

# Ecological Immanence: A Cartoonish Case Against Architectural Transcendence<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This paper adopts an interpretive methodology to investigate architectural movement in two animated case studies, Pixar's 2008 *WALL·E* and Disney/Pixar's 2009 *Up*. The two cases are used as an excuse to make an ecological case against transcendentalism.

While the idea of transcendentalism, as used in this paper, may differ from that intended by ACSF,<sup>2</sup> the provocations here can still allow for a healthy dialogue on the issue of transcendence, from a disciplinary lens of architecture. Rather than starting with the ambitious task of offering a comprehensive and conclusive definition of transcendence, one can start by focusing on two categories that perhaps matter most to designers: The first outlook is descriptive; it looks at the experience of space, while the other is prescriptive, looking at the process of design. When it comes to the first approach, one can argue that any (spatial) experience eventually transcends the object. The consumption of architecture by a (human) subject similarly and necessarily goes beyond the immediate architectural object. Naturally, such perceptions vary in quality, but can designers of the built environment exploit spatial properties to provoke, trigger, or elicit a certain transcendental message? This deliberate injection of transcendental meaning into the architectural text is the focus of my critique here. Using the two animations, I will argue that such an approach reduces architectural experience to the semantic level. In this process, *Up* helps support my problematization of transcendentalism in the first half of the paper while *WALL·E* will later offer a solution to *Up*'s pathology.

## Flying *Up*-wards

*Up*'s protagonist is one 78-year-old balloon salesman, Carl Fredricksen, whose house, in the middle of a developing downtown neighborhood, is sought by developers who want to replace it with skyscrapers. Escaping the tension, Carl ties thousands of helium balloons to his house, flying it away to Paradise Falls (a South American wilderness), thereby fulfilling his belated wife's lifelong dream. During his many adventures, Carl has to throw out many of his belongings, including picture frames of his beloved wife, to keep the house light and flying.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper directly combines two book chapters that I had published before: Vahid Vahdat, "Virtual Interiorities of Consumption: The Second Fall of Man in Wall-E," in *Virtual interiorities: The Myth of Total Virtuality*, ed. Vahid Vahdat, Dave Gottwald, and Gregory Turner-Rahman (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University ETC Press, 2022). Vahid Vahdat "The Slave Aesthetics of Suburbia: Animate Architecture in Howl's Moving Castle and Up," in *Animate(d) Architecture: A Spatial Investigation of the Moving Image*, ed. Vahid Vahdat (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2024) 153–68.

<sup>2</sup> By "transcendentalism," I am not referring to the American spiritual tradition that emerged in the early 1800's, in which the idea of religion as the sole mode of relation to a diety was rejected, in favor of a more personal and intuitive response to the phenomenological world.

Even the dull synopsis provided here cannot conceal the blandly obvious didactic of the film. The way-too-familiar message, that to reach higher spiritual status thou must free thyself from the weight of all worldly attachments, has a well-established theological and mystical history, including in the poetry of Rumi. In its aim to explore “transcendent unity in a world of multiplicity,” the symposium misquotes Rumi saying, “The wound is the place where the Light enters you.” The actual two examples below perhaps better capture the message of *Up*, if not the premise of the conference:

Die, die, don't fear your death,  
Rise from this dirt, hold the sky,  
Cut loose from your ego, for it is your chain, and you its slave. . .  
Break away from this prison cell. . .  
Die, die, and rise out of this cloud.  
Once over the cloud, you shall shine, for you are the moon. . .

Held in a temporary cage, made of my body,  
I am a heavenly bird, to this dusty earth I do not belong.  
What a day, when I break away,  
Flying toward my beloved one.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from the repeating transcendental content of such poetry, the form also is rather similar (and transcendental). As evident from these examples, dirt, chain, prison, cage, etc., all signify the same idea of attachments that holds one back from another set of signifiers for emancipation, such as escaping, growing, shining, and, of course, flying. They are all metaphors.

Metaphor is a figure of speech that, for rhetorical purposes, uses a concept by intending a meaning that is different from its literal connotation. The aesthetic encounter with metaphors culminates in the triumphant pleasure of decoding a literary puzzle and deciphering the referential trickery of the syntax. What is central here is the association of metaphors to a meaning that transcends its immediate connotation. While metaphors supposedly produce an illusion of depth, by implying “deeper” layers of meaning, they paradoxically flatten interpretation to only a secondary level, that awaits unmasking. Metaphors deny alternative readings.

*Up*'s world is metaphoric and therefore rather straightforward. Everything from the film's title to the two couches that belong to the protagonist and his deceased wife Ellie takes part in one coherent, supposedly hidden master narrative, that is stuffed into the narrative. Being somewhat of a stickler, Carl's club chair has a more rectilinear (even cubical) form hinting at his cautious, even timid, personality. Ellie's wingback chair with curved sides reflects her free-spirited personality. This appropriation of (probably reductionist) preconceptions about straight versus curved forms is not character building—it is a simple referential device that works through association. Blunter examples include the name of Carl's dream destiny: “Paradise” Falls (majestic, romanticized, pastoral, and heavenly, in its Abrahamic glory) and the name of the retirement house he tries to avoid: “Shady” Oaks. Even the sarcasm of quotation marks cannot make such reference more exposed.

The transcendental ambition of *Up* can be extended to the suburban residential typology. The main character in *Up* is, in some sense, the house. The film shows its entire life, from its inception as a crayon drawing, its acquisition, renovation, and furnishing, up to its flight, and, in a way, its afterlife in Paradise (Falls). And the suburban house plays this role perfectly.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more poetic translation, see Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi, *Hidden Music*, trans. Maryam Mafi and Azima Melita Kolin (London: Thorsons, 2001)..

To the suburban house, nature is as romanticized, fetishized, and abstract as Timothy Morton suggests in his *Ecology without Nature*: Nature for suburbia is placed on a pedestal and admired from afar.<sup>4</sup> It is a glorified image with flavors of primitivism and sacredness—it is the heavens. That is why the suburban house is never at home—it is always out of place. Because deep down, the suburban subjectivity, with its antiurban resentments (even misanthropic tendencies), longs for a home that is isolated in “nature”—deep into a secluded forest, looking onto a tranquil lake, or right across a majestic waterfall. The 60'x120' lot is the best it can afford—it will always feel like a temporary surrogate.

The suburban house is thus by definition a metaphor. It sits in the place of an idea that transcends its immediate function. It points upward to a heavenly ideal that it so desperately desires. And distances itself from any urban condition that it so resentfully detests. Meanwhile, it suffers from a pathological thirst for this mirage of a nature that its sheer existence perpetually destroys. Paradise Falls is casted for its role precisely because it is “a lost world,” “never before seen by civilized humanity,” and “undiscovered by science,” as the film dialogues suggest. Suburbia is consumed with an obsession for an undiscoverable and unachievable desire. It justifies its impotence to consummate its desire by deferring it to a status of transcendental sacredness, while simultaneously developing a resentment towards alternative profane typologies.

The suburban metaphysics of beauty ascribes to transcendental ideals, associated with sacred, spiritual, or mystical values, while concealing its roots in racial and gendered resentments. “Although the suburbanization of the United States began in the 1920s,” as Eric Avila shows, “it was not until the postwar era that the process gave way to white flight through the collusion of public policy and private practice.”<sup>5</sup>

With the Great Migration of over 4 million African Americans from the South to northern or western cities between 1940 and 1970, the racial character of major American cities saw major transformations. In response, to this postwar “exodus,”<sup>6</sup> “whites fled the cities by the droves, heading into newly developed areas outside the metropolitan congestion. These new suburbs became sites of refuge, places to begin (whiteness) again, far away from the compounding racial threats of the cities.”<sup>7</sup>

In a clear resentment toward the immanent aesthetics of life and freedom, with its everyday pleasures, displayed in the racially transformed urban condition of postwar American cities, the suburban transcendentalism was constructed as a spatial metaphor: the sanctuary of familial and religious values. In his search for “the emergence of a true suburbia,” the urban planning scholar, Robert Fishman, studies the case of Clapham, England, concluding that, “the design of this prototypical suburban community [is] reinforced by the particular concerns of the evangelical movement.”<sup>8</sup> According to Fishman,

“The contradiction between the city and the Evangelical ideal of the family provided the final impetus for the unprecedented separation of the citizen’s home from the city that is the essence of the suburban idea. The city was not just crowded, dirty, and unhealthy; it was

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology without nature: rethinking environmental aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Avila, “Dark City: White Flight and the Urban Science Fiction Film in Postwar America,” in *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New York: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 57.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert J. Gans, “The White Exodus to Suburbia Steps Up,” in *Cities in Trouble*, ed. Nathan Glazer (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas A. Cunningham, “A Theme Park Built for One: The New Urbanism vs. Disney Design in “The Truman Show,”” *Critical Survey* 17, no. 1 (2005): 113, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41556097>.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois utopias: the rise and fall of suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 39.

immoral. Salvation itself depended on separating the woman's sacred world of family and children from the profane metropolis."<sup>9</sup>

The reactionary nature of the suburban transcendentalism hides its patriarchal and racist tendencies by pointing *upward* to the "sacred world" of familial and religious ideals, and thereby distancing itself from the earthly, profane, immoral, dirty urban condition.

### The Fall

While *Up* has provided this paper with a structure on which a pathological reading of architectural transcendence was articulated, *WALL·E* is used to offer response to the ecological crises that humanity faces. *WALL·E*, as one would expect from an animation made primarily for an audience of children, is clearly a didactic film, if not purely ideological. Given its not-so-hidden biblical references, the film has received praise from religious commentators.<sup>10</sup> After all, Axiom, as a vessel with the mission to transport the last of all living species to safety, resembles Noah's ark. And much like Noah's dove who brought back an olive branch as a sign of proximity to habitable land, the Axiom would send out Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluators (Eve) in search of vegetative life forms. But as the unconvincing line up of these three words that are forcefully put together to generate the desired abbreviation suggests, the main theological reference of the film is to the Genesis. Eve and WALL·E, and a group of primitive homo sapiens, abandon their heavenly lives for a life on a clearly less-desirable earth.

But what the conservative proponents of the film fail to see is its subversive adoption of biblical narratives. While the *Fall of Man* aims to show its audience that their temporary life on the earthly dwelling will pass away, and they should through a virtuous life seek return to their eternal house in heaven, *WALL·E* seems to prescribe a second fall, not through expulsion, but a choice that requires courage, sacrifice, and hard, messy work. This anti-transcendental position in articulating a theme that is clearly ecological is in line with Morton's proclamation that, "nature has become a transcendental principle."<sup>11</sup> Morton is critical of how the idea of nature, "is set up as a transcendental, unified, independent category."<sup>12</sup>

This is where Morton's commitment to flat ontology helps deanthropocentrize nature. Flat ontology is a thesis that suggests all objects, have the same degree of being-ness as any other object. A rusticated part from a broken garbage disposal machine, in this viewpoint, exists equally to an overweight person playing virtual golf. The reality of their existence is non-hierarchical and irreducible. A diamond ring's ontological value is no more than its felt box. Flat ontology, as Levi Bryant asserts, "rejects any ontology of transcendence;"<sup>13</sup> likewise Morton's ecological thought abandons the concept of nature as some sort of a transcendental unified whole, external to human thought and culture, within which beings reside.

The landing of Axiom should thus be read as an attempt to bring down humans from the privileged subjective position they have occupied and immanently relocate them on a flattened ecological system that includes technology, urbanity, as well as pieces of Styrofoam cups from hundreds of years

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<sup>9</sup> Fishman, *Bourgeois utopias*, 37.

<sup>10</sup> "Movieguide," an online venue with the mission "to redeem the values of the entertainment industry, according to biblical principles," gives *WALL·E* four stars for its "Biblical worldview." It praises the film for its manifesting "virtues that Christians and most conservatives would commend," and for its "very strong Christian, redemptive worldview without mentioning Jesus" "WALL-E Great Love Conquers Time and Space." Movie Guide, updated 2017-11-21, 2012, accessed July 13, 2021, <https://www.movieguide.org/reviews/walle.html>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ecology without nature : rethinking environmental aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ecology without nature : rethinking environmental aesthetics*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> "The democracy of objects," (2011): 245, <http://www.doabooks.org/doab?func=fulltext&rid=14527>.

ago. The flatness can additionally be extended to the hierarchical relationship between the physical and the virtual.