

***The Loss of Humanity through
Consumerism in WALL-E***

by Ashton Treadaway

The 2008 animated feature film *WALL-E*, produced by Pixar Animation Studios, follows a robot trash compactor who is the lone occupant of a deserted earth. Over the course of the film this robot named WALL-E follows another robot EVE back to her ship called the Axiom on which the last surviving humans live. EVE was sent to earth to find evidence that it could sustain life. When she does find this evidence in the form of a small plant which she returns to the Axiom, life aboard the ship is interrupted as the two robots and the ship's captain attempt to initiate a return trip to earth. The robotic autopilot, programmed to keep the ship on its course, attempts to override their efforts. The film prominently features the fictional mega-corporation Buy-In-Large or BnL for short. This singular corporation produces and controls all of the robots and technology seen throughout the movie, including the Axiom ship. Aboard the Axiom, humans live on floating chairs with digital screens directly in front of their faces. They do nothing for themselves, and their lives are managed and controlled by robots and the BnL Corporation. Their only purpose in life is to consume what BnL produces for them, and they lose all human agency. In addition, the robots of the film have more personality and exhibit more agency than any of the human characters, which shows that robots have become more human than the humans who are essentially controlled by the Buy-In-Large Corporation. By creating a world in which the earth has been destroyed by trash and the last remnants of humanity live aboard a ship on which life is controlled by a corporation, the film *WALL-E* not only criticizes consumerism, but also shows that through complacency,

humans lose agency and become like robots. However, by regaining our agency, humans can affect positive change and even protect the environment.

In the opening shot of the film, the audience is presented with a zoom in shot of the earth. It is immediately clear that there is something wrong with the planet. Orbiting the earth is a large amount of satellites, debris, and trash which almost render it unrecognizable. The earth itself is drab and brown and it looks like a desert devoid of life. The audience is also shown a city in which the skyline is filled with mounds of trash that are piled up higher and larger than the surrounding skyscrapers. Throughout this opening scene, several buildings are shown with the Buy-N-Large corporation logo, which subliminally links the abundance of trash with the corporation. Later in the film, the captain of the Axiom is shown a video in which the CEO of BnL discusses the purpose of the Axiom's voyage. In this video, the CEO states that an abundance of trash has rendered planet earth uninhabitable, and the Axiom is supposed to be a temporary shelter for humanity until BnL can clean up their own mess and humans are able to recolonize earth. In a later scene, however, the CEO admits that the trash has led to a rise in toxicity in the atmosphere and that it is beyond BnL's control to fix the mess it created, and humans will not be able to return to earth. These scenes in the film show that in the world of *WALL-E* humans have consumed so much and produced so much waste, that it has essentially covered the whole planet and made life unsustainable. By showing the relationship between corporations, consumerism and waste, the film critiques contemporary consumption patterns. The film shows that a society that exalts consumption and produces more waste than it can counter will eventually lead to the destruction of the environment and the earth as a whole.

Through the structure of the film, the Buy-N-Large Corporation is presented as being indistinguishable from the government. Because all of humanity lives on what is a giant space cruise ship which is run by BnL, the corporation essentially governs all of humanity. The film adds to the illusion of BnL being the government in its presentation of the CEO. During the videos that the CEO of BnL created for the captain of the Axiom, he is framed in such a way that he could easily be mistaken for the President of the United States. He wears a suit and stands in front of a backdrop which closely resembles that of the U.S. president during a briefing or speech at the White House. In these scenes, he is even referred to by others as “Mr. President.” The film makes a direct comparison between the CEO and a political leader. This comparison calls attention to the power and authority of BnL. In the film the corporation owns everything and controls the lives of all humans. Aboard the Axiom, BnL controls everything and dictates what all the passengers do or even eat. Through BnL, the film shows the dangers of corporations and an extreme view of what they could look like if they become too powerful. BnL is a mega-corporation with a seeming monopoly on everything. The film shows that if left unchecked, corporations could potentially become so powerful that they could even overtake the government, and control every aspect of our lives. However, the film shows that BnL does not just take all of its power, but consumers allow them to take control.

The humans in *WALL-E* are the epitome of consumers. All humans aboard the Axiom live with no purpose other than to consume what is created for them by BnL. They hover around in chairs and are constantly being serviced by BnL robots. The robots do everything for the humans including waking them up, performing hygiene care, and getting them back into their chairs should they accidentally fall out. They are also constantly being bombarded by advertisements from BnL which they accept without question. They are constantly looking at a screen which

hovers directly in front of their faces, and they essentially live a digital world where they do not have to do anything for themselves except to consume. During one scene, two men are having a conversation with each other through a digital call on their screens despite being directly next to each other. They are so engrossed in their digital worlds that they are not aware of the physical world. This is shown again when one woman has her screen interrupted by WALL-E and it is as if she is seeing the real world for the first time. She is even surprised to realize that the ship she has lived on her whole life has a pool. For the majority of the film there is little-to-no human agency.

In *WALL-E*, humans lose their agency and become like robots who are programmed to consume what BnL tells them to. One major reason that the humans aboard the Axiom may have first become indoctrinated to consume is the idea of cognitive dissonance. James McNeal explains what cognitive dissonance is and how it can be applied to consumer behavior. He states, “A person perceiving inconsistent bits of information about himself or his environment will experience psychological tension, called cognitive dissonance” (119). He goes on to describe how individuals experiencing cognitive dissonance will behave in a way to reduce the dissonance or mental tension. He also explains how advertisers could potentially exploit consumers’ desires to ease their cognitive dissonance, and this kind of exploitation is present in *WALL-E*. We see BnL exploit consumers’ cognitive dissonance when they advertise new products. For example, there is a moment when BnL urges the passengers of the Axiom to change the color of their clothes from red to blue. Without hesitation, every single passenger obeys the advertisement and presses a button which changes the apparent color of their clothing. A major factor in why they obey BnL so fervently is so they have no cognitive dissonance with their own appearance compared to

everyone else. The humans know that everyone else will follow the advertisement, so they must as well if they wish to conform and to not cause any conflict. Another reason why they might obey BnL is because they are shown to be indoctrinated from birth by the corporation. During a scene, there is a quick moment when the audience is shown the equivalent of a classroom in which a robot is teaching very young children the ABCs, and the robot tells them that B stands for Buy-in-Large who is their “very best friend.” BnL controls everything about the axiom including the upbringing of human children. The film shows that not only are the children taught by robots, but they also must be raised by them, because they do not have any human parents. One way that the humans of the Axiom might be able to break away from their cycle of mindless consumption is to make individual changes and not agree with everything that BnL tries to sell to them.

When consumers band together, it forces businesses and corporations like BnL to cater to the needs of the consumer in order to survive. David Craven makes the argument that when consumers band together and demand change that it forces businesses to listen to their needs. He states that it is irresponsible and naïve for businesses to ignore the desires of their consumers and that it would lead to their downfall. He claims that businesses must adapt their perspective to tend to the needs of consumers. As Craven argues, “Such a perspective must include an examination of social goals, the parties involved, their interrelationships, and identification of the emerging issues” (234). Furthermore, if the Axiom’s passengers (or consumers) came together to influence some form of change aboard the ship, BnL would be forced to comply. The corporation would not be able to function without pleasing the consumers. However, the humans of the Axiom do not make any attempt to change the status quo of the Axiom; thus they continue to live lives controlled completely by BnL. The humans

therefore must be saved by robots who demonstrate more humanity than the programmed consumers of the Axiom.

In the film, robots drive the majority of the action, and are shown to have more human characteristics than the docile consumers of the Axiom. The eponymous character is a robot with apparent sentience who shows more emotion and drive throughout the film than the humans. WALL-E is shown to have curiosity and also feels loneliness. In addition, he shows the ability to feel love for another robot. Also, aboard the Axiom robots have taken over all of the jobs that humans once performed. These include barbers, janitors, and masseuses. The film also shows the lack of human agency through the character of the captain. The captain of the Axiom is the most important human aboard the ship, but his job is useless, and his authority is a façade. His only jobs aboard the ship are to run diagnostics, which are always the same, and to make morning announcements. The captain even remarks that the only thing he gets to do aboard the ship is the morning announcements, which prove to be trivial, and he essentially reads out BnL advertisements. The captain also does not have as much authority as he believes. When it comes time for him to take action and take the Axiom back to earth, he realizes that he does not have the power to do so. He is stopped by AUTO the robotic autopilot who actually controls the ship.

WALL-E and EVE are the characters of the film who save the humans. They find and save the plant that AUTO had tried to destroy, and they deliver it to the captain so that he can start the process to return the Axiom to earth. Without these robots, the humans would have forever roamed the universe aimlessly, consuming mindlessly, and never returning to earth. The robots of the film have to save the humans who have no agency of their own and are portrayed like babies. Through their consumeristic lifestyle and docility, in addition to microgravity, the humans of the Axiom undergo

physical changes. Over time they become obese and they suffer bone loss. In appearance, they are similar to infants. Their physical appearance also reflects how they have lost the ability to take care of themselves and be humans. They are reduced to having the agency of infants.

Although the majority of the humans in *WALL-E* show little-to-no agency, they appear to regain their agency when they return to Earth. When they first arrive on earth, the humans start to walk again rather than using their floating chairs provided to them by BnL. During the credits, the audience is shown what happens to the humans after the events of the film. The humans begin to plant their own food and provide for themselves. While they still work along robots, humans do things for themselves, and over time they regain the appearance of healthy humans rather than looking like giant infants. One way that the humans of the axiom could avoid making the same mistakes as their predecessors and avoid polluting the earth and causing environmental damage would be to become more conscientious consumers. If they think about the effect that their consumption has on the environment and become what P. Chander and S. Muthukrishnan call a “green consumer.” In their article, Chander and Muthukrishnan argue that green consumers can have a major influence on reducing pollution and shows that decisions made by individuals to consume with the protection of the environment in mind, can add up and make significant changes (27). According to Chander and Muthukrishnan, individuals can make a difference in the environment. If the humans aboard the Axiom believe this and make personal decisions rather than going along with everyone else and obeying a bigger entity like BnL, they could protect the environment and prevent the destruction of the earth from repeating itself.

In conclusion, the film *WALL-E* critiques consumerism and shows its destructive capabilities. Through consumerist societies, humans allow for corporations to

dominate their lives and they do not care about the waste that their consumption produces. In the film, humans lack agency and they do not care what happens to the world around them besides what they can consume. The movie shows that this ideology has not only led to the devastation of the earth, but it has also caused humans to lose their humanity. They live in digital worlds and do nothing productive with their lives. By showing the harm that can be caused by humans not caring about their environment and only consuming, *WALL-E* makes a call to action to all of its human audience. The film asks us to not be like the humans of the Axiom, and for us to care about our physical world. It asks us to pay attention to what we consume and waste, so that hopefully we can avoid the fate of humanity presented in *WALL-E*.

Works Cited

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