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WALL-E

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WALL-E

Abstract

This is a review of *WALL-E* (2008).

WALL-E, the latest animated film by Disney/Pixar, is ostensibly an adventure story about the titular character: An anthropomorphic robot who cannot speak but manages to convey a compelling range of emotions with his large, binocular-like eyes. However, the world depicted in this family movie asks serious questions about humanity, where we have come from, and where we are heading. From a religious perspective, *WALL-E* contains elements of theodicy and eschatology.

The basic premise of the story is as follows: by the early 22nd century, the nations of the earth are united under the benevolent fascism of the “Buy n Large Corporation” – seemingly a parody of Wal-Mart. A culture of mass consumption has led to environmental devastation and the Earth is no longer inhabitable. Buy n Large’s solution is to take humans aboard a fully automated luxury “star-liner” cruise ship. While this futuristic Ark moves through space, a crew of Waste Allocation Load Lifter – Earth class (*WALL-E*) robots is left behind to clean up the planet.

After 700 years in space, the descendents of the human race live a life of utter hedonism. Labor is no longer necessary as robots cater to their every desire. Obese humans float about reclining in futuristic “deck chairs” and have lost their ability to walk or stand upright. Humans never physically touch or even look at one another – rather their chairs are equipped with a sort a communication device that functions as an Internet browser and a cell phone. Despite the fact that no currency is shown in the film, the landscape of the cruise-ship is a stark depiction of late capitalism: Humans float past endless billboards erected by the Buy n Large Corporation. With no goals, dreams, or desires, their lives are filled with endless consumption.

Conflict emerges when an Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator (EVE) robot, aided by the only surviving *WALL-E* unit, returns from Earth bearing a single living plant. Much like the dove

that returns to Noah bearing an olive branch, this is the sign that the ship must return home to re-colonize the planet. However, the ship's autopilot computer attempts to destroy this evidence: It has received secret orders not to return to Earth and to keep humanity in a perpetual state of hedonistic ignorance. With the help of WALL-E and EVE, humanity is able to regain control of its destiny and defeat the autopilot computer. The ship's passengers return to Earth and create a new, agrarian society in which humans and robots live together in harmony.

The film's depiction of robot laborers naturally lends itself to a Marxist theodicy: The story makes it clear that a life of affluence and indolence is dehumanizing and cannot lead to a fulfilling existence. When the autopilot tells the ship's captain that he cannot live on Earth, he answers, "I don't want to live, I want to survive!" The technology of the cruise-ship has alienated humanity from their labor and from each other. WALL-E, a tireless worker covered in dirt, naturally represents the proletariat. Stumbling around the ship, he inadvertently causes humans to see and touch each other for the first time—perhaps in hundreds of years. By breaking the isolation created by private affluence, humans are able to play together, love each other, and ultimately mount a resistance against the autopilot.

The new society depicted at the film's conclusion has an eschatological dimension indebted to the Christian tradition. This new Earth is only possible after WALL-E sacrifices himself, saving humanity from the autopilot. Although EVE repairs him, she is unable to restore his memories or personality. WALL-E appears to have suffered the robotic equivalent of death until EVE "kisses" him—passing a spark of electricity between their faces. This act somehow restores his sentience. The message seems clear: WALL-E's resurrection was not achieved through mechanical means but through the power of love. As the credits roll, we see EVE and WALL-E together on the new

Earth: EVE has become the new Eve and the resurrected WALL-E the new Adam. If this film depicts the folly of unchecked capitalism as the source of evil in the world, then this new society represents atonement and the return of mankind to its place in the divine order. Although presented as a children's movie, WALL-E invites the audience to consider nothing less than the nature of human happiness and the ultimate future of the human race.