



WALL-E: Consumerism and the Destruction of Physical Spaces

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In the Disney-Pixar film *Wall-E*, the abandoned Earth and detached humans serve as a reflection of our own society's overconsumption and disregard for environmental responsibility, revealing the unrealistic and dangerous belief that our physical spaces can endlessly absorb our waste. Spatiality is the tool used by the film to show the destruction we produce on Earth through unsustainable patterns of consumption. This research essay analyzes how *Wall-E* exposes the spatial foundations and consequences of consumerism in the modern world. It considers the role of eco-films like *Wall-E* in advocating for personal responsibility and prompting viewers to reduce consumption.



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The opening scene of *Wall-E* immediately establishes a profound sense of loneliness through its sweeping images of an abandoned Earth. In *Wall-E*, the camera drifts slowly over endless towers of compacted trash and crumbling skyscrapers swallowed by dust, with no signs of human life. The landscape is painted in muted, neutral tones. The scene foregrounds silence, with only the faint crackle of an old musical playing from *Wall-E*'s speakers.

These details emphasize the planet's desolation. The once-bustling world has become a graveyard of consumer waste, and the vast emptiness makes the small robot microscopic as he methodically compacts garbage. Inside his truck-home, the small string of Christmas lights and carefully arranged trinkets glow warmly against the cold, gray world outside, highlighting how desperately *Wall-E* clings to

fragments of human connection. A discarded film creates a sense of companionship for *Wall-E*. By using the abandoned Earth as both setting and symbol, the film makes loneliness not just an emotion but the defining atmosphere of the entire world.

This film follows its protagonist, *Wall-E* (Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-class), the last robot left on Earth as he spends his days tidying up the planet, one piece of garbage at a time. Over 700 years, *Wall-E* has developed a personality, and he is, predictably, lonely. Then he spots *EVE*, a sleek and shapely probe sent back to Earth on a scanning mission. Smitten, *Wall-E* embarks on an adventure where he follows *EVE* across the galaxy. When she finds a tiny plant and powers down after sending a signal to her ship, he follows her back to the giant starship *Axiom*, where humanity lives in lazy, obese luxury, controlled by a directive

to return to Earth once vegetation is confirmed. The film becomes a space adventure as Wall-E, with EVE and a few awakened humans, battle against the ship's automated captain, AUTO. In doing this, they deliver the plant and fulfill the directive, saving humanity from itself and paving the way for Earth's restoration.

The Pixar film *Wall-E* was written primarily by Andrew Stanton with the help of Pete Docter. Stanton was inspired to create this film by the rise of Amazon and Apple, and the question of where does all the "stuff" go when we go away? He began playing with an editor friend's binoculars at a baseball game, making different emotional faces with them. This messing around gave him the idea of placing these binoculars on top of a trash compactor, creating our beloved Wall-E. He saw our connection and addiction to devices, comparing them to a nicotine hit or drug, and conceived the device-dependent Axiom society for the film. Andrew Stanton created an intentional connection to our behavior, with a bittersweet ending, to allow for a realization of our future if changes are not made. Disney-Pixar's *Wall-E* has been widely

discussed as a critique of hyper-consumerism in contemporary culture. The fast-paced cycle of buying and discarding promoted by the Buy-N-Large company leads to the absolute destruction of Earth, forcing humans to live on the spaceship, Axiom. They become increasingly passive in their consumption, creating destruction aboard the ship, as well, and leaving themselves completely dependent on the machinery around them. They lose their autonomy, as well as their humanity. The film serves as a warning against consumption and passive destruction trends, and urges a change in behavior.

In *Wall-E*, spatiality is a central tool in warning viewers about overconsumption. The film creates a contrast between Earth's vast, trash-covered emptiness and the Axiom's confined, artificial comfort. *Wall-E* shows how the spaces we inhabit shape our connection to the world and to each other: the vast, empty, polluted Earth highlights loneliness, while the compact, screen-filled Axiom emphasizes how technology and consumption can shrink both physical and social space. Through this spatial lens, the film promotes reclaiming real, tangible spaces to restore connection and humanity. This contrast reveals how physical

distance and digital immersion can disconnect people not only from their environment but also from each other.

Wall-E's curiosity and persistence shows that meaningful connections can still be rebuilt. The film suggests that reclaiming physical space through exploring and noticing our surroundings is essential for rediscovering our humanity. *Wall-E* offers a hopeful message: even in a world shaped by isolation, people can choose to reconnect and rebuild. This optimistic element is important because it allows the reader to connect the film with their own behaviors and the consequences of those behaviors, and to draw their own solutions to better their physical spaces.

The film asks what lessons we can take from our growing separation from Earth. By showing robots with human qualities and humans behaving mechanically, *Wall-E* encourages us to reconsider what it means to be "human" or "alive." Through these spatial reversals, the film critiques environmental neglect and humanity's loss of meaningful connection. In "*Wall-E* Reflection: When Robots are Human, and Humans are

Robots," Kati Henderson argues that in *Wall-E* the typical roles of "human" and "robot" are reversed. Many biological humans act like thoughtless, dependent robots, while some robots (like Wall-E and EVE) display individuality, emotion, and agency. This source shows that *Wall-E* does not just critique environmental destruction and consumerism on a surface level—it also exposes how these forces dehumanize society. The article argues that humans in the film have become passive beings because of their dependence on technology and consumer culture, while robots display the curiosity, emotion, and agency that humans have lost. *Wall-E* uses this reversal of spaces to warn audiences about the consequences of overconsumption and disconnection from physical space and human relationships.

Wall-E links humanity's potential extinction to environmental destruction caused by unchecked consumerism and corporate control. It also demonstrates that humans only begin to survive and thrive again once they reconnect with the real world, and rebuild genuine human relationships. Ashton Treadaway's "The Loss of

Humanity through Consumerism in *Wall-E*” argues that *Wall-E* critiques extreme consumerism by showing how humans lose their identities when they allow corporations and technology to control every aspect of their lives. The author explains that Buy-N-Large’s dominance turns humans into passive consumers who no longer think or engage with the real world. Meanwhile, robots like Wall-E and EVE display emotion and moral responsibility more than humans do. These character reversals suggest that regaining individual agency and becoming more conscientious consumers are essential if humanity hopes to avoid the destruction shown in the film.

Eco-films like *Wall-E* warn that neglecting our natural and built spaces leads to environmental collapse and a dangerous disconnection from the world we depend on. Treadaway emphasizes the protection and personal responsibility attached to our physical spaces. Life on the Axiom disconnects humans from any natural environment, trapping them in an artificial world where they lose awareness, agency, and even their humanity.

This reinforces that the film asks us to care about our physical

world (or physical spaces) before the damage becomes irreversible. *Wall-E* uses these physical spaces, ruined landscapes and artificial living environments to warn that neglecting these spaces leads to environmental destruction and a profound disconnection from the real world.

Wall-E warns against the consequences of environmental neglect, which we see in the eroding health of our physical spaces, due to today’s systems of rapid production and disposal. Within spatial studies, scholars debate how humans affect physical spaces and determine their outcomes. We can understand this impact through the theories of Henri Lefebvre. In the *Production of Space*, Lefebvre explains that physical space is constantly shaped by human activity, especially through the priorities of modern capitalism. Lefebvre argues that natural space is increasingly overwritten by socially produced spaces built for economic efficiency, consumption, and control rather than human or ecological well-being. Under consumerism, space becomes a commodity, planned and engineered to encourage buying and productivity rather than authentic

lived experience. As a result, things like malls, highways, and even public areas reflect the values of a system that turns land and everyday environments into extensions of the market. In this way, our consumer habits do not just happen in space; they actively produce the physical spaces around us. This production reinforces the very systems that shape our lives.

John Cairns, Jr. argues that modern consumption patterns are damaging our physical spaces, by showing how disproportionately high resource use drives ecological overshoot and environmental degradation. Cairns highlights that the United States, despite having only 4% of the world's population, consumes nearly 25% of its resources, illustrating the severity of the imbalance. He argues that consumerism has become a defining feature of the 21st-century lifestyle, contributing significantly to the planet's declining ecological health. This evidence serves as a call to action. It urges individuals to adopt less materialistic behaviors in the short term, and calls on societies to pursue long-term structural change.

In their working paper titled "Consumerism and Environment: Does Consumption Behavior Affect Environmental Quality?,"

Carlo Orecchia and Pietro Zoppoli address similar concerns. Their analysis demonstrates that as consumer behavior becomes more focused on convenience and disposability, environmental degradation accelerates. Like Cairns, Orecchia and Zoppoli argue that unsustainable consumption is not just an individual problem but a systemic one, shaped by economic structures that encourage constant purchasing and resource use. Together, these points reinforce the broader warning that without significant changes in both personal habits and societal systems, our physical spaces will continue to deteriorate.

Eco-films made for children, foster early recognition of damaging patterns and the potential for future change. Given the ongoing deterioration of physical spaces, acknowledgment of behavior and call to action are more important than ever. Shifting research focuses on the question of how eco-films influence society and what kinds of change they have the potential to inspire. In a study titled "Effects of Eco-Animations on Nine and Twelve-Year-Old Children's Environmental Conceptions: How Wall-E Changed Young Spectators' Views of Earth

and Environmental Protection,” researchers examined how nine and twelve-year-olds’ environmental conceptions changed after watching *Wall-E*. Children completed word association tasks before and after the film. Through content and cluster analysis, researchers identified shifts in how participants understood Earth, pollution, and environmental responsibility. In scientific studies, content and clutter analysis examines the objects and arrangement within a space to infer patterns about people’s behaviors, identities, and lifestyles. The study showed that *Wall-E* meaningfully reshaped children’s views of Earth and environmental protection, though the nature of these changes varied by age. Overall, the film prompted stronger associations with pollution and responsibility, demonstrating how eco-animations can influence young audiences’ environmental understanding.

Due to the story’s emotional connection and moral tension, it naturally sparks discussions about values, ethical decision-making, and the consequences of inaction. In Staci M. Zavattaro’s “We’ll See Who’s Powerless Now!: Using *Wall-E* to Teach Administrative Ethics,” shows that fictional stories

like *Wall-E* can be powerful tools for helping students grasp complex ethical concepts by presenting them in a vivid, accessible narrative. The film allows students to engage with issues such as power, accountability, and public leadership in a way that feels concrete rather than abstract. Eco-films and other narratives can, therefore, open space for deeper critical reflection than traditional lectures alone.

However, there is only so much that a film can do to make physical changes in the world. Kylie and Brett Caraway’s “Representing Ecological Crises in Children’s Media: An Analysis of *The Lorax* and *Wall-E*” discusses how these films portray ecological crisis, environmental destruction, and humanity’s disconnection from nature. While children’s media often attempts to raise awareness about sustainability and responsibility, we should be wary of eco-films’ tendency to oversimplify ecological problems by framing them as individual moral failures rather than systemic issues rooted in larger economic and political structures.

The authors also point out that the solutions offered (such as planting a single seed or returning

to a nostalgic natural past) are symbolic rather than transformative. Such endings risk giving audiences a false sense of resolution, so while eco-films can spark awareness, they rarely challenge deeper systems driving environmental destruction. It is important to raise awareness in young people regarding threats to the environment, but it is also important to avoid simplifying the issue through false resolutions. These films are great first steps, especially for kids, but we must continue to acknowledge larger causes of physical destruction and avoid settling for shallow solutions.

By pairing critiques of overconsumption with strategies for personal and collective change, these sources show that bettering our physical spaces depends on reducing our own consumption, teaching environmental awareness, and actively choosing behaviors that support sustainability as a broader society. Reduced consumption and sustainable choices are ways individuals can take responsibility for the spaces they inhabit, connecting personal actions to broader environmental and societal benefits. This research does not just analyze problems like overconsumption and destruction of physical space; it explores practical

solutions. Through these solutions, we can establish a framework that connects individual responsibility with the bettering of physical spaces and moving forward to action.

Cairns articulates several practical solutions to address overconsumption and environmental degradation. Individuals can reduce their ecological impact by consuming less, embracing less materialistic lifestyles, and making more sustainable choices. On a broader scale, societies can shift toward renewable energy, increase efficiency, stabilize population growth, and redefine progress by prioritizing well-being over material wealth. In this way, we will create a framework for long-term sustainability.

As Korfiatis suggests, eco-animations like *Wall-E* demonstrate how media can influence personal responsibility and our relationship with physical spaces. By increasing awareness of issues like pollution and waste, these films encourage everyday sustainable actions such as recycling, conserving energy, and reducing waste that show even small choices can improve the environments we inhabit. They also foster long-term environmental

values, making sustainability a tangible part of daily life, and reinforcing the idea that individuals play a role in creating healthier physical spaces. However, as Kyle Caraway and Brett Caraway remind us, awareness is only a first step. It is important that our acknowledgment of the issue moves beyond symbolic solutions.

In *Wall-E*, the abandoned Earth and the technologically detached humans reflect our own society's overconsumption and unrealistic belief that physical spaces can endlessly absorb waste. While the film is widely recognized as a critique of hyper-consumerism, this essay adds a spatial perspective: embodied engagement such as observing and interacting with one's surroundings is essential to restoring human connection. Drawing on research about environmental deterioration, the impact of eco-films on young audiences, and our responsibilities as inhabitants of shared spaces, this essay situates *Wall-E* within broader conversations about environmental accountability. Spatial theory emphasizes that humanity's survival depends on confronting ecological destruction, resisting consumerism, and rebuilding meaningful relationships with natural as well

as built environments. Eco-films, particularly those aimed at children, can foster early awareness of harmful patterns and inspire long-term change, but must be accompanied with real work. Future research should focus on concrete, real-world examples of environmental action to move beyond film-based awareness toward genuine, spatially grounded change.

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