

## A Childlike Ragpicker: Toward a Benjaminian Reading of *WALL-E*

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### Abstract

*WALL-E*, a multi-award winning film released in 2008, compels our attention to the entanglements of consumerism and environmentalism in a capitalistic society. This essay argues that *WALL-E* illustrates an ecological approach that taps into the articulation of nature, commodity, and technology when its film narrative is read along with Walter Benjamin's theoretical perspectives of the child and the ragpicker. The essay examines the extent to which the character WALL-E is figured as a child-like ragpicker, who collects odds and ends, tracks trash, debunks the myth of technological progress, and helps find life on the abandoned Earth. The character and presence of this childlike ragpicker suggests an ecological approach which does not celebrate the ostensibly pristine nature that capitalism often markets, or the advancing technology that humans seem to have too much faith in, but instead copes with the obsolete commodities or trash heaps that humans have discarded along the way.

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### A Childlike Ragpicker: Toward a Benjaminian Reading of *WALL-E*

Since its release in 2008, the film *WALL-E* has elicited conflicting responses to the environmental messages embedded in the film. Andrew Stanton, writer and director of the film, claims that apocalyptic environmentalism is not the film's theme. He told the reporter that he was "freaked out" by "the environment talk" (Onstad). In a public disavowal of "the political bent," or the message to "preach," Stanton emphasizes that his story starts from "the premise that irrational love defeats life's programming, and that the most robotic beings I've met are us" (Onstad). However, scholars, such as Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann, see the film as a kind of Edenic recovery narrative. They argue that *WALL-E* presents "the most powerful environmental statement made by either Disney or Pixar studios" (211). For Murray and Heumann, "the film asserts not only that humanity has destroyed Earth but that humans—with the help of the robot left to clean up the mess—can and should restore it to its more natural previous state" (211). Michelle Yates may concur with Murray and Heumann, but she contends that the film is a kind of reformed, "green" capitalism that naturalizes two of the fundamental features of capitalism: labor and the commodity form" (530-531). Christopher Todd Anderson holds a different view, investigating the "nostalgic fondness for consumer goods" embedded within the film's lament over environmental destruction (267). He argues that *WALL-E* is ambiguous in its mixture of heavy warnings over environmental destruction and nostalgic affection for consumer goods. While Andrew Stanton and scholars have provided disparate views of the environmentalism of the film, the controversial responses seem to suggest that critics have been revolving around how to position *WALL-E*, a cinematic blockbuster whose environmental message is entangled with its own involvement in consumerism.

Given the diverging accounts of the environmentalism of the film, the 2008 Pixar film can be seen as what Deidre Pike calls a "dialogue-prompting environ-toon" whose "often comedic portrayals of complex environmental discourses" create

“layers of perspective and open-ended conclusions” (13).<sup>1</sup> For an “environ-toon” with possible layers of perspective, focusing only on the overall sentiment of the film does not take account of the levels of engagement in environmentalism the film addresses one way of another. To carry on the conversation, this essay explores the film’s environmentalism from a somewhat different perspective, examining the title character Waste Allocation Load Lifter on Earth (abbreviated as WALL-E) along with Walter Benjamin’s theories of the child and the ragpicker, as defined in his oeuvre. At first glance Benjamin may not address the environmental issues directly, and yet the historical materialism he espouses is concerned with human societies and their development over time. Speaking of the contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin, Jürgen Habermas recognizes “the impulse to rescue and redeem” in Benjamin’s theory of history (38). For Habermas, Benjamin offers “a differentiated view of progress that furnishes a perspective that does not simply inhibit courage, but rather ensures that political action can hit its mark with greater accuracy” (59). To pursue this further, this essay argues that Benjamin’s theoretical perspectives of human progress, especially his views of the child and the ragpicker, have ethical implications for environmentalism, offering an acute awareness of the historical and political actions individuals can take with regards to environmental destruction in *WALL-E*. Just as the angel of history struggles to “awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed,” so too individuals have the responsibility and ability to face up to the past and tackle all that lie discarded in a strong storm called progress (“Concept of History,” *SW* 4: 392).<sup>2</sup>

Seen from this perspective, there seems to be an intriguing affinity between the open-

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<sup>1</sup> According to Deidre Pike, Jaime Weinman perhaps first used the term “environ-toon” to classify environmentally themed animation (12). To extend Weinman’s category with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of “dialogic,” and “heteroglossic,” Pike uses “dialogue-prompting animations” to describe “both the potential conversations within the text and the multiplicity of languages in their interactions and juxtapositions” (13).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” (1940), in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap P, 2003), 392; hereafter *Benjamin’s Selected Writings* are referenced with the following abbreviation: *SW*.

ing sequences of the film *WALL-E* and the scenario of “one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it” at the feet of the angel of history (“Concept of History,” *SW* 4: 392). Benjamin conceptualizes modern history as a disaster with piles of debris that grow higher and higher as time goes by. This particular view of modernity is recapitulated as an environmental catastrophe in the opening sequences of the film in which the last robot works alone in urban wasteland, whirled up now and then by raging storms of debris. The debris-strewn Earth is what Benjamin describes as “a graphic indication of the dangers threatening mankind from the repressions implicit in civilization” (“Work of Art” *SW* 3: 118). The deserted banks, restaurants, and highways, and the newspaper the little robot drives over suggest that the consumer goods of today are the garbage and trash of tomorrow in a buy-it-and-bin-it society. We find a rather bitter irony of circumstance in the opening sequence when the conglomerate or mega-corporation BNL can send humans to a more inhospitable environment such as the outer space, but cannot clear up the polluted Earth in a short time. The holograms at the BNL terminals that advertise a luxury vacation from the Earth are strongly incongruent with the devastated Earth clogged with masses of garbage. The advertisements feature “a course for nonstop entertainment and fine dining” served by “fully automated crew” on “the jewel of the BNL fleet” of spaceships, whereas a small rusty robot diligently cubes the masses of garbage left behind on the Earth (Stanton and Reardon 3). Despite the planetary crisis, no humans discuss how best to tackle the world’s waste problem. Instead of curbing conspicuous consumption, those who survive are evacuated from the Earth for a five-year cruise in the outer space. All that the megacorporation does is initiating a five-year plan “Operation Clean-Up,” assigning a team of Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-Class to clean up the trash humans have produced but fail to handle. However, the plan turns out to be a fiasco, and directive A113 is issued, declaring the Earth a lost cause. By the time the movie begins, only one small junky WALL-E charged by solar energy survives the catastrophe that lasts for hundreds of years on the Earth. In this urban wasteland, trash heaps tower over the abandoned high-rise buildings. In the garbage-strewn world, “the nature that buffets us,” as Patricia Yaeger says, “is never culture’s opposite. Instead, it is compacted with refuse, ozone, and mercury: the molecular crush of

already mingled matter" (323). Towers of trash that dominate the Earth unexpectedly take on "the sublimity that was once associated with nature" (Yaeger 327), jarring with all the garish, neon promise of a commercial district, suggest that commodities always turn into trash. The animated film creates a compelling chronotope where "molecular garbage has infiltrated earth, water, and air," so "we can no longer encounter the natural untouched or uncontaminated by human remains. Trash becomes nature, and nature becomes trash" (Yaeger 332).

It is in such an all-encompassing and potentially inevitable storm of progress that WALL-E emerges like a child who is able to act into the world, to initiate novel possibilities even in an abandoned world. Unlike the angel of history who mournfully looks back at the pile of debris, however, WALL-E is a robot programmed to perform a Sisyphean task—clean up the garbage-stricken Earth. If the angel's attempts to look back to the past suggest some kind of hope of salvation latent in the piles of debris, the small robot is portrayed in the film as a childlike trash collector who constantly gleans in mountains of trash on the devastated Earth, and later unwittingly awakens humans from their blind faith in advancing technology which induces them to relinquish their claim to the Earth.

In what follows, the essay discusses how Benjamin's theories illuminate the character of WALL-E as a childlike ragpicker, and considers the extent to which that characterization is connected with environmentalism. By reading the film's narrative along with Benjamin's theories of the ragpicker and the child, this essay will focus in particular on WALL-E's "irrational love" for human debris, his attempts to glean (to recycle and reuse) in the rubbish, and the potential he demonstrates for environmental awareness that comes from his Sisyphean ragpicking. By centering on the various moments when WALL-E is figured as a childlike trash collector gleaming in a debris-stricken world, we may gain a different perspective on the environmental message the film delivers.

Here Benjamin's concern with the marginalized figures such as ragpickers and children in society is pertinent to our understanding of WALL-E as a childlike trash collector. He sees in children's world the potential that awakens the slumbering forces of the capitalist culture.

Benjamin writes,

[e]very childhood achieves something great and irreplaceable for humanity. By the interest it takes in technological phenomena, by the curiosity it displays before any sort of invention and machinery, every childhood binds the accomplishments of technology to the old worlds of symbol.<sup>3</sup>

Here Benjamin is fascinated by the reciprocal relation between the child and the objects of the world. He also believes in children's capacity to syncretize modern technology with ancient symbolism, reconciling components of the state-of-the-art technology and the traditional elements of material culture.

Benjamin's view of the child's materialist concern is epitomized by the only Waste Allocation Load Lifter on Earth in Pixar's 2008 film. "In the garbage war," writes John Scanlan, "the refuse workers are cast as the unlikely storm troopers for progress, saviours of the city and of modern society. Not only does this fact go unrecognized but, as significantly, their very existence ensures that the spectre of garbage is kept at bay" (157). It is worth noting that a Pixar animated film which targets toward children features a small trash compactor or a refuse worker, which is fundamental in the organization of a society but rarely portrayed in the film. The ragpicker or chiffonnier was a common figure in nineteenth-century French literature, invoking the abject other of the capitalist culture. In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, the ragpicker and the sewer-man are described as the "two beings in whom all the material things of civilisation terminate"; the ragpicker collects shred of clothing and trinkets and the sewer-man works upon the quagmire under the city (1013-1014). Regarding the ragpicker, Benjamin also notes, "Here we have a man whose job it is to pick up the day's rubbish in the capital. He collects and catalogues everything that the great city

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. ed. Roy Tiedemann. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap P, 2002) 461; hereafter cited as *AP* in the text and notes.

has cast off, everything it has lost, and discarded, and broken... he collects the garbage that will become objects of utility or pleasure when refurbished by Industrial magic” (*AP* 349).

In the 2008 animation, however, WALL-E is not a ragpicker that exists, in Benjamin’s view, outside the capitalist world of production and consumption, but a robot the BNL mega-corporation exploits to tackle the trash. He works in a futuristic world where robots serve humans. WALL-E is designed to use solar energy, a provision that nature has made available to the Earth. A dented, rust-stained robot that has been working for 700 years, he belongs to “Earth class,” different from the huge, more advanced “WALL-A” which grabs a ton of trash on the Axiom. The little robot is a junky trash compactor, but survives the environmental catastrophe that lasts for hundreds of years. He follows his routine to work and rummages in rubble, which was once the basis of the capitalist society, and which has been incongruous with the empty promises made by the mega-corporation.

If a ragpicker rummages through the refuse in the streets to collect odds and ends to make a living, WALL-E is by no means a conventional ragpicker or a chiffonnier who wrings the last drops of exchange value from the discards in a capitalist society. Apart from the programmed task, he collects various pieces of trash he finds interesting and stores them in his shelter. For WALL-E all that exists is not necessarily ruin or dust. He is an automation which performs like a curious child who is “particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on” and who is “irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry” (“One Way,” *SW I*: 449). While scavenging from garbage, WALL-E plays with remote locking keys, and tries out a brassiere on his mechanical eyes. When discovering a diamond ring in a jewel case, he throws out the ring and keeps the case. “In waste products,” WALL-E explores like a child who can “recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to [him]” (“One Way,” *SW I*: 449).

While working in a garbage-strangled world, WALL-E seems to enjoy gleaning in the trash. His shelter is an ideal locus for exploring Pixar’s fascination with the low-tech, archaic odds and ends. WALL-E picks up knick-knacks of found junks, brings them back to his truck, and makes his own collection. His shelter is a giant garbage truck that houses a variety

of detritus which has been acquired and accumulated over hundreds of years. There is a huge collection of bits and pieces, and nuts and bolts that are categorized on the rolling selves. There are a few small pieces of bric-à-brac, including Christmas lights. There are also oddities such as a rubber duck, a paddle ball, and a singing Billy Bass fish. Judging from WALL-E's collection, Christopher Todd Anderson argues that much of what we purchase "provides lighthearted but superficial entertainment, and long-term value resides not in the objects themselves, nor in their practical utility, but in the nostalgia and other emotions we project onto the things we collect" (274). The things strewn around WALL-E's shelter may evoke nostalgia in some audience members, but it does not mean WALL-E the rusty robot is nostalgic. Rather, it is some audience members that enjoy the nostalgia brought on by the images of the memorabilia. As Deidre M. Pike suggests, WALL-E is merely "channeling" some people's "fascination with contemporary cultural realities that could, someday, be lost" (123).

Despite his working-man ethos, WALL-E is, Anderson suggests, "a perpetual adolescent drown to emblems of childhood, whimsy, and feel-good entertainment, and his human qualities are particularly apparent when his behavior is most youthful" (273). Anderson may be right to point to the complexity of waste in the film, suggesting the youthful qualities WALL-E seems to display. But it is necessary to qualify the "childlike" qualities WALL-E demonstrates in the film. The tendency to anthropomorphize creatures or the inanimate objects is essential to animation in general, but it is especially intriguing in this film as it personifies a junky robot as a childlike ragpicker. The character WALL-E may *speak* little, saying only one-word sentence, but he is visually a robot that has a "listening face," "twinkling eyes," wheel-like feet, and spade-like hands, corresponding to what Aletta G. Dorst calls a kind of "body-part personification" (132). The large collection inside the garbage truck crystalizes in the most unexpected ways the teeny, tiny effort WALL-E has made over the decades. Benjamin suggests that children's approach to the forsaken and forgotten often opens up the new possibilities of the obsolete objects at hand. In *One Way Street*, the child is described as a hunter tracing the spirits in seemingly small things, a collector whose dresser drawers are "arsenal and zoo" in which "prickly chestnuts that are spiky clubs, tinfoil that is

hoarded silver, bricks that are coffins, cacti that are totem poles, and copper pennies that are shields” (“One Way,” *SW 1*: 465). According to Benjamin, children frequently address or readdress the objects that are no longer deemed socially valuable from a novel or alternative perspective, redeeming them from the homogeneous narrative of historical progress.

Seen from this perspective, the huge collection inside the garbage truck evokes not so much what Anderson calls “nostalgic fondness for consumer goods” as a sense of romance for the 3R’s principles often moralized and taken for granted (267). WALL-E re-uses or recycles the objects he salvages in a novel way. He replenishes himself by recycling some parts of the old compactors. To watch his favorite video *Hello, Dolly*, WALL-E removes the video from a toaster and watches it on an *ad-hoc* iPod. As the screen on the iPod is too small to see well, WALL-E uses a kind of Fresnel lens to magnify the sequences and make them visible. He also activates a fire extinguisher for fun, and later uses another as a form of propulsion in the outer space, though it is empirically improbable. Furthermore, a self-created order is established by the little compactor who has brought obsolete materials together in the old truck where he shelters himself from raving storm of toxic waste. By removing the discarded objects from their status as trash littering the path of progress, and placing them in alternative “constellations,” the little robot playfully reveals the singularity of each object in light of a new configuration. When engaged with the discarded objects, WALL-E often recognizes in them new values, withdrawing them from their conventional circle of utility. Garbage turns out to become for the little working robot a chance to play, to explore, and to learn. As Benjamin says, “Children can accomplish the renewal of existence in a hundred unending ways” (“Unpacking,” *SW 2*: 487). WALL-E proves himself a child free to play, enjoying prying objects loose from their common usage. WALL-E scavenges for whatever “worthwhile” discards he finds in the trash, but he does not pick up objects merely for their “functional, utilitarian values,” but “studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate” (“Unpacking,” *SW 2*: 487).

As can be seen from the way he acts, WALL-E is a garbage collecting robot that evolves over time to take on human qualities. If Mickey Mouse “disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind” (“Mickey,” *SW 2*: 545), WALL-E is a

hybridized character that conflates and confounds the category of nature. WALL-E, on the one hand, carries out its programmed tasks, stacking masses of trash and freeing up space on Earth; on the other, he scavenges for whatever "worthwhile" discards he finds in the trash. He also has a cockroach as a pal pet which follows him wherever he works in the dump heaps. Just like the spork he fails to decide whether to store with his collection of spoons or forks, WALL-E is a sentient robot, with human personality traits. As Vivian Sobchack suggests, WALL-E is "a category-blurring entity," which "embodies the signs of both animation and automation" (385).

WALL-E is not merely a machine that is programmed to follow directives but a robot that demonstrates "the mimetic faculty," which is, in Benjamin's view, "the highest capacity human beings possess to produce similarities" ("Mimetic," *SW 2*: 720). WALL-E may be a moving machine which performs a range of functions by coded instructions, but he is able to involve himself in a process of mimicking and learning. WALL-E's ability to behave mimetically is exemplified in the *mise en abymes* when he repeatedly watches *Hello, Dolly!* on a screen.<sup>4</sup> At the moment when watching the scene wherein Michael Crawford holds Marianne McAndrew's hand, WALL-E tilts his head, clutching his own hands in an imitation of the images of real people who are acting out their love in a discernible way. Later when WALL-E plays for EVE the same segment, he also attempts to hold EVE's "hand." These *mise en abymes* self-reflectively celebrate the magic power of a popular film, which engages its audience so much that WALL-E watches it repeatedly. Furthermore, these scenes serve to highlight the rusty robot's capacity to respond to the film by mimicking the gestures of the characters. He learns and copies the dance moves performed by the characters while watching the film. He also keeps a recording of the theme song on him and listens to it while

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<sup>4</sup> In her attempt to consider *mise en abyme* as "narrative's response to *prolepsis* in general," Ann Jefferson writes that *mise en abyme* can function "as a simple retelling, as the accomplishment of a prophecy or as the fulfillment of an anticipation (200). In the case of *WALL-E*, the allusion to a romantic comedy *Hello, Dolly!* may direct the reader's attention to a seemingly romantic relationship that develops between WALL-E and EVE; however, the essay explores the mimetic significance of the gestures of holding hands for a robotic machine like WALL-E.

cleaning up the garbage. His endless listening to and watching of *Hello, Dolly!* redeems an obsolete video tape from the piles of trash. He turns the old film into some sort of sustenance for him, and he also demonstrates that even an old tape has the potential to transform something or someone.

The way he sees and seeks the little green plant goes one step further to epitomizes the particular ability WALL-E has as a child with an attachment to primordial nature. The turning point of the film occurs when Eve locks inside her shell the little green plant WALL-E shows her. While he does not seem to understand its ecological significance, he is enchanted by the little green seedling found in a fridge, and puts it in a boot he has found. He loves it so much that he shows it to EVE, but he never knows that Eve is a probe that comes to seek and take back any sign of life back to the spaceship staying in the outer space. The little green plant turns out to be more than a *thing* taken back from the trash heap in the film narrative. It becomes not only part of EVE which WALL-E cannot let go, a sign of life the humanity has been searching on the trash-covered Earth, but also a link between the Earth where WALL-E works and the outer space where the humanity stays. Despite the trope of romantic love used to implicate the film in the cultural imaginary of heteronormativity, WALL-E is shown as motivated by "the collector's passion" for the singularity of the plant ("Unpacking," *SW* 2: 486). The search for EVE is not only caused by a desire for being reunited with the seedling, but also by a wish for being able to relive the experiences associated with the seedling. As a true collector, WALL-E demonstrates the potential to struggle to retrieve the discarded plant while the Captain and Autopilot are fighting for it.

To quest for EVE who has the green plant inside, WALL-E also becomes crucial in connecting the ravaged Earth and the false utopia of the Axiom in the structure of the film narrative. His search for EVE also gears toward the inevitable entanglement of humans, nature and technology.<sup>5</sup> As Benjamin observes, "technology is the mastery of not nature but of

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<sup>5</sup> Historical or philosophical inquiries into the relations between nature and technology are beyond the scope of this essay. Thinkers, like Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), have explored the dimensions of modern technology, illuminating the way nature is seen as objectively calculable resources, and seeking to find a way of thinking with which people might be free from this conception (1977). For a broad

the relation between nature and man" ("One Way," *SW I*: 487). "In technology," he adds, "a *physis* is being organized through which mankind's contact with the cosmos takes a new and different form from that which it had in nations and families" ("One Way," *SW I*: 487). WALL-E's devotion to EVE the sleek robot propels him into the Axiom spaceship, a futuristic world where robots of various designs are naturalized as part of the quotidian. The depiction of the humans on the Axiom, though often compared to a parallel to Noah's Ark, subverts the myth of human agency based on mastery over nature. They evacuate to the outer space from the trash they have produced but fail to handle. Axiom is a false utopia, "a city-sized, mall-like world with the BNL logo appearing on the face of the simulated sun" (Stanton and Reardon 28). Unlike the desolate Earth covered with trash, the Axiom appears like a brave new world where the passengers equip themselves with service robots of all types and a whole world of machine-mediated relationships on networked devices. In the midst of a queer ecology, the distinction between humans and robots is blurred. The robots are equipped with specific capacities allowing them to serve, such as the defibrillator bot, the painting robot, the beautician bot, the light bot, and steward bots designed for security purposes. They are also anthropomorphized with regard to their cognitive development and emotional make-up. Apart from that, the reject or malfunctioning robots are able to perceive that they are liberated from the repair ward when all the orderly-arms go limp, all the force fields disappear, and the doors open up. They cheer by lifting WALL-E on their shoulders and carry him out of the ward. "The robotic escapees of the high-tech repair ward," notes Zoe Jacques, "offer an especially stimulating representation of disarticulated machine sovereignty that resists seeing the robot purely as a mechanistic laborer" (204).

On the contrary, humans exist mindlessly with modes of consumption predetermined

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survey of people's understandings of nature from antiquity to the present in the West, see Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, translated by Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006), and for an important study of how perceptions of the nature shaped the course of human events across millennia, see Clarence James Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1967).

by the mega-corporation BNL. While WALL-E is able to generate values from the discarded that would otherwise be compacted, the people on the Axiom fail to discern meanings made possible by technological innovations. Ironically, if WALL-E develops like a human child who is able to mimic, the humans who live on the Axiom turn out to be machine-like. The passengers have fat, blobby bodies and small limbs, and look like big babies or "the most extreme form of couch potatoes" (Stanton and Reardon 27). They wear the same BNL jumpsuits, riding on "all-access hover chairs" that steer themselves, and "engrossed in their video screens, cocooned in virtual worlds" (Stanton and Reardon 28). There seems to be no reason or purpose for them to get up or get out of the hover chairs. They seem to constantly engage themselves communicating with each other, but they are always confined and isolated in their hover chairs, in their jumpsuits, totally unaware of others' presence. This is also true of the Captain of the Axiom. As the camera pans across the cabin, we are shown each generation of Captain, who devolves "from human to gelatinous blob" (Stanton and Reardon 34). The entire Axiom is nearing what Sherry Turkle calls the "robotic moment" when technology is so much naturalized as a part of the Axiom, and humans, in turn, are shaped by it (3). Advancing technology gives rise to human comfort and convenience, but if humans do not use technology thoughtfully, or merely submit themselves to a range of technical innovations, they would be shaped and conditioned by technology.

The character traits WALL-E demonstrates as opposed to those of the Axiom's passengers reveal the film's ambivalence toward high-tech supremacy. Its ambivalence is exemplified in the tyranny of Autopilot, which appears like a single camera eye but handles all the true command functions on the spaceship. Technology seems to serve, but almost masters humans on the Axiom. When BNL fails to master the detritus-strewn Earth, its CEO has given the override directive "A113" to Autopilot, which takes complete control of the Axiom. However, Autopilot performs its assigned tasks without caring about any circumstantial changes or human concerns. When the Captain expresses his desire to return to Earth, Autopilot dictates that they should not return to the Earth but stay on the Axiom to survive. "In the mythology of the American Dream," write William Rathje and Cullen Murphy, "the relationship between advancing technology and a state of personal well-being that ratchets ever

upwards was long assumed to be linear and direct” (174). This assumption is mocked and satirized when the humans are shown to learn nothing about the real situation of the Axiom. With advancing technology, they outsource their responsibilities to machines. The humans may remain in the outer space, but they are never in charge of the spaceship they seem to own, let alone the life they lead. They never expect the ways machine intelligence works make it hard to understand and even harder to control. As the Captain is reminded of his responsibility for the Earth, realizing that his home is out there on the Earth, and that he and his people have been doing nothing when their home is in trouble, he cannot help exclaiming to AUTO, "I DON'T WANT TO SURVIVE! I WANT TO LIVE!" (Stanton and Reardon 68). This reveals not just the new awareness the Captain gains of the real situation of the Axiom, but also debunks the dehumanizing assumption that technological advancements automatically contributes positively to human wellbeing.

Paradoxically, it is WALL-E, a rusty junk unfit for the Axiom world, which wakes up in the people new kinds of feelings and awareness. While the junky robot comes from the Earth, and metaphorically stands up for the ravaged Earth, he has effectively little awareness of the situation of both the Earth and humanity. A naïve character, WALL-E fails to understand the implications of the reactions of others to his actions. Neither does he intend or attempt to awaken humans out of their apathy to connect with each other. WALL-E, a low-tech robot which belongs to the past, unknowingly disrupts and awakens the humans who are served by high-tech robots on the Axiom. He intends to rescue EVE only to cause commotions and liberate the reject robots in the Repair Ward. He comes across John and Mary, and unexpectedly prompts them to turn away from the screen to stare into each other's eyes. He evokes in them "new feelings of their own" to look around, to see the world in their own way, and to take care of the babies and toddlers scared and crying (Stanton and Reardon 88). Above all, WALL-E, who displays a strong sense of curiosity in his interaction with the trash around, evokes in the Captain the same curiosity about the dirt. Coming from the Earth, Wall-E is identified as a "filthy trail" by a cleaning robot which is programmed to rid off "foreign contaminant" on the Axiom. While shaking his hand, WALL-E inadvertently leaves a clump of dirt in the Captain's palm. Such a close encounter between the rusty robot and the

humanity triggers the Captain's interest in the flecks of dirt and prompts him to learn from the video about the plenty of the Earth. When he is given a chance to water the little plant, watching it sprout from the soil further moves him to awe and wonder, and inspires in him the desire to return to the Earth. In his fight for the steering wheel of the spaceship, watching the rusty robot from the Earth crushed by the holo-detector eventually motivates the Captain to manage to stand up on his own to shut off AUTO in order to return to the Earth.

If animation is an art of bringing life to the lifeless, the film narrative of *WALL-E* keeps crisscrossing the lines between humans and machines, and the concluding sequences also highlights the fact that the Axiom's passengers cannot shed their responsibility but must stand on their own feet to work with the robots to override the Autopilot's "non-return" directive and take back the steering wheel. As the Once-ler's says in Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*, "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, Nothing is going to get better. It's not." (n. pag.) As if to respond to the repentant Once-ler's words, the family-friendly film ends with the sequence in which the passengers re-turn to the ruined Earth, starting to clean up towering mountains of garbage, and glean from them new signs of sustenance. It suggests that the hope for environmental healing lies in trans-boundary cooperation; both humans and "dys-functional" robots work together.

John Scanlan states, "Garbage is civilization's double—or shadow—from which we flee in order to find the space to live" (179). But Pixar 2008 film suggests that it is only in engaging the trash on the Earth, the uncomely mess of refuse—recycling it, reconstituting it, and renovating it—that we gain a new understanding of our agency in the crises ahead. The film features the frequently overlooked hero of the modern society, characterizing a trash compacting robot as a childlike collector, who keeps crisscrossing the demarcated lines between commodity and trash, humanity and technology, and offers an alternative way of imagining the relations between humans and their environment. The character and presence of this childlike ragpicker suggests an ecological approach which does not celebrate the ostensibly pristine nature that capitalism often markets, or the advancing technology that humans seem to have too much faith in, but copes with the obsolete commodities or trash heaps humans have discarded along the way. Metaphorically,

WALL-E's rummage into the trash heaps instantiates the interactions between the world of technological progression and the antiquities of the everyday. His fascination for some discarded objects demonstrates a radical openness to the objects themselves. The littered were once reified or fetishized commodities in the continuum of history. As discarded objects, they exist apart from the progress of history time. But WALL-E looks through them, approaching them as things imbued with remarkable possibilities. Instead of delivering a didactic or doctrinal environmental message, the character WALL-E embodies a practice of itinerant gathering of obsolete materials or a practice of recycling and reassembling in debris-stricken land.

A childlike trash compactor and collector, WALL-E not only opens himself up to new possibilities of the discarded at hand, but also awakens in the slumbering crowd a sense of human agency. WALL-E, on the one hand, exemplifies an economical way of life in which he constantly repairs himself, and reconstitutes the forsaken into new contexts. The rusty compactor that comes from the Earth, on the other hand, unknowingly connects people and events that know nothing of each other. Significantly, he facilitates our understanding that humans cannot free themselves from knowledge of and responsibility to the Earth by resorting only to the new state-of-the-art technology. The story of WALL-E, to some extent, gives an alternative interpretation of Benjamin's angle of history. Unlike Benjamin's angel of history, WALL-E is essentially a robot. Like the angel of history, however, WALL-E demonstrates the necessity to look back to the debris of commodity culture, reconciling elements of the advanced technology and the traditional elements of material culture.

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# 破舊機器成為拾荒小童 —— 與班雅明一同閱讀《瓦力》

楊麗中\*

## 摘要

本文主張電影《瓦力》藉由主角瓦力，一部廢棄物處理機器，道出並處理有關商品、科技與自然之間糾結的議題。本文認為這部動畫連結三個看似獨立的領域之間的關係，並提供進一步的展演，探索環境生態議題與資本主義基本價值間無可避免的衝突與共謀關係。本文視《瓦力》為促進彼此對話的「環保動畫」，以充滿想像的方式勾勒上述問題。文章嘗試從班雅明關於兒童、拾荒者和垃圾的論點閱讀這部動畫的敘事，探究班雅明的觀點如何協助進一步理解《瓦力》中自然與商品之間的關係。文章中指出，這部動畫將主角瓦力刻劃成拾荒小童，堆疊垃圾，收集各種不起眼的小玩意兒，打破「商品豐富、科技進步即生活美好」的神話，並重新喚醒人類對地球的意識。本文認為，瓦力這個拾荒小童所意味的環保取向，不再是繼續頌揚資本主義行銷的自然，一個外表純淨的自然，而是必須應對資本主義沿途揚棄的各種垃圾或過時的產品。

**關鍵詞：**動畫電影、電影中的環保主義、班雅明、垃圾文化

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