transnational community also suggests alteration in the tropes of U.S. imperialism.

Keywords: ambiguity, animation, identity, ideology, imperialism, Pixar, queer

At the beginning of the Pixar animated film *Up* (Pete Docter, 2009) a young Carl Frederickson is shown eagerly watching the afternoon program at a local movie theater. Set in the early 1930s, the program starts with a black-and-white newsreel montage of the ‘Movietown News “Spotlight on Adventure”’ which provides ‘footage never before seen by civilised humanity: a lost world in South America’. Into this Paradise Falls with its ‘plants

and animals undiscovered by science' and dwelling in its 'inhospitable summit', only the lone explorer Charles Muntz dares to venture. Speaking before a mesmerised crowd of admirers in a dashing leather aviator jacket and with a white scarf, Muntz represents the clichéd personification of the adventurer: 'attractive, endowed with personal magnetism, ardent in romance, a natural leader with ... a sense of duty to a country or cause ... selflessly dedicated to justice ... honorable, fair, and chivalrous, behaving as a gentleman and recognizing a code of conduct'.¹ Furthermore, the imagery and rhetoric of the newsreel montage establish a binary opposition between South American 'wilderness' and 'Western civilisation' in which the former needs to be catalogued, explored, and conquered by the superior forces of science and male individualism. But, as the announcer continues, the explorer is dishonorably stripped of his ranks in the scientific community after the bird skeleton he brought from South America was deemed to be a fraud. Exiled from his intellectual and spiritual community, the news episode ends by showing Muntz boarding his zeppelin to venture to South America again to prove the existence of the bird, promising to continue the search until his reputation is restored.

This anachronism in the presentation of the archetypal hero-adventurer figure as an ambiguous character is furthered by the dated black-and-white imagery of the newsreel and the antiquated voice-over. The cinematic travelogue *Up* is invoking in its opening scene – particularly the *Fox Movietone News* (1928-1963) presented by Lowell Thomas – further hints at an imperial trope and a sense of antiquatedness.² The zeppelin Muntz boards also underscores the outmoded quality of the imperial trope *Up* establishes from its beginning; after all, the airship was a popular symbol of (Western) technological advance during its heyday in the first decades of the 20th century, but lost all of its economic, military, and cultural significance after the zeppelins' vulnerability to fire had been tragically exposed by the explosion of the *GrafHindenburg* in 1937.

Up portrays imperialism as an archaic phenomenon and thereafter negotiates its destructive consequences. As an older man, Carl will not meet the dashing and daring mythic adventurer-hero of his youth but rather a bitter, paranoid, and ruthless maniac – an experience which will enable Carl to acknowledge his similarity to Charles and abandon the pursuit of his own imperial fantasy. Despite his eventual reformation, by usurping Muntz' zeppelin Carl remains an adventurer and explorer until the very end of the film. In this sense both characters have to be situated within the frame of imperial conquest; as adventurers they represent 'a vision of what the new empire can become'.³ The closeness between Carl and Charles – of

which their similarity in name is an obvious sign – demands exploration of the way the old imperialism represented by Charles is not merely discarded by the ‘anti-imperial’ Carl but rather supplanted by a contemporary form of imperialism.

The following film analysis aims to incorporate an essential element of the discourse of U.S. exceptionalism: the perseverance of what Amy Kaplan has aptly phrased ‘the tenacious grasp of American exceptionalism’.⁴ Kaplan cautions us against developing a critique of U.S. exceptionalism ‘which chastises America for not living up to its own ideals’.⁵ For Kaplan ‘this approach is both insular and exceptionalist, as it implicitly makes the United States the bearer of universal values’ while such a perspective simplifies ‘the complexity of US engagement with the world to a Manichean conflict between a good and a bad America’.⁶ This dichotomous construction of U.S. exceptionalism through its values re-inscribes exceptionalism as the hegemonic trope of a cultural text struggling to shift beyond its initial confines.

The essay ‘Down Kerouac’s Road to Pixar’s *Up*’ by Walter Metz can function as an explication of this danger. In his reading of *Up*, Metz explores the intertextual references in the Pixar film to such canonical films as *The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1928), *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), *The Aviator* (Martin Scorsese, 2004), and the book *On the Road* (1957) written by Jack Kerouac to demonstrate that in contrast to the larger-than-life characters of a Howard Hughes, Charles Foster Kane, or Dean Moriarty, ‘true humanity [is to be found] in the sharing of a simple moment of happiness in the company of our loved ones’ in *Up*.⁷ As I will demonstrate, this interpretation is even more convincing because the film abandons the ideal of the nuclear family in favor of a non-hetero-normative, non-biological, and trans-racial community of friends. This queer model of family and kinship incorporates gender-bending identities, representations of strong female personas, and the celebration of single parenthood and old age.

Just as the reading of *Up* by Metz merely hints at these progressive images his intertextual consideration fails to notice more ambiguous notions in the film. To assert that ‘*Up* ... glorifies the common American men like Carl’⁸ is to neglect the closeness between this ‘common man’ and his idol gone mad Charles Muntz. Accordingly, by killing Charles, Carl does not merely rid himself of his exceptionalist twin image but also continues Charles’ imperial legacy by taking possession of his zeppelin ‘Spirit of Adventure’. The denunciation and simultaneous continuation of imperialism encapsulates this strategy of disavowal in which old-fashioned colonialism is portrayed

to be a disruptive, harmful, and malevolent project (Charles), yet can only be obliterated by the ‘common American man’ (Carl).⁹

Historically, this notion of justifying imperialism as an anti-colonial or emancipatory intervention dates back to the Monroe Doctrine (1823). By denying any European nation-state or alliance to intervene in North or South America, the doctrine ‘held in balance New World exceptionalism and the embattled dialectics of the Americas’¹⁰ and asserted the privilege of the United States to intervene in this ‘Western hemisphere’. Consequently, the Monroe Doctrine oscillated between anticolonialism (vis-à-vis Europe) and imperialism (vis-à-vis the Americas) while simultaneously disavowing the imperialist dimension of U.S. policies by casting the country as the bearer of democracy.¹¹

Although its outdated model of (separated Eastern and Western) hemispheres does not suit the contemporary globalised world, the rationale of the Monroe Doctrine continues to inform present U.S. imperial practices. This datedness as well as the logic of imperialism present two vantage points from which I will analyse *Up*. The outmoded dimension of the doctrine mirrors the film narrative, which chronicles the struggle of two older men relentlessly pursuing their (imperial) fantasies – therefore, the animation picture revolves around questions of aging, obsolescence, and adapting to the contemporary world. Through Carl and Charles the validity of old systems of belief (i.e. imperialism) is addressed and the possible adjustment to the contemporary world explored. In addition, although the establishment of a queer community and the dismissal of the imperial fantasy present its anti-imperial notion, I hesitate to celebrate *Up* as an example of ‘true humanity’. The imperialist tradition of animation and the disavowal of imperialism demand exploration of the implications of any anti-imperial conclusion. However, I am similarly unwilling to condemn the entire film as an imperialist text – as Dorfman and Mattelart do in their seminal reading of Disney – because this assessment would disregard the subversive moments in *Up*.¹² My aim is to explore in what ways the tenacious grasp of U.S. imperialism holds a firm grip around this decidedly anti-imperial film and whether the exceptionalist hold loosens.¹³

The imperial fantasies of James, Carl, and Charles

The figure of the explorer or adventurer, the binary logic of wilderness and civilisation, and the localisation of the former within the geographical space of South America invoke the 19th and (early) 20th century imperial discourse

of the Monroe Doctrine. Formulated by President James Monroe in 1823, the doctrine envisioned a binary South America in which its newly-independent democracies were (geographically and spiritually) connected to the United States but required protection from their aristocratic European colonizers; it constructed a South America in need of regulation by the United States. In her book *Hemispheric Imaginings: The Monroe Doctrine and Narratives of U.S. Empire*, Gretchen Murphy characterises this ‘binary between Old World tyranny and *New World* democracy’¹⁴ as a tool to justify U.S. interventions in the Americas while invoking anti-imperial imagery and narratives. The Monroe Doctrine can therefore be considered an instrument in denying the imperial practices of ‘Indian removal and slavery [as] signs of colonialism and tyranny within the democracies of the *New World*’, giving voice to chauvinistic reservations within the United States ‘that South Americans were racially incapable of democratic self-rule’¹⁵ at the same time.

This disavowal of the imperial quality of the Monroe Doctrine – or rather its ‘flexibility’ to figure as an anti-colonial text justifying U.S. imperial intervention in South (and Latin) America – offers an explanation for its growing attractiveness throughout the 19th and into the first decades of the 20th century. During the Second World War and the following Cold War, the Monroe Doctrine had been further invoked to rationalise the numerous military interventions in Latin and South America. Again, against the foil of fascist or communist expansion, U.S. imperial practices were deemed to be justified anti-imperial enterprises. Consequently, the essential logic of the Monroe Doctrine functioned as a fundamental element of Cold War (U.S.) exceptionalism as ‘the United States’ professed opposition to imperialism ... constituted its exceptional standing throughout the Cold War’.¹⁶

The demise of the Soviet Union eventually exposed the confines of the concept of two separated hemispheres as the Monroe Doctrine was supplanted by notions of ‘global interconnectedness’ and interdependent networks.¹⁷ Although this idea of two hemispheres did not suit the post-Cold War world the fundamental logic of the Monroe Doctrine continues to function as a core matrix of present U.S. policies. Continuing to vilify foreign military engagement as imperial while justifying U.S. interventions as anti-imperial, ‘the disavowal of American imperialism persists in the opposition to new “evil empires”’.¹⁸

In *Up* the powerful images and dramatic voice-over narration of the ‘Movietown News’ do not fail to make their mark on the young Carl. In an almost educational fashion, *Up* illustrates the power of film as the boy stares mesmerised at the silver screen, absorbing the glorification of adventure travels in his explorer outfit with goggles and pilot cap. Embodying the

imperial discourse, Carl wanders through the streets afterwards carrying a 'Spirit of Adventure' balloon, jumping over tiny cracks in the pavement, and climbing small tree stumps to the voice-over narration of the previous newsreel. In a playful manner, these shots frame 'the boy's banal childhood activities as the work of an epic adventurer ... [as] these actions become the climbing of Mount Everest and the fording of the Grand Canyon'.¹⁹ Notwithstanding the tongue-in-cheek tone of the movie travelogue grandeur, Carl is completely enthralled by the fiction.

His imperial fantasies intensify when he meets a young girl, Ellie, in an abandoned house. The lively girl enacts her own fantasies of exploration, traveling the world, and discovering unknown places to the theme of 'adventure is out there'. Through their shared imperial imagination and play the two children become friends, fall in love, and eventually marry. In a beautiful silent montage *Up* chronicles their life, as Ellie and Carl move into the abandoned house of their childhood to enjoy a happy marriage but have their hopes of traveling to South America continuously shattered by everyday inconveniences. As the years go by their fantasies of exploring South America slowly fade away to be supplanted by their desire for children. After a miscarriage Ellie and Carl are forced to bury this dream as well, but their love enables them to lead a happy and satisfied life. Ellie dies when they finally save enough money for tickets to South America.

Instead of spending the last years of life with his beloved wife Carl now has to face a society fundamentally different from his childhood. Surrounded by numerous skyscrapers, his small two-story house with its little garden appears to be an anachronism in this booming hyper-modern neighborhood. Out of time and out of place, Carl has withdrawn into an inner exile after Ellie's death and responds with hostile aggression to any intrusion from the outside. After his beloved mailbox is damaged Carl ventilates all his anger and sadness by violently hitting a construction worker. As a consequence of this incident Carl loses his property in a court ruling and is forced to join a retirement home. As his faded fantasies of adventure and exploration forcefully re-emerge Carl sees a collage by his deceased wife that pictures their house atop a waterfall at Paradise Falls. He becomes inspired to journey into the 'exotic wilderness' of his childhood fantasies. To do so, Carl launches his whole house into the air by releasing tens of thousands of helium balloons attached to the building.²⁰

Just as Charles Muntz had vowed to restore his reputation by continuing to explore the 'unknown wilderness' of South America at the end of the newsreel montage, Carl is determined to fulfill his fantasy of placing his home atop Paradise Falls – an imperial gesture mirroring the setting of a

flag and locating Carl amidst the imagery of conquest. As Carl rests gleefully in his armchair, satisfied with his coup while the house is floating safely through the air, his escapist journey is interrupted by a sudden knock on the door. Carl has accidentally taken a stowaway aboard. In his effort to complete all the tasks to become a 'senior wilderness explorer', the Asian-American Boy Scout Russell had been on the porch when Carl launched the house. This unintentional intervention in his plans is just the first episode of disruption Carl has to face in pursuing his imperial childhood fantasy.

After the house is caught in a heavy storm Carl and Russell arrive in Paradise Falls but have to drag the floating house through the valley to get the building where Ellie had imagined it. On their journey the two encounter a large bird that they name Kevin and a speaking dog named Dug. As this gang of four slowly makes their way to their destination the film introduces each of the characters as marginalised, deviating from the norm, and lonely: Dug has been ostracised from his pack for lack of intellect; Kevin is the rare bird hunted by Charles Muntz; Russell suffers from the absence of his father; and Carl is an outsider to contemporary society unable to cope with the death of his wife. While the first three characters are immediately drawn to each other and to Carl in particular, the old man continuously discourages and disparages Kevin and Dug in his desire to be alone with his memories of Ellie. Just as Carl is unable to shake off Kevin and Dug, Russell repeatedly ignores orders issued by the ill-tempered Carl. His inability to dictate his companions' behavior is not merely an expression of the powerlessness of the grumpy old man and the (relatively) independent minds of all the characters, but also a fundamental element of the reluctant hero. As Dug continues to pester Carl about becoming his new master, the latter loses his temper and yells: 'I am not your master ... I am nobody's master, got it'?

The group eventually encounters the long-lost Charles Muntz who, after more than 70 years, is still devoted to restoring his reputation by finding proof of the existence of the rare bird species. Initially Carl is excited to meet his 'childhood hero' but slowly discovers the monomaniacal, sinister character Charles has become. When the latter detects Kevin hidden on top of the floating house Charles indicates to his frightened guests that he has killed other visitors before because they had attempted to 'steal' Kevin. Uncompromisingly pursuing his dream of scientific glory, Charles has lost all the qualities of the adventurer-hero and instead is a remorseless murderer in the isolation of Paradise Falls. Through the fallen colonial hero Charles, *Up* characterises (his) imperial fantasy as a harmful, totalitarian, and obsolete ideology, particularly for the imperial agent.²¹

As Carl has also been stuck in the past with his memories of Ellie the resemblance between him and Charles is slowly foregrounded in the film. After Charles is able to track down Carl, Russell, Kevin, and Dug, he sets the house on fire to divert Carl and capture the bird. Afraid to lose his dream Carl first extinguishes the flames and then refuses to rescue Kevin, because 'I am going to Paradise Falls, even if it kills me'. This fanatic dedication to a single objective disregards the consequences for Carl and those traveling with him. Just as Charles transformed into a schizophrenic murderer because of the relentless attempt to re-establish his reputation as a trustworthy scientist, Carl begins to resemble his childhood hero, as the old man is completely transfixed by the imperial fantasy of placing his house atop Paradise Falls.²²

Adventure is in here – the rewriting of imperial fantasies

Although Carl comes close to being consumed by his obsession his social ties to Kevin, Dug, and Russell save him from ending up like Charles. After Carl and Russell complete their mission to pull the house to its destination, Russell – fed up with the bickering old man – uses some of the remaining balloons to build a small aircraft and ventures off to rescue his bird friend Kevin. With Russell gone and the house at its final destination Carl has accomplished his dream. However, the imagery and the extra-diegetic music cast doubt on this moment of triumph. After the long and rough journey the house is devastated and in miserable condition; broken furniture and personal belongings are scattered everywhere as dull, grey colors further illustrate the damaged interior. To the minimal sounds of a sad oboe Carl begins to clean his living room. As he sits down in his beloved armchair surrounded by the emptiness and dullness of the house, and to the silence of a muted soundtrack, a high-angle camera shot captures the dreariness of his life. In fulfilling his (imperial) fantasy Carl proves to be more successful than Charles but remains as isolated and lonely.

Rummaging through Ellie's *My Adventure Book*, Carl discovers that his wife has documented their entire marriage under the section 'Stuff I'm Going to Do'. These pages imply that her adventure was not a journey to some faraway place but rather to live a rich and satisfied life with Carl. The book ends with a brief note from Ellie encouraging Carl not to remain stuck in the past: 'Thank you for the adventure. Now go have a new one. Love, Ellie.' These memories of a meaningful past and the encouragement to continue life redefine the concept of adventure. While Carl (and Charles)

framed 'adventure' as a spatial journey into an 'unknown wilderness', the note left by Ellie characterises 'adventure' as a spiritual endeavor and social practice (i.e. being part of a community). As this reasoning begins to dawn on Carl brighter colors supplant the grey tones to illustrate his emancipation from a fixation on the past.

After this change of heart Carl decides to assist Russell in freeing the captured Kevin. In order to get the building off the ground again Carl throws out old furniture, a fridge, and private belongings. As he literally abandons his past life and rids himself of all the objects that kept his house down Carl is eventually able to fly to the rescue of his new friends. While earlier in the film damage done to his house (the mailbox) triggered a violent outburst, Carl realises at Paradise Falls that this obsession with the past undermines his present. Through the uncompromising and militant pursuit of their respective dreams *Up* establishes a parallel between Carl and Charles, but offers Carl the opportunity through his social bonds to Russell, Kevin, and Dug to disentangle himself from his imperial fantasy. In the logic of the narrative the final battle between the monomaniacal Charles and the reformed Carl is, consequently, about the role of the past and the grasp of its imperial legacy.

Their final confrontation ends with Charles slipping off the zeppelin and falling to his death at the same moment the house also slides off. This correlation between the obsession with the past (Carl) and the desire to explore the 'wilderness' for fame and fortune (Charles) presents imperial fantasies as dated, malicious desires of and for a bygone era; transcending this mania for the past is deeply intertwined with the denunciation of imperial fantasies, and vice versa. Through the embrace of his contemporary social life Carl casts off the desire to resurrect his childhood imperial fantasies. In the logic of *Up* the death of Charles concludes the reformation of Carl and liberates the latter to begin a new chapter in his life by becoming a surrogate father for Russell. Although the animated feature portrays imperialism as an obsolete fantasy of the past, even detrimental to the present, its dreadful dimensions are portrayed as particularly harmful for the imperial dreamer. After all, *Up* narrates the trials and tribulations of Carl while the object of imperial desire is relegated to the margins.²³

The film concludes with Russell's inauguration into the ranks of 'senior wildlife explorer'. After the ceremony Carl, Russell, and Dug are pictured eating ice cream outside a parlor while counting red, blue, and grey cars. This second-to-last shot of an old man, an Asian-American boy, and a speaking dog forming an intimate community encapsulates those qualities Judith Halberstam deems indicative of a progressive animated feature. In her book

The Queer Art of Failure, Halberstam attributes an emancipatory potential to those animation films celebrating a diverse community by ‘connect[ing] individualism to selfishness, to untrammelled consumption, and [opposing] it with a collective mentality’.²⁴ For her a progressive animated film resists ‘an overemphasis on nuclear *family* and a normative investment in coupled *romance*’ as images of ‘collectivity ... social bonding ... [and] diverse communities’ come to trump notions of ‘extraordinary individuals’.²⁵ In *Up* the hetero-normative ideal of family never fully came into existence, as Carl and Ellie led a satisfied childless life. While Russell may represent the offspring they never had the community portrayed at the end of the film transgresses the fantasy of (biological) familial bliss. This community is not tied together by hetero-sexual romance,²⁶ nor by normative hierarchies of race, age, nationality, or species. Rather, the reciprocal relationship between the young Asian-American boy and the older Euro-American man also includes the speaking dog Dug and the South American queer, single mother Kevin.

This non-genealogical transnational community of outsiders and queer identities also supplants the obsolete imperial fantasies represented by Charles. Instead of the exhilarating adventure of the exceptional individual conquering an ‘unknown wilderness’ the film cherishes mundane moments of life shared with others. In this light counting cars does not simply invoke some of the fondest memories Russell had of his father but rather elevates benign activities above the imperial agenda of Charles. So the film cherishes ‘the ordinary American life, not the one which reaches for the heights of fame and fortune’²⁷ and corresponds to the progressive narrative category of portraying an ‘animated world of triumph for the little guys’.²⁸ As an empire-critical text *Up* highlights the repercussions of imperial fantasies for the imperial dreamer and envisions an alternative communal experience.

The spirit of the ‘informal’ empire

This cautionary tale about the dangers of imperialism for the imperialist agent continues the imperial trope, as the plight of the perpetrator marginalises the colonised yet again. This tenacity of the imperial logic is particularly visible in the portrayal of the indigenous Kevin. Presented as intellectually-inferior, the image of a South American native maintains familiar tropes of imperialism by reproducing the colonial dichotomy of nature and culture.²⁹ As an animal without any technological knowledge or cultural sophistication, the South American native Kevin is naturalised as another feature of the scenery of Paradise Falls – her inability to speak

differentiates Kevin from all other (human or animal) characters in the film. When the U.S. American 'wilderness explorer' Russell further names the South American mother 'Kevin' and simultaneously misrecognises her, this queering of gender has to be situated within a history of imperial practices which utilise strategies of othering to establish hierarchies of inferiority and superiority. Tellingly, Kevin is also the only character in the film whose vocal expressions are translated, interpreted, and framed by others.³⁰ When Carl promises to protect the South American native mother bird from the ambitions and desires of the imperialist Charles the hegemonic logic of the Monroe Doctrine is further echoed in the narrative.

In addition to the normative representation of South American characters the film concludes with the (strict) separation of masculine and feminine spheres. Whereas Carl, Russell, and Dug happily enjoy their ice cream in a decidedly urban space, Kevin (and Ellie) is left in the 'wilderness' of Paradise Falls. This division enforces traditional gendered notions of imperialism, as the United States is eventually home to the male characters and South America to the female characters (whether North American or not).

This separation of gender is additionally marked by normative representations of (im)mobility which 'have often coded masculinity as "active," "extending," and "mobile," and femininity as "passive," "inhibited," and "stationary"'.³¹ By traveling to South America in a house and later to the United States in a zeppelin, Carl and Russell display degrees of mobility unattainable for the female characters. Although Kevin has been portrayed as an agile, quick, and mobile bird throughout the film her inability to fly restricts her to the confines of Paradise Falls. Ellie has been a similarly active and agile character at the beginning of the film but loses her mobility; she is personified after her death by the house.³² In the final shot of the film the camera slowly pans away from Paradise Falls where 'Ellie' is located permanently atop the valley as Kevin is heard squeaking in the background.

These gendered representations of (im)mobility maintain an intimate connection to U.S. exceptionalism since 'geographical and social mobility ... have been of major significance for the narratives of nation-building and American subject formation' by conceptualising an 'immobilized Other' in a 'highly exclusionary'³³ fashion. Because 'mobility has been the core of American foundational mythology',³⁴ the characterisation of gender, mobility, and space in *Up* complicates a progressive reading as femininity, immobility, wilderness, and otherness are compartmentalised in a binary opposition to masculinity, mobility, urbanity (or 'civilization') and the (U.S.) nation. This normative dichotomy of exclusion and inclusion suggests a

highly ambiguous critique of imperialism as notions of U.S. exceptionalism continue to emerge in the animated feature.

The last shots in *Up* heighten this uneasiness about the film. When Carl and Russell take possession of the Spirit of Adventure both also appropriate imperial power. The airship in *Up* combines the luxurious interior design of the *Graf Hindenburg*, the South American context recalls the travels of the *Graf Zeppelin*, and the ability to carry other airplanes is indicative of the U.S. zeppelins *ZRS 4* and *ZRS 5*. This amalgamation situates the Spirit of Adventure within an aeronautic history motivated by commercial business competition, imperial conquest, and military conflict. The combination of iconographic airship features haunts the final shots of *Up*, as the zeppelin is a reliable and effective tool of transportation enabling Carl and Russell to comfortably travel anywhere in the world.

Within the context of imperialism the expanded (global) mobility represented by the zeppelin additionally symbolises a shift from the dominance of the British to the U.S. Empire and their modes of imperial control. Brian Larkin describes the 19th century British Empire as being organised through control of seas, postal systems, telegraphic networks, and chains of wireless stations through which a command and control structure existed, tying far-flung nodes into a single territorial system. The push here was toward tighter integration, faster linkages, greater centralised control, and less autonomy for outlying areas.³⁵

The relative stasis of the British Empire is most aptly represented by the deployment of large military and bureaucratic resources to the colonial periphery to maintain a very tight, hierarchical control over these spaces. Or, to follow James Laxer in his *Empire*: '[w]hile an important part of the British Empire was informal, in that the Union Jack did not fly over it, the largest part of the empire was formally British territory, directly ruled from London'.³⁶ By contrast, a U.S. empire has to be considered informal as it is not defined 'by settlers and the annexation of territory but organized around the faster movement of goods and a preference for proxy political regimes as long as they guaranteed that speed of movement'.³⁷ Since U.S. imperialism molds vital economic, political, military, and cultural 'decisions in the countries that fall within the empire' even as local, regional, or national governments keep legal sovereignty over their territory, its strategies differ extensively from British imperial practices.³⁸

In *Up* these different forms of empire are mirrored in the way social cohesion is sustained (by Charles), the employment of the zeppelin, and the treatment of the colonial space. By maintaining a tight hierarchy among his dog pack Charles is able to employ his numerous animals to establish

control of Paradise Falls. South America remains a foreign and peripheral space for Charles, a site to extract precious resources from in order to re-establish his reputation in the imperial center. Living in his luxurious quarters aboard the Spirit of Adventure while being catered to by his loyal dogs, Charles continues to preserve the familiar lifestyle of the imperial center (for dinner hot dogs are served) as he remains visually isolated from the valley in his dashing flight jacket and with his enormous 19th century hunting rifle. In an obsolete fashion, even the zeppelin is merely used as a stationary headquarters rather than a mobile tool of permanent observation and control.

By saving Kevin and her chickens from Charles, Carl and Russell align themselves with the local inhabitants and their struggle against imperial usurpers. However, leaving the house atop Paradise Falls functions as a visible reminder of their deeds and manifests a subtler form of surveillance which rests upon the regulation of space through symbols rather than physical presence. Additionally, the authority of the symbol is substantiated by the mobility of the Spirit of Adventure. Since the zeppelin allows for global mobility every location in the world becomes an easily accessible destination for the neo-imperialist Carl and Russell, as the globe is configured into a single, manageable network.

In this sense the disavowal of imperialism in *Up* is made possible by an obsolete conceptualisation of empire, as its formal version of the physical occupation of territory is intimately linked to Charles Muntz. His disappearance during the 1930s further echoes popular (mis)conceptions about U.S. imperialism. Although some expansionist tendencies in U.S. history (the Spanish-American War in 1898 and the annexation of Cuba and the Philippines) tend to be acknowledged, the Monroe Doctrine in the 19th century and the advent of fascism and communism (in Europe and Asia) in the 20th were employed to define U.S. imperial practices at the turn of the century as a deviation from an otherwise anti-imperial tradition vis-à-vis European Empires, fascism, and communism. Consequently, the transformation of the all-American adventurer Charles Muntz into a fanatical imperialist is made possible in part by his disappearance in time.

As Charles represents a (supposedly) bygone era of U.S. history the depiction of imperialism as a long-lost relict of the past can be additionally read as a denouncement of contemporary U.S. (foreign) politics. The re-appearance of Charles frames the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as (outdated) imperial endeavors motivated by dubious reasons. This critique rests upon an obsolete definition of imperialism which neglects the 'informal' or neo-imperial qualities of a U.S. empire predominant after the Second World War. The

portrayal of empire as a malevolent fantasy and endeavor continues to neglect the persistence of imperialism, as *Up* does not represent a farewell to U.S. imperial power per se. The zeppelin as a tool of unrestricted global travel indicates the preservation of imperial agency just as its name, Spirit of Adventure, underlines the non-physical quality of empire.

While *Up* may question the logic of imperial fantasies as leading to a life of social isolation, psychological mania, and violent death, the narrative does not engage with the experiences of the object of imperial desires. Instead of detailing Kevin's trials and tribulations after her home is invaded by Charles the film explores the damaging consequences of the imperial fantasy for its potential agent Carl (whose fantasy is similarly invaded by Charles in the Movietown News 'Spotlight on Adventure' newsreel). As the (female) imperial object is marginalised her story is supplanted by a portrayal of the dangers of the imperial fantasy for the (male) imperial subject-to-be.

Conclusion

The non-normative moments in *Up* continue to be haunted by contemporary forms of U.S. imperial ideology. Through the friendship of Carl, Russell, Dug, and Kevin the film offers a vision of a communal ideal transgressing the grasp of imperial ideology. Although the film abandons the patriarchal, hetero-normative, monocultural, nuclear family structure in favor of an unconventional, transcultural, and transnational community, it continues to be embedded within narratives of a U.S. empire. The transgressive community divided along the lines of normative gender assumptions, (im)mobility, and space alludes to the 'the well-known nineteenth-century "cult of domesticity" or ideology of "separate spheres"'³⁹ which figured prominently as 'engine[s] of national expansion'.⁴⁰

While Kaplan uses a different nexus to explore these issues in her *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*, her interest in imperial practices via Manifest Destiny resonates with my reading of the Monroe Doctrine in *Up*. Particularly, the reconfiguration of the South American Paradise Falls as a separate yet integral sphere of U.S. domesticity echoes the 'paradoxical effect whereby the distinction between inside and outside is obliterated by the expansion of the home/nation/temple to encompass the globe'.⁴¹ The film does not abandon all forms of imperial power, as the Spirit of Adventure symbolises (the potential) continuation of imperial practices with a non-normative appeal. The last shots of a blissful,

transnational community between the Americas within the hegemonial frame of the Monroe Doctrine echo ‘the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and that of domesticity shar[ing] a vocabulary that runs imperial conquest into spiritual regeneration ... in visions of geopolitical domination as global harmony’.⁴²

Even while *Up* may be read as a comment upon the military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan and a cautionary tale about the dangers imperialism extols upon its agents, the tenacity of the grasp of U.S. exceptionalism continues in the 21st century. If the cultures of U.S. imperialism haunt the national sphere then the transgressive, transnational community envisioned by *Up* may also question the firmness of this grasp. The zeppelin is a ‘slippery sign’⁴³ of imperial power due to its obsolescence and fragility. The history of the zeppelin is stained by a tremendous loss of lives as numerous crew members, passengers, and ground personnel died due to the aircraft’s technological faults and its susceptibility to natural phenomena. This vulnerability eventually led to the abandonment of zeppelins as means of air travel – the airship’s status as a symbol of Western superiority, civilised progress, and technological advancement vanished. The iconography of the zeppelin represents an inadequate tool of domination.

Similarly, the older Carl and the younger Russell both may exemplify the expansion of U.S. exceptionalism to incorporate a more diverse spectrum of people, yet their physical vulnerability and their childish naiveté deviate from past norms of exceptionalism. In addition, the figure of the Boy Scout represents a third slippery sign. While the Boy Scouts of America are deeply entangled with the imperial ideology of the United States⁴⁴ the Asian-American boy also speaks to the changing nature of this ideology.

A possible reading of *Up* may highlight the perseverance of U.S. exceptionalism and its ability to adapt to a changed social sphere incorporating previously marginalised groups and even queer communities into its framework. This all-encompassing tenacious grasp of U.S. exceptionalism is thereby altered nonetheless. My reading of *Up* may function as a cautionary tale about the persistence of U.S. exceptionalism while simultaneously acknowledging its instability. The resonance of 19th century U.S. exceptionalism differs from its 21st century version.

Notes

1. Taves 1993, pp. 111-112
2. The *Fox Movietone News* had been a common feature of news reporting at the cinema for decades. Since these newsreels ‘pandered to popular tastes and to the short, tabloid-induced

attention span of their audiences' (Herzstein 1988, p. 314), their choice of themes, imagery, and voice-over commentary perpetuated a decidedly U.S. perspective on their subject matter (cf. Henderson 1988, p. 129). The travelogues in particular were steeped in colonialism (cf. Gunning 2006, pp. 30-31)

3. Gunning 2006, p. 42.
4. Kaplan 2004, p. 153.
5. Ibid., p. 156.
6. Ibid., pp. 156-157.
7. Metz 2010, p. 80.
8. Ibid., p. 68.
9. This disavowal of imperialism has already been a fundamental narrative structure in Disney comics. As Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart write: '[i]n order to assure the redemptive powers of present-day imperialism, it is only necessary to measure it against old-style colonialism and robbery' (Dorfman & Mattelart 1975, p. 54).
10. Murphy 2005, p. 2.
11. Ibid., pp. 6, 145.
12. For Dorfman and Mattelart, who represent a Marxist tradition of treating ideology as complete, impenetrable, and stable, resistance to imperial texts can only lay outside in the socio-political sphere (Dorfman & Mattelart 1975, p. 99). While this is not the space to question their perspective in detail suffice it to say that I understand cultural texts to be more complex, as they are open to continuous (re-)interpretations. For a comprehensive discussion of the ideological instability of texts see Fluck 2009.
13. In my reading I do not explore the ways computer animation or children's culture may shape our understanding of *Up*. I am aware of the different approaches investigating the particular subversive quality animation holds (see Wells 2002) and the dangers of ideological formation through children's culture (see Dorfman & Mattelart 1975). Both perspectives do not represent the defining view on animation or children's culture, as their normative and subversive potentials continue to be debated. In this sense, to explore the issue of imperialism in *Up* from either of the two perspectives may highlight different (cinematic and narrative) themes and (socio-political or economic) contexts. My overall interest in the ideological (in)stability of imperialism does not depend on the issue of animation or children's culture.
14. Murphy 2005, p. 5.
15. Ibid., p. 5.
16. Pease 2011, p. 21.
17. Murphy 2005, pp. 148-149.
18. Kaplan 1993, p. 12.
19. Metz 2010, p. 70.
20. The journey in an airborne house evokes Dorothy's trip to the Land of Oz in Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). In his reading of the novel Frank Kelleter links its representations of otherness to the need for tolerating differences, negotiating compromises, and embracing modes of co-existence. Kelleter further identifies an anti-interventionist motive in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and he connects it to the Boxer Rebellion and European imperialism in China (Kelleter 2013, pp. 177-178). Both the ethic of difference and the anti-interventionist theme of the novel are echoed in *Up*.
21. This juxtaposition of the two male protagonists recalls Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). While Carl can be considered a Marlowe figure fascinated by fantasies of travel and exploration, Charles resembles the white imperial hero-figure Kurtz, whose brutality and crudeness exposes the devastating consequences of (European) colonialism. The notion

- of a physical journey into foreign territory which figures as a psychological exploration of (Western) morality in *Up* similarly echoes an essential trope of *Heart of Darkness*. Since the novella has further been considered to provide 'a powerful critique of at least some manifestations of imperialism and racism as it simultaneously presents that critique in ways that can be characterized only as imperialist and racist' (Brantlinger 1999, p. 192), even the debates surrounding *Heart of Darkness* mirror my thesis about the tenacious grasp of imperialism in *Up*. To name but two additional parallels: the deconstruction of the hero figure as a (potentially) subversive gesture (Thieme 2001, p. 27) and the portrayal of the white, male protagonist(s) as victim(s) of imperial ideology (Hampson 1999, p. 210).
22. In addition to the monomaniacal fixation on their dreams both characters are also driven by the fetishisation of a female figure: Charles desperately attempts to capture the single-mother bird Kevin to restore his reputation by any means necessary, while Carl clings to his past with Ellie.
 23. While Kevin and Paradise Falls come to embody the imperialist obsessions of Charles and Carl the film does not explore the consequences of their objectification. *Up* neither considers the psychological effects a 70-year hunt has on Kevin and his family nor the environmental impact Charles and Carl may have on Paradise Falls. In highlighting the agony Carl experiences due to his imperialist fixation the animated feature has to be situated within an imperial history which understood South America from a European and U.S. perspective (Mignolo 2005, pp. xi-xii).
 24. Halberstam 2011, p. 47.
 25. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.
 26. The film remains fairly vague about the familial situation of Russell. His father and mother are probably divorced. While his father rarely spends any time with Russell his mother also appears to be struggling with the boy, as her favorite game, according to Russell, is 'who can be quiet the longest'. Even when Russell is promoted to 'senior wildlife explorer' at the end of the film, Carl stands with Russell while his mother is only briefly shown in the audience. This marginalisation of his biological family underscores the non-genealogical quality of the community of friends.
 27. Metz 2010, p. 67.
 28. Halberstam 2011, p. 47.
 29. Mignolo 2005, pp. 81-82.
 30. In one scene Kevin is shown to be scavenging food from a house as Dug explains to the puzzled Carl and Russell (and the viewer) that Kevin is doing this in order to feed her chickens.
 31. Steinhoff 2012, p. 110.
 32. Carl continuously speaks to the house by calling the building 'Ellie'.
 33. Paul & Ganser & Gerund 2012, p. 12.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
 35. Larkin 2010, p. 155.
 36. Laxer 2006, p. 20.
 37. Larkin 2010, p. 155.
 38. Laxer 2006, p. 20.
 39. Kaplan 2002, p. 24.
 40. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
 41. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
 42. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
 43. Freedman 2004, p. 62.
 44. Macleod 1983, pp. 46, 138, 144.

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