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### Sustainability in an Animated World

Released in June, Pixar's visually stunning WALL-E represents the most recent pinnacle of full-length animated motion pictures. Roundly lauded for its visionary technological aesthetics, the film also garnered significant praise for its potent message rooted in environmental sustainability and the perils of reckless human consumption. In short, the computer-animated science fiction romance follows the story of WALL-E, a robot designed to clean up an Earth so wracked with pollution that its inhabitants were forced to relocate to outer space. The robot, created to eliminate millennia of human waste and pave the way for an eventual return to the planet, falls in love with a robot sent to seek and protect any signs of plant life, considered harbingers of a healing planet Earth. Beyond the sweet and simple narrative, though, lie a host of media messages focused on forcing viewers to examine the nature of environmental sustainability within their own lives. Silverblatt's keys to media literacy also reveal and illuminate an intriguing subtext centered on the same sense of rampant commercialism and product worship the film seeks to vilify — in many ways, WALL-E is a 98-minute glorification of computer and technology company Apple.

The makers of WALL-E use several contextual and structural tools to convey media messages about the need for viewers to embrace environmentally sustainable practices. The story's narrative arc adheres to a formulaic structure, which helps to

coalesce action and characters around a central overt theme — namely that the planet’s current inhabitants have the potential to destroy or help repair their endangered home. After the movie’s docile opening featuring wide pans and sweeping landscapes, viewers encounter conflict and confusion with the entrance of WALL-E’s robot love interest and the storyline she represents. Silverblatt suggests that, “In many genres (including the sitcom), the standard formula is order/chaos/order.... The cumulative message behind this structure is that problems are all solvable, and justice always prevails” (148).

Meanwhile, the film’s makers also use color to code messages and meaning regarding environmental sustainability and its importance. The female robot sent to locate and protect the Earth’s fledgling plant life is a pristine, shimmering white — a powerful amalgamation of the spectrum of color often associated with purity, righteousness and truth. Equally powerful is the green plant symbol that emanates from the female robot’s chest once the fledgling plant is secure. The pulsating light — vibrant green — also conveys an aura of purity and clarity. At the same time, landscape shots that pan a trash-strewn, ecologically ruined Earth are marked by rich, raw browns and darker hues, signifying to viewers the waste and decay they are capable of creating. Silverblatt asserts that, “Color schemes can serve as a dramatic device that reinforces themes and messages in a media presentation” (170). Last, the sheer technological prowess involved in the film’s production helps transport viewers beyond the confines of the animation genre. This production savvy, which has rapidly evolved in the last decade, allows the filmmakers to keep the messages at the forefront. Pixar’s first animated short, *Luxo, Jr.*, garnered rave reviews for its production value: “[Pixar] has succeeded in rendering characters that made the audience forget they were watching technology in action” (The

Boston Globe). The company's crowning animation achievement to date, WALL-E possesses a production value that far outstrips that original short, only adding to the power of its overt and latent messages.

Aside from Wall.E's blatant criticisms of overabundance and consumerism, and its push for sustainability, the more unintentional messaging is in its ownership and subliminal product placement. Currently owned by media giant Walt Disney Company, Pixar has a longstanding history with Apple, Inc. CEO Steve Jobs. It was Jobs who bought The Graphics Group (later renamed Pixar) from Lucas Films in 1986 and served as CEO until Disney's \$7.4 billion buyout in 2006. The Financial Post reports it was Jobs' intent to use the team's knowledge to create hardware and software that would dominate computer graphics (1). He now sits on Disney's board of directors as Disney's largest shareholder (The Boston Globe, 1). Silverblatt notes:

While behind the scenes executives may not be household names, they exercise enormous influence over content we receive through the media. These important media figures determine not one what appears but who appears as well. (Silverblatt, 29)

Therefore, it's no surprise that WALL-E harbors a multitude of Apple innuendos: EVE — the brainchild of Director Andrew Stanton and Apple's Senior Vice President of Industrial Design, Jonathan Ive — is an obvious ode to the shiny iMac. The sleek, white ovoid robot has no visible buttons, her arms lock seamlessly into her egg-shaped body and her chest mounted indicator lights glow beneath her plastic skin like a Mac LED sleep mode indicator. Then there is WALL-E who watches *Hello Dolly* on an iPod and emits the Mac welcome chime to signify his batteries are fully charged. The voice of

Auto, the computer autopilot that flies the Earth-dweller's ship, is credited to MacInTalk, an early speech synthesizer for Mac. More subtly, Apple remnants — keyboards and desktop images — are scattered throughout WALL-E's home, and one-button Apple mice scamper across the floor as a visual pun. "[The film] doesn't just reinforce a single Apple product, it reinforces Apple's entire design approach," according to Abram Sauer, freelance writer for Brandchannel.com (Advertising Age, 1). Even taken as a whole, that litany of reinforcements throughout the film ultimately serves as a latent undercurrent regarding the superiority and complexity of Apple products and the brand itself. The writers and filmmakers weave the undercurrent through timely humor and a sweeping narrative, pushing the commercial aspect to the background. "Entertainment is a deceptively strategic communication function. Humor is a social mechanism that brings people together" (Silverblatt, 32).

Part of the success of the movie's underlying messages rests in its makeup — as an animated film, WALL-E appeals to both children and adults. The latter may possess the media literacy acumen necessary to decode some of the film's latent messages, while children — once the clear-cut target audience of animated films — are left to grapple with overarching messages and issues. To those legions of younger movie-goers, those latent messages may fail to register or take time to fully materialize. "Latent function can be very subtle, escaping the attention of a young audience" (Silverblatt, 35).

In a film that portrays devastation triggered by a societal refusal to embrace sustainability and limitation, Apple uses a host of blatant and subtle media messages to position itself as a consummate environmental company. Silverblatt's use of historical context to analyze messages plays a key role when examining the backdrop and

confluence of real-life events and ideas that come together in WALL-E. “A historical approach to media analysis offers a way to put prominent events and figures of the day into meaningful perspective” (Silverblatt, 67). While revered as a hip and ultra-trendy company, Apple has taken heat from several environmental watchdogs. More than 95 percent of Apple’s carbon footprint comes from the products they manufacture. The nonprofit organization Greenpeace has long questioned the material composition of Apple’s products, claiming they are “poison Apples full of chemicals” (GreenMyApple, 1). In 2006, Greenpeace launched its “Green my Apple” campaign urging Apple consumers to demand a sustainable, greener company. “Apple should be an environmental leader ... at the forefront of green technology” (GreenMyApple, 1). Not deaf to chatter in the marketplace, Steve Jobs responded in May 2007, kicking off “A Greener Apple” — a declaration of Apple’s movement towards a sustainable future. Apple managed to phase out the worst chemical pollutants in its product range — Brominated Fire Retardants (BFRs) and Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC) — by 2008, one year ahead of Dell and other computer manufacturers. It’s this type of nuanced, detailed historical context that proves key to fully comprehending the messages buried within Pixar’s latest masterpiece.

Without contextual clues and a solid social and historical framework, viewers may miss some of the film’s more latent messages and the machinations behind them. But both Apple and Pixar remain the kind of cutting-edge companies that count on a more informed and savvy audience to evaluate and interpret their products. Ultimately, there seems little doubt that the film’s creators and its standard bearers know a sizable portion of their audience appreciates at least a slice of the undercurrent.

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