

Analysis of Movie with an Environmental Message: WALL-E

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About *WALL-E*

This is an analysis of the film *WALL-E*. It was viewed on June 10, 2018, at my home in Orlando Florida. *Wall-E* was released in 2008 Pixar Animation studios and distributed by Disney. We also watched portions of the director commentary to get a more robust perspective on the film.

The most blatant environmental theme in the film is that of uncontrolled waste and pollution. Though the director (A. Stanton) claims in the commentary that there was no message explicitly built into the plot, he says the team “just extrapolated [that]... if we keep buying too much, and throwing it all away, sooner or later, there won’t be enough places to put it all, and once there’s no room, what would you have to do?... Sadly, things just got more timely with the world as we were making the film” (Morris & Stanton, 2008). In fact, the original working title of the film was simply *Trash Planet* before being changed to *WALL-E* (Morris & Stanton, 2008).

In the film, a small trash-compacting robot roams a lifeless landscape, devastated by the effects of human pollution and waste. His job is to collect, compact, and organize trash into large piles for an unknown purpose. The commentary explains that the original idea was to have larger incinerator robots come and burn the trash up (Morris & Stanton, 2008), though these robots are not evident in the film. In the opening, it can also be seen that the earth is completely surrounded by space trash (like abandoned satellites) and that among the trash are remains of power plants (coal, nuclear and wind), nodding to the role of human’s power consumption in creating this barren landscape. Ultimately, it is shown through a sequence of events that human consumerism and wastefulness led to this dark reality, and that a small population of humans still exist, wandering the

galaxy in a giant cruise-like spaceship, continuing their consumeristic lives made possible by the huge commercial entity “Buy n’ Large,” whose logos are omnipresent throughout the film.

Through the barren earth landscape, WALL-E’s characterization and the details of life demonstrated on the cruise ship, it becomes clear that the movie’s main message is the danger of becoming consumed by commercialism. The environmental devastation results from a destructive cycle of production, consumption, and disposal; there seems to be no single clear “evil entity” which caused the destruction; instead, it was a collaboration between a large and faceless company, and its many unwavering customers. This cycle, along with its’ lack of a clearly responsible party, is chillingly reminiscent of the actual situation in our country and in our world. The widespread and global participation in the consumer waste cycle makes it very difficult to institute policy change to protect against this type of destruction.

Still, the film inspires hope, and despite the director’s insistence that there is no explicit “message,” I believe one was coded into the plot. As the movie progresses, a tenacious little plant from Earth makes its way into the hands of the cruise ships’ captain. As it starts to wilt, the captain waters it and says “you just needed someone to look after you, that’s all.” (Morris & Stanton, 2008). He then looks down at his globe, and realizes that the Earth, too, needs someone to look after it. This sets the action for the rest of the film, and ultimately ends with the cruise ship survivors back on Earth, ready to help nurse it back to health. We, too, have an opportunity to make changes and become the ones that look after our planet Earth.

Realism & Accuracy

The realism of *WALL-E* is arguable; it certainly participates in the science fiction genre, borrowing from reality to form an imagined vision of a potential future. The environmental concerns it is based upon are realistic, but its dystopian setting is the product of creative liberties.

WALL-E opens to a landscape overtaken with solid waste. It is likely that there are chemical and toxic wastes present as well. How likely is it that our waste problem will become so widespread? The matter of waste management and its future implications are complicated and multivariate. However, most sources agree that global waste management is a problem.

According to a 2016 article, a source at the UN stated that “public waste systems in cities cannot keep pace with urban expansion; rapid industrialization is happening in countries that have not yet developed the appropriate systems to deal with hazardous and special wastes” (Simmons, 2016). Wealthier countries such as the US, Germany, Brazil, Japan and China produce the most waste at over 100,000 metric tons produced per day, with an annual estimate of about 1.3 billion tons of waste worldwide and increasing (Simmons, 2016). The Toxics Action Center (TAC), a non-profit group advocating for contaminant clean-up and enforcement of waste disposal laws, reports that Americans alone contribute 250 millions tons of this annual accumulation, and that we recycle or compost only 34% of that waste (TAC, 2017). Although the EPA reports that landfill management is sufficient at this time (TAC, 2017), the ever-growing amount of waste produced by the US and other countries is of great concern to many environmental groups like the TAC, and is likely the inspiration for the dreary landscape depicted in *WALL-E*.

The environmental impacts of the abundant waste and pollution are depicted in a few ways. The only apparent life remaining in the early scenes of the movie is a cockroach who acts as WALL-E's pet; one of the more resilient animals. Certainly, a heavily polluted Earth may be able to sustain small animals and insects even if larger ones are extinct, and cockroaches are a likely survival candidate due to their well-known resilience.

WALL-E also experiences large dust storms; the scale of these storms is huge, but it's not unthinkable that such storms would occur. In the absence of grasses and other deep-rooted plants keeping soil stable, a situation might develop like the "dust bowl" of the 1930s where loose soil is whipped up by winds (perhaps made stronger by weather systems resulting in climate change), creating the storms depicted in the film.

The idea that humans would arrange to send probes back to Earth, like the EVE probe in the film, is also realistic (considering the proposed scenario). Much like we send probes to Mars for signs of life, we might send probes back to Earth to detect signs of repair and life. Of course, the anthropomorphization of these robots is fairly unrealistic. The love interest subplot is certainly one of the aspects that gives the film so much appeal, but is quite fantastic. Still, I think using the robots as a plot vehicle is a brilliant use of fiction in service of truth, where a message is cloaked in a more palatable, attractive, and enjoyable context, which allows the message to reach further than it would have otherwise. For example, I think more people have seen the movie *WALL-E* than have seen *An Inconvenient Truth*.

The robots themselves are entirely fictitious, but were based on designs from NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab (JPL) (Lewinski, 2008). As such, it is possible that robots whose designs resemble

those in the film may in fact exist: “[The director’s] visits to JPL helped create a more realistic look at what robots will be able to do in the near future” (Lewinski, 2008). Whether or not the citizens of earth would fly away on a giant commercialized space-bound cruise line and leave these robots back home to clean up our mess? That’s still to be determined.

Once the film’s setting moves to the space-bound cruiseship, an entirely new realm of fantasy and science fiction is explored, and much of the realism of the film disappears. Realities of air pressure, the vacuum of space, space travel and physics are done away with in the interest of storytelling. However, the writers nod to some realistic problems involved with space travel, such as bone density loss and cardiovascular complications (Abadie, Lloyd, & Shelhamer, 2017). However, the speed with which the humans on board are able to recover their health, including the ability to walk after a lifetime of muscle atrophy, remains unrealistic; if this scenario were realistic, people who lived their entire lives in space and have literally never walked would not be able to support their own weight (Ferro, 2016), and would likely suffer serious effects for the rest of their lives.

Classroom Use & Application

I would consider *WALL-E* to be one of the few movies from the list provided that would be acceptable to watch in its entirety in a classroom setting; it is age-appropriate as of elementary or middle school, is visually appealing, has minimal violence, and has an engaging plot (though the early scenes on the desolate earth may bore very young viewers). The message is fairly benign yet straightforward, while containing additional levels of complexity for older viewers. Still, it is not

always possible to show an entire film in class due to time constraints (and in some cases, licensing issues), or the entirety of the film may not be necessary to communicate the desired information.

If I were to use the film in my own class, I would begin by choosing my objectives based on the standards for my lesson. As I will be teaching a high school environmental science course next year, I will be using standards from that course. In this case, I would choose SC.912.L.17.14 “Assess the need for adequate waste management strategies” (Florida Department of Education, 2017) and SC.912.L.17.16 “Discuss the large-scale environmental impacts resulting from human activity, including waste spills, oil spills, runoff, greenhouse gases, ozone depletion, and surface and groundwater pollution” (Florida Department of Education, 2017), both of which could be part of a waste management and pollution unit.

An early objective in the unit might be “students will be able to express three or more impacts of human activity on the environment”. For this objective, I would love to use the opening few minutes of the film. I would start by asking a simple question: “What will the Earth look like in 700 years?” I would provide 1 minute for thinking and 2 minutes for a written response. Then, I would show the first few minutes of *WALL-E*, from the satellite-covered Earth, zooming in through the piles of garbage, and a few minutes into the robot interacting with the trash. I would then stop the video and ask, “what does the director of this movie think the Earth will look like in 700 years? Do you agree or disagree?” I would give about a minute to silently think and jot down a response, and then open it up to a class discussion. This would be an excellent opportunity for student discussion, with the teacher taking a back seat, but jotting down a graphic organizer on the board, with points under “Agree” and “Disagree.” Whether or not the class agrees with the depiction in *WALL-E*, the conversation will inevitably touch upon several human impacts on the

environment. An exit ticket could explicitly ask, “What are three ways human activity negatively impacts the environment? What are two ways humans can impact their environment more positively?” The responses could be the foundation for a later lesson, or a project on positive impact.

In a later lesson, after having reviewed categories of pollution and types of waste that are managed in landfills, I might use the objective “students will be able to identify at least three categories of pollution and examples of each.” I would begin the class with some kind of review of the pollution categories and types of waste. However, rather than asking the students to draw from their own memory, I could play them the first 20 minutes of the film, and then ask them to identify as many types of pollution and physical waste as they can from the clip. I would end the clip at the discovery of the plant inside the refrigerator. After the clip ends (possibly the following day), I would ask them to list all that they had seen, encouraging them to use their imagination. I would ask them to provide examples of each suggestion (for example: air pollution because there aren’t any animals; climate change due to carbon emission, because there doesn’t appear to be any water).

After compiling the list publicly I could ask, “at the end of the clip, EVE found a plant. Why is that important? What changes might be symbolized by a plant suddenly growing on Earth?” The students would then be led to refer to the list again, considering the types of pollution, now in *reverse*, as they consider what would the result be of each of those types of pollution lessening rather than increasing.

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