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‘Married Life’?: The Intra-diegetic, Thematic Transformation, and Disney Pixar’s *Up* (2009)

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## ‘Married Life’?: The Intra-diegetic, Thematic Transformation, and Disney Pixar’s *Up* (2009)

### Introduction

Pixar’s *Up* has one of the most memorable montages in recent cinema. The opening sequence follows the married life of Carl and Ellie, showing them grow old together and ending with Ellie’s death. Michael Giacchino scores this sequence through a set of variations, revolving around the same theme (which will be referred to as ‘Ellie’s Theme’ from now on). This theme appears throughout the film, initially at moments in which Carl talks to the now deceased Ellie, personified (to Carl) as the house they shared. Daniel Goldmark has noted how Pixar scores often move away from trends in cartoon music, such as mickey-mousing, towards something that is ‘as rich, provoking, and complex as any live-action Hollywood film’.<sup>1</sup> Giacchino’s score to *Up* is certainly deeply connected to the film’s narrative, primarily through ‘Ellie’s Theme’. This essay will explore how this theme maps itself onto the film’s narrative in two ways. First, it will cover Ben Winters’s theory of the ‘intra-diegetic’<sup>2</sup> as well as a broader discussion on the implications of music and narrative, showing how music can closely relate itself to characters and plot. Secondly, it will show the transformation of the theme’s meaning as the film progresses by acting as Carl’s musical monologue; it is a melody from his married life (which is implied to be diegetic in the opening montage) that becomes a signifier for his changing perception on family.

### Winters and the Intra-Diegetic

Winters’s theory of music and narrative broadly revolves around the idea that since narrative film worlds are somewhat removed from reality, then it is not unreasonable to assume that the characters in the film can hear the non-diegetic music: ‘Might we better understand such music not as a narrating voice but as the product of narration, belonging to the same narrative

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Goldmark, ‘Drawing a New Narrative for Cartoon Music’, in David Neumeyer (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p241.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Winters, ‘The Non-Diegetic Fallacy: Film, Music and Narrative Space’, *Music & Letters*, 91/2 (2010), p237.

space as the characters and their world?'.<sup>3</sup> This is a departure from Claudia Gorbman's theories on diegesis, in that only diegetic music comes from 'a source within the narrative'.<sup>4</sup> Winters's position is that all music and sound in cinema is a 'narrative agent', and thus can serve the plot of the film.<sup>5</sup> Winters's draws upon two terms used by David Bordwell (which Bordwell took from Russian neo-formalists) and applies them to music: *syuzhet* ('all sounds and images presented in a film) and *fabula* (the abstracted narrative constructed by the spectator) to distinguish between all film sound and narratively driven sound.<sup>6</sup> This distinction, between *fabula* and *syuzhet*, that the idea of the intra-diegetic is built upon.

Winters defines the intra-diegetic as this: 'intra-diegetic music or sound exists in the film's everyday narrative space and time, and is thus properly thought of as part of the film's *fabula*: it may be considered to be produced by the characters themselves (either as a result of their physical movements, as with mickey-mousing, as an expression of their emotional state, or as a musical calling-card), or by the geographical space of the film'.<sup>7</sup> Intra-diegetic music has the potential therefore to be explicitly linked to the character's actions and personal development. This means that it unlocks the potential of fluid thematic meaning; if a character's interpretation of events changes, their music or its musical meaning will change with them. This combined with Winters's idea of the non-realistic film world is especially potent for animation; animation is already removed from reality by its visual aesthetics, and thus it could be seen as a world in which the music the audience perceives non-diegetic music as actually narrating the lives of these characters.

However, there are some issues with Winters's theories. Two of the most prominent critiques come from Guido Heldt and Tobias Pontara. Heldt sees the non-diegetic as 'essential to the

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p228.

<sup>4</sup> Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard melodies: narrative film music*, (London : BFI ; Bloomington, Ind : Indiana University Press, 1987), p22.

<sup>5</sup> Winters, 2010, p236.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p231.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p237.

*depiction* of the fictional world’ and not ‘the fictional world *as depicted* in the film’.<sup>8</sup> This can be seen as problematic for Winters’s argument, which hinges on a hyper-fictionalised depiction of film narratives. This hyper-fictionalisation may not be applicable for live-action films, clearly set in the real world. Historical dramas are arguably the best examples of this, and it is odd that Winters uses *Saving Private Ryan* as his primary case study,<sup>9</sup> a film where music is not that prominent, and which tries to be as realistic in its sound design as possible (especially in the D-Day landing sequence). Heldt also takes issue with the rigidity of Winters’s terms, in that they do not allow for ‘fluid phenomena’<sup>10</sup>, which is how he sees the relationship between music and narrative, diegesis and non-diegesis. Music can be implied to be part of the diegesis (e.g. a stereo out of shot as two characters listen to the music) or be non-diegetic but could also be part of the film’s world (most pop song scores can be seen as this). For Pontara, the issue is much simpler. He sees Winters’s ideas as ‘unconvincing for the simple reason that most people do in fact find it unproblematic to hear musical underscoring as nondiegetic’;<sup>11</sup> music is simply a part of the film going experience, and thus audiences now expect an underscore. Pontara sees the intradiegetic as a term that can be broadly applied to certain films, but not all of them, arguing that ‘the single most important factor influencing the applicability or nonapplicability of intradiegetic conceptions is cinematic genre’.<sup>12</sup> Genre is key, and for Winters’s theories to be applicable, a less “realistic” genre is more appropriate. Animation is perfect for this as the visuals are unrealistic by design, and often contain more fantastical stories. In the case of *Up*, Carl and Ellie are designed to look entirely different from one another and not at all realistic (Carl is short, blocky, and angular, while Ellie is drawn using smoother lines) and the plot focusses on a man flying his house to South

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<sup>8</sup> Guido Heldt, *Music and Levels of Narration in Film* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), p61.

<sup>9</sup> Winters, 2010, p238-242.

<sup>10</sup> Heldt, 2013, p61.

<sup>11</sup> Tobias Pontara, ‘Interpretation and Underscoring: Modest Constructivism and the Issue of Nondiegetic versus Intradiegetic Music in Film’, *Music and the Moving Image*, 9/2 (2016), p44.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p48.

America by tying lots of helium balloons to it. It is this fantastical setting that lends *Up* to an intra-diegetic reading.

#### Narrative, Thematic Transformation, and the Implications on Animation

On the role of the composer, Giacchino has said ‘As a film composer, your job is not to write music; your job is to tell a story’.<sup>13</sup> Giacchino’s vision of the role of the composer shows that he feels music is interwoven with the narrative structure. Jerrold Levinson has noted how the narrator is a ‘fictional agent’<sup>14</sup> and that ‘music composed *for* a film ... is more likely to be purely narrative in function than pre-existing music appropriated *by* the filmmaker’.<sup>15</sup> In *Up*, this idea of purely narrative music comes in the form of thematic transformation, as Ellie’s theme changes meaning while remaining mostly musically the same. In narrative film, music can act as simply underscoring or play a variety of other roles. Claudia Gorbman has called music ‘the supreme border-crosser of narrative categories; it so often ‘comes from nowhere’ that, like water, it can seep into any ‘crack’’.<sup>16</sup> This amorphous nature has made defining music and narrative difficult. Why is there film in music at all? What role does it play? When is it successfully used? The debates on music and narrative have covered a variety of issues, with Anahid Kassabian even arguing that the focus on audio and the fictional world has ‘restrained other ways of thinking about soundtracks and narrativity’.<sup>17</sup>

To approach the issue of music and narrative, it must be decided how realistically we view the film world. While Winters’s argument might be seen as extreme, it does raise an interesting point in terms of the discussion of music and animation. Thus, what Winters’s

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<sup>13</sup> J. Burlingame, ‘Michael Giacchino: Driven by stories’ at <http://variety.com/2010/digital/news/michael-giacchino-driven-by-stories-1118025204/> 2010. (Accessed 25/02/2018)

<sup>14</sup> Jerrold Levinson, ‘Film Music and Narrative Agency’ in David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (eds), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), p263.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p249.

<sup>16</sup> Anahid Kassabian et al, ‘Roundtable: Current Perspectives on Music, Sound, and Narrative in Screen Media’, in Miguel Mera, Ronald Sadoff, and Ben Winters (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Screen Music and Sound* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p110.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p112.

calls a film's 'presentational strategies'<sup>18</sup> (how a film presents its narrative and its world to the audience) can also vary. This is why the intra-diegetic is a useful term to apply to music and animation; because the presentation is not realistic, the musical storytelling can also be more explicit. Pontara has said that 'the further removed a cinematic fictional world is from the perceived constitution of our actual world, the more likely it is that Winters's model can be plausibly applied'<sup>19</sup> and one of the furthest points of removal from reality is animation.

Before continuing onto a broader discussion of *Up*, it is important to note how musical themes are able to change meaning in tandem with the cinematic events they narrate.

Matthew Bribitzer-Stull, in his book on the leitmotif, has said that 'leitmotifs are developmental in nature, evolving to reflect and create new musico-dramatic contexts'.<sup>20</sup> This can be used within an intradiegetic reading of films, as a theme would alter as the thematic subject changes along with the narrative. While his book mostly discusses musical changes to themes, it is useful to see how leitmotivic meaning transforms. Bribitzer-Stull has said that 'thematic relationships need to strike a balance to be effective'; if a theme played throughout the entirety of a film, it would lose all semiotic meaning as it could not possibly cover every possible moment within a narrative. This balance can be achieved in a number of ways, such as by having a variety of different musical themes that refer to different things (as in Howard Shore's score to *The Lord of the Rings*) or having one idea that is surrounded by non-intrusive music. Giacchino has taken this second approach in *Up*. While other characters (such as Kevin the mother bird and Muntz) do have themes, they are nowhere near as prominent as Ellie's. None of them is given the attention that Ellie's theme gets, as it is the sole musical focus for the most prominent scene at the film's opening. Bribitzer-Stull also mentions how 'music's very nature – sound abstraction unfolding in real time – makes it a

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<sup>18</sup> Ben Winters, *Music, Performance, and the Realities of Film* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), p175.

<sup>19</sup> Pontara, 2016, p50.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew Bribitzer-Stull, *Understanding the leitmotif: from Wagner to Hollywood film music*, (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p10.

natural metaphor for that most abstract of human real-time experience: feelings'.<sup>21</sup> It is this gradual unfolding of meaning that takes place in *Up*; Carl slowly realising how Ellie was not his only possible family, and how Ellie's theme is slowly transformed to now be about Carl's new family. To show this, this essay will use Andrew Simmons idea that 'musical cues must be contextualised in relation to their greater narrative structures to reveal global functions that may otherwise be concealed'.<sup>22</sup> By looking at the placement of Ellie's theme within the narrative of *Up*, we can see it change meaning and see it as an intra-diegetic theme, created by Carl as his perception of family and home changes.

### *Up* – The montage and emotion

Daniel Goldmark has noted that through 'deftly crafted stories, animation, and soundtracks, ... [Pixar] have a striking capacity to evoke emotional responses in many new ways'.<sup>23</sup> These cover a variety of scenes, such as the furnace sequence in *Toy Story 3*, WALL-E's reboot in *WALL-E*, and Joy accepting the role of Sadness in *Inside Out*. However, there are two major differences between these scenes and the 'Married Life' sequence in *Up*: one is that they come at the end of their respective films, and the second is that while they all use non-diegetic music (*Inside Out* was scored by Giacchino, and the scene mentioned above definitely uses music for emotional effect), none uses music as extensively or with the same impact as 'Married Life'. The montage at the opening of *Up* details every element of Carl and Ellie's marriage. This is done without dialogue, using just visuals and Giacchino's score and the lack of dialogue gives the music unprecedented power over similar scenes in Pixar's canon. It is an emotionally affecting scene, with the music reacting to the images without resorting to explicit mickey-mousing; Heather Laing has said that music is 'often used to

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p84.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Simmons, 'Giacchino as Storyteller: Structure and Thematic Distribution in Pixar's *Inside Out* (2015)' from Sarah Hall and James B. Williams (eds), *Music On Screen: From Cinema Screens to Touchscreens* (Musicological Research, Issue 2, Spring 2017), p90.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Goldmark, 'Pixar and the Animated Soundtrack' in in John Richardson, Claudia Gorbman and Carol Vernallis (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p213.

reflect the presumed emotional response of the characters to diegetic events'.<sup>24</sup> The scene also may seem somewhat narratively redundant; the main action of the film does not begin until it ends. However, Ellie's music remains present throughout the film, and this, according to Giacchino, was a way of keeping 'her alive in this movie'.<sup>25</sup> Music in montage must effectively serve the narrative it is attempting to condense; James Buhler, David Neumeier, and Rob Deemer have said that music in montage can create 'a sense of continuity'.<sup>26</sup> The pervasive nature of this theme means that it follows Carl's journey at the same pace as the audience.

Before acknowledging how the music changes along with Carl, it is important to show the structure of the montage, and how Giacchino constructs a theme and variations structure based around 'Ellie's Theme' without ever significantly changing the musical material. The repetitive nature of this musical presentation, along with the sequence's emotional impact, helps the audience remember the music. This musical structure is similar to that in films such as *Citizen Kane*, in which a montage underscored by a theme and variations shows the disintegration of Kane's first marriage. 'Married Life' demonstrates Sergei Eisenstein's 'montage of attractions' which is when any or all element of a cinematic montage 'subjects the audience to emotional or psychological influence'.<sup>27</sup> The music is part of this emotional response; without the dialogue, the music becomes equal to the visuals, thus aiding the audience's memory of the theme and of the sequence as a whole. The 'Married Life' montage is structured as follows:

Thematic Iteration	Event	Instrument playing the theme
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<sup>24</sup> Heather Laing, 'Emotion by Numbers: Music, Song and the Musical', in Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell (eds), *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond* (Exeter: Intellect, 2000), p6.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Giacchino, quoted in Goldmark, in Gorbman and Vernallis (eds), 2013, p220.

<sup>26</sup> James Buhler, David Neumeier; Rob Deemer, *Hearing the movies : music and sound in film history*, (New York : Oxford University Press, 2010), p181.

<sup>27</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, trans. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents*, (Routledge & Kegan Pau Ltd., 1988). Quote found in Robert Robertson, *Eisenstein on the audiovisual : the montage of music, image and sound in cinema*, (London : I. B. Tauris, 2009), p3.

1	Carl and Ellie move into their house after their wedding and remodel	Muted Trumpet
2	Picnic and cloud watching, showing jobs at the zoo	Violin
3	Second cloud watching and trying for a baby	Celeste
4 (partial)	Ellie finds out she cannot get pregnant	Clarinet
5 (sad)	Ellie's depression, she and Carl start saving to go to Paradise Falls	Piano and strings
6	Saving for Paradise Falls, and the events that prevent them from going e.g. a tree falling through their roof	Muted Trumpet
7	Carl and Ellie in old age. Moment of implied diegesis in which they waltz in their living room	Vibraphone, then violin
8	Carl buys tickets to Paradise Falls, finds out that Ellie is ill.	Clarinet
9 (sad)	Ellie in hospital, gives Carl her adventure book. Ellie dies.	Piano

Apparently after seeing the sequence for the first time, Giacchino cried. He said that 'here you have this film, which is very funny and colorful [sic] with lots of adventure, but at its heart it's telling you, 'Don't forget, this is what we're all going to go through in our life'. Out

of that feeling came the whole score'.<sup>28</sup> If the composer of the score has a strong emotional response to the combination of image and music, then the audience probably have just as strong a reaction. It is this strong reaction that aids the memory of 'Ellie's Theme' and means that the theme can be easily recalled by the audience. This means that when the theme reappears, the viewer notices it more and thus can map this theme upon to Carl's journey and how his perceptions change as his adventure continues.

#### 'Ellie's Theme' – Becoming a Family, the Intra-Diegetic, and Carl's Musical Monologue

While the opening montage of *Up* illustrates marital bliss between Carl and Ellie, the audience next sees Carl as a bitter old man, clinging onto the past. This is best shown by him referring to his house as 'Ellie', and when he initially takes off for South America, he tells a photo of her "We're on our way, Ellie". This journey is Carl fulfilling his and Ellie's final wish, but sadly alone. This sequence, appropriately, is accompanied by a lush orchestral setting of 'Ellie's Theme', which is not used in the 'Married Life' montage. However, the music as Carl takes off is interrupted by Russell knocking at the door, ruining his hopes of enacting his wife's final wish alone. Initially, Carl is hostile to Russell, only taking him along because he is stuck with him. As the film progresses, he bonds with Russell, and even agrees to help return Kevin the bird to her home; this is the beginning of Carl forming a new familial unit. However, when Kevin is captured by Muntz and the house is damaged, Carl ignores Russell and takes the house to Paradise Falls. Russell leaves Carl in order to rescue Kevin, and Carl is finally left alone with his house. It is at this point he finds Ellie's Adventure Book, full of photographs of their life together, with Ellie's final message to him saying 'Thanks for the adventure – now go have a new one!'. The visuals imply a new family dynamic; Russell's Wilderness Explorer sash is placed on Ellie's chair, showing how Carl

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<sup>28</sup> Burlingame, 2010.

can remember Ellie and still have a new family. It is at this point that Carl, with Dug the dog in tow, sets off to rescue Kevin and Russell.

‘Ellie’s Theme’ recurs throughout *Up*, initially playing at points in which Carl is directly addressing her. The orchestration in these later settings is often different to the ‘Married Life’ sequence, now reflecting Carl’s new mindset and attitude towards Russell and his perception of family. The first indication that the theme’s meaning will shift as the film progresses is when Russell knocks on the door when the house is in the air, interrupting the music; Carl would have initially ignored Russell and continue to reminisce, but the surprise of the knock at the door changes the isolation he intended by the trip. As the second and third acts of the film progress, ‘Ellie’s Theme’ begins to play over moments in which she is barely alluded to, or not mentioned at all, showing a dramatic shift in thematic meaning.

The first of these instances is when Carl, Russell, Kevin, and Dug escape from Muntz. A menacing version of the theme plays while they escape, which can be seen as the reversal of Carl and Ellie’s admiration for Muntz at the opening of the film. The next iteration however, is the first where there is not even a tangible link to Ellie. The theme plays as they bring Kevin back to her home. This moment is the initial point when the meaning of the theme starts to shift away from just Ellie, and towards a notion of family. Kevin is being delivered back to her children, while Carl is beginning to warm to Russell and Dug, the new family he will adopt at the end of the film. The moment that solidifies this is when the house initially arrives at Paradise Falls. ‘Ellie’s Theme’ doesn’t play, showing how he has not only lost his new family, but also hasn’t fulfilled Ellie’s final wish for him, which he later discovers in her Adventure Book, when ‘Ellie’s Theme’ does reappear; this is music being used to show how Carl does not need to forget Ellie in order to have a new adventure/family. A new triumphant setting plays as Carl and Dug set off to rescue Russell and Kevin; this is his new family, and he is going on an “adventure” to protect and rescue them. The theme continues to score the

rescue sequence, culminating in a plaintive setting as the house finally floats away, and a brass setting as they pilot away the Spirit of Adventure, Muntz's airship. The final scenes of the film (Carl giving Russell the 'Ellie' badge, Carl, Russell, and Dug eating ice cream, and the house finally sitting by Paradise Falls) all are scored by 'Ellie's Theme', showing how both Carl's old and new family are encapsulated with the same musical idea.

How does this shift in thematic meaning relate to the intra-diegetic? Returning to Winter's definition, he says that it exists in 'the film's everyday narrative space and time' as well as being 'produced by the characters themselves (either as a result of their physical movements ... as an expression of their emotional state, or as a musical calling-card'.<sup>29</sup> These ideas are definitely present in the presentation of 'Ellie's Theme' in *Up*; the music can be seen as Carl's wordless internal monologue, showing his views on Russell, Dug, and Kevin changing and their eventual acceptance into his familial circle. This also manifests in actions, especially in Carl's decision to adopt Dug, and giving Russell the 'Ellie' badge. The theme also doesn't play when he abandons his new family as Russell tries to rescue Kevin alone and he tells Dug to leave. Carl's actions not underscored by 'Ellie's Theme' can be perceived as actions that Ellie would not have approved of (such as abandoning Russell and telling Dug to leave); he is not having his own adventure but clinging onto the past.

Due to its animatic aesthetic, it is not unfeasible that the other characters can hear this music. However, as Gregory Currie has noted, we must consider the 'intrinsic point of view possessed by a movie';<sup>30</sup> *Up* is Carl's story, and the recurrence of 'Ellie's Theme', while initially relating to Ellie, makes more sense as Carl's internal musical monologue. It always plays over him, and the implied diegesis in the 'Married Life' montage means that it may have some sort of potency in Carl's memories of Ellie. This perspective allows for the

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<sup>29</sup> Winters, 2010, p237.

<sup>30</sup> Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p174.

changing of meaning and can fall both into the category of the intra-diegetic as well as what Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer call “‘imagined sound”, in which the soundtrack is playing in the head of the characters’.<sup>31</sup>

This film clearly shows how music can form a close relationship with narrative; Levinson notes how if ‘nondiegetic film music were generally unheard ... then there would not be much of an interpretive issue for the viewer of how to construe such music in relation to the rest of what is going on in the film’.<sup>32</sup> The noticeable role of music at the opening as well as its emotional impact when coupled with the montage immediately means that it has more power than most non-diegetic music. The placement of ‘Ellie’s Theme’ throughout the film makes it intra-diegetic, due to its placement at moments of change in Carl’s life and moments when his and Ellie’s dreams combine with his new family. Daniel Yacavone has said that as an audience, ‘we are thus primarily witnesses to the film’s constitutive thought about its own world as this is more or less directly perceived rather than interpreted’.<sup>33</sup> The audience can witness the thematic change of ‘Ellie’s Theme’ in *Up* as they also see Carl’s journey; this is a manifestation of Jeff Smith’s idea of how music can relate to ‘narrative space, the film narration’s selfconsciousness and communicativeness, and the music’s aural fidelity’.<sup>34</sup> ‘Ellie’s Theme’ is not only intra-diegetic as its meaning changes with Carl, it is narrational; it plays when he remembers her, but also when he accepts her passing and lets a new family become a part of his life.

### Conclusion

In Pixar’s tradition of scenes with intense emotion, *Up*’s ‘Married Life’ sequence uses music to create a touching narrative about a marriage, as well as the heartbreak caused by the death

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<sup>31</sup> Buhler, Neumeyer, Deemer, 2010, p78.

<sup>32</sup> Levinson, 1996, p249.

<sup>33</sup> Daniel Yacavone. ‘Spaces, Gaps, and Levels: From the Diegetic to the Aesthetic in Film Theory’, *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*, 6/1 (2012), p26.

<sup>34</sup> Jeff Smith, ‘Bridging the Gap: Reconsidering the Border Between Diegetic and Nondiegetic Music’, *Music and the Moving Image*, 2/1 (2009), p1.

of one of the partners. The power of the sequence means that its musical accompaniment, a set of variations around 'Ellie's Theme', becomes a musical signifier for Carl. This theme becomes an intra-diegetic calling card for Carl's own perception of family, as it acts as an internal monologue for Carl's perception of events. This theme eventually comes to show how Carl feels about his new family, Russell and Dug. This film can be an example not only of the usefulness of the intra-diegetic in film criticism (though it should be used in every case) but also how our conception of thematic construction should not be attributed to one aspect, as this can change as the film progresses. Just like the ideas they narrate, musical themes can go on transformative adventures.

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