

# Pixar and politics; the hidden messages of wall-e



This essay will be focusing on the 2008 film *Wall-E* released by Pixar animation studios. This essay will be reviewing and discussing the political side of the film, as well as looking at any other hidden messages. These include the environmental messages, nostalgia and dystopia. As well as reviewing the film itself to see if there is any pattern forming to link all the elements together.

*Wall-e* was released in 2008 by Disney Pixar studios, and featured voices such as Ben Burtt as Wall-e and Elissa Knight as Eve, it also features Sigourney Weaver. *Wall-e* is a computer generated animated feature created on Pixar's own software Renderman. *Wall-e* is based on a small waste collecting robot who unwillingly embarks on a space journey that decides the fate of mankind. Wall-E stands for Waste Allocation Load Lifter- Earth class, and Eve stands for Extra-terrestrial Vegetative Extractor.

In a not so distant future, mankind has left earth because of the state it has become. Completely over run by rubbish that towers over the tallest skyscraper, all the rubbish seems to be the product of a multi-million dollar company, Buy N' Large. One robot has been left behind to clean up the mess, Wall-E, one of the last living things on the planet, as well as his pet, a cockroach. Wall-E is infatuated with the objects left behind by people, enriched with mankind's history and a tape of show tunes he found. One day he follows a light hoping to add it to his collection, unbeknownst to him, its actually part of the landing process for a ship carrying the Eve probe. Eve has been sent to find evidence of life being sustainable once again on earth. Wall-E falls in love with Eve, and rescues her from a dust storm, and takes her back to where he lives. He shows Eve all of his trinkets, including his

latest find, a plant. This plant is what Eve has gone to earth for, she takes the plant from Wall-E and then shuts down, with just a green plant symbol on her front blinking. Wall-E isn't sure what has happened to her, and thinks that her battery could just be running low, so he takes her outside to charge in the sun, and makes many attempts to wake her up. When that fails he protects her from the various weather conditions, until the ship comes back to retrieve her. Something Wall-E didn't expect, so he hitches a ride on the back of the ship, to the axiom. The axiom is the space cruise ship that is carrying all the people of earth who evacuated over 700 years ago; they were only supposed to be aboard for 5 years whilst the robots cleaned up the planet. The people of earth are all living a secluded life, never walking anywhere, constantly in their floating chairs, which give them full access to TV and social networking. They never eat solid foods, they drink it all from a cup and a straw, and they've all become overweight due to bone loss, and lack of exercise. Any exercise they do is done through a robot that they control on their screens. When Eve manages to bring the plant back to the pilot, the auto pilot, who's acting upon instructions given to him 700 years ago, stages a mutiny, so that nobody will be able to return to earth. It's with the help of Wall-E that the people aboard the axiom realise that they need to go back to earth to save it and end the "5 year cruise".

In the book '*The films of Pixar animation studio*' they point out that the film looks at "what it is to be human" this is because in the film *Wall-E*, all the humans that left earth are now "surviving" on the axiom, which is a space cruise ship used as a home for the rest of humankind. All the people aboard the axiom however seem to be living a secluded life, they never interact with

anybody face to face, or walk anywhere, and they are constantly eating fast food. They live such a secluded life that when they are introduced to a new colour for their suits, as to which it says “ try blue, it’s the new red” and they all happily change into it. None of the people aboard the axiom really start to pay attention until Wall-E arrives; he accidentally knocks someone off of their chair and then introduces himself to them, giving them their first face to face interaction. He later does it again when he switches off a woman’s screen on her chair, and again introduces himself to her. Pixar make a point of showing that is Wall-E that is the one who shows both us the audience and the people aboard the axiom, what it is to be human, through his love for Eve and his sacrifice for her mission. He’s the one who opens the captain’s eyes with regards to earth and saving it.

*Wall-E* is distinctive for being the Pixar film with the longest sustained stretch without dialogue. There is very little spoken in the film, until Wall-E and Eve introduce themselves to one another, but even then the majority of the dialogue isn’t used until later on in the film when they’re aboard the axiom. Although the less dialogue presented in a film, the stronger it might be, the film or message could be made a lot clearer by the use of silence, or the lack of dialogue. So it’s not stuck with the ordinariness of realistic dialogue and free of any barriers that accompany spoken language. The images used in the films, if used in the correct context have a way of presenting them universality...

Critical to the realisation of *Wall-E* was a powerful emphasis on its soundtrack. This helped to move the story along and helped the viewer feel the emotions that were necessary. In the film *Wall-E* they feature two songs  
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from *Hello, Dolly!* (Gene Kelly, 1969) these are ' *Put on your Sunday clothes*' and ' *It only takes a minute*' to help reiterate Wall-E's feelings towards Eve, and it's used at other moments when Wall-E really wants to hold Eves hand. Then at the end of the film, after Eve has repaired Wall-E and he no longer remembers who he is, or anything that has happened to him. Eve plays the song that he's recorded ' *It only takes a minute*' hoping it will wake him up, but it doesn't, only her kiss manages to spark him back awake. There is very little dialogue in these scenes so the soundtrack helps to emphasise everything that's happening.

In the book ' *The films of Pixar animation studio*' written by James Clarke there is a quote taken from Burtt, of his work on the film *Wall-E* and it reads:

' The problem does go back, for me, to the sort of primal R2-D2 idea, which is how do you have a character not speak words, or in the case of Wall-E, just very few words, but you understand what is going on in their head and they also seem to have a depth of character. So it is a matter of that relationship, how much electronic, how much human, and you sway back and forth to create the different sounds.'(who?)

This quote allows you to think about the sound mentioned earlier on for Wall-E, because Wall-E needs to be relatable to the audience, and he is unable to show facial expressions due to only having eyes on his head. So the creators of Wall-E used R2-D2 from the Star Wars trilogy as a reference for sound to better communicate with the audience.

During the past few years a lot of studios have released animated films that have an important message that they want to put across. An example of two  
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are *The Simpsons* (2007) and *Happy Feet* (2006), both of which have a similar environmental message as *Wall-E*, their sometimes post-modern stories are told through either a modern or an orthodox aesthetic, which is the case with most Disney films. Pixar on the other hand, try to overstep the modern in both narrative and form, completely changing the modern technologies and aesthetics in which animated film is based, which is why *Wall-E* works so well, it's different to what people have seen.

In the book *That's all folks? Eco critical readings of American animated features* written by Robin J. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann, it starts to mention that *Wall-E* revolves around nostalgia and dystopia, and that the opening of the film has two conflicting images, of the planet earth, this is down to the *Hello, Dolly!* (1969) music and the scenes of exploring space, allowing viewers to romanticise and feel happy about what they're seeing, until it changes to the view of earth, the music still plays, and eventually changes to a ghost like echo to match the emptiness of a ghost like earth. When the camera is showing all the nice parts of space, you assume that earth will be in the same region, instead when the camera pans across, you see a very brown looking earth surrounded by what first seems like rocks. Until it zooms in and you realise it's actually Buy N' Large satellites, and as the camera starts to give you a tour you realise that the world is in fact an environmentally degraded version of the world we know. The whole seen is a witty juxtaposition, due to the fan-fare like music and the opposite being shown to the audience. This all makes the opening credits of *Wall-E* nostalgic, because of the romantic feeling at the start, to the dystopic as the camera views earth, highlighting the films two main themes.

The two different visions of earth introduce the ideologies surrounding the films expression, those of Disney and Pixar studios shows the approaches to ecology forming the films story: human ecology that encourages conservation and organismic ecology demonstrating the need for mutual dependence.

[Reword next part in book]

In the animated films *Finding Nemo* (2003), *Wall-E* (2008) and *A Bugs Life* (1998), nature and environment become the primary focus of the films, and take centre stage. *A Bugs Life* (1998) follows flick, a worker ant who attempts to save his ant colony from the human like grasshoppers, as noted in the book *That's All Folks? Ecocritical readings of American Animated Features* Murray and Heumann the writers of the book then go on to say about *Finding Nemo* (2003) and how it looks at human intervention from under the sea, because of the diver taking Nemo, due to Nemo panicking the diver thought that Nemo was in trouble, so in turn thought he was rescuing him, when in fact it was the opposite. *Wall-E* examines environmental exploitation on both the earth's surface, and on board the axiom, which is the ship that mankind is now "surviving" on. These three films reiterate the philosophies that Pixar have.

Murray and Heumann go on to speak about how *Wall-E* illustrates other values, such as "Romantic devotion and monogamy" and "hard work, faithfulness to duty" along with denigrating "passive independency" all of which seem to be drawn from a Disney score card and appeal to both liberal and conservative audiences. They then go onto quote Neal Gabler (Find

reference) who says that he ' sees Disney animation providing a space in which Disney and his viewers " would ultimately find nurturance, love, independence and authority".'

Murray and Heumann then begin to discuss the political views of Wall-E, although there are conflicting politics behind the reviews for Wall-E, it still appeals to both liberal and conservative audiences. Liberal viewers are drawn to the obvious environmental message that the film puts across based on " its initial critique of over consumption and the capitalist economy that perpetuate the humans cruise above the planet."

The conservative viewers feel that the film was able to put across healthy values such as conservatism. Heumann and Murray then look at one conservative Christians views, taken from *The Los Angeles Times*, Charlotte Allen, a reviewer for *Wall-E* says:

' If Wall-E is didactic, what it has to teach is profoundly conservative. For starters, the film never even goes near the climate- crusading vocabulary of ' global warming', ' carbon footprints', or even ' green'.'(who?)

Instead Allen suggests that ' The crime of how humans vacate earth isn't failure to drive a Prius but strewing detritus' she sees this as a crime with regards to conservatism, Allen claims

' Conservatives detest litterbugs and other parasites who expect others to clean up after them. Wall-E champions hard work, faithfulness to duty and the fact that even a dreary job like garbage collecting can be meaningful and



fulfilling. The film isn't denigrating consumerism but passive dependency. The film celebrates western civilisation.' (Who?)

In an article written by Rod Dreher, there is a point he makes about the political side of *Wall-E*, where he says that *Wall-E* goes much deeper than contemporary politics. Dreher then points out that the film *Wall-E* is a traditionalist conservative, but it's also Aristotelian, agrarian, a critique of modernity, and the fate of man under consumerist technology. Dreher goes on to give examples, with Buy N' Large there isn't anything that they don't do; they have sophisticated technology that carries the human race through space. They developed floating chairs that carries all the overweight people around, feeds them and raises their children, teaching the children propaganda to further advance BNL's interests. Dreher looks at the political use inside the film instead of the political message the film gives to the audience. He looks at the political ideas of the company Buy N' Large and they're planting ideas into people's heads by satisfying their needs, and because it's been 700 years, the people aboard the axiom have no memory of their past, so have no desire to change, which is something *Wall-E* and *Eve* threaten to destroy with the plant.

Dreher then speaks about how *Wall-E* 'Contends that what makes us fully human is cultivating our own deepest nature by working, and working together, in a stunningly iconic image at the films end, the tree of life on the new earth grows out of an old work boot. Humanity renews the face of the earth through its own labour, by people taking responsibility for them instead of being passive consumers coddled by the corporate welfare state.' Dreher

then quotes Francis Bacon who declared that the appropriate end of politics is “ the conquest of nature for the relief of man’s estate.”

Murray and Heumann go on to speak about how *Wall-E* seems to have ‘ the most powerfully environmental statement made by Disney and Pixar studios’ they then mention how mankind was supposed to protect the earth and its resources, but instead they left it all behind by moving onto a spaceship, which means that they can no longer effectively preserve humankind. Instead mankind are only surviving as a species because they are artificially sustained and separate from the world and its natural resources it destroyed until wall-e intervened. Like other recent films, wall-e draws on nostalgia to strengthen its argument. In an integration of hominoid and organismic approaches to ecology, Wall-E proclaims not only that mankind has ruined earth but that the people aboard the axiom- with the help of wall-e, who was left to clean up the planet- can and should return it to its more natural state.

Wall-E uses three types of nostalgia to support its environmental message. These three types of nostalgia show images of nature as a collective and an individual eco memory, which explored Wall-E’s progression from tragic to witty environmental hero.

Murray and Heumann begin to look at how nostalgia is used in the film Wall-E, they begin speaking about the ways that nostalgia is established, at the start of the film Wall-E ‘ projects human artefacts through a sentimental and nostalgic lens.’ The film then goes on to show the ‘ innocence and heterosexual romance of main street USA’ which are shown in clips and music from Gene Kelly’s *Hello, Dolly!* (1969) as well as homages to other

films and melodies. We are first introduced to nostalgia in Wall-E when the film shows Wall-E collecting “ cultural artefacts” from the scrap mountains during his work day. Murray and Heumann then go on to give an example of the nostalgia presented, by saying

“ Wall-E is built for clean-up, collecting and compacting garbage to build a new cityscape made of rubbish bricks. He is alone with only a cockroach as a companion. The vacant Buy N’ Large shops, banks and train line they pass demonstrate a loneliness reinforced by the motionless piles of robots like himself along the road, the dead Wall-E’s. Wall-E is the sole survivor in this vacant city, and he uses their parts to repair himself.” (Who?)

Wall-E creates a story of environmental adaption that offers a space for narrative and a broader vision of humanity, which includes the humanoid robots that teach them a better way. In order to build this story the film follows a three act story revolving around nature and showing versions of nostalgia that evolve from being lonely to becoming shared or as Murray and Heumann said ‘ from the solitary to the communal’. The first act is showing how earth is an inhospitable place for any person or any other living thing to survive except for some insects and microbes, like cockroaches. The second act is leaving the planet on an ‘ evolutionary journey’ and third and final act is returning to earth to transform it back to its original glory and make it into an inhabitable home once more.

[Conclusion]

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