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"I Don't Want to Survive, I Want to Live": *WALL-E* and the Environment

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1. ONCE UPON A DISASTER

On the morning of August 23, 2005, it looked as if it was going to rain again along the coast of Louisiana. Few people could imagine that day would mark the beginning of one of the most devastating natural disasters the USA would have to face. From this day on, the images of flooded neighbourhoods and people sitting stranded on the roofs of their homes will remain on the minds of the people worldwide. Katrina, the tropical storm that had been formed over Bahamas a day before, turned into a hurricane when it crossed southern Florida. By the time it reached New Orleans, it had increased its intensity from moderate Category 2 to Category 5, the highest one in the Fujita-Pearson scale. Although Katrina hit the states of Mississippi, Alabama and Florida, it was the city of New Orleans that bore the brunt of the hurricane, causing unprecedented personal and economic damage which would transform the city. As regards the impact on people, the number of deaths was enormous and those who survived had to flee from their homes, leaving everything behind. Concerning the financial impact, New Orleans was flooded and a large number of buildings, including numerous residential houses, was destroyed. From that moment on, hurricanes have been increasing in both number and intensity due to global warming. Hurricane Katrina made visible, in the most traumatic way, the consequences of climate change, but the inadequacy of the response on the part of Bush administration also showed the ways in which environmental issues are connected with politics in the current context. It is not that the way of dealing with the catastrophe was not as efficient as it should have been, but rather Hurricane Katrina exposed the failure of the environmental policies of the US government. This wake-up call to deal with climate change has since been answered in different ways across all media and popular culture. The images of hopeless people wandering through the devastated New Orleans streets have resonated among people from all over the world

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and have created an iconography that connects with the imagery of many expressions of popular culture, in particular with the mise-en-scéne of many contemporary, so-called post-apocalyptic films.

Films like Joon-ho Bong's *Snowpiercer* (2013), Matt Reeves' *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (2014) and John Hillcoat's *The Road* (2009) – just to mention a few – have unequivocally dealt with the effects of human activity on the environment in recent years. However, in 2008, Disney-Pixar's animated film *WALL-E* already touched upon environmental issues and, like the afore mentioned films, its narrative rested on images and stories that evoked the effects of natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina. In this dissertation project I reflect on the way an animated film like *WALL-E* engages with environmental issues. In particular, I look at the way *WALL-E* deals with contemporary challenges like humans' devastating effects on the planet and its growing unsuitability for life.

Although environmental concerns are more urgent now than before, people do not seem to be really aware of the consequencesthat the present disregard for the environment may have in the near future. As noted above, these concerns have manifested themselves in cinema in a number of ways during the last years. The films that deal with the destruction of the environment demand to be seen in their social, political and cultural context. In this dissertation project I will argue that there is an important relationship between society and how society is represented in popular culture. My analysis places the film *WALL-E* within its socio-political and cultural contexts in order to consider how it deals with contemporary environmental challenges. Directed by Andrew Stanton, *WALL-E* is not simply a highly entertaining animated film made for the little ones. By touching upon pressing environmental issues, *WALL-E*, like Jimmy T. Murakami's *When the Wind Blows* (1986) and Bill Kroyer's *FernGully: The*

Last Rainforest (1992), emerges as a sombre story about the path taken by humankind and its effects of the Earth's ecosystem. I will also argue about the importance of analysing films from a more structural perspective and of paying attention to the narrative and aesthetic specificity of each film as well as to its handling of film genres. As will be seen later, *WALL-E*, for example, borrows and combines conventions from such genres as the science fiction film, the musical, the romantic comedy, silent cinema and the Western to illustrate its particular take on the environmental challenges we face.

WALL-E is not the only film to deal with environmental concerns in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In 2006, with New Orleans still recovering from the devastation it caused, Al Gore, the Democratic Party presidential candidate that ran and lost against George W. Bush in 2000, made *An Inconvenient Truth*, a documentary film based on global warming and its effects. Gore's film revolves around a moral issue: the betrayal of man's duties toward planet Earth, which is directly related to the film *WALL-E*. In 2009, James Cameron made the highly publicized *Avatar*, an innovative film that drew attention to the delicate balance between life and the natural world. Less successful but not any less remarkable was Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, which, in 2012, seemed to be commenting directly not only on the effects of Hurricane Katrina but also on the class issues involved in the way environmental issues were handled by the Bush Administration. Karl Burkart, for example, mentions some of these films in his "Top 10 Environmental Films of All Time" (2010). What is relevant is that Burkart places *WALL-E* at the top of the list and, reading between the lines, it is clear that the reason is to be found not only in the humour and warmth with which such a critical topic is dealt, but in the fact that it is an animated film.

The devastation seen in *WALL-E* as well as the solutions adopted seem directly related to natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina. When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf

Coast, the authorities recommended people to evacuate certain areas due to the devastation and the impossibility to live there. Many of the afore-mentioned films direct our attention to this situation. In *WALL-E*, for example, life on Earth has been wiped out and the surviving humans have left and are living in a spaceship called Axiom. We learn that they were supposed to spend five years inthe spaceship after vacating the Earth but so far the human race has been in outer space for seven hundred years and cannot go back to the Earth until life is viable. The need to leave their homeland in search of a place where humans can survive as recounted in *WALL-E* speaks of the experience undergone by some of the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Many were evacuated and were told not to come back to their homes until the situation was under control. The parallelism between these two situations hints at the role that films can play in society. My suggestion is that, by analysing a film like *WALL-E* in the context of the increasing number of natural disasters and the way these are managed by US politicians, viewers gain a critical awareness of the situation of the environment and the consequences of human activity in general and policy making in particular. This dissertation project draws from socio-political approaches to popular culture as exemplified, for example, by John Storey (in Portillo Serrano). First, I will consider the social and political context in which *WALL-E* was released and with which it relates. In particular, I will look at the implications of the impact of neoliberal policies in the last decade and how they are dealt with the film. Then, I will consider how the conventions of animation cinema determine our response. Finally, I will analyse two scenes in more detail without losing sight of these contexts. In the first one, I examine how the combination of genre conventions, drawn primarily from the Western and the musical,serves to juxtapose an idealized and harmonious perception of the past with a harsh and hostile present. The analysis of the second scene focuses on the question of technology and how this affects

our perception of ecological discourses and the need to take care of the environment. My conclusion is that an animated film such as *WALL-E* is able to raise awareness about the importance of taking care of the environment to guarantee life on Earth.

2.RULERS AND THEIR RULES

The devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina was unprecedented, but the response of the US Government was not any less astonishing. Accordingly, it was heavily criticised at the time and is now considered as one of the most iconic failures of Bush era. In her article "Review of Government Response to Hurricane Katrina," Michelle Hoffmann notes that the people in charge of the situation were not prepared enough to deal with such a huge disaster. These views were shared by the journalists at National Public Radio who, in their article "Executive Summary of Findings," denounced the numerous failures and deficiencies of the actions taken by the Bush Administration. Although it was not the first dreadful catastrophe Bush Government had to face (it goes without saying that less than a year after taking office George W. Bush had to deal with the 9/11 terrorist attacks) their response was found lacking in both planning and efficacy. In addition, the time the president took to react to the situation, together with a complete lack of coordination, resulted in an ineffective response to the catastrophe. As a consequence, in a presidency full of critical mistakes, US people have come to consider the response to Hurricane Katrina one of the biggest failures of the Government in general and of President George W. Bush in particular.

It should come as no surprise that one of the biggest mistakes of the George W. Bush presidency involves questions of climate change, environmentalism and the administering of federal money, these three issues were reflected in the neoliberal politics defended by Bush's government. Although *WALL-E* was released in 2008, the

film touches upon political issues that go back to the 1980s and, therefore, the political forces that have shaped US society during the last decades of the twentieth century should be taken into account for the analysis of the film. The US presidency has alternated between Republicans and Democrats during the last decades. In general terms, and although things are more complex in Congress, party divisions and majority parties also tend to swing in the Senate and the House of Representatives. Of course, these fluctuations affect, among other things, Government's environmental policies. Democrats and Republicans hold different views about the role of the Federal Government and this has determined the environmental policies adopted at different times. In 1994, with Democrat Bill Clinton as president (1993-2001), another natural disaster hit the USA: an earthquake struck the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles leaving 57 people dead. In his article "January 1994 – 6.7 Northridge Earthquake Rocks Southern California," Elson Trinidad observes that the Clinton Administration devoted a budget of $20 billion for response, while Republican George W. Bush, who succeeded Clinton as President of the USA in 2001, assigned a budget of $108 billion for the response to Hurricane Katrina. Although the figure may strike us as noticeably higher, it must be noted that, according to Richard D. Knabb, Jamie R. Rhome and Daniel P. Brown from the National Hurricane Center, Hurricane Katrina devastated the coast of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama with significant effects in Georgia and the Florida Panhandle, which made it one of the most destructive and deadly natural disasters in the history of the USA. In her article "Hurricane Katrina Facts, Damage, and Costs: What Made Katrina So Devastating," Kimberly Amadeo believes that 1836 died in the hurricane and the subsequent floods. Amadeo observes that the budget that the Republican president assigned to this dreadful disaster was $108 billion. As it can be seen, the difference between the two budgets is not proportional to the size of the

disaster. Democrats have traditionally given moreimportance to the environment, devoting higher sums of money to the cause, meanwhile the environmental concerns for Republicans, far from being a priority, seem to have got on the way of their economic policy. Although, without a doubt, there are many issues involved, this helps explain that, despite the intimidating figure, the Katrina federal relief budget signed by the Republican Administration was much more restricted than the one the Democrats managed to approve when the Northridge Earthquake took place in 1994.

It should be no surprise to anyone because, as Nicola Smith says, cutting down on environmental measures and funding lie at the heart of neo-liberalism. In "Neo-liberalism: Political and Social Science," Smith notes that neo-liberalism is both an ideology and a policy model which stresses the benefit of free market competition. Neo-liberalism is generally associated with the economic principle of laissez-faire; it is committed to the freedom of trade and capital and consequently the emphasis is on minimal state intervention both in economic and social issues. For Elizabeth Martinez and Arnoldo García, for example, neo-liberalism is characterised by an unregulated market as the way to increase economic growth; a reduction in public expense for social services; privatisation and a reduction of the Government's regulation of business; in short, neo-liberalism defends the non-intervention of the state in economic issues and the replacement of public or social functions for individual responsibility, and attempts to reduce the role of the central government only to questions of national defence and the provision of law and order. Although the afore-mentioned characteristics of neo-liberalism may be seen as a positive force, there are some authors that have a less positive view of an unregulated market. In her article "A Brief Examination of Neo-liberalism and Its Consequences in Sociology," Candace Smith suggests that the consequences of neo-liberalism include critical changes at the state, international and

individual level such as the dismantlement of the welfare state and the increase of a globalised inequality. All this has important consequences for the environment. For example, as Brian Duignan points out, the Clear Skies Act was proposed in 2003. The objective was to reduce air pollution by reducing emissions of nitrogen oxides, sulphur dioxide and mercury. However, the bill never moved out of the congressional committee because of disagreements and, in 2005, it was finally dropped. Neo-liberalism directly affects environmental policies; it not only disregarded the importance of measures like the Clear Skies Act, but also led George W. Bush to abandon the Kyoto Protocol, which denoted an all-out attack against the environment in the name of a deregulated economy.

According to Alison Purdy, the Kyoto Protocol is an international agreement linked to the United Nations that focuses on climate change and whose main aim is to reduce the emissions of carbon dioxide and of other gases which cause global warning. The Kyoto Protocol was adopted in 1997 in the Japanese city of Kyoto being Democrat Bill Clinton the President of the United States at the time. The USA became part of the protocol until the George W. Bush Administration decided to abandon and not to implement it, even though the USA is one of the largest greenhouse gases emitters.Shocking as this may be, it is consistent with the neo-liberal economic policy upheld by Republican leaders. For David Sanger in his article "Bush Will Continue to Oppose Kyoto Pact on Global Warming," the reason why the USA decided to abandon the Kyoto Protocol was the harmful effect it could have on the worldwide economy as well as not taking into account the restrictions on the Kyoto Protocol. Bush's environmental plans for the US country went in a different direction; apart from the development of new technologies, he proposed a voluntary control of the emissions to be carried out by the same US companies that would be subject of control.

The Kyoto Protocol is not the only target of the Republican Party and right-wing organizations. One of the most iconic cases in the battle going on between neo-liberalism and environmentalism is the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). On their website, the United States Environmental Protection Agency defines itself as anindependent agency of the federal government whose aim is to develop and enforce regulations to protect human health and the environment. The EPA also organizes response activities when a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina takes place. Some of the objectives of the EPA are to ensure that people "have clean air, land and water," to ensure that "contaminated lands and toxic sites are cleaned up by potentially responsible parties and revitalized," "chemicals in the marketplace are reviewed for safety" and "reducing emissions of hazardous air pollutants." This, needless to say, not only goes against the interests of highly polluting industries, but is also contrary to the deregulatory and small-government doctrine of neo-liberalism. As Alexis C. Madrigal states, the EPA was established in 1970 when Richard Nixon was the president of the USA. Its budget is agreed with the Government, although at the time of Bush's presidency there were a number of disagreements. According to Eric Pianin and Guy Gugliotta, Christine Todd Whitman presented her resignation as administrator of the EPA in 2003, due to several facts such as the Government's pressures to ease regulations and a reduction in the budget that threatened the agency's efforts to fight global warming. These obstacles that Republican Whitman encountered to carry out the traditional environmental policies of the EPA show that Bush Administration did not consider environment care an important issue, at least not as important as it should be or less important than the demands of industry. According to National Public Radio, another disagreement between the EPA and the Bush Administration was the fact that during Hurricane Katrina there was a lack of information on the part of the Government

regarding the magnitude of the hurricane and the need for assistance which was added to the criticism the Bush Government received. These examples reveal to what extent the environmental discourse in the USA is mixed with economic and cultural forces. In conclusion, it can be said that environmental concerns have not found a place in the political agenda of conservative politicians, information isdeliberately incongruous and, for a large majority of people, it is not an issue of concern. However, it must be stressed that there are other kinds of discourses that are generated in other fields, that enter into a dialogue with the dominant perceptions and that help us develop a different, more complex perspective on the question of global warming and climate change. Cinema performs this function, but the way to put forward complex understandings of the present challenges is to pay attention to questions of style in the context of animated film history too.

3.FROM FAIRY TALES TO ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Cinema is a type of mass media through which people can get a different story about a topic such as the destruction of the environment and, therefore, films can be seen as a way of becoming aware of the challenges that we face in the years ahead. These social problems were the ones underrated by the ideology and the policies of neo-liberalism, which, as explained above, has thus far had so many bad consequences for the environment and for the people. Animation cinema has dealt with a wide range of topics from conservative and retrograde ones to others that revealed socially progressive concerns. Some of these have contributed to inspire care for the environment. It is with this in mind that I now turn to the film *WALL-E*. I will argue that, among other things, *WALL-E* can make people aware of the current degradation of the environment as well as of its consequences if we keep acting in the same wayand do not start taking care of

it. *WALL-E* opens our eyes to the possible future that awaits us if we do not start protecting the environment but, all in all, it offers a hopeful message. *WALL-E* is a Disney-Pixar production meant for children as well as adults that offers an interesting perspective into the environmental challenges that lie ahead. But first of all, it is important to examine the topics and the style of animation that have characterised Disney and Pixar films. We must keep in mind that animation cinema plays an important role due to its capacity of reaching out to different audiences. I will argue that *WALL-E* not only touches upon real, contemporary environmental issues but it makes viewers, children and adults alike, aware of the nature and these issues and of the need of taking care of the environment.

One of the central topics of *WALL-E* is the threat to the environment. In the film, the situation of the environment is dramatic. The Earth has been devastated by humans; it is covered in industrial waste and the population has been evacuated to a spaceship until the planet is inhabitable again. The only sign of activity is WALL-E, a robot who continues cleaning up the garbage, and his fellow friend, a cockroach. The only hope of returning back to Earth is determining that it is inhabitable again. This is done by EVE, a robot sent by the crew of Axiom in search of life with whom WALL-E falls in love. *WALL-E* was the first film released by Pixar after being taken over by Disney in 2006. Before proceeding with the analysis of the film, it is first necessary to outline the identity features of Disney and Pixar as well as the general topics that came to characterise both companies.

Although not all animation cinemacan be reduced to the films made by Disney, it is unquestionable that the influence of this company has been huge in the field of animation cinema. According to Kelci Douglas, the field of animation was dominated by Disney Studio when it signed a contract with Pixar Animation Studios in 1991 to

produce three full-length animated films. The first film released jointly by Disney and Pixa rwas *Toy Story* (1995), which was the world's first computer-animated film and resulted to be a blockbuster marking a remarkable moment in the history of animation cinema. According to Derick Esch et al., after the success of *Toy Story*, both companies released two more films - *A Bug's Life* (1998) and *Toy Story 2* (1999) - as part of their contract. Their corporate relationship continued with the signing of another contract in 1997 to produce five more films in the next ten years. When the contract ended in 2006, Walt Disney Company bought Pixar Animation Studio with the purpose of creating innovative stories, characters and films.

Before this merger, Disney and Pixar had different policies and different narrative and aesthetic features. The Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio had been founded in 1923 by Walt Disney and his brother Roy. According to Kelci Douglas, in 1937, the first full-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was released, winning a special Academy Award for "screen innovation" that same year. In the following decades Disney made a name for itself adapting folk tales and children's books like *Bambi* (1942), *Cinderella* (1950), *Lady and the Tramp* (1955) or *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) only to name a few. Thus, Disney, soon became associated with fairy tales and melodramatic love stories with a happy ending. According to Celestino Deleyto (p. 297), these films have had a powerful impact in the audience, both in children and adults. Although Disney's production is more diverse than this outline might suggest, this trend continued right up to the present. Films like *Aladdin* (1992) and *The Lion King* (1994) are a case in point. Characters and stories are somehow repeated in many Disney animated films. For example, orphanhood is present in a large number of stories, as in the case of the afore-mentioned *Cinderella* (it seems this is based on Walt Disney's personal reasons); the protagonist is often accompanied by a loyal friend that provides a

comic counterpoint, as in the case of *Pinocchio* (1940). But if there is something remarkable and characteristic of the films made by Disney, that is the handling of the musical genre. As Deleyto observes (p. 298; my translation),

> Disney maintains the emphasis on the existence of a unique hero or heroine and adapts the patterns of the Hollywood musical to this traditional narrativestructure. Therefore, Disney shows stories that form complex symbols of ideological discourses by using the power and magnificence that feature the classical musical together with the audio dissolve, that is to say the capacity of fusing the dialogues with the musical performances and, consequently, the real world with the ideal one as it can be identified in *The Little Mermaid* (1989).

Pixar, on the other hand,developed a different kind of story and a different identity. According to Derick Esch et al., Pixar's original name was Graphics Group, it was founded by George Lucas in 1975 and, initially, it was the company responsible for creating computer special effects for different films such as *Star Wars*. Graphics Group was the pioneer in the field of designing and using motion control cameras as well as optical compositing. Graphics Group was purchased by Steve Jobs in 1986, the name was changed to Pixar Animation Studios and it focused on improving computer animation processes. For Kyle Munkittrick, for example, "Pixar films contain a complex, nuanced, philosophical and political essence." Rather than offering escapist (and fairly conservative) fantasies, the films by Pixar address present and future issues and attempt to prepare the audience for the social changes that lie ahead. When seen in the context of the animated films mentioned above, one of the most noticeable features of Pixar's productions is that the characters have no magical powers and live together with humans in a familiar world as is the case of *Tin Toy* (1989). In addition, in Pixar's films, there is always an intelligent character who is not human but has emotions and feelings as can be seen, for example, in *Red's Dream* (1987). And finally - and this is a

significant feature - Pixar started dealing with new social issues as was the case of social inequality in *Knick Knack* (1989).

After the merge, Disney-Pixar became a single company, being *WALL-E* the first film to be released. It is significant that the story also seems to be a synthesis of some of the individual characteristics that both companies had come to be associated with. Together with questions of characterisation, like the presence of a loyal fellow so common in Disney's films (in this case the cockroach that follows WALL-E around), one of the central topics of the film is a romantic love story with a happy ending (as noted above, WALL-E falls in love with EVE, the robot that is sent to Earth in search of signs of life). More important still, *WALL-E*, like so many films by Disney, draws from the musical film genre and uses songs to put across and reinforce the message of the story while making it more attractive. However, as Deleyto (p. 300) notes, all films made by Pixar in association with Disney opened a new way in the history of animation cinema by abandoning the structure of the classical musical. As will be shown below, the musical genre is approached in a different way in *WALL-E* by incorporating the musical *Hello, Dolly!* (1969). Likewise, *WALL-E* can be said to address an urgent social issue, which seems to have its roots in Pixar. Therefore, it is my contention that all the familiar narrative and aesthetic tropes that *WALL-E* shares with previous, well-known Disney films must be seen against the backdrop of a devastated planet and the causes that contributed to it. In other words, it is through the manipulation of recognisable conventions that viewers become aware of the environmental message of the film and of the importance of taking care of the environment to preserve life on Earth. What is more, at a moment of increasing pressures from neo-liberal politicians and organisations that, as noted above, threaten to accelerate global warning, *WALL-E* manages to put on

the table the need to find ways to stop the destruction of the environment and reverse the situation.

Apart from the musical, *WALL-E*, like most contemporary animated films, draws from other well-known genres to draw the attention ofthe viewers, in particular the adult ones. Conventions from sci-fi films, westerns, romantic comedies and even silent comedies are brought together to put into images the environmental message of the film. It is significant, for example, that, as Celestino Deleyto (p. 300) notes, Pixar's most iconic feature is the use of a new technique known as computer-generated imagery or 3-D animation, a resource which is reinforced by the limited use of voices, giving thus more importance to body language as can be seen in the "performance" of the main characters, WALL-E and EVE, and that refers back to the comedies of the silent era. In the analysis that follows, I will examine how these issues are handled to spread an ecological message.

4. *WALL-E*'S LESSON TO BE DOWN TO EARTH

WALL-E premiered in 2008 and, as Yates notes (p. 1), it won numerous awards, among them Best Film of the Year from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, Movie of the Year from the American Film Institute and Best Animated Feature at the Academy Awards. Although *WALL-E* falls under the broad umbrella of animation cinema, it must be stressed that, from a narrative and stylistic perspective, it combines conventions from many different film genres, most notably silent cinema, science fiction, the Western, the musical and romantic comedies. The film is set in a futuristic but recognisable representation of our planet, the Earth, where a trash-picking robot called WALL-E, the main character of the film, has been left alone to recollect the trash left by human beings. WALL-E, which stands for Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-Class, works in a

devastated environment where human life is no longer possible. For that reason, humans had to flee 700 years before and at the time they live in a spaceship called Axiom, where they continue with their lives until the planet is inhabitable again. Periodically, they send an expedition to the Earth in search of signs of life that would demonstrate that life is feasible again. To carry out this mission, a robot conveniently called EVE, which stands for Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator, is sent from the spaceship Axiom. During her routine check, EVE is shown a plant that WALL-E found when he was collecting rubbish. EVE takes the plant and leaves, but, by then, WALL-E has fallen in love with EVE and follows her to Axiom.

In what follows, I will examine two key scenes from the film. First, I will analyse the opening scene to demonstrate that genre mixing serves to establish an opposition between the idyllic past and the desolate future that poignantly comments on contemporary environmental devastation. Then, I will consider a later scene in which WALL-E and EVE are together in the spaceship. The analysis of this second scene also rests on the combination of popular film genres, but, in this case, attention is directed to showing how technology leads to dehumanisation. By way of conclusion, I will consider how the different topics relate with one another to offer a more complex picture of the threat to the environment in the current political context.

4.1. PAST VS. FUTURE

WALL-E starts with an aerial view of a desolate and uninhabited land. The mixture of broken windmills, abandoned nuclear power plants and rubble suggests that it was the impact of human lifestyles what has destroyed this land. As noted in "Technology's Role in *WALL-E*," "These early scenes in the movie foreshadow the lazy, wasteful, dehumanized state of our society that we see later in the movie." Right from the

beginning, the film adopts a futuristic approach characteristic of dystopic sci-fi films and, as is usually the case in these films, the Earth is still recognisable. What is most striking about these first shots is the mountains of rubbish that spread across the landscape and the way they have been compacted into cubes and piled in the shape of buildings. For a brief moment, they even resemble a group of cypresses, thus suggesting that the Earth has become a cemetery, that it has been destroyed and there is no life left there. All this devastation and lack of life bring us back to Hurricane Katrina and other recent natural disasters and the terrible consequences these have for the environment and the people. As mentioned above, *WALL-E* combines a number of film genres, and in this scene, the allusions to the Western serve to comment on the environmental impact of human agency.

To start with, the arid, devastated setting in the opening shots, with its brown palette and faded colours, its lonely roads and ruined remnants of what once was a city is a clear reference to Western films. The truth is that intertextual references to Western abound in *WALL-E*. These seem to have two functions. On the one hand, as is usually the case in contemporary animated films, they delight those adult viewers who identify them. On the other hand, they comment on the topics the film deals with. For example, early in the film WALL-E realises his wheel chains are worn out and replaces them with a new set he takes from one of the "dead" robots found on the side of the road. This brings to mind iconic scenes from a number of Westerns in which a character replaces his worn-out boots with those found in a dead body. In *The Wild Bunch* (1969), for example, when the opening carnage ends several gunmen rush to take the boots of the dead ones. In this way, boots not only emerge as one of the most valued items in the colonisation of the West, but also serve to represent a highly individualistic society in which each character looks after himself. Similarly, in *WALL-E*, taking the wheel chains

of a "dead" robot enables him to continue with his job of cleaning the Earth. More important, with these references to the Western genre, *WALL-E* invites the audience to establish a relation between classical Westerns, in which the hero dominates the space, and the destruction of the environment. The Western genre has presented the colonisation of the American West as a domination of the space or setting and films like *WALL-E* show the last consequences. In classical Westerns, the landscape appears to be empty and ready for the taking by land-hungry settlers and speculators, a space to be filled, conquered and mastered. The history of Westerns is also the history of the appropriation of its resources and films such as *WALL-E*, in line with other contemporary films that mix conventions from the Western and the apocalyptic sci-fi film like *The Road*, deal with the consequences of that attitude towards the landscape, which have resulted in an isolated world.

The Western iconography, with its emphasis in aridness, isolation and ruggedness contrasts with the music of the opening scenes. The extradiegetic song takes the viewer to the world of musicals. In a sense, music suggests that a change of course is possible by adhering to the community values represented by the classical Hollywood musical. After a hard day of work, WALL-E goes back to his sweet container-home where he feels protected and comfortable. This relaxing time involves getting things ready for the following day and, while he does this, he starts to hum the song that accompanied the early shots of the film. If anyone were in doubt about the source of the song, when WALL-E plays a videotape it becomes clear that the song has been taken from themusical *Hello, Dolly!* It is in this way that the musical genre is present in *WALL-E*. While WALL-E listens to the musical, he tidies up his belongings, items he has picked up from the waste that litters the Earth and which seem to have a special meaning for him. Props such as a classic, 1950s-style toaster, a Zippo lighter, some

bowls and even a Rubik cube among other iconic objects from US popular culture. These objects that WALL-E collects and help him turn his container into a cosy home also evoke for the audience a previous, nostalgia-laden period in the history of the USA that has been re-constructed in mainstream cinema to suggest social harmony, a sort of ideal, trouble-free society. Although these props belong to a period marked by inequality and social conflicts, in popular culture they have come to stand for an idyllic society with happy, traditional families in a suburban house. This, we will learn, is what is missing in the society presented in *WALL-E*. This ideal society does no longer exist, and the idyllic past contrasts with the catastrophic future depicted in the film. However, the use of these juxtaposed and decontextualised props from a supposedly idyllic past not only can be seen as a critique of the vacuity and conservative nature of postmodernism, but also makes clear their links with unregulated capitalism and the values that have become increasingly popular since the late 1970s. That is, this pastiche also questions the quasi-mythical mid-century society and their lack of values and identifies unsustainable consumerism, with its roots in the 1950s, as the origin of the present condition of the planet.

This is the way *WALL-E* comments on a model of society that, with its disregard for the environment, has led to climate change and the destruction of the planet. The musical genre can be said to play other important role in the narrative. As noted above, the musical shown in the film is Gene Kelly's *Hello Dolly!* from 1969, and two of its songs, "Put On Your Sunday Clothes" and "It Only Takes a Moment," are essential at a thematic level throughout the film. First, these songs are a really important narrative resource in *WALL-E* since they help narrate the story and anticipate the outcome of the film, that is, the idea that change to a better life is still possible and love will somehow help us achieve this goal. According to Carlson in his article "*WALL-E*: Robot Romance

Inspired by *Hello, Dolly*!," the two songs, "Put on Your Sunday Clothes" and "It Only Takes a Moment," are prominently used in the story told by *WALL-E* to convey the inner world of the robot WALL-E, thus making WALL-E more human. According to García, the musical *Hello, Dolly!* supports the narrative structure of the film and helps express the purposes of the main characters, develop their personality and the meaning of the whole story. What is more, the musical genre brings about an idea of a harmonious community and underscores the idea that US society needs to recover some of the values of the past as opposed to the values that have led to the devastation of the planet.

In the opening scene what draws the viewers' attention the most from the very beginning is the way the film is introduced in terms of sound. *WALL-E* starts with the song "Put On Your Sunday Clothes," which will appear over and over again. The song heard in the opening scene serves as a guide to the cheerful atmosphere of change which is transmitted to the audience. This, on the other hand, contrasts with the images of a devastated planet shown as the song is playing. During the opening scene, the song "Put On Your Sunday Clothes" does not come from the world of the narrative, the audio is extradiegetic, but by the time WALL-E is seen in the dump, the audio has become intradiegetic, emanating from WALL-E himself. That is, at the beginning of the film, the spectator has no clue about the source where the song comes from and it is reasonable to think it is an extradiegetic song, but, later on, when WALL-E stops the audio with his own audio controls, the spectator discovers that WALL-E himself was the source of the music. In this way, the audience is given the idea that he is in control of the situation. The two different ways in which this audio is perceived have a parallelism with the situation of the environment in the US society at the time the film was released. At the time, there was a Republican president in the White House and Republicans held a majority in both houses and their neo-liberal take on the Federal Government was

unsuited to curb environmental damage. Although the majority of society knew about the deterioration of the environment, it was evident that the situation was not under control. There are many ways in which every person can help preserve the environment but it is also responsibility of the central government to promote greener behaviour through federal agencies like EPA and, in particular, to regulate greenhouse gases.

The song "Put On Your Sunday Clothes," with which *WALL-E* opens, conveys a message of change even before the audience is able to see the destruction of the Earth. According to Carlson's article, Stanton, the director of *WALL-E*, stated that he juxtaposes 1950s music with a futuristic setting in the opening of the film, using old songs together with an image of the space, which reflects the tension between past and futurethat characterises the narrative. The song "Put On Your Sunday Clothes," as García observes, makes the characters take the decision to change their current state towards a more desired and unknown one. This change is also seen in WALL-E when he leaves the Earth and follows EVE to Axiom. WALL-E is alone in the Earth and, through the song, he is shown to have a desire to live a different life, which already points to the way the story will develop. The lyrics of the song - "Out there/There's a world outside of Yonkers" - are significant for the understanding of *WALL-E*. They, for example, give added meaning to the scene in WALL-E's home. In the film, the words of the song - "Way out there beyond this hick town, Barnaby/ There's a slick town, Barnaby/ Out there, full of shine and full of sparkle" - express WALL-E's longing for love as well as a hopeful environmental message: the Earth, now ruined, has a possibility of being a wonderful place to live in again and it is in our hands to make it possible, provided we change our obsessive relationship with material things and stop associating happiness with consumerism.

In *WALL-E*, genre mixing and, in particular, the choice of music serve to oppose an idyllic and romanticised past with a bleak future and to link romantic relationships and the possibility of saving the Earth, or rather, to link the adventurous nature of true love and the urge to change the course of society and abandon the overprotected environment of Axiom for a less comfortable but more rewarding life on planet Earth. The following section focuses both on the romantic relationship between WALL-E and EVE and on the representation of technology.

4.2. LET'S GO GREEN

The second scene that I will focus on is the moment when WALL-E and EVE are aboard the spaceship, Axiom. After the discovery of the plant that signals life is viable again on the Earth, EVE comes back to Axiom to complete her mission. Seeing that she is leaving, WALL-E, who is in love with EVE, decides to follow her in spite of not knowing her destination. In this scene, WALL-E starts a journey from the Earth and across the universe to the spaceship. Once he gets there, one of the most remarkable issues is the representation of technology. As "Technology's Role in *WALL-E*" points out, the solution human beings have adopted in the film once the Earth has been destroyed is to evacuate the planet and go to live in a luxurious spaceship where everything is designed to make life easier. Technology, which provides them with everything they need, becomes the focus of the narrative. Humans were expected to stay in Axiom for five years while robots cleaned the planet, but five years turned into seven hundred years. Life in Axiom depends on technology in every way, as can be seen from the moment WALL-E and EVE arrive at the spaceship. Robots are the only characters that appear when they enter Axiom. Humans are only shown later on, but they cannot be said to be ordinary humans, but rather "technological" ones. According to

"Technology's Role in *WALL-E*," *WALL-E* shows that the use of technology causes dehumanization, obesity and lack of awareness concerning the role of the environment. These three issues are presented as a normal development of the human race, and also a reflection of what was happening in society at that time, thus suggesting, in an indirect way, that this is what will happen in the future if there are no changes. So *WALL-E* is therefore trying to depict global problems, not only those directly related to environmental issues but also problems such as bad eating habits and lack of exercise, which are the causes of obesity. These global problems have appeared in animation films before, mainly in the ones made by Pixar, thus bringing an array of new social issues to popular culture.

The representation of technology makes allusion to the society in which we are living today and to our addiction to smart phones, laptops, etc. Technology is turning our society into a dehumanized, less sensitive and less compassionate one. From the first time humans are shown in the film, they are portrayed lying on a sort of floating technological armchair. Humans rely on the most advanced technology even for the act of moving themselves from one place to another. Many other examples of this dependence on technology are present in their daily routines such as the act of brushing their teeth, getting shaved and getting dressed. Humans do nothing by themselves; robots do it for them. They have all the possible commodities and facilities and everything is done for them. Technology has turned humans into "technological" beings. Humans barely have proper human qualities. Meanwhile, WALL-E and EVE, two robots and the product of human technology, have human qualities such as feelings and emotions. While humans have been dehumanised, robots have been humanised. WALL-E wants to live the life of a human being; in contrast, humans do not value that kind of life anymore. For example, as noted above, WALL-E has a fellow friend, a cockroach

that follows him around the Earth. This is an example of how *WALL-E* adopts well-known genre conventions - in this case from classical Disney films - to comment on contemporary social issues: how technology moves us away from human relations. Likewise, WALL-E also falls in love with EVE, he holds EVE's hands and they kiss each other. This makes WALL-E and EVE more human than the people that inhabit Axiom. What is more, humans do not even communicate in the usual way but using technology. They do not talk face to face but through a screen that is placed at eye-level in their floating armchairs. Consequently, physical contact has disappeared.

Axiom is a microcosm of technology. Mention should also be made to the central computer of the spaceship Axiom, a clear reference to HAL 9000, the computer that controls the spaceship in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, both in Arthur C. Clark's novel and Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation (both 1968). Unlike the previous scene examined, in this scene, there are dialogues and conversations. WALL-E cannot speak, but he manages to convey the message anyway. According to Sobchack, the lack of dialogue in many parts of *WALL-E* is a reference to silent cinema, one of the various genres combined in the film. Like Charles Chaplin, one of the best representatives of silent comedy, WALL-E succeeds in transmitting the message without using words, performance in general and body language and movement in particular are the resources used. Movement not only is used to convey WALL-E's feelings and intentions, it acquires added meaning if, as noted above, we keep in mind that humans, who have the ability to move, do not move at all or take any action (not at the beginning at least). Action and movement seem to be the attributes of robots; it is remarkable, for example, that WALL-E is moving all the time either to do his cleaning tasks or to follow EVE. Furthermore, movement, which is an integral part of WALL-E's undertakings, is thus associated with the possibility of making life on Earth possible again.

References to the musical *Hello, Dolly!*appear again in this other scene. Both "Put On Your Sunday Clothes" and "It Only Takes a Moment," the two songs heard early in the film, are heard once again. However, it is the latter that acquires a more relevant meaning. According to García, "Put on Your Sunday Clothes" opens the film and "It Only Takes a Moment" closes it; that is to say, the first song expresses the adventure to come, the desire to live and love and that is why the song points to the future while, the second song shows the rewards of having chosen the opportunity to live and love which closes the film, and therefore the song is commenting on the present. For García, the song "It Only Takes a Moment" appears in the first scene and with its reference to learning how to hold hands, which is considered one of the most intimate public demonstration of affection, shows WALL-E's interest in love without the need of saying it directly or using words and anticipates his love for EVE. The song "It Only Takes a Moment" is heard again in this scene when the captain makes EVE remember her journey on Earth and, when this song plays, EVE reacts in an excited way remembering WALL-E and how he taught her to hold hands. It is in this moment that EVE realises WALL-E's love for her, and the lyrics of the song help the audience understand it (this brings us back to Disney films, where love is always one of the main topics and is usually expressed through songs). At the beginning of the song, when it says "You will never be alone again," there is a clear reference to the loneliness WALL-E was feeling until EVE arrived, changing his condition and making him discover what love is. This idea goes hand in hand with the situation on Earth. The Earth has been uninhabited, empty, until the moment EVE arrives to change this situation, making known that life on the Earth is possible again and opening the possibility of people returning back to their planet.

The lyrics of the song "It Only Takes a Moment" raise the issue of all the wonderful things the Earth has, which contrasts with the images of a planet devastated and not beautiful at all. This is reinforced by another idea put forward by the song: the loss of social ties and the lack of a future. This can be seen as referring both to WALL-E and the Earth. WALL-E locates his future and happiness on the values promoted by a Hollywood romantic musical and he makes this a reality when EVE turns up and he falls in love with her. Forgetting for a moment that this storyline seems to assume that heterosexual relationships are the norm, the film seems to argue that it will be through a revaluation of social relationships (as opposed to individuality and a "technological life") that the destruction of the planet will be turned around. More to the point, WALL-E abandons all the material things he has gathered over the years, and that represented a romanticised view of the past, to follow EVE. In this way the film condemns the increasing consumerism of US society and establishes a connection with the Government's economic measures and the consequences all this has for the environment. According to Narcisa García, one of the functions of music numbers in a film is to make the audience sympathise with the feelings and emotions of the characters and go along with the story. The song implies that love and interpersonal relationships are the two only things that matter. It is in this way (through a manipulation of film genres in the context of the increasing degradation of the environment and the failure of the Government to respond accordingly) that *WALL-E* offers a solution to current problems. The film's happy ending establishes a connection between love and the viability of life on Earth and, therefore, the prospect of saving planet Earth.

    WALL-E sends an unmistakable ecological message to the audience. The film wants the audience to be aware of the situation of the environment and the possible

consequences if people keep on acting in the same way. This message is conveyed throughout the film in a number of ways but, in this second scene, the plant and the consequences of finding it acquire a special meaning. According to "Technology's Role in *WALL-E*," the plant found by EVE symbolises the promise of a different life for the inhabitants of the spaceship. Nature is seen as opposed to technology and nature is needed to return to Earth. As "Technology's Role in *WALL-E*" states, this is similar to today's society, and we must resist the uncritical advance of technology if we do not want to end up like the people seen in *WALL-E*. As Jennifer A. English notes in her article, it is ironic that WALL-E and EVE, two robots, are the ones that struggle to achieve their goal of giving the plant to the captain, which, for humans, means life and the possibility of returning back to Earth. Robots are the ones that understand the power of nature and who open humans' eyes to what really matters; it is these two robots that teach humans the importance of taking care of the Earth. The plant makes the captain aware of the fact that life beyond Axiom is possible; as a result of this, the captain discovers the meaning of the word Earth and, consequently, starts to investigate about the Earth and the activities that could be carried out there. In this way, he realises another way of living is possible and he sets out to achieve it. The captain of the spaceship decides to go back to Earth once he discovers the incredible and astonishing life humans could have on Earth. For English, *WALL-E* seeks to convince the audience of the significance of taking care of our environment, to promote a return to environmental values. Through the adventure WALL-E embarks on, the film contributes to making "green living" a desirable lifestyle and popularising ecologically-responsible thinking and living.

The idea of an ethical green living is also tackled by Jennifer A. English in her article "*WALL-E*'s Rhetoric: An Ecological Sermon from a Strange Preacher." For

English, the film uses two rhetorical strategies to promote a lifestyle that helps preserve the Earth's natural resources. The film tries to convince the audience of the necessity of a green movement in a subtle way combining, on the one hand, the rhetoric of the irreparable and, on the other hand, the rhetoric of the ecological jeremiad. The rhetoric of the irreparable is used to display nature as something unique which can be devastated. The film wants to show that, unless urgent action is taken, there is a huge risk that the environment is destroyed. The rhetoric of the ecological jeremiad in *WALL-E* maintains that if humans protect the Earth again, the harm can be fixed. Christian topics are used in the film to emphasise this rhetoric of jeremiad. According to Huy Nguyen, *WALL-E*'s director Andrew Stanton is a Christian and included Christian ideas and imagery taken from the Bible. Needless to say, the name of the female robot, EVE, evokes the first woman who lived on Earth according to Christian lore, and is a reminder of the sacred bond with nature. EVE becomes a companion for WALL-E in the same way that, in the book of Genesis, EVE is created to accompany Adam. God created the Earth as a paradise for humans to live in, and it was their misconduct that drove them away from it. Therefore, Stanton criticises the lack of value humans give to God's creation and focuses on the recovery of God's gift, trying to convince humans to take care of their planet. Humans have to take into consideration the importance of protecting the environment and the planet where they live because, otherwise, its resources will be destroyed and life will not be possible.

5. CONCLUSION: ALL GOOD THINGS MUST COME TO AN END

Christine Todd Whitman, administrator of the EPA during Bush presidency, resigned in 2003 mainly because of the limits put by the Bush administration and the lack of information about the dimension of Hurricane Katrina, which revealed that the

Republicans did not consider environment as an important issue, or at least not as important as the demands of the corporations. These limits had their rationale in the fiscal policies of neo-liberalism. Environmental policies were minimised as reflected, for example, by the non-ratification of the Kyoto Protocol. The environment is a global problem that concerns everybody and popular culture in general and films in particular have dealt with these challenges. In the field of animation cinema, Pixar first and Disney-Pixar later are known to address social problems. *WALL-E* is a case in point. In the film, WALL-E, together with a cockroach, lives in the devastated Earth and his only source of happiness is a videotape of a Hollywood musical until he finds love. These characteristics are common to many Disney animated films, but in *WALL-E* they are to be seen in the context of a story about the effects of environmental degradation.

In *WALL-E*, the conventions of the musical serve to articulate the character's nostalgia about an idyllic past in which communities were harmonious and there was hope for a better world. This contrasts with the images of the bleak, hopeless present on Earth. These desolate images, together with the brown and yellow palette and the saturated colours remind the viewer of the inhospitable landscape of many Westerns. In this hostile setting, the musical *Hello, Dolly!* functions as a sentimental map for WALL-E. In line with conventional romantic comedies, WALL-E will find the love he is yearning for and the film ends with a happy ending. However, conventional as it may seem, this storyline must be assessed in the context of a narrative about the environment and the impact of technology.

Technology has not delivered on the promise that it would make people happier. Life in *WALL-E* is dominated by technology, but this technological life keeps humans inactive both mentally and physically. The hope for a better future cannot be separated from the way people relate to technological innovations. As "Technology's Role in

WALL-E" observes, in the film, humans have to resist the excess of technology to get back home to planet Earth much the same way we currently need to resist technology to prevent consequences as severe as those seen in the film. All these storylines, as well as the way they are developed by combining popular film genres, make *WALL-E* not only an entertaining film but also a didactic one whose aim is to bring awareness about the importance of taking care of the environment. A message of hope is put forward but it involves the recovery of a series of values that US society has cast off during a period dominated by disregard for the environment. The promotion and acceptance of laissez-faire economics, with governments worldwide pushing for the abolition of regulations and the rolling-back of environmental protection laws, has led to a dire situation for the planet and a film like *WALL-E* helps create awareness about all these issues.

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