

Example of movie review on digital film theory: wall-e

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



For André Bazin, the famous film critic and theorist from France, cinemas were a realist medium. This is why majority of film theorists would perhaps argue that if he got a look at the computer-animated film WALL·E (2008) by Disney/Pixar, he would turn over in his grave. His theories revolved around the notion that there is always a mummy complex underlying the origin of any form of art, including cinema. Bazin's notion suggests that art struggles to immortalize the mortal, to preserve the physical existence on screen. According to Bazin, the medium that eliminates most of the distance between art and reality is photography. Thus, Bazin suggests that the basic purpose of arts such as photography and even cinematography is to record reality so that it may be preserved and immortalized (Bazin, and Gray 8).

The above short intro to Bazin's theory may seem irrelevant and unrelated to contemporary Digital Film Theory. However, it is arguable that Bazin would find WALL·E (2008) questionable and would have a hard time actually classifying the film as cinema, since it is entirely artificially made. Indeed, a film theorist like André Bazin would not judge a film like WALL·E (2008) favorable, since it is nothing but an artificial creation. However, it can be justified that this film is not merely a product of artificial reality, but even the reality of nature has been embraced by this film as well. This paper will use the Digital Film Theory to reach this conclusion and to link Bazin's notion of realism to WALL·E (2008).

Before proceeding with an in-depth analysis of WALL·E (2008) on the basis of the Digital Film Theory, it is necessary to differentiate digital mediums from analogue ones. This is the only way to understand what doors the emergence of digital cinema is opening, whether good or bad. A major

difference between the two mediums of film is that the analogue medium is continuous, while the digital medium is discrete (Mitchell). This can be explained by juxtaposing the analogue medium to a ramp, and the digital medium to a staircase (Mitchell 4). What this means is that analogue images actually represent the space - it is possible to zoom in but whatever is visible is still the space, even though zooming in might make it blurry and prevent it from being recognizable.

When we take a look at the computer-animated film WALL•E (2008), many aspects of the film seem to be related to the Digital Film theory. The narrative of the film is set in a fictional future, where humans no longer inhabit the earth but have gone to space for 5 years, because it has become excessively polluted with garbage. Meanwhile, back on earth, robots are cleaning up the earth. In that sense, much like the cinematic techniques prior to 1985, the film does not attempt to depict any known reality. Another intriguing aspect is that both of the main characters of the film are actually robots with artificial intelligence, which is certainly not the reality we know today. WALL•E (2008) appears to be playing on the idea of not being real since a majority of the film revolves around artificial intelligence, there are barely any human characters in the film.

However, something even more interesting happens in the film. When Wall-E meets EVE, the new sleek robot, he is immediately fascinated. Wall-E follows her around while keeping a safe distance and takes considerable interest in her. On the other hand, EVE appears to be much colder and dedicated to do what she has been sent to do. Here, considering the fact that Wall-E is an older robot, with a sentimental and sensitive side, it seems that is a

representation of the old analog cinematic medium of film stock before digital cinematic and digital techniques came by. On the other hand, EVE is a representation of the new digital medium of cinema, which arguably is not concerned about the old medium, leaving it behind (Manovich). Thus, at the same times the audience may view Wall-E as the analogue cinema and EVE as the digital cinema.

Similarly, Wall-E can also be viewed as a representation of the passage of the old-school cinema to digital cinema, especially digital animation techniques. This transition is represented in the film when Wall-E goes into space with EVE, gladly and readily taking up her new, modern world. Wall-E's portrayal at this point in the film reveals how old he actually is, and entering EVE's new world almost kills him. Similarly, as the film nears its end, it is EVE, the new technology, who saves him.

Considering the fact that WALL·E (2008) is an animated film, it is not hard to analyze it using the digital film theory, however, linking the film to Bazin's notion of realism can be hard. Introducing this argument will be quite tricky. Nonetheless, it is arguable that the basic rules of reality, as far as lighting and the idea of space are concerned; still have to be obeyed by computer based 3D modeling, especially when a live-action footage is integrated into an animated story as seen in WALL·E (2008). Moreover, the robot characters in the film have been developed by Pixar in such a way that they humanize the animation process, which is generally quite static. The point here is that, even though “ some of these representations [in the film], while being referentially unreal, are perceptually realistic” (Prince 35). As a result of these attributes, a new standard has been created by WALL·E (2008) for the

future of films that are created using computer-generated imaging technology.

Although the digital film theory is applicable to WALL·E (2008), it is not a purely animated film since live-action has been used by Pixar for the first time within a CGI framework. Pixar used live-action footage of Fred Willard and other actors that was captured using an actual camera, and made it a part of the virtual world of WALL·E (2008). The footage of all of the actors was shot on a blue screen, and all of the human characters were digitally inserted into the animated world of the film by Stanton and his team.

Willard himself referred to the process as an “actor’s dream” because of how easy the work was, and said he would love to be in an animated film as a human character again. Willard further elaborated the nature of the character he played in the film by saying that when his character had to interact with digital constituents, he had to use his imagination.

The human passengers that are seen aboard the AXIOM ship in the film are also live-action shots of real actors. In WALL·E (2008), the audience gets to see live actors drinking from animated drinking glasses and sitting in animated chairs, surrounded by robots performing mundane tasks that these human characters stopped performing when they left earth. A stop-motion animation technology similar to the one used in the Star War films was used in WALL·E (2008). Stanton worked with Industrial Light & Magic to incorporate the footage of the humans into the sets of the film that were CGI-developed. Although this live-action footage was only seen for a total of eight minutes on screen, they gave this CGI-animated film, which is a representation of digital cinematic technology, a whole new meaning. Pixar

usually takes around six to eight months to create the shots for its films, but Stanton's joke is true, that these live-action shoots were the "fastest" film shots for Pixar (von Riedemann).

It was back in July 2007 when Pixar announced that live-action footage would be used in the film, and this news was shocking for the fans. Some were concerned that the live-action footage would not successfully blend with the animated ones, just like the scenes in *Happy Feet* (2006) where scenes near the end of the film contained human actors. Others were worried that *WALL·E* (2008) would end up being criticized in the same way *The Polar Express* (2004) and the most recent *Star Wars* films were criticized. Based on these examples, it seemed that making animation too photorealistic actually made it less believable. The placement of real life objects in these animated films made the flaws of the animation far too noticeable. On its own, the animation was stunningly detailed, but the photorealistic elements made them oddly fake (Kane).

However, Stanton shrugged off his critics, claiming that he was critics claiming that he was creating *WALL·E* (2008) as an attempt to set an example for the CGI and new media world. Stanton took animation technology to a whole new level by creating a hybrid animated film using CGI animated technology and live-action film making (Fritz). With the creation of *WALL·E* (2008), Stanton stated that he wanted to elucidate both "types" of robots in cinema: humans with metallic skin like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*, and purposeful machines, such as the Pixar Lamp, Luxo, and the astromech droid from the *Star Wars* universe, R2-D2. Ultimately, Stanton decided to combine the two characterizations of robots, truly setting a new

example for digital animated films.

Ever since Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), robots have become a prevailing entity in digital science fiction films. By creating Maria, Fritz marked a “defining transition” from the robot depicted in science fiction literature to the artificial intelligence we now see in digital science fiction films. Just like the Tin Man, initially robots seen on screen in old school Hollywood science fiction films were nothing more than metal creatures with stiff movements. In some of those films, the digitized voices of these robots sounded outlandish next to human actors. Science fiction films that came later began examining the humanizing appeal of these robots. For instance, the robots seen in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) displayed human characteristics, such as emotions and thoughts.

Thus, Stanton’s team created the scenes in *WALL·E* (2008) using these techniques, especially stop-motion animation. Digital tablets were used by the Pixar animators to sketch images while they observed computer screens above them to view how the sketches appeared. They then moved the sketches into their correct order by photographing them and placing them on a placement board. Finally, they shot these images back into the computer and the digital editors then put them together. Essentially, the computer served as the film’s camera, making it possible for the editors to zoom in and out between areas of the on-screen images. According to Pixar’s claims, although films may appear less aesthetic because of the use of the computer, but in their “filmmaking vocabulary” its works are quite traditional because of harmoniously all the creative aspects work (Sarafian 218).

Additionally, as screenshots were being generated by his filmmakers, Stanton would act out the movements while standing in front of projectors, which were then replicated by his animators into the film. Stanton would accentuate the aspects of the characters he wanted to make prominent by contorting his face and moving his body. Some of the more tender scenes in the film in which WALL-E and EVE are an evident example of the emotions displayed by Stanton in front of his animators. The robots do not seem like characters that would have any humanizing characteristics at all, since they were created as products just to assist humans. However, Stanton's robots display a wide variety of emotions. WALL-E and EVE fold their hands and shake when they are nervous in awkward situations, light up when they are joyful if they find something charming or funny, and throw up their hands when infuriated.

With the evolution of storytelling and technology, filmmakers have taken machines to a level far above than existing standards, developing “innovative processes” so that animators may have the tools to add a touch of realism to technological products that are to be a part of a digital film (Sarafian 213). The body language, the design, and the stop-motion animation of the robots in WALL·E (2008) work together so harmoniously that it really brings this digital animated film to life.

WALL·E (2008): A New Form Of Digital Animated Media

Lev Manovich claims that, “ Animation foregrounds its artificial character, openly admitting that its images are mere representations [] It is discrete and self-consciously discontinuous: crudely rendered characters moving against a stationary and detailed background (Mirzoeff 408). Some digital

animated films tend to feel strained and superficial despite the use of stop-motion technique. However, in WALL·E (2008), all aspects of filmmaking have been successfully rendered into a digital animation film, and this is what makes it an example of the new form of digital media. The example that Stanton had envisioned comes to life through this film in which influences from everyday life with CGI animation and live-action footage have been cohesively blended. The film has a credible story because of the live-action shots and the emotions of the human characters, and this is what allures the audience and makes WALL·E (2008) a challenge for rival film companies.

The Digital Film Theory can be applicable to any film that makes use of digital imagery, images that comprise of pixels in a grid. Of course, as mentioned, the making of WALL·E (2008) involved the creation of pixel-by-pixel digital pictures and many other digital animation techniques. In conclusion, WALL·E (2008) is definitely a digital film and a part of the digital, arguably a film that perhaps someone like Bazin would not approve of.

However, this analysis reveals that despite technically being a digital animated film, it is more of a digital-“ organic” film, especially because of the instinctive human characteristics that is robotic characters have and the involvement of human actors. Bazin wanted films to serve a natural, realistic purpose, and a film like WALL·E (2008) does that to quite an extent, thus it can be linked to Bazin’s notion of realism.

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