

# AN ECOCRITICAL DECONSTRUCTION OF DISNEY'S WALL·E

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**Abstract**—*In recent years, the connection between nature and mankind has fallen on unsteady grounds. However, the environmental theme has aroused interest in academics as well as popular culture, especially films. Andrew Stanton's motion picture Wall·E depicts an environmental dystopia in which Earth has been devastated by the self-obsessed consumerist culture of humans to an extent where it can no longer support any life form. The film recreates a visual demonstration of the detrimental effects of letting two things go unchecked: a society's insatiable need to consume and private industry's greed for profit. Through an eco-critical framework, I examine how the rocky human-nature relationship transpires as interplay of humanity, nature, capitalism and technology. In Wall·E, humans are themselves the agents responsible for the next environmental disaster that displaces them. The devastation is a direct result of unbridled greed of capitalism, further aggravated by the overuse of technology. If anything, Wall·E proves to be a daring cautionary tale on the dangers of a capitalistic society and a call to preserve our environment before it's too late.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between humanity and nature has been one of contention and turmoil. Mankind has repeatedly waged a war against nature; not treating it as a sustainer of life rather using it as a tool for mindless advancement of technology and civilization. Due to the looming dangers of ecological abuse, environmental issues have become an area of increased provocation for academicians and artists alike, finding itself in literature as well as films. Environmental concerns have been vast, ranging from alarming rates of population explosion to exploitation of natural resources, pollution of vast water bodies to deforestation of land in order to build concrete wonders such as shopping malls and sky rises. On the other hand, nature has its own way of giving back in the form of hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and more commonly, floods. The Kerala floods of 2018 were the worst floods to hit the state in a century, devastating the state, displacing over tens of thousands of natives and killing around five hundred people. Mother nature unleashed herself in the cruellest form against which stood no mercy, no force. Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Florence devastated the

Caribbean islands and the East coast of the United States. Surprisingly, studies suggest urbanization as the major cause of disaster. It is arguable that the current environmental problems are largely of our own making - a byproduct of our consumerist culture.

*Wall·E* (2008), is an English language, American science fiction film which was released by Pixar studios for Walt Disney Pictures. It has been co-written and directed by Andrew Stanton. The aim of this research paper is to analyse the animated movie *Wall·E* (Disney/Pixar 2008) through an ecocritical perspective by examining the relationship between humanity, nature, capitalism and technology. The theory of Ecocriticism provides the perfect framework for the study of the movie *Wall·E*, in order to assess the environmental anxieties of mankind.

## 2. WALL·E AS POST APOCALYPTIC CINEMA

The storyline involves a post apocalyptic, barren world consumed by garbage and debris, shrouded in smog and left abandoned by all forms of life, except for one surviving albeit outdated robot. A futuristic imagination of the planet Earth, 700 years into the future is envisioned as having been destroyed by industrialization and consumerism. What remains on the planet is the robot *Wall·E* (Waste Allocation Load Lifter - Earth Class) who is struggling to clean up the debris while scavenging bits and pieces from other units to stay alive. The sheer amount of trash has turned the once hospitable planet completely into a completely uninhabitable one, forcing humans to flee into space. The soil has become infertile and the climate has turned hostile for any form of life to flourish. The mega-corporation Buy-n-Large (BnL) meets the needs of the people by using advanced technology on a space cruise ship or a starliner called the *Axiom*. The spaceship sends regular probes to Earth in search of plant life required to recolonise planet Earth. After seven hundred years of compacting refuse, the lonely *Wall·E* has evolved into a sentient, emotionally intelligent being along with acquiring a seemingly satisfying 9-5 job in the process. The film shows

the struggle of humans creating a utopia after seven hundred years of abandoning their home planet due to uninhabitable conditions caused by extreme pollution. After centuries of human race surviving in space, the current captain of the spaceship is hit with the realization of his moral obligation to protect Earth. The sentient androids Wall·E and EVE along with the humans trapped in space, launch a rebellion against the consumption-oriented dictatorship of Buy-n-Large they live under, to go back and recolonize Earth.

*Wall·E* can be classified in the Science Fiction genre unlike typical Disney movies that are usually a play on fantasy and romance. The New Yorker film columnist David Denby observed “Wall·E blends two kinds of science fiction – the post-apocalyptic disaster scenario and the dystopian fantasy derived from Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, in which people are controlled not by coercion but by pleasure” (Apud. Shaw 392). The hit film Wall·E was marketed as an entertaining children’s film but it is a befitting environmental work of fiction, that serves as a critique on environmental practices and what it could lead to in the future. It addresses most environmental anxieties and fears of the human race.

### 2.1 Eco crisis and the Wasteland

In the very first scene, we are greeted with the sight of the outer space, highlighting the enchanting cosmos, stars and faraway galaxies, while slowly zooming on Earth. As awe evoking the scenes from space are, the sight on Planet Earth makes for a jaw dropping disappointment. What used to be a vision of green and blue has now been painted brown and gray only reminiscent of dust, dirt and decay. The cityscape is full of skyscrapers built by piling garbage on top of each other. The planet looks like a post apocalyptic vision with its deserted buildings, sand dunes and no sound except for the occasional strong winds and the song “Put on your Sunday clothes” on the barely functional relic of a television.

The state of the planet is in direct interest to ecocritical analysis. The planet has been destroyed by the consumerist habits of the people, as aided by the mega corporation Buy-n-Large (BnL). The earth is no longer fertile, suitable or sustainable for any form of life, so humans have abandoned the planet to live on Buy-n-Large’s cruise spaceship called the Axiom. The disastrous landscape proves to be a realistic warning to humanity of what may happen if we do not take steps to protect and preserve nature. The climate of the planet has become unsustainable for life except for a cockroach that accompanies Wall·E in his endeavours. Humans continue to send EVE (Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator) probes to Earth for over 700 years in a desperate search for any sign of plant life. Bill McKibben in his *The End of Nature* writes, “in pursuit of warm houses and eternal economic growth and of agriculture so productive it would free most of us from farming,” were destroying the atmosphere, and would cause heat, dryness, and storms. These would breed deserts across the earth and eventually end nature”. (719) The wasted Earth

is visible throughout the movie where the planet is unsustainable because nature has been violated thereby, giving way to the creation of a world that is covered only in dust and garbage and nature has ceased to exist.

The word ‘eco’ in the term Ecocriticism has its roots in Greek ‘oikos’ which means ‘household’. Humans have abandoned their ancestral house and what they identify as ‘home’ due to their own consumeristic practices. If we look at Indian ethos, living is understood as being in perfect symphony with nature. Another offshoot of Hindu philosophy, Advaita Vedanta considers the entire world as one integrated family where there exists oneness of all life or ‘Vasudheva Kutumbham’. *Wall·E* is one movie where the humans are themselves the destroyers of their home, the cause being their highly consumerist behaviour and insatiable greed.

Movies like *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and *Wall·E* portray humans as agents who will be responsible for the next environmental disaster. Humankind has already wiped off different plant/animal species, polluted the water bodies and irrevocably, altered the atmosphere. “If the damage continues at the current or a higher rate, it may hasten the entry of the planet into a new geological epoch or the “anthropocene” where ‘anthropo’ stands for “man,” and cene stands for “new”; the period “defined by our own massive impact on the planet. That mark will endure in the geologic record long after our cities have crumbled” (Neumann et al 70) At this estimated rate of damage, the next catastrophic period for the planet may prove to be its own death or act as the catalyst for a creation of a new environmental reality which may not support regeneration as in the past. Regardless, the human will remain the catalyst agent for the devastation of the planet: “[i]n the past half billion years asteroid impacts and other natural events have caused five catastrophic mass extinctions of plants and animals. Humans may be causing a sixth” (Neumann et al 78)

### 2.2. Technology: A Catalyst for Ecological Failure

Although the human species was born as one element among many in the diverse ecosystem, it has managed to ‘threaten’ the environment due to its far-reaching and powerful evolution, making the reality of a precocious destruction quite possible. Unless we make efforts as a human community to control our negative impact on the planet, we may as well be looking at a future where we will have to abandon the planet in order to survive. Elon Musk, the tech entrepreneur and owner of SpaceX successfully launched and recovered a spacecraft from the orbit 21 times. The mission of SpaceX is to encourage space tourism and make humans an “interplanetary species” while also “enabling the recolonization of Mars” With the reality of space exploration taking a concrete shape, humans may have to relocate into space much like the megacorporation’s spaceship Axiom where all imaginable human needs are met with technology. Even on the spaceship, people live their lives in technology-

induced luxury to such an extent that the humans have become borderline obese. The need to walk or physically move has become redundant in the technology-fuelled utopia. What was supposed to be a brief exodus of five years has now spanned into hundreds of years of exile, triggering evolutionary changes such as bone loss in the humans. Microgravity has rendered limbs useless as the people are permanently seated in a floating multipurpose chair.

Devall and Sessions view technology as “alienating the humans from nature, from other humans and from themselves (67).” Technology encourages habits of destruction that are behind the breakdown of stable communities. In the present time, technology has hijacked our lives through the use of internet and artificial intelligence drawing human social units further apart. We are connected all the time yet we have never been so disconnected from each other. Upcoming technological areas include the Internet of things and the creation of humanoid robots like Sophia, who has already earned a citizenship of Saudi Arabia. It is not hard to foresee how our lives will increasingly be taken over by technology in the coming years.

In Spike Jonez's *Her* (2013) we see the reality of a technologically advanced world where technology has seeped into every sphere of life including relationships. The protagonist, Theodore Twombly has a romantic relationship with an intelligent Operating System Samantha who is an intuitive entity in her own right. We see how the people in their futuristic world are always glued to their screens, whether it is playing video games or having online phone sex. In a similar way, residents on Axiom are always dependent on gadgets, to the point they replace real human contact. People navigate in their multipurpose hovering chairs that are connected all across the spaceship. They do not physically move, not even to brush their teeth or change their clothes. Humans Mary and John fall in love only because they accidentally get disconnected from their respective connective social devices. In *Wall·E*, technology is not necessarily the problem but it plays an unmistakable role in alienating humans from other humans, thus creating an atmosphere of indifference towards nature and human bonds.

### 2.3 Eco Crisis and Capitalism

Although technology is portrayed as a product of ecological failure, the ominous mega corporation BnL uses technology as a means of propagating capitalism. Consumerism is shown as the biggest cause of destruction of Earth, being strongly associated with capitalism. As a capitalist giant, BnL understands the power of desire and fantasy - how to create new ones and even control them. They succeed in creating the illusion of the consumer being the most important entity which essentially, nourishes anthropocentric attitudes. In one scene, we watch Mary catch a glimpse of an advertisement for trendy fashion saying, “Red is the new Blue”. It hardly takes her a couple of seconds to believe the slogan and ‘consume’ the

latest fashion by changing her blue outfit to the colour red instantly. Marco Madureirawrites, “Members of consumer societies who live in urban and suburban environments tend to be victims of the capitalist cyclic system and have difficulty escaping that condition”. BnL even goes to use environmentalism as a marketing strategy by advertising the space-cruise as a holiday destination while the company makes themselves ‘look’ committed to the act of revitalizing Earth.

The radically capitalistic society resembles a late stage capitalistic society. Late stage capitalism is a phrase used to describe the disproportionate demand and distribution in a society, revealing both the contradictions and absurdity of the system. The current times are reflective of what maybe called as Late Stage Capitalism, focusing on the superpower corporates, dwindling middle class and stark inequality. In April 2019, a section of the iconic Notre Dame caught fire and billionaires of the world pledged \$700 million within a couple of days while the tragedy of Sri Lanka's terrorist bombings which led to over 300 people getting killed, has failed to garner any kind of response.

Marxist Ernest Mandel spoke of late capitalism as the economic period that witnessed the rise of mass communication, multinationals and global finance. Fredric Jameson in his iconic essay, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* examines how the post industrial, global economy is responsible for the genesis of postmodern culture and art where every commodity is peculiarly consumable. Culture and art have both turned into a superficial and self-obsessed modes of expression, as seen even today.

BnL's slogan is ‘Buy. Shop. Live’. Their selection of toys, fashion, food and drinks substantiates the slogan by suggesting that to live the ideal life, one must continue buying and shopping. It is not necessary that the products be unique or special, rather everyone is seen to be consuming the same products at the same time. The prevalent idea is that the products are not products per se, but have a fantastical element to them; that go beyond meeting the basic needs of an individual. What is being put on sale is life itself! Therefore, by creating a sense of artificial lack, the consumers are compelled to feed the emptiness by purchasing as many commodities as possible. The capitalist answer offered here is that it is only through consumption, a person can have a complete life. Each commodity is advertised as an alluring, mysterious addition to people's lives that may allow them to be unique. But this belief is driven by irony as each passenger wears nearly the same uniform, consumes the same products at the same time only to believe that each one is different. In beauty salons, women passengers are seen getting similar hairstyles by trained robots, who greet them with automated compliments like “It's the new you!” while they look like each other's clones. The paradox that erupts in such a post apocalyptic setting is how an end of the world scenario

presents the spacefarers living a life of enjoyment instead of creating a sense of dire need for resources to be conserved, in an otherwise existential sojourn across the universe. The passengers have bought into the idea that self preservation is possible only through the power of purchasing.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The film industry, specifically the computer animated Hollywood environmental movies, bears ideological power that is particularly potent and impressionable on young minds. In conclusion, we can observe that the Earth and its resources need to be safeguarded and preserved so that a calamitous future does not await us. In the film, mankind is artificially sustained, separating them from the natural world. Ultimately, there is a glimmer of hope because of Wall·E and EVE's interference in rescuing the only plant that has made it alive. Despite technology being a part of the problem that has alienated people and made communities unstable, it also has a redeeming quality. Robots like Wall·E clean up heaps of trash, in an attempt to restore the vitality of the planet. The ominous presence of consumerism is a reflection of a capitalistic society which is shown as the reason behind the downfall, leading the planet to choke on itself. The magnanimity of human actions is so far-reaching that consumerist habits create a chain of production and consumption that ends in severe abuse of nature's resources. It has been 10 years since the movie was released and we are already living in Pixar's future. For example, we see floating holographic screens pop up everywhere as a tool of advertisement on Axiom whereas we are surrounded by advertisements, be it online or offline. The number of advertisers on Facebook has tripled from one million in 2013 to three million currently. We also see the people on the spaceship eat their assorted liquid lunch in a cup. Not so surprisingly, companies have also started coming up with liquid food or powdered food replacements.

The movie throws light on our moral responsibility towards the protection of our own home, protecting its varied inhabitants including plants, animals and other natural resources. As of 2018, human actions have erased several animal species due to human interference with some species teetering on the brink of extinction. The movie serves as a stark warning on current environmental abuse that may replicate the trash-strewn wasteland and the disintegration of humans into helpless, shapeless flesh globules who have lost the ability to live instinctively whether it is to think laterally, create authentically or love innately. The movie Wall·E has turned out to be one of the most thought provoking environmental commentaries made by Pixar/Disney studios so far in its history. Whether or not the movie creators have a deliberate ecological message to push is irrelevant as the story acts as a cautionary tale of a reality we may soon face.

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