

## Reimagining Humanity: Humans, Machines and Technological

### Mediation in WALL-E

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#### Abstract

Several intellectuals and activists have been consistently warning about the harmful effects of contamination of air, water and land. The climate change and biodiversity deterioration that we face today is largely the result of our own behavior. Efficient waste management strategies are required to minimize the impact on environment. Several waste management technologies have evolved in the recent years. The integration of technology and robotics to handle the 'dirty' task can significantly lower the risk of harm to workers involved in this dangerous profession. The present study is based on 2008 American animated romantic science fiction film *WALL-E* directed by Andrew Stanton. The film discusses several themes including human environmental impact and concern, consumerism, corporate control, technology, hope, renewal, love, emotional connection and waste management. The story is set on a deserted Earth in 2805 where a solitary robot named WALL-E is left to clean up the garbage. He falls in love with another robot EVE, sent from the starship Axiom to detect life. The study examines the way by which love and care function as catalyst for ecological restoration. The paper aims to analyze the representation of environmental degradation and the possibility of renewal in a technologically mediated future in *WALL-E*.

**Keywords:** Environmental, Technology, Waste, Robot

*WALL-E* is a critically acclaimed film that won one Oscar Academy Award and was nominated for five others. The film brought out several environmental issues and broader issues like obesity and consumerism and is regarded as an extremely powerful environmental film. Human beings leave earth and live in a spaceship as they have polluted the earth and have made it uninhabitable. The eponymous character is a lone robot WALL-E (Waste Allocation Load Lifter, Earth class) who is left in a post-apocalyptic Earth to collect and compact trash into small cubes and pile them to giant structures. During his work, he comes across a cockroach and a plant and he takes them home. Soon another glossy robot named EVE (Extra-terrestrial Vegetation Evaluator) arrives on earth and WALL-E falls in love with her. She was sent to detect life on earth. Her directive is to locate vegetation on earth and verify habitability.

When a dust storm approaches, WALL-E attempts to protect her and take her to his home. There he shows her the ‘treasures’ he had collected from earth and in his attempt to make her happy he gifts her, the plant that he found. EVE stores the plant inside her and immediately signals the space shuttle to come and collect her. WALL-E is smitten by his love for EVE and couldn’t afford to lose her. So he hangs onto the spaceship risking even his life.

When the spaceship reaches the ‘mother ship’ named Axiom, WALL-E finds numerous human beings leading a very comfortable life there with the help of robots like him. They are like giant babies who couldn’t even stand on their feet. When they fall from their chairs, the robots help to put them back onto their chairs. They do not have any connection with each other and they communicate with the help of a screen that hover before their faces. They are incapable of doing anything and their lives are controlled and managed by robots produced by Buy-n-Large (BnL) Corporation. When the captain finds the precious plant which EVE brought from earth, he attempts to initiate ‘Operation Recolonize’ to return

to earth. But his attempts are foiled and he is held hostage by Axiom's AI, Auto. Auto attempts to destroy the plant multiple times. Auto is following directive 113 issued by the CEO of Buy-n-Large. According to the directive, human inhabitants of Axiom are barred from returning to earth as life has become unsustainable on earth. Finally the captain succeeds in deactivating Auto and the movie ends with human beings and robots working together to revitalize the planet.

One of the major aspects that the film discusses is the role of large corporations in environmental degradation. The dystopian world of *WALL-E* reminds us of Frederic Jameson's critique of late capitalist society – a world characterized by consumerism, corporate domination and environmental destruction. Citing Jameson and Žižek, Mark Fisher points out, "... we are inevitably reminded of the phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (Fisher 6).

Large companies are responsible for several environmental problems including carbon emission that contribute to climate crisis. The fictional corporation in the film, Buy-n-Large encourages consumerism which leads to proliferation of waste. The film critiques contemporary consumption patterns and draws attention to the relationship between corporations, consumerism and accumulation of waste. In a video the CEO of the company, often referred to as the President, proudly proclaims that his greatest achievement is to give the people more to consume. They are not concerned about the destructive environmental impacts of their actions. In "The Loss of Humanity through Consumerism in *WALL-E*", Ashton Treadaway examines the authority of the CEO of BnL:

The film adds to the illusion of BnL being the government in its presentation of the CEO. During the videos that the CEO of BnL created for the captain of the Axiom, he is framed in such a way that he could easily be mistaken for the President of the

United States. He wears a suit and stands in front of a backdrop which closely resembles that of the U.S. president during a briefing or speech at the White House. In these scenes, he is even referred to by others as “Mr. President”... This comparison calls attention to the power and authority of BnL. In the film the corporation owns everything and controls the lives of all humans. (Treadaway 08)

BnL controls everything including the upbringing of children in Axiom. When the robot teaches ABCs, it tells the children that B stands for Buy-N-Large, their “very best friend”. Capitalism leads to artificial needs and strips the planet of life and meaning. The solution that the company proposes is abandonment of the spoiled earth and living in the spaceship named Axiom. The company’s slogan states, “*Buy-N-Large, everything you need to be happy*”. The President says, “too much garbage in your face? There’s lot of space in space”. The only purpose in the lives of humans is to consume what BnL produces for them. The stay of humans outside the planet was initially intended for five years, but we later find out that humans have been in space for 3500 years. Such a long time has proven insufficient to clean up the mess that humans have created.

The autopilot AI named Auto exerts supreme control over the ship. It enforces consumption and prevents the captain from returning to earth. It ensures the inhabitants of Axiom that life in the space ship is easier and safer than on earth. It has become so convenient in Axiom that people have forgotten to stand-up on their two feet and even their physical structure has changed. Humans have traded their freedom for ‘comfort’ and are shown as captives of technology. Auto is programmed by Buy-N-Large to prevent human beings from returning to earth. It carries out the directive even when earth appears to be a safe place supporting life. It is only after shutting down Auto that the captain could carry out his efforts to return to earth. The end of the film however points out that both humans and machines should work collectively to renew earth.

*WALL-E* can be seen as a posthuman narrative based on the theoretical perspectives of N. Katherine Hayles. In the film we find Hayles' notion of posthuman in the blurring of distinction between the human and the machine. Survival on earth depends on collaboration between humans, technology and the environment. In *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999), Hayles points out:

Humans may enter into symbiotic relationships with intelligent machines (already the case, for example, in computer-assisted surgery); they may be displaced by intelligent machines (already in effect, for example, at Japanese and American assembly plants that use robotic arms for labor); but there is a limit to how seamlessly humans can be articulated with intelligent machines, which remain distinctively different from humans in their embodiments. (Hayles 284)

In the film, robots, humans and computers collaborate to make decisions and the film ends on a utopian vision of renewal where humanity work together with robots in order to make earth more sustainable.

Technology can make the lives of people convenient but it can also affect their relationship with each other and their natural environment. Humans in *Axiom* do not communicate with each other and the situation reminds us that we often forget to look up from our smartphones and electronic gadgets. The film points out the need to reconnect with nature. When one character in *Axiom* is interrupted by *WALL-E*, he is forced to look up and astonishingly remarks, "I didn't know we had a pool". Another instance from the film shows two characters conversing with each other through digital screens despite being close to one another. They have forgotten their existence in the physical world. The story astoundingly reminds us the extents to which human beings are separated from their natural world. The captain asks his computer "define Earth", "define sea" and so on. He becomes more and more fascinated to the point where he says, "Auto! Earth is amazing". But the captain is shattered

when he inspects EVE's records regarding earth. He says, "wait, that doesn't look like earth. Where's the blue sky? Where's the grass?"

*WALL-E* can be regarded as one of the most important environmental films of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As an eco-animation film it can create a deep impact on children's perception about environment and an increased exposure to environmental issues can shape their worldviews. The film offers a glimpse into the disastrous future of mankind that stem from the unsustainable practices of the mankind. Earth is our only home. The slogan, "There is no planet B" emphasized during COP Conferences draws our attention to the fact that there is no other alternative. The depiction of environmental ruin presented in the film strikes a chord with Timothy Morton's concept of "dark ecology". Morton's perspective is a break from traditional romantic view of nature and centers on the disturbing awareness of environmental collapse. Even though the entire humanity was shifted to Axiom, several other things are lost – biodiversity of crops, animals and the people who couldn't afford a trip to space and so on.

In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon points out that environmental destruction often occurs in the form of "slow violence". Such destruction often occurs in a gradual and invisible manner often affecting the poor and the marginalized communities in the Global South. Their environments are degraded due to resource extraction and industrialization. Nixon states.

Most of our planet's people face more immediate terrors than a terrorist attack: creeping deserts that reduce farms to sand; the incremental assaults of climate change compounded by deforestation; not knowing where tonight's meal will come from; unsafe drinking water; having to walk five or ten miles to collect firewood to keep one's children warm and fed. Such quotidian terrors haunt the lives of hundreds of millions immiserated, abandoned, and humiliated by authoritarian rule and by a purportedly postcolonial new-world order. Under such circumstances, slow violence

(often coupled with direct repression) can ignite tensions, creating flashpoints of desperation and explosive rage. (Nixon 149)

The abandoned planet in the film is depicted as a wasteland with towering garbage heaps. Lone WALL-E toils endlessly in the mountains of trash. The film shows the efforts of humans and robots to protect the plant that has sprouted on the earth's surface and ends on a hopeful note.

The film highlights the significance of technology. It brings to light the role of AI waste sorting robots which can be used in waste management. They can work for longer periods to pick and sort waste that can be recycled. It also points out the fact that a machine is able to make decisions in the same way as a human being would. WALL-E is programmed to classify waste materials into different categories. He can identify between waste which he needs to compress and the useful items like a Rubik's cube or a light bulb which he wants to keep. He has the vision of a machine along with human-like vision which enables him to see the beauty, value and meaning of things.

Yet another aspect which the movie highlights is the importance of human relations in a natural world. The robots, WALL-E and EVE are more human than real human beings. People in Axiom watch the love of EVE and WALL-E and realize how disconnected they are from one another. The actions of the two robots help to make the world a better place. It is the robots who reintroduce humans to the natural world and create in them the desire to renew earth and rebuild the vegetation. WALL-E possesses numerous qualities which mankind has lost. He has curiosity, love and feelings of loneliness much like a human. He enjoys music, and has developed human qualities like intimacy, compassion and empathy which people have lost with the advancement of technology. He cares and nurtures the plant that he finds on earth. He cares for the cockroach that he finds on earth and falls in love with another robot, EVE. He even risks his own life to be with EVE. He shows EVE the trivial

things he collected – a lighter, Rubik’s cube, music video and gives her the plant to make her happy. Andrew Stanton remarks about his favourite moment in the film in an interview which appeared in *indieLONDON go anywhere virtually*:

It’s a very small moment, but, to me, it’s one of the most powerful and it’s when EVE’s in the truck with WALL-E and she discovers what his lighter does. We catch him privately staring at her while she’s looking at the lighter. To me that was a kind of maturity in using the camera to tell so much emotion that I just felt I always get that in great movies but I’ve never seen it in animation. I felt we’d finally tapped into it. (Stanton)

Capitalism has alienated humans from nature. It is technology that controls them. Yet the humans would not have returned to earth without the help of the robots and they would have stayed in the spaceship forever.

The study of *WALL-E* is significant as it exposes several issues related to over dependence of technology, consumerism and ecological crisis. Technology should be used to serve humanity but overdependence on it is presented as dangerous. The film cannot be dismissed as mere entertainment. It provides deep insights into several ecological and technological issues. It redefines the concept of humanity and makes us wonder about what makes a person truly ‘human’.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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