Going Beyond Our Directive: *Wall-E* and the Limits of Social Commentary
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In the director’s commentary for the DVD release of Pixar’s 2008 film *Wall-E*, Andrew Stanton states, “I didn’t have any agenda” when making the film; he wanted to tell a story about a robot that kept doing its job long after the humans who created it had vanished. The choice of trash compacting as the job, however, required a back story—how robot and trash got there—which led to an imagined dystopic future for our planet. One consequence of that dystopic future setting is that, whether Stanton wanted to deliver a “message” or not, the film has been received as “an environmental cautionary tale,” to use reviewer Stephanie Zacharek’s term. This environmental message, which Shawn Levy argues “is more explicit than anything in any previous Pixar film,” might be desirable in an age where cities (Toronto comes to mind) have been known to truck garbage into neighbouring countries to find room for it, but not all viewers received it that way. Although many reviews and online comments treat the narrative of the film as the classic boy-meets-girl love story, the “cautionary tale” aspect of the film triggered widely different ratings and debates on online sites. These debates draw attention to the ways that *Wall-E*—considered as object of young people’s culture, as text, and as theatre experience—is implicated within its own critique: its science-fiction conventions (robots programmed with “directives”) raise questions about the way humans are “programmed” through education and consumer directives, but, as an “ecological fable” (Stevens) targeted to younger viewers and as a media product distributed by Disney, the film itself has been accused of attempting to “program” its audiences; moreover, the environmentalism promoted by the film is contradicted by its own position as consumable object and limited by its vision of environmental solutions.

Genre conventions and traditions of science fiction facilitate the engagement of *Wall-E* with issues
of consumption and programming. The creation of a future world through extrapolation from current conditions is a common practice in science fiction; in *Wall-E*, contemporary anxieties about garbage disposal and over-consumption are extrapolated to create a compelling visual image when, in the opening sequence, the camera gradually reveals the towering skyscrapers of garbage that cover the Earth. As I have argued elsewhere, the setting of the film roughly eight hundred years from now means that futuristic technology provides part of the visual spectacle of the film—an opportunity to showcase Pixar/Disney strengths in animation—but it also allows the film to engage in science-fiction tradition by exploring the relationship between human and machine. That relationship is, ultimately, one of similarity, with the robots able, in Stanton’s words from the director’s commentary, to “bring humanity back to itself”; one of the greatest similarities between humans and robots is the possibility of their being programmed, and the need to go beyond such programming. The robot Eve introduces the issue when she inquires of the robot Wall-E, “Directive?” Since one of the most striking features of the film, as reviewers such as Zacharek, Levy, Dana Stevens, and Jenni Miller note, is the lack of dialogue in the first part of the film, “Directive?” stands out after the beeps, clicks, and other noises used by Wall-E and a cockroach (the only two inhabitants of Earth prior to Eve’s arrival) to communicate. Directives generate many of the action sequences of the film (since different robots have opposing directives), but the implications of following a directive—what one has been programmed to do—are a central thematic concern of the film, particularly as they address human consumer practices.

**Consuming Objects, Consuming Narratives**

With *Wall-E*, there are two types of consumption at issue: the consumption of objects, the consequences of which are the towers of garbage shown in the film, and the consumption of texts or narratives, performed within the film as Wall-E watches *Hello Dolly!* and performed in the acts of viewing and interpreting *Wall-E* itself. Both kinds of consumption—particularly when associated with young people—have been theorized in association with “programming”; that is, cultural theorists and scholars of young people’s culture have attempted to theorize the degree of agency which consumers of products (objects or cultural narratives) can exercise. While some argue one extreme or another—consumers as completely free to choose products and create interpretations or consumers as robotic consumers of what has been dictated to them—many attempt to explain a more complex relationship of individual to system of production; such explanations can serve to temper the optimism of the first position without accepting the hopelessness (in terms of the possibility of change) of
the second. Children’s ability, in particular, to create “their own meanings” from elements of popular media culture should not be overlooked, as Dan Cook argues, since “[i]f we lose sight of children’s ability to exercise personal agency . . . we will forever be stuck in the belief structure which grants near-omnipotence to the corporate realm” that produces many of the media products for children.

John Fiske’s theorizing of popular culture is particularly interested in the way that consumers produce “relevance” from cultural products. Fiske locates the production of relevance with the consumers, for whatever might be intended by the producer of the cultural object or text, “[r]elevance can be produced only by the people, for only they can know which texts enable them to make the meanings that will function in their every day lives” (6). For Fiske, the failure rate of products in the marketplace is significant: “The cultural industries, by which I mean all industries, have to produce a repertoire of products from which the people choose. . . . [so] it is the people who finally choose which commodities they will use in their culture” (5). While that choice has limits—the “repertoire of products”—it enables the production of multiple meanings. As Sidney Eve Matrix notes in applying Fiske’s theories to prom culture, “pop-cultural productions are both oppressive and rebellious vis-à-vis the status quo” (10), neither solely imposed on nor solely empowering to their consumers.

Jean Baudrillard’s theorizing of consumer culture in The Consumer Society goes further to link consumer behaviour and corporate production to both growth and waste, issues relevant in the context of the environmental critique that Wall-E attempts. While Baudrillard argues “that the freedom and sovereignty of the consumer are mystification” (72), he admits that consumers are not conditioned in any simplistic way: “We know how consumers resist particular precise injunctions, how they rove over the gamut of objects with which they might fulfil their ‘needs,’ how advertising is not all-powerful and sometimes induces opposite reactions, and what substitutions there can be between one object and another to meet the same ‘need’” (74). The myth of consumer choice and the reality of consumer choice, apparent contradictions, are symptoms of the same system since, for Baudrillard, consumer “needs are not produced one by one, in relation to the respective objects, but are produced as consumption power, as an overall framework within the more general framework of the productive forces” (74–75). Capitalism, in this view, relies on the “mystique . . . of individual satisfaction and choice” as it is “the very ideology of the industrial system, justifying its arbitrary power and all the collective nuisances it generates: dirt, pollution, deculturation” (72). Pollution defined as garbage or waste, in fact, is not just a nuisance, a by-product, or a failure of the rationality of the individual consumer; waste
“orientates the whole system” (45) by acting as a sign of affluence and a guarantee of growth defined in economic (rather than organic, personal, or spiritual) terms. Capitalism requires not just consumption, but excessive consumption and waste, and all elements of the system, even those not explicitly economic, work to produce excessive and wasteful consumers.

Cultural texts, therefore, act within the system Baudrillard describes; indeed, they are likely, in myriad explicit and implicit ways, to naturalize and reproduce that system (or at least elements of it). Anders Hansen and David Machin put it this way: “discourse does not merely reflect social processes and structures but is itself seen to contribute to the production and reproduction of these processes and structures” (780). Films such as *Wall-E*, regardless of their entertaining qualities, are therefore also “pedagogical sites,” as Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe define them: “places where power is organized and deployed, including libraries, TV, movies, newspapers, magazines, toys, advertisements, video games, books, sports, and so on” (15). Recognizing the pedagogical work of cultural texts such as *Wall-E* does not deny the complexity of processes of reception—by which I mean both individuals’ interpretations of content and individuals’ choices as to whether to participate in the promoted experience in the first place; it also acknowledges the role of such texts in the socialization process through which individuals come to understand—and negotiate their own relationship to—the values of the dominant culture within which they live, although neither the dominant culture nor its values is static. “Possibly the most contentious issue in relation to children and media,” Sonia Livingstone contends, “centres on children’s susceptibility to media influences . . . because at its heart lies the question of children’s agency” (5). At issue is the extent to which media such as books,
television, film, or games influence the behaviour of young people, whether the behaviour at stake involves violent actions, sexual activity, spending habits, or recycling.

Children, like other consumers of cultural narratives, do produce their own meanings from them. Studies have examined the way that children incorporate elements of media culture into their own play, particularly in the creation of fantasy worlds (see Götz et al.) and in their understanding of relevant issues (see Gauntlett); the results of such studies suggest that children are not merely passive recipients of television or other media. That no text ever has just one interpretation also suggests the activity required in meaning-making; as online comments for Wall-E indicate, viewers of the same film (adults or young people) interpreted the content in different ways, sometimes privileging the love story to the exclusion of any environmental comment, or vice versa. Furthermore, Chas Critcher’s history of public debates on children and media finds that fears of media influence on children have been articulated in very similar ways over time, whether the fear concerns popular literature in the nineteenth century, or film, radio, comics, television, and electronic games in the twentieth century. He concludes that “[c]ontroversies over children’s relationship to each new mass medium may thus be explained as the outcome of these three influences: the urge to moral regulation, the struggle for cultural standards and the effort to preserve a particular construction of childhood” (102). Fear of media influence may be more about young people’s willingness to choose emerging practices over traditional ones than about their passivity or lack of agency.

Nevertheless, children’s agency, like adults’ agency, is not unlimited, and media as pedagogical sites teach their consumers something—whether explicit behaviours or implicit ideological positions. Henry A. Giroux, analyzing the effect of media controlled by Disney on young people, asserts that popular culture “is the primary way in which youth learn about themselves, their relationship to others, and the larger world” (2). By encoding assumptions about the way human relationships and society should be represented, therefore, the products of popular culture continually educate their audiences, whether that education is accepted or rejected, and whether or not such education is even recognized. Wall-E incorporates into its narrative this process of learning from media; by watching an old copy of Hello Dolly! Wall-E discovers human actions such as dancing and hand-holding, actions which he then attempts to mimic by himself and with Eve. Andrea Millwood Hargrave and Sonia Livingstone observe that “[r]esearchers have long pointed to the role of the media in relation to reality-defining effects, arguing that the media provide frameworks or expectations with which the
public understands the world around them” (18–19); Wall-E’s viewing of Hello Dolly! is shown to lead to very human, rather than robotic, expectations of relationships.

Thus, while interpretations of media texts are not singular and while effects may not be simple or direct (Gauntlett 11), interpretations are not limitless or unconstrained. Sonia Livingstone and Kirsten Drotner argue that variation in readings has limits because of textual strategies and cultural positioning: “the possibilities for critical or oppositional readings are anticipated, enabled or restricted by the degree of closure semiotically encoded into the text and by audiences’ variable access to symbolic resources” (11). Cook phrases the problem this way: “Imaginations can be colonized.” If a variety of pedagogical sites, including different media texts, repeat similar formulations of an issue such as environmentalism, that formulation is more likely to appear to be commonsensical or natural, and thus to become a nearly invisible assumption underlying behaviour and beliefs and supporting structures of power. Using Antonio Gramsci’s notion of the “hegemonic state” and speaking specifically of environmentalism, Gauntlett notes that environmental debates are repeatedly packaged in particular ways: “the fundamental questions at the heart of the issue, of industrialism versus its alternatives, have instead been recast as questions such as whether or not one should recycle household waste. This becomes the accepted terrain of debate, the ‘common sense’ approach to the subject, and the more radical perspectives are left outside of the debate altogether” (37). The approach to environmental questions in Wall-E remains within this “common-sense” framework, with the result that its critique of ideologies dependent on consumption and waste is limited.

Since the corporate producers of Wall-E and of other elements of kinderculture depend (financially and otherwise) on such ideologies, it is not surprising that the critique contained in these texts tends to be limited, nor is it surprising that these texts can produce anxiety. Anxiety about the ways in which children’s imaginations may be “colonized” or programmed by cultural texts arises in part because of anxiety about who or what is performing this action. Critcher argues, “The basic insecurity is that socializing children is inherently a hazardous enterprise. It is accomplished by families and schools, despite a mass-media system which is at best indifferent and at worst hostile to the enterprise” (101). That “mass-media system” is firmly associated with corporate power and materialism. Giroux, Janet Wasko, and others have noted that media—including entertainment media for young people—are increasingly controlled by a handful of companies, including Disney. If popular media inevitably act as pedagogical sites, and if much of popular culture is produced by corporations whose
primary objective—given the capitalist system in which they operate—must be profitability, youth learning is inevitably tied to commercial concerns that need to increase rather than reduce consumption of goods—a position fundamentally at odds with environmentalism.

**Wall-E and Programming**

*Wall-E* explicitly raises the question of “programming” through its robot characters who follow “directives,” but it also shows the way advertising encourages its human characters to follow the “directives” of a mega-corporation; the film, therefore, can be read as a sustained meditation on the relationship of cultural products, consumers, and programming, using conventions of animated film and speculative fiction to engage with contemporary issues of environmental degradation and over-consumption. Through its celebration of the individual and humankind, its position as a mainstream media product distributed by Disney, and its visual reinforcement of the accumulation of mass-produced items, *Wall-E* encourages its audience to accept and participate in the very consumer culture that it critiques. While recognizing that individuals will experience texts differently and create meanings in different ways, the following analysis maps some of the textual and commercial strategies that attempt to position individuals to create certain meanings and not others, and the contradictions of the meanings encouraged: *Wall-E* simultaneously critiques and reinforces as natural a consumerist ethic.

The consideration of programming in the film begins with Eve’s question to Wall-E about his “directive,” and, through contrasting the various robots’ understandings of their directives, the film celebrates the ability to move beyond one’s programming. The most action-packed sequences of the film are generated by Eve’s repeated
attempts to follow her directive and return the plant Wall-E has found on Earth to the human Captain of the spaceship Axiom in opposition to the robotic Autopilot who insists, “I must follow my directive” as it refuses to let the Captain plan a return to Earth. Autopilot’s determination to follow seven-hundred-year-old orders leads it to imprison the Captain and to attempt to discredit or destroy Eve and Wall-E. The film has created sympathy for these latter characters in particular; more time has been spent in their character development, they are more humanoid in shape than Autopilot or its allies, and they express more emotions (longing, fear, and joy) through “facial” expressions or actions that mimic human ones, or through the limited sounds that they can make (which include giggles on Eve’s part). Autopilot’s inflexibility is paired with a lack of human attributes: its shape resembles the navigation wheel of a ship. The combination of inflexible adherence to directives and inhuman features is coded as villainous, dangerous, and obstructing new life.

Minor robot characters support the dichotomy between those who are able to go beyond their directives and those who can only follow them. Throughout the Axiom, lines on the floor indicate pathways for all robot characters to follow, and this design creates visual patterns that suggest order (regular spaces between objects and all objects moving in similar ways) and great activity (the speed and sheer numbers of objects). Wall-E is literally outside of this regimen, and his eruption into it—for example, when he first attempts to merge into the lanes of traffic—causes chaos and physical comedy. Other robots, however, also move off the lines. The first to do so is M-O, the cleaning robot who is distressed by the “foreign contaminant” that coats Wall-E and that he leaves behind him. M-O’s movement away from the orderly line only happens after a visible hesitation, which suggests the difficulty of overcoming programming. Since M-O’s duty is to clean up contaminants, his shift in focus from following the line to following Wall-E can be seen as an extension of his directive; he exchanges one programmed path for another related one.

The other robots who do not follow the lines are coded as “sick” or “defective.” They are first encountered in a special “Repair Ward” where they display erratic and repetitive behaviours; many of them follow their programming to such an excess (the hairdressing robot applying make-up on Wall-E, for example) that their directives are paradoxically no longer fulfilled. When Wall-E accidently frees them, they move into the rest of the Axiom bunched together, ignoring the usual spacing and not following any lines. This grouping and movement makes them visually distinct from other robots and suggests their potential for violence and chaos, an association that Autopilot uses when broadcasting its “Wanted” notices for Wall-E and Eve. Because that violence and chaos supports the
goals of Wall-E and Eve (and, by extension, the good of the human characters), it becomes more easily read as comedic, rather than villainous. Furthermore, the scene in which the group of “rogue” robots faces the security bots characterizes the two groups in terms of individuality. The rogue robots are individualized: there are a variety of robot designs in the group, and, by virtue of their malfunctioning, they are different from others the film has shown who perform similar functions on the ship. The security bots, on the other hand, form up in orderly lines and are identical to one another; when one falls, another exactly the same takes its place. To follow directives, these visual cues suggest, is to be a drone, easily replaced, not individual. The film thus replicates “deeply-held beliefs about self-expression and freedom of choice” as empowering (Cook) and as unquestionably “good,” beliefs that commonly appear in cultural products for children—whether advertisements or narratives (see Shannon).

In addition to emphasizing the desirability of individuality, the depiction of robot characters in the film engages with cultural anxieties about the degree to which technology threatens or ensures human survival (a concern addressed in many science-fiction narratives), and the difference between danger and salvation seems to be the extent to which the technology takes on “human” attributes. The inflexible, non-humanoid Autopilot, by supposedly guarding human existence according to its directive, would eventually reduce its human cargo to helpless automatons; the more human Wall-E dutifully follows his directive to clean up the mess humans have left, but he gives relationship and community a higher priority than that directive (for example, when he abandons Earth to follow Eve), and thus forces the human characters with whom he interacts to recognize their humanity too. Individual humans often need to learn to improve themselves, to become more authentically human in their emotional commitments and community responsibilities, but humans remain the centre of the universe as a standard of potential that technological creatures like Wall-E must reach.

That human characters need to learn to recognize their humanity is the consequence of their “programming”; “directives” affect human characters through values inculcated by cultural products promoted by a mega-corporation (Buy n Large). When Wall-E passes a daycare on the Axiom, babies lie on the floor cooing, all watching a screen that teaches, through visual and verbal stimuli, that “A is for Axiom . . . B is for Buy n Large, your very best friend.” Steinberg and Kincheloe argue that “[p]atterns of consumption shaped by corporate advertising empower commercial institutions as the teachers of the contemporary era” (16); Wall-E makes this blurring of corporate commercialism and education obvious. Adult inhabitants of the Axiom also demonstrate their programming. They follow consumer
directives, all switching to blue clothing the moment they are told that it is the new fashion. The slogan, “blue, it’s the new red,” makes little sense, but, without a pause, the human characters key in the command to turn their clothing blue. When Wall-E gets the attention of Mary, her clothing turns red again; visually, she suddenly stands out from the crowd of (animated) human characters; she is individualized.

Through both robots and human characters, therefore, the film suggests that the ultimate danger of programming is loss of individuality. Wall-E reinscribes the value of the individual as the basic premise on which the critique of consumerism and environmental destruction rests. Buy n Large, whose CEO has given Autopilot its directive, abandons Earth rather than developing new strategies to solve its environmental problems; the corporation is, in that respect, vilified. However, that company is given a face—quite literally, since Shelby Forthright is one of the few speaking parts in the film to be played by a live actor (Fred Willard). Autopilot’s directive thus comes from an individual, and it is countered by another individual, the Captain. What systemic structures are visible—those of consumption and waste management—resemble those of our present: significantly, humans on board the Axiom still produce huge volumes of garbage that is compacted into giant cubes; the only difference is the dump location—space instead of Earth. Other systemic structures remain invisible: questions about whether people work, how they afford their hoverchairs, how their ancestors got places on the Axiom, or how the new society on Earth will be organized do not make sense in the world of the film. Making invisible the socio-economic systems governing its futuristic world, Wall-E makes it easy to assume that they resemble those of the viewers’ present: twenty-first-century corporate capitalism becomes timeless and thus natural and inevitable. The film, instead of promoting a rethinking of the systems themselves, suggests that all environmental problems and solutions depend solely on individual decisions and actions.

The social critique in Wall-E, therefore, is less about the structures of our society than about our individual choices, or, perhaps more accurately, the apathy and passivity that makes individuals vulnerable to programming and incapable of making environmentally sound choices. In warning against the dangers of being programmed by commercial interests, however, the film can be read as hypocritical, and some online respondents have made this point (Ashley P. in “What Our Users Said”). It is, after all, produced and promoted by Disney, a corporation whose practices and influence have made it vulnerable to charges of “programming” its audiences. As various analysts of Disney theme parks have noted, the arrangement of the parks “carefully organizes and controls its guests’ point of view” (Telotte 4), so that, as Alexander Wilson observes in “The Betrayal of the
Future: Walt Disney’s EPCOT Center, “[t]here is never a moment or space that is not visually, aurally, and olfactorily programmed” (qtd. in Telotte 4). Furthermore, because of Disney’s influence and saturation of the media market, the corporation’s products have, in the last fifteen years, been subjected to much critical scrutiny of “the futures they envision, the values they promote, and the forms of identification they offer” (Giroux 7). Disney’s attempts to position itself as educator, whether through manufacturing “educational toys” or funding scholarships and teaching awards (Bell, Haas, and Sells 7), has only increased anxieties about its influence, suggesting that part of the problem is the nature of education itself. Although there is a distinction between programming and education, the terms are not as far apart as we might like. Programming suggests a passive recipient, one who simply accepts and follows the directives given; education, ideally, suggests an active recipient, one who learns not just content, but to question and to think critically. Scholars of Disney entertainment products often investigate the type of educational experience such products provide because of Disney’s saturation of the market (Giroux 7). As Giroux points out, the concern is “what these films are saying” (85) in their role as pedagogical sites, particularly given their association with “conservative and commercial values” (91) that are somehow seen as “innocent” and non-ideological.

Online comments provide insight into the way that filmgoers (whether adults or young people) have interpreted Wall-E, into their expectations of film as leisure-time activity, and, by extension, into their acceptance of mainstream film as pedagogical. Some responses to Wall-E suggest anxiety about multiple roles of film as entertainer and programmer/educator. Some, like Patrick S., recognize the “strong political and environmental message” but resist the debate, preferring...
to concentrate on the entertainment: he asks, “Why can’t we just watch a movie in simplicity?” Similarly, Chad S. argues that “movies . . . [are] a form of entertainment and in being so they are there merely to entertain you.” Nikki A. refers to those talking about the environmental message as “WRONG. The director distinctly said when interviewed that this film had nothing to do with the environment or politics, he was just making a film” (“What Our Users Said”). Such responses reinforce Giroux’s observation that “[p]opular audiences tend to reject any link between ideology and the prolific entertainment world of Disney” (89). In the online comments I examined, such rejection is sometimes blatantly stated, as in the previous examples. More common are comments that praise the film for its charming characters or love story, without mentioning the bleak future setting where these characters live and learn to love.

Other respondents, however, express resentment that the film emphasizes or takes too seriously its role as programmer/educator. Josh D.’s comment makes clear an expectation that the role of a film as entertainer should not be compromised by a message: “a public service announcement does not a two hour movie make.” Similar resentment is sometimes communicated by the words chosen to speak about the message of the film: Don B., for example, refers to “propaganda.” Others articulate their feelings in more detail: Pat N. complains, “We took the kids to see a movie which look[ed] entertaining in the trailer, only to be insulted . . . and feed [sic] a load of crap”; Rita N. feels “ashamed” of taking her grandchildren to the movie, saying, “I hope they aren’t permanently damaged” (“What Our Users Said”). While some of the user ratings fall into the middle range (five, six, or seven out of ten), many of those voting chose one extreme or the other. Among those who chose the lower ratings (zero to four), words such as “preachy,” “lecture,” “sermon,” and “heavy handed” appear often in the comments. It is not always clear, since comments tend to be just a couple of sentences, whether the individual’s objection is to the way the message was handled, the fact that this particular message was included, or the presence of any message in what was marketed as children’s entertainment; all three of these possibilities are raised by various respondents. Consequently, one of the implications of mainstream film as pedagogical site seems to be the risk of audience disappointment (possibly even boycott) when that educational role becomes obvious or when the “lesson” involved is deemed inappropriate for its viewers; because of the nature of environmental debates, a “lesson” related to environmentalism particularly risks such censure.

Wall-E as “Environmental Cautionary Tale”

In its depiction of a futuristic, garbage-ravaged Earth, Wall-E participates in a growing debate about
the state of the global environment, the degree to which human activity is irrevocably damaging that environment, and the actions that need to be taken as a result. Despite the prevalence of the discussion of environmental issues, however, there is little consensus on the causes and the extent of environmental damage, or on appropriate action to be taken. Representations of environmental problems, whether presented in a documentary, in an educational setting, or in a film for children, therefore, often encounter resistance. *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), for example, elicited some of the same responses as *Wall-E* on the Metacritic site: votes were often split between very low (several respondents gave it a zero) and very high, and those who gave it low ratings disputed the truth-claims of the film, challenged the scientific evidence for climate change (or demanded “real” scientific evidence), and referred to “propaganda” (Revs. of *An Inconvenient*). Likewise, environmental education in classrooms has elicited accusations that such programs “pollute kids’ minds” (Richardson 12) or are full of “Little Green Lies” (Adler). Such responses interpret environmental education as indoctrination (or programming) rather than education: Valerie Richardson includes a quotation from “an associate professor of political science” who states, “What they’re clearly trying to do is politicize these kids” (13). Jonathan Adler also objects to the political dimension of environmental education, demanding that such education be “conducted in a careful, thoughtful, and non-ideological manner. After all, schools are for education, not political indoctrination.” Significantly, Adler counters many of the environmental “myths” that students are being taught with the assurance that free market forces will correct any problem: for the myth that “We Use Too Much,” Adler responds, “Even if a given resource were to become scarce, this would not be the end of the world. Its price would rise, and the economy would promote increased efficiency and the development of alternatives.” Adler presents such assurances as though teaching the benefits of such market forces would be non-ideological. The discussion of environmental issues, however grounded in scientific fact, is inevitably ideological, for research findings are interpreted according to a variety of frameworks. When these issues are further transfigured by the conventions of storytelling and genre, and the media of an animated film, the risk increases that the resulting presentation of established “truths” about the environment will be perceived as “propaganda” that is particularly reprehensible for being targeted toward children.

The assumed goal of environmental education—whether in an academic setting or a mainstream film—is to raise awareness, at least, if not to change behaviour. David W. Orr argues that “an ecologically literate and caring public” is crucial to solving environmental problems, and he locates that literacy...
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as beginning with an “affinity for the living world” and a “sense of the kinship of life” (90; 86; 86–87). David Ockwell, Lorraine Whitmarsh, and Saffron O’Neill explain that engagement with environmental issues takes place on “cognitive,” “affective,” and “behavioural” levels, and feeling protective of the environment (the affective) is necessary to provide motivation for action (306). Fiction has long been assumed (or suspected, in some cases) to be particularly suited to the stirring of emotions, and fiction presented by visual media even more so (see Critcher 101). Gauntlett, for example, states that in The Animals of Farthing Wood, “[h]aving fictional characters whom the audience can come to know and have feelings about . . . is seen to contribute greatly to the programme’s impact” (64). But the affective element is not the only one required for change. For example, Alan R. Berkowitz, Mary E. Ford, and Carol A. Brewer break down the call for “ecological literacy” into three components: ecological literacy, civics literacy, and environmental citizenship. In this view, ecological literacy is a way of thinking about and understanding one’s environment, civics literacy is a way of thinking about and understanding the social/political/economic systems that govern society, and environmental citizenship is the will (understood as desire and motivation) to put both of these literacies into action (228). The explicit content of Wall-E encourages an emotional response, the “affinity for the living world” that David W. Orr identifies; however, its education cannot move beyond that affective response because of its contradictory position as consumer product and its contradictory images of consumption.

In order to maximize the possibility of affective response, the film must engage viewers in terms they can understand. Regardless of age, viewers will likely have had some exposure to environmental issues before seeing the film. Gauntlett’s 1996 study of children from the city
of Leeds found that before its in-school environmental video project began, “[t]here did not appear to be any individual, in any of the groups, who did not have some knowledge or awareness of environmental matters” (95); similarly, a study conducted in the mid-nineties in the northeast of England as part of the research initiative Emergent Environmentalism found that children in their study “as early as 4 years of age” could “speak of short-term effects of environmental change” (Palmer and Suggate 235). While family practices such as recycling contribute to environmental awareness, school curricula, entertainment media, and even advertisements play important roles. School curricula increasingly contain, as Robert Veel notes, “content which deals directly with human impact on the environment or . . . take[s] an ‘environmentalist perspective’ on traditional content” (114). Media directed toward children also contain environmentalist content: Gauntlett cites non-fiction books such as 50 Simple Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth (1990), films such as Pocahontas (1995) and FernGully (1992), and several UK children’s television shows known by the participants in his study. In addition, as Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor demonstrates, some fiction for children gives Nature a voice that “calls upon the reader’s help in [its] survival” (143). Commercial interests also play a role: while “ecologically-responsible advertisements directed to children” are still in the minority, Robin T. Peterson’s study found that their proportion is increasing (206). Children, not only adults, encounter a range of information and images about the state of our local, national, and global environment.

Issues that seem to be of particular concern for children include pollution—particularly litter—and desecration of natural landscapes, as well as scarcity of resources. For example, the children in Gauntlett’s study always addressed litter and ugly city spaces in their videos (131); Diane Parker used litter to provoke interest for a grade-school math project; Peterson’s categories in the analysis of advertisements include water, air, and noise pollution, as well as “depletion of scarce resources,” “destruction of the landscape,” and “population explosion” (207); and the common “myths” Adler counters also include these issues. Wall-E incorporates both pollution and the desecration of landscapes; at the level of its environmental “message,” it addresses quite young children with ideas of which they might be expected to have some understanding or awareness, through characters to whom they might be expected to relate. The opening sequence of the film, which moves visually from the galaxy to the solar system and finally through the atmosphere to the surface of Earth, introduces pollution as a planet-threatening problem: the air is hazy with particles, and the surface of the planet is covered with debris or with skyscraper-like towers of compacted cubes of trash. The bleakness of the landscape is emphasized by the solitary figure that
moves into the frame far below the camera: the robot Wall-E. Wall-E’s relatively small size, curiosity, funny noises, and whimsical expressions that suggest emotion establish him as a typical protagonist of young people’s narratives because he displays enough character and developmental similarities with children to facilitate their interest. Theatres emphasized the connection between Wall-E and child viewers: in the Canadian theatre where I first saw the film, concession-stand Wall-E combos included smaller portions of popcorn, candy, and drinks, and the bottom of the carton had a connect-the-dots activity. The film and the theatre experience thus catered deliberately, though not exclusively, to a younger audience through its protagonist, genre, and peripheral products, but also through its environmental narrative.

The theatre experience is significant when considering Wall-E as social commentary because within that experience are several contradictory “directives.” On the one hand, there is the “message” of this film, cautioning its audiences about human wastefulness and consumerism. On the other hand, the theatre experience of any film encourages consumption because, as William Paul notes, the theatre attempts to persuade customers (adults or children) to consume not just the images and sounds of the chosen film, but also snacks and other concessions. Paul comments on the importance of the “impulse buying . . . that centers around the concession stand” (287); the architectural design of theatres, particularly the multiplex theatres common now, makes the concession stand “the first thing you see upon entering, and something you generally move by in leaving” (287). Furthermore, the film exhibition system in place since the latter part of the twentieth century depends on “widespread interest” being generated in a film before it ever opens, which leads to “mass-media advertising” and “the treatment of the individual film as a brand name” (Paul 289).

One of the ways to increase the awareness of the brand name is to promote other products in association with the film, including themed concession-stand combos. In the case of Wall-E, the “kid’s combo” included a plastic collector’s cup showing the face of the robot, but also repeatedly displaying logos for Disney and for Dasani (“a registered trademark of the Coca-Cola company,” according to the cup). As Lisa Orr reports, “[s]tarting in the late 1990s, marketing studies revealed that children younger than three could, and did, recognize brands” (15). Brand-name placement works under the assumption that people—children as well as adults—exposed to one product will buy something else of the same brand; it presupposes more and more consumption. Moreover, as the film suggests, “collectibles” and “garbage” are closely related terms. Although the collector cup can be taken home and reused, when I left the theatre clutching mine, I noticed many of these combos in garbage bins—cardboard tray, plastic cup, and all. Another marketing scheme,
mentioned by an online respondent (identified as tande04) to Mark Wilson’s review of the DVD, involved “little disposable watches they gave out during the movie’s opening”; the respondent noted the irony of this ploy: “You get the feeling that the marketing department hadn’t seen the movie yet.”

The DVD and Blu-ray release of the film in November 2008 occasioned another round of marketing, with life-sized cardboard Wall-E figures propped beside distributors’ shelves, and television advertisements promoting purchases. In another response to Mark Wilson’s review of the DVD release, mj_and_hj suggests the power of such marketing: “Every time a commercial came on for this movie the past week my 2 year old little girl would scream, WALL-E. She hasn’t even seen it. She keeps asking to go to walmart to get it.” This example suggests that quite young children do learn from media such as television and film, and, among other information and skills, they learn to be consumers of products and customers of corporate giants. While the marketing of the DVD attempts to acknowledge the “message” of the film—the packaging is supposed to be more environmentally friendly—there is no escaping the fact that any treatment of the film as consumable product contradicts its images of the consequences of ongoing consumption. Because “[c]hildren’s media programs are commodities themselves that are bought and sold in an ever-expanding marketplace” (Wasko 463), the warning about consumption in the film is always being countered by the entrenched practices of theatregoing, film promotion, and home entertainment.

Such contradictions, however, can also be found within the film itself. While falling in love is the behaviour that most obviously indicates Wall-E’s human qualities, his habit of collecting also makes him seem human and provides the material for numerous sight gags,

While compacting trash into orderly cubes, Wall-E selects certain items, presumably ones that pique his curiosity.
but it is problematic in terms of the environmental message of the film. While compacting trash into orderly cubes, Wall-E selects certain items, presumably ones that pique his curiosity. His “home” is filled with memorabilia such as the fake fish that sings “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” bubble wrap, Rubik’s cubes, cutlery, lighters, and a VHS tape of *Hello Dolly!* This habit provides the plot logic necessary for the plant to be found and rescued in the first place: Wall-E discovers it, keeps it, and shows it to Eve—which in turn leads to the journey to the *Axiom*. It also provides humour through sight gags and physical comedy: Wall-E’s attempt to figure out the purpose of a bra, his encounter with an old fire-extinguisher that propels him across the garbage dump, and Eve’s rapid-fire bubble-wrap busting or Rubik’s cube solving are just a few examples. Wall-E’s collection, because it gives him and Eve the physical and narrative space to interact as he shows her his treasures, also provides an opportunity for the robot romance to progress in a recognizably human (even nostalgic) way: human courtship is often about shared consumption—of dinners, films, cultural events, gifts, and other objects.

Wall-E’s habit of collecting might be seen as recycling, or the equivalent of garage-sale shopping and thus an extension of the environmental message; in this view, he collects fragments that he recombines in new ways for decorative or practical purposes. Wall-E uses old strings of lights, for example, to create ambiance for his home; he watches *Hello Dolly!* repeatedly and learns about human behaviour from it; and both he and Eve find, in the midst of his collection, replacement parts to fix his robotic body. In her review, Zacharek suggests that Wall-E is “a hero who, by culling through the masses of junk that we so casually throw away, becomes a repository for human memories”; he invests the discarded with meaning, and his wonder at each object may work, in the tradition of science fiction, to create estrangement, to make viewers of the film “see” garbage in a new way, to see the possibilities in objects commonly treated as disposable. His collection, in this sense, is postmodern bricolage, the creation of art from fragments of the mundane.

This reading of Wall-E’s collecting, however, is problematic. Most of his treasures seem to have no other purpose than to be collected and categorized, and the sheer number of the same objects (Zippo lighters, cutlery) suggests to me less aesthetic production of meaning or creative reuse than compulsive collecting. That such compulsions are significant in North American society can be seen in the recent development of reality-television series (such as A&E Television’s *Hoarders*) that are devoted to people whose collections take over their living space and damage their relationships. While I do not wish to pathologize Wall-E’s habit, I do think that his activity reinforces as natural the investment Western society
has in the collection of mass-produced objects as signs of status, markers of identity, indicators of worth, and particularly as providers of comfort. Cook argues that “one’s sense of self” or “self worth” has become attached to the consumption of objects, to “owning a Barbie or a Pokemon card.” As the lone robot becomes less robotic and more human-like, objects stand in for relationships; Wall-E’s relationship to objects helps to define his “humanity” for viewers, making the collection of objects “natural” and inevitable.

Wall-E’s willingness to abandon these objects points to their emptiness in comparison to relationships, but Wall-E and Eve ultimately return to his home and his treasures, so the abandonment of the objects is only temporary; the film thus reinscribes “home” as a place where one’s “stuff” is located. Tom Crompton asserts that “[e]nvironmental problems can often be traced to our appetite for ‘stuff,’” a sentiment echoed by David Suzuki: “We have an economic system that . . . is dependent on consumption. And most of that consumption is frivolous stuff” (qtd. in Gillespie). Whether we need them or not, such “items . . . demand resources and energy in their manufacture, sale, use and disposal” (Crompton); Wall-E’s items have, of course, been manufactured long ago, but even the collecting of objects requires more resources, as more “stuff” requires more space to house it. The film seems to suggest that such behaviour makes us human and is thus inevitable, but it does not address how we might negotiate the problems that such behaviour—as it is implicated in over-consumption and waste—cause; moreover, reaffirming collecting as human behaviour also makes easier the commercialization of Wall-E into collectible objects.

In exploring such contradictions in Wall-E, I am aware of my own contradictions: I write with a computer drawing power from the grid, very little of which is “green” power; I work in a house full of objects much like Wall-E’s (though with no singing fish); and the list could go on. Furthermore, such contradictions exist in the environmental movement itself: “Popular culture,” state Mark Meister and Phyllis M. Japp, “is a world where commodification reigns, a world in which everything is a product for consumption; everything is for sale in some aspect or another,” so that environmentalism itself is sold, as groups raise money for their causes with the sale of commodities such as t-shirts or mugs (7). The contradictions in Wall-E are thus not unexpected or unique; given “the interpellation of Western society by the very discourse under interrogation” (Cranny-Francis 71), any critique tends to become entangled in such contradictions.

Given those contradictions, what does Wall-E as pedagogical site communicate about environmental problems and solutions? The powerful visual images of a devastated Earth of the early sections are countered by an equally powerful hopeful image at the end:
the Captain, surrounded by children, plants one fragile-looking, generic plant. The dialogue that accompanies the scene refers to “farming” and suggests the possible foods to be produced by that activity (including the unlikely “pizza plant”), so the scene thus uses “resourcist language” (Meisner and Japp 7) that continues to value nature according to its usefulness to humans. It is, nevertheless, an important image of caring for the Earth. Wall-E takes advantage of its medium—particularly its visual and aural properties—to create the “affective” engagement with environmental issues mentioned earlier (Ockwell, Whitmarsh, and O’Neill 306), that “affinity for the living world” (David W. Orr 86). The image of planting at the end of the film encourages that affinity by mobilizing associations of organic and personal growth, community, and relationship with nature. The plant most obviously symbolizes potential growth, but the people surrounding it also invoke this idea, either because of their age (the children) or the changes they have made (the Captain walking on his own two feet). The people work as a group, and, unlike the earlier visuals of people aboard the Axiom, these individuals communicate directly, rather than through technology; they are no longer isolated from one another and from their environment. The careful treatment of the plant suggests a respect for nature; the lyrics to the song from Hello Dolly! that accompany the resolution of Wall-E and Eve’s love story are also heard during the planting, so that the “love” that will last “our whole life long” becomes not just romantic love but love for the planet, as the camera pulls back to show an iconographic image, what social and cultural critic Andrew Ross has called “the ultimate global spectacle, the fragile, vulnerable ball of spaceship earth” (qtd. in Meisner and Japp 7). Crompton states, “Studies find that people who engage in behaviour in pursuit of . . . personal growth,
community involvement, or a sense of connection with
nature . . . tend to be more highly motivated and more
likely to engage in environmentally friendly behaviour.”
The resolution of the film thus invokes these affective
elements to communicate a feeling more than a specific
set of actions.

Those feelings are essential, but they are not
sufficient in themselves: “cognitive” and “behavioural”
levels are also required (Ockwell, Whitmarsh, and
O’Neill et al 306), and those levels are seldom
addressed in popular-culture representations of
environmental problems and solutions. Hansen and
Machin, surveying photographs supplied by Getty
Images for marketing campaigns and editorials related
to environmentalism, suggest that the type of generic
images that inspire feelings for nature “do not allow
us to show actually how we will think innovatively
and what kinds of vision will allow us to deal with
environmental issues” (791). If these affective discourses
become the accepted ones for dealing with the
environment, other kinds of discourses analyzing the
problems may not be heard, making incomplete the
conditions for environmental change. Affective images
do not portray “actual causes, effects and solutions but
highlight . . . the fragility and beauty of nature,” and as
a result they address “not . . . cause in global capitalism
and production but . . . personal emotional responses”
(Hansen and Machin 791). Affective elements may
motivate actions, but they can also comfort viewers with
the idea that individual feelings are enough; frequently,
corporate use of environmentalism capitalizes on such
feelings to promote products or companies rather than
to promote meaningful change. Gauntlett, drawing on
the writings of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno,
argues that popular culture presents environmental
issues in ways that, “[r]ather than being fundamentally
challenging, . . . have the role of giving the impression
that mass culture is engaged in critical dialogue with
forms of social organisation” (15). Wall-E, like many
other popular representations of environmentalism,
focuses on individual action, whereas theorists such
as Baudrillard, recognizing the role that waste plays
in maintaining a system of production, suggest that
calls to reduce it are “illusory” (45) if the system
remains in place. Gauntlett identifies the promotion
of individual action as opposed to larger institutional
and social changes as one of the ways in which
environmental critique is contained: “the media can
appear challenging by suggesting individual action to
counter environmental pollution—but macro social
changes which would have a much greater impact are
rarely mentioned” (34). The celebration of individuality
in Wall-E, discussed earlier, empowers individuals
to act—Wall-E, Eve, M-O, and the Captain all make
decisions to alter their behaviour—and even the
corporation is a matter of individuals (misguided or
villainous though they may be) such as Autopilot and
Shelby Forthright. Larger capitalist structures remain
intact, even if individual corporate representatives have been the target of humour. The audience is encouraged to feel for the environment, even to act individually, but is not encouraged to question the structures that naturalize (because they depend upon) our collection of “stuff.”

*Wall-E* does provide powerful visual images to persuade its viewers to form that affective attachment to our environment. It has great potential to raise awareness of environmental issues, particularly among younger viewers whose habits of thought about the environment may be more open to change. But environmental critique always runs the risk of being mobilized to sell more: Hansen and Machin point to “the commercial appropriation of this discourse [of environmentalism] and therefore the effect of promoting greater consumption” through this discourse (792). As media product within a commercial system of distribution, *Wall-E* is particularly susceptible to having its environmentalism co-opted to sell products: that is, after all, what the distribution system is designed to do. The privileging of individual action can thus also be co-opted into individual acts of consumption (buy the DVD . . . it’s environmentally friendly). Marketing of *Wall-E* DVDs, toys, calendars, birthday cards, and so on may be a reminder that we should love our Earth, but it seems likely to reinforce that we should love our “stuff” more.
Environmentalism and ecology are closely related in that both “share the view that humans and human activity need to be seen as part of the physical environment” (Veel 120), not separate from it, and that the language humans use to explain “natural” processes constructs a particular view of the relationship between humans and the environment. Robert Veel distinguishes between environmentalism and ecology by defining environmentalism as “a particular way of relating information and accounting for phenomena” (120) that includes an “orientation to reform,” while ecology “claims to be objective in the way it gathers and presents data” (121). Given the emotive power of Wall-E and its fictionality, I will use “environmentalism” and its variants rather than variants of “ecology,” but reviews tend to deploy the terms interchangeably.

See my review in Science Fiction Film and Television for a discussion of the participation of the film in science-fiction tradition, including its allusions to previous science-fiction films such as Short Circuit and 2001: A Space Odyssey.

I include here the hoverchairs. Although they carry human passengers, those passengers generally seem oblivious to where they are or how they are getting to their destination; I assume that once they tell the chair where they want to be taken, the chair does the rest.


Respondents on the sites I visited use either a code name, first name and last initial, or some version of an email address as identifiers. Although some refer to personal details that suggest their age group (as in those who mention attending the film with children or grandchildren), it is not possible to know the ages of all the respondents. I therefore use these responses, not as evidence of what a particular age group thinks of Wall-E, but as more general evidence of meanings produced and circulated from the film, and of assumptions about media and children.

The majority of responses were posted on Metacritic.com, an online site that links to major reviews of films, deduces a rating from those reviews, and allows people to post their own comments and ratings in the section “What Our Users Said.” Comments range from personal reviews of the film to responses to other comments already posted. The “metascore” (“a weighted, normalized average of all individual scores given by critics”) for Wall-E was ninety-three out of one hundred as of November 19, 2008; the “average user rating” was 9.0 out of ten on the same date, based on 979 votes.

Producers of children’s media texts recognize the possibility of such objections: one of the television producers that Gauntlett interviewed, while admitting the potentially environmentalist content of his show (The Animals of Farthing Wood), insisted that “I wouldn’t like to think for a moment that we were doing anything that could be even remotely regarded as propagandist” (64).

Anne Cranny-Francis identifies a similar problem in science-fiction films. Commenting on Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner (1982), Cranny-Francis asks, “How do you make a film about the dangers of high technology without making a film which relies for its visual impact on high technology?” (71).


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