

The Rhetoric of Isolation and Renewal in Pixar's WALL-E



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Abstract

Brenden Findlay gives a brief explanation on the themes of Pixar's hit animated film *Wall-E*.

WALL-E (2008), directed by Andrew Stanton and produced by the animation company Pixar, is a film that explores the importance of environmental degradation, consumerism, and humanity's dependency on technology. Through character behavior and social commentary, Stanton urges viewers to reflect on their behavior and the potential long-term consequences. Set in a distant future where Earth is uninhabitable due to pollution, *WALL-E* presents a lone waste-collecting robot who discovers a growing plant amidst the waste. This plant is green and looks a lot different from the piles of trash, sparking a chain of events that reconnect humanity with its home. Through storytelling, transparent visuals, and character development, *WALL-E* gives a cautionary tale about the problems that are pos-

sible if humans become too negligent. Stanton blends entertainment with reflection on real-world problems. He involves the audience in confronting these issues and considers the importance of their behavior. Stanton communicates *WALL-E*'s central message about the environment, technology, and human nature through many means that are impactful in many rhetorical ways.

In the film's beginning, Earth is covered in massive piles of trash that have accumulated over time, a metaphor for human negligence toward the planet. The landscape symbolizes humans' disregard for consumerism's impact on the Earth. *WALL-E* tirelessly works to compact trash into cubes and build tall structures, reflecting on the severity of how bad the waste problem is. With a dystopian setting, Pixar makes a clear point about the environment.

According to Ben Sherlock (2023), the world portrayed in *WALL-E* offers a direct warning about the consequences of unchecked consumption for the environment. Uninhabitability in the 22nd century reflects world concerns over climate change and environmental destruction. Sherlock points out that *WALL-E* was ahead of its time in addressing these concerns, warning that humanity could face similar consequences if current behaviors go unchecked. The soft beeps and almost child-like tone of *WALL-E*'s EVE call contrast with the impersonal sounds of the other robots on the Axiom, emphasizing his unique character and inviting viewers to empathize with his loneliness and search for connection. The towering piles of waste visually overwhelm the viewers, as it gives a sense of guilt. The dirty planet that is left by lazy humans and *WALL-E*'s cleaning creates an emotional response. *WALL-E* is left alone to work among the towering trash piles, symbolizing responsibility for facing environmental issues. The presence of a small plant on the planet carries symbolic weight. It represents hope and potential for renewal, offering optimism despite circumstances that seem irreparable. The Captain of the spaceship Axiom nurtures the

plant, stating, "You just needed someone to look after you, that is all." This line insinuates the film's central message: Earth can be saved if humanity takes responsibility for it (Sherlock, 2023). This meaningful moment stresses that while environmental damage is pervasive, there is always time to reverse course if humanity acts responsibly. EVE's development from a mission-focused robot into one who deeply cares for *WALL-E* and the plant mirrors the film's message about reconnecting with the Earth. Her commitment to protecting *WALL-E* and embracing his perspective reflects the potential for humanity to rediscover empathy and responsibility.

WALL-E appeals to credibility through its popular reception and its place in the broader cultural and cinematic landscape. As Sherlock (2023) noted, *WALL-E* has earned a place in the U.S. National Film Registry for its "cultural, historical, and aesthetic significance." The film is widely regarded as one of the greatest science fiction movies, giving it substantial credibility as a piece of art that addresses urgent contemporary issues like climate change and technological dependence. Stanton's crafting of a film that emotionally connects with children and adults further enhances the appeal to credibility of *WALL-E*.

It strengthens its purpose. Its visionary portrayal of environmental collapse reflects global anxieties about climate change. In 2008, climate change discussions were less prominent than today, yet *WALL-E* directly addresses these concerns by portraying an Earth covered in trash, a product of rampant consumerism and neglect. The film's environmental message, scientific data, and NASA's predictions of some regions of Earth becoming uninhabitable by 2050 (Sherlock, 2023) support *WALL-E*'s credibility with its existing dystopian vision rooted in reality. *WALL-E* avoids overt political messaging, making it more desirable to a broad audience. Alissa Wilkinson (2017) highlights that Stanton rejected the label of an "environmentalist parable" because the film focuses on the love story between two robots. This strategic neutrality allows the film to connect with viewers across the political spectrum without alienating them by maintaining integrity and refraining from heavy-handed rhetoric. Instead of pushing an ideology, *WALL-E* invites viewers to reflect on their actions.

WALL-E takes a sharp, though understated, look at the dangers of unchecked consumerism. The megacorporation Buy n Large (BnL)

plays a central role in the downfall of Earth. It is responsible for the rampant consumer culture that filled the planet with trash and the spaceship that shelters the remnants of humanity. BnL shows us the dangers of allowing corporate interests to prioritize profit in the public good, which happens a lot today. The company has immense control over human life, from the Earth's environment to the people who run the Axiom cooperation, and serves as a warning about the dangers of monopolistic corporations and the unchecked power they can have. As Wilkinson (2017) notes, *WALL-E* criticizes a society that is driven by consumption, where people's lives are dictated by convenience and instant gratification. The fat humans aboard the Axiom, futuristic spaceship that is traveling through space, have everything they need provided for them by machines, leading to a loss of individuality, creativity, and the ability to work for themselves. In a society where there is overconsumption, people are encouraged to buy more and do less, which leads to both environmental devastation and the deterioration of human health. The film uses this futuristic scenario to warn of the dangers of excessive consumption. It all comes

back to how consumerism can lead to a society that is disconnected and ultimately unsustainable. Along with a critique of consumerism, *WALL-E* offers a nuanced perspective on artificial intelligence. Unlike other science fiction films that portray Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a threat, *WALL-E* presents AI in a more optimistic light. WALL-E and EVE are portrayed as sentient beings who care for the Earth and each other, while the humans are passive and dependent on technology. This contrast shows how AI, if used responsibly, can be a force for good. As Sherlock (2023) argues, *WALL-E* shows that AI can be a positive force if it is designed to enhance life rather than replace it. The film suggests that technology can be dangerous, but if allowed to dominate human life, it can also be a tool for preserving the environment and restoring humanity's connection to the Earth.

WALL-E effectively conveys the point of Stanton's message using visual symbols, emotional appeal, and societal criticism, which encourages viewers to reflect on their behavior towards the environment and technology. *WALL-E* shows how it presents conceivable actions that can lead to severe consequences in the future. These severe consequences urge view-

ers to take responsibility and make changes now to prevent a tragic outcome. Although Andrew Stanton's attempts to minimize political implications, *WALL-E* has become a representation of environmental activism, as referenced by Wilkinson (2017). The movie shows a world destroyed by disregard from lazy humans and disgusting garbage, leading to concerns about climate change. Soeratin (2023) points out that the movie's portrayal of technology acts as a warning about the risks of depending too much on automation and artificial intelligence. The messages in *WALL-E* are not delivered using forceful political speeches or political propaganda but through engaging narratives and relatable characters that can connect on the emotional level with adults and young children. This results in a powerful impact. *WALL-E* is commonly included in high school lesson plans, specifically in environmental science courses, to help students better understand the urgent issue of climate change. This educational element also shows students the primary purpose of the film, which is to educate young viewers and future generations in comprehending the actual consequences of environmental neglect and excessive consumption.

WALL-E reflects Stanton's vision of a world where human carelessness and consumerism have led to devastating consequences, but it also offers a hopeful path forward. By showing how both humans and robots learn to reclaim their purpose and responsibility, Stanton underscores that while the damage may be severe, it is still reversible if humanity can reconnect with the world and each other. This final note of hope drives home Stanton's point: though the challenges of environmental degradation and technological dependence are accurate, we still have the power to shape a better future. 📌

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Image by Kristen Crumpler

This piece was created through Photoshop 2024 using the paintbrush and blender tools. This was based on a photograph I took from the balcony of the Paramount Theater in Farmville, North Carolina. I was in a production of *The Great Gatsby* and decided to photograph the theater to utilize for art.