WALL-E's Rhetoric: An Ecological Sermon from a Strange Preacher

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Introduction

Disney-Pixar's 2008 film, *WALL-E*, intrigued audiences with its futuristic story that followed rather unconventional characters placed in an apocalyptic setting. *WALL-E* received critical acclaim for its ability to tell the love story of two animated robots who rarely use words throughout the film's ninety-eight minutes, yet draw a mainstream audience in to the story. *WALL-E* was highly successful around the world, opening at number one at the box office and grossing worldwide ticket sales of over five hundred million dollars ("WALL-E" 1). The movie stimulates its audience's imagination with its vivid computer-generated images, and, while its main characters are two robots, they still manage to convey a wide range of human emotions. *WALL-E* is set in 2700 AD, and the landscape is barren, empty, and covered in trash – which lays the foundation for the film's environmental message.

As the story unfolds, the audience finds out that the consumerist humans abandoned the earth seven hundred years before, leaving the fate of the planet in the hands of robots like WALL-E, whose mission is to clean up the piles of trash. Meanwhile, the humans jet around space in lounge-chairs, talking on their video phones and ignoring the passing of time, alienated from their home planet. However, WALL-E makes an important discovery that offers hope of redemption to the estranged human race. The film seems to portray a human-nature relationship gone wrong and then provide an example of how to restore a loving relationship as WALL-E helps the humans return home. The *New York Times* review explains, "*WALL-E* is a film very much of its moment, although in a cheeky, uninsistent way; it has plenty to say, but does so in a light, insouciant manner that allows you to take the message or leave it on the table" (McCarthy 1). *WALL-E* tries to persuade its audience of the importance of taking care of our environment; however, the movie uses its storytelling to convince its audience, rather than explicit statements

or calls for strong environmental action. The film's vivid simplicity works to promote a return to valuing Mother Earth.

The movie's environmental theme fits into society's increasing concern about protecting the earth. The film's environmental message is unavoidable, and gently confronts the movie-going audience with the environmental challenges faced today. The popularity of a movie like *WALL-E* demonstrates that the general public accepts and enjoys movies that have environmental inclinations. In a nod towards the mainstream green movement, *WALL-E* seems to assume that its viewers already accept the effects of our actions on the environment. *WALL-E* acts upon this common basis with its audience and moves to make green living a natural part of life. Identifying the rhetorical forms at work in *WALL-E* will reveal some strategies that can be used effectively on the modern audience.

The film presents communication scholars with some important insights into the use of two rhetorical forms at work in rhetoric concerning the environment. *WALL-E* takes a new approach to convincing audiences of the necessity of the green movement. It does not mirror past attempts, such as Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, which use a factually-based documentary style to prove their points. Instead, *WALL-E* uses a more subtle approach, combining the rhetorical forms of the ecological jeremiad with Cox's rhetoric of the irreparable to gain persuasive power. The movie's audience does not see charts and graphs about environmental destruction; instead, it receives the jeremiad's call to return to a respectful relationship with Mother Nature, combined with the rhetoric of the irreparable's warning that dire consequences are inevitable if the human race carries on unchanged. Presently, there is a distinct lack of study regarding either rhetorical form in visual media. With the green movement becoming more mainstream in modern society, it is important to study environmentally-themed movies like

WALL-E. Scholars can gain insight into rhetoric concerning the environment by looking for the ecological jeremiad and the rhetoric of the irreparable in similar films.

The major question this paper will examine is how mainstream movies frame the human-nature relationship. By combining the rhetorical strategies of the ecological jeremiad and the rhetoric of the irreparable to frame the human-nature relationship as an essential, loving relationship, the movie *WALL-E* seeks to popularize ecologically-responsible thinking and living—however, the movie's anthropocentric worldview poses some serious limitations on the lasting impact of *WALL-E*'s rhetoric. This paper will have four parts: a description of the Close Textual Analysis method I will use to analyze *WALL-E*; an explanation of the film's context; a close reading of the movie to reveal three main rhetorical strategies and limitations; and a conclusion relating this artifact's significance to rhetorical practice and theory.

Plot Overview

The basic plot of *WALL-E* follows the adventures of a robot named WALL-E, which stands for "Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-class" (McCarthy 2). WALL-E spends his days compacting the endless mounds of trash that have consumed New York City, neatly stacking the trash into skyscrapers that are ironic reminders of the past human occupants. It is soon revealed that all humans have left earth to the robots, deciding to wait for the cleanup while floating around in the spaceship of mega-corporation "Big and Large" (BnL). WALL-E is the last functioning robot of his type on earth. The initial humans who left earth planned to return once the robots' jobs were done, but apparently it has been hundreds of years since they left, and earth is still trashed. This sets the scene for EVE ("Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator")—a robot sent from the human spaceship to check for signs of life on earth—who zooms into WALL-E's life and steals his robotic heart. WALL-E eventually becomes friends with EVE, but longs—as is

revealed in his love of the movie *Hello Dolly!*—to love her and hold her hand.

EVE eventually finds a plant sprout that WALL-E has saved and hidden. She incubates the plant and shuts down until the human ship takes her back. WALL-E cannot stand to let go of EVE and holds on to her and is taken up into the space ship. There he encounters the humans, who are so overweight they never leave their floating chairs. The humans spend all day long hooked up to their videophones and never stop to talk to one another. EVE gives the plant to the ship's captain, and the ship is supposed to return to Earth to allow the humans to resettle it. However, WALL-E must help the captain override the ship's auto-pilot computer, which does not want to send the humans back to earth. The movie ends with humanity's return to earth, and WALL-E and EVE get to be together in the restored environment. According to movie critic Todd McCarthy, the movie's optimistic ending says, "Yes, the worst will come, whatever it is, but humanity will, no matter what, be able to reconnect with its roots" (McCarthy 3).

The main feature of the movie that stands out to modern audiences is its almost silent-film quality, centered around the two robots. Movie critic Joe Mondello explains, "The first hour of *WALL-E* is a crazily inventive, deliriously engaging and almost wordless silent comedy of the sort that Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton used to make" (2). *WALL-E* engages its audience by portraying WALL-E and EVE's love story using movement and the robots' "facial" expressions. "WALL-E's images are filled with emotion, just as silent film's images were—even though its characters look like they're made of metal and plastic, and can't say a word" (Mondello 3). The movie uses two non-human robots to teach the humans the importance of respecting the earth. In the words of movie critic Frank Baker, "This little robot has the desire to understand what living is all about while the people who truly have the gift of being alive have lost it" (93). It takes non-human characters to truly understand the power of nature and open the humans' eyes to what

they had willingly thrown away.

Framework for Analysis

Applying the rhetorical criticism method of Close Textual Analysis (CTA) will give insight into the strategies and limitations of *WALL-E*'s rhetorical messages. CTA features the text being examined and tries to find an explanation for the rhetorical message based upon the artifact's strategies. According to rhetoric scholar Carl Burghchardt, "Close textual analysis studies the relationship between the inner workings of public discourse and its historical context in order to discover what makes a particular text function persuasively" (Burghchardt 563). CTA does not follow any specific theoretical steps in the analysis, but searches the text itself to find organization for the criticism. Burgchardt elaborates: "…close textual analysis aims to reveal and explicate the precise, often hidden, mechanisms that give a particular text artistic unity and rhetorical effect" (Burgchardt 563). CTA does not impose any theoretical outline onto a text, but searches the message, itself, in order to explain the artifact's rhetorical power.

CTA found popularity with scholars in the 1980s who preferred to find unique traits within the artifact, rather than follow a conceptual method for criticism. "To some extent, close textual analysis… is a reaction to the highly theoretical approaches to rhetorical criticism that proliferated in the 1970s" (Burgchardt 563). Some critics use CTA to study a message on its word- and sentence-level. In his study of the American Declaration of Independence, Stephen Lucas explains his use of CTA with the following words:

> Although many scholars have recognized [its] merits, there are surprisingly few sustained studies of the stylistic artistry of the Declaration. This essay seeks to illuminate that artistry by probing the discourse microscopically – at the level of the sentence, phrase, word, and syllable. (Lucas 569)

Lucas does proceed to focus in on the "microscopic" details of the Declaration, and indeed discovers how the organization and subject-choice in the Declaration led to its rhetorical power and artistic quality. Lucas's example of CTA shows how the method avoids strict formulas in its application; rather, it seeks to understand a text's power through analyzing its message on a "microscopic" level.

Rhetorical critic Peter Ehrenhaus applied CTA to a piece of visual rhetoric, the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, which demonstrates how the method can be applied to a variety of media beyond just the written word. In his essay, "Why We Fought: Holocaust Memory in Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*," Ehrenhaus uses CTA to reveal hidden rhetorical themes at work in the movie. Ehrenhaus argues that previous scholars were overly focused upon the film's public reception, and he uses his analysis to offer a new explanation for the film's message. Ehrenhaus uses CTA to uncover the movie's strategies for reimagining American involvement in World War II as a direct reaction to the Holocaust. "However, a closer examination reveals the paradoxical voice of a now secularized Christianity as the source of the nation's moral imagination" (Ehrenhaus 595). Ehrenhaus's criticism reveals a different dimension of *Saving Private Ryan* that is only possible by closely investigating the visual rhetoric in the artifact, itself.

CTA has also recently been applied to movies that focus on "green" themes, similar to the way CTA will be applied in this analysis of *WALL-E*. Anita Krajnc's article, "Epocalypse Now: The Time for Eco-flicks Has Arrived," analyzes recent Hollywood films that attempt to persuade audiences towards an environmentally friendly position utilizing a vast array of strategies. Krajnc argues that Al Gore's film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, gained popularity through its ending optimism. "Despite the film's dire warnings of the consequences looming ahead if

action is not taken immediately, Gore's doc is surprisingly upbeat. It creates possibility by clearly showing what the future can look like" (Krajnc et al 2). Krajnc further uses CTA to examine the different ways other movies have used apocalyptic themes as elements of persuasion.

As a final example of the many applications of CTA, David Ingram's book *Green Screen* examined over twenty movies to discover the strategies and limitations of their ecological rhetoric. Ingram explains that "*Green Screen* analyses these themes in Hollywood cinema by attempting to synthesize two approaches within film studies: close textual analysis and the general survey" (Ingram ix). Ingram's use of CTA shows that the method need not stop at an examination of style; rather, Ingram involves the movies examined in the larger picture of environmental movements. Ingram believes "that Hollywood movies oversimplify complex social and political issues, and provide facile resolutions to real-life problems" (Ingram 1), and reveals how the movies, themselves, limit the effectiveness of their messages. Ingram's analysis demonstrates how CTA can be applied on a broad scale, as well as on a "microscopic level" like Lucas's analysis.

In this paper, I will apply Close Textual Analysis to *WALL-E* to examine the rhetorical strategies that work to shape its rhetoric. First, I will examine the rhetorical context that influences the film's rhetoric. Second, I will explain the rhetorical forms of the ecological jeremiad and the rhetoric of the irreparable. Third, I will analyze how *WALL-E* uses strategies from both rhetorical forms to make its message stronger and its call to action seem urgent. Finally, I will discuss how the anthropocentric worldview which characterizes the film serves both to help and hurt the lasting impact of its message.

Rhetorical Context

As shown by David Ingram's application of CTA, one can gain insight into *WALL-E*'s

message by looking at its historical context. *WALL-E* debuted in 2008, during a time of increased awareness regarding ecological issues. Global warming concerns are now being framed as "climate change," and the world is searching for strategies to combat environmental destruction. Corporations are jumping into the environmental movement and trying to make their companies ecologically responsible. Despite current efforts towards battling waste, huge amounts of trash still litter the planet, overflowing from landfills since the garbage does not decompose quickly. Even technological products that help to cut back upon paper waste have contributed to the problem, as computers are replaced rapidly while technology constantly grows. "The mountain of obsolete electronic products is expanding at a huge rate as our consumption of electronic devices continues to grow rapidly" ("The New IT Mandate" 1). Many companies realize the public's dislike of environmental destruction, and want to frame themselves as eco-friendly. "Green" bleach products, "green" car wash, "green" pencils – all of the above products can be found at local grocery stores or drugstores. "'Going Green' seems to be the new mantra of technology manufacturers, with organizations like The Green Grid becoming popular as companies try to position themselves to customers as being environmentally friendly" ("The New IT Mandate" 1). *WALL-E* fits into the growing amount of rhetoric concerning the importance of respecting the earth.

The rhetor behind *WALL-E* is the Disney-Pixar team, led by director Andrew Stanton. Before its acquisition by Disney, Pixar had established a reputation for being an independent, extremely creative company. "Such is the Pixar brand, or anti-brand: a multibillion dollar company that acts like a nerd hobbyist in a basement" (Onstad 2). Walt Disney Studios, however, brings more of a reputation for being corporate and making millions of dollars off of its theme parks and merchandise. *New York Times* critic Katrina Onstad argues, "But that balancing

act is even tougher to pull off as a subsidiary of Disney, a company whose very name has been turned into a neologism — Disneyfication — for a kind of bland commercial aesthetic" (2). Overall, one must remember that the rhetors behind *WALL-E* "operate on the principle that entertainment values come first" (McCarthy 3).

The constraints upon the rhetor shape the film's rhetoric. The director, Andrew Stanton, is influenced by his position with Disney-Pixar. He must effectively use *WALL-E* to make a profit for his company, and he cannot disregard Disney's corporate image as he makes the film. Since the movie is so constrained by its association with Disney, its environmental message seems hypocritical to some critics. For example, Kelly Gates of UC San Diego scoffed, "I mean, releasing the eco-message movie of the year and still having the nerve to mass market the merchandise? Toys, video games, bed sheets, books, apparel, and more—get it all at Disneyshopping.com" (Gates 58). However, *WALL-E* did not explicitly purport an environmental message using facts or statistics, but tried to subtly enter it into its audience's mind while focusing on the robots' love story. This may have been largely due to the limitation placed upon the rhetor in his position working for Disney. By understanding *WALL-E*'s rhetorical context, one can gain a mental framework within which to consider the film's message.

An Ecological Jeremiad

Using Close Textual Analysis, rhetorical critics have discovered a rhetorical genre, the jeremiad, at work in many rhetorical messages in America. In his article, "The Jeremiad and Jenkin Lloyd Jones," Richard Johanessen outlines the jeremiad's four key elements. First, the rhetor reminds the audience of a previously established sacred covenant. The speaker points to sacred texts or the teachings of a spiritual leader as the basis for the covenant. Second, the rhetor

outlines how the audience has failed to live up to the covenant and how this has brought disaster to the community. The speaker attributes the problems the community is experiencing to the people's rejection of the covenant. Third, the speaker encourages the audience to restore the sacred promises and return to its core principles. Finally, the rhetor tells the audience that if they return to following the rules, then the community will be restored from the disaster. The jeremiad allows for the possibility of redemption, but only if the community restores its previous values. (Johannesen 158)

The Jeremiad began as a Puritanical religious strategy, but has evolved in America to cover secular topics. Johannesen sees "…the contemporary secular jeremiad as a genre" (156) that is not based upon the Puritan religion, but emphasizes other key values; "... a civil religion of the American Dream has replaced the Puritan religion" (160). For example, the American Constitution is held up as a sacred covenant, and an American jeremiad encourages returning to the Founding Fathers' values in order to stave off disaster for the country. A key element of all jeremiads is that they go "beyond a solely negative tone or function" and have "optimism, with affirmation of redemption, promise, and progress" (Johannesen 159). Secular jeremiads follow the similar format as the Puritan jeremiad, but the key values emphasized differ based upon the jeremiad's application.

Dylan Wolfe argues for the existence of an ecological jeremiad in his work, "The Ecological Jeremiad, the American Myth, and the Vivid Force of Color in Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*." The ecological jeremiad reminds the audience of the environmental covenant established by their wise environmental leaders. Wolfe explains, "Like the modern American jeremiad, the ecological jeremiad begins with a divine element. Rather than a chosen people, however, The Lorax presents a chosen land…" (11). Wolfe explains that in Dr. Seuss's story, the characters are

reminded of their land's special relationship with nature that previously allowed them to thrive. The first step in the ecological jeremiad requires the speaker to remind the audience of a sacred promise made to nature in the past by environmental leaders.

True to the second step of the jeremiad, the ecological jeremiad then tells the audience of the consequences that come from breaking the environmental covenant. Wolfe looks at *The Lorax* and finds "examples of environmental disturbance… a breaking from the covenant of pristine wilderness… The environmental principles have not been followed—the ecological covenant has been broken" (11). In *The Lorax*, the land is covered in slime and the corporation has chopped down all of the beautiful trees, leaving the characters hungry and distraught. The ecological jeremiad points out that environmental disaster came as a result of rejecting a contract to care for nature.

Finally, the ecological jeremiad ends with a call to return to past principles that can restore the earth to harmony. "Ultimately the covenant must be restored by adhering to the environmental principals of the past…" (11). In *The Lorax*, the land is restored once the characters return to honoring nature in the ways they had in the past. Wolfe's application of the jeremiad to an ecological context demonstrates that this rhetorical form can be found at work in topics besides religion or politics.

In their article, "Tracking the Elusive Jeremiad: The Rhetorical Character of American Environmental Discourse," John Opie and Norbert Elliot also argue for the existence of an ecological jeremiad. They trace the development of the ecological jeremiad from diverse speakers across hundreds of years, ranging from Jonathan Edwards to John Muir to Al Gore (9). While the speakers each used the ecological jeremiad differently, Opie and Elliot claim that in all of their messages, "…the heart of the jeremiad [is] its aim to obviate the differences between

sacred and secular ends" (12). For example, the preacher Jonathan Edwards saw the wilderness as "…the unfettered spirit's potential for receiving grace" (16), while Ralph Waldo Emerson viewed nature as "…the source of human enlightenment" (21). All of the rhetoricians cited in Opie and Elliot's article followed the jeremiad's traditional format, but instead of citing religious or political figures, urged listeners to return to a sacred covenant with nature. "Human society is flawed; the source of renewal is in nature" (Opie and Elliot 21).

Rhetoric of the Irreparable

A similar approach to discovering the tactics of environmental-based rhetoric is Robert Cox's "rhetoric of the irreparable," as he coined it in his article, "The Die Is Cast: Topical and Ontological Dimensions of the Locus of the Irreparable." The rhetoric of the irreparable has one important distinction from the ecological jeremiad. While the jeremiad usually "…extends the alarm and activism of early environmentalism, including the tendency for strong, even apocalyptic, rhetoric," the "jeremiadic form of the story also offers a redemptive possibility…" (Wolfe 12). The rhetoric of the irreparable does not include the restorative return to past values; rather, it stresses immediate action to stave off irreparable results. "Unlike religious promises of grace (restoration), the irreparable does not offer hope. That which is 'fallen' cannot be undone, its effects lasting an infinity of time" (Cox 233). While *WALL-E* does offer a redemptive possibility, it also relies on the strategies of the rhetoric of the irreparable, explained below.

Cox's rhetoric of the irreparable follows a framework that places environmental destruction as an urgent issue through several strategies. First, the rhetoric of the irreparable focuses upon preserving unique, treasured components of the world. "Human life and aspects of experience and the environment which cannot be restored, if 'lost,' are seen in their singularity – as distinct, original, rare, or exceptional" (Cox 229). After establishing the unique value of the

subject of the rhetoric, the rhetor then stresses that "…its constancy is open to challenge – its very existence, precarious" (Cox 230). The threat to the priceless environment leads to a sense of compelling urgency; the rhetoric of the irreparable stresses the need to act immediately to preserve what is valued. "Our experience with precarious reality places value upon the timeliness of choice or action" (Cox 231). Cox claims that the rhetoric of the irreparable leads to the justification of tremendous actions in response to the message: "Because the irreparable lasts 'an infinity of time,' actors may feel justified in going to extreme lengths to block or forestall the loss of something rare, precious, or unique" (Cox 236).

The Rhetorical Forms in *WALL-E*

One can see both the ecological jeremiad and the rhetoric of the irreparable at work in *WALL-E* throughout the movie. While the characters may not explicitly state that a jeremiadic covenant with nature has been broken, it is very heavily implied. The movie even has Christian themes subtly at work to strengthen the presence of a jeremiad. For example, the first female robot to come to the vacant earth is named "EVE," reflecting the Genesis story and reminding the audience of a sacred covenant made with nature at the beginning of time. Throughout the movie, the human characters recognize the connection they should have to nature when they are woken up out of their virtual worlds on the spaceship. For example, when the ship's captain asks the computer to explain "earth," he is awed by earth's power and recognizes that humans should be taking care of it. "Out there is our home" says the captain when the auto-pilot robot (named Auto) tries to stop the humans from returning. Throughout the movie, the humans are portrayed as a "chosen people" that were destined to live and thrive on earth.

The captain senses the nurturing relationship that humans previously had with the earth when he says, "I don't want to survive, I want to live." Even the non-human robots recognize the

sacred nature of the earth, such as when WALL-E stops dead in his tracks when he spots the plant amidst the trash. He intrinsically knows he must protect the plant, and he saves it inside his shelter. Ironically, the source of knowledge regarding the humans' past relationship with earth comes from the ship's computer, a technological machine created by the humans to help them dominate nature. While no environmental leaders explicitly remind the characters of the covenant to take care of nature, the movie implies that the humans had previously valued this relationship and are reminded of it when they learn about their past on earth.

WALL-E uses the rhetoric of the irreparable to emphasize nature as a special, unique thing which can be destroyed. The movie uses the characters' emotional connection to the last plant to show how valuable the earth is to them. For example, when WALL-E finds the plant in the pile of trash, the background music changes to a mystical chord; WALL-E intrinsically knows the value of the plant he holds. Additionally, the ship's captain knows the value of the earth when he is charmed by watching images of humans dancing and farming. He is so excited about his new knowledge that he shares it with everyone on board, further demonstrating how *WALL-E* portrays nature as something unique and irreplaceable. The captain's actions further add to the Christian theme in *WALL-E*; similar to the actions of the followers of Jesus, the captain is compelled to tell others of the good news about earth. By employing this Christian symbolism, the film further stresses the sacred value of nature. By using this first strategy in the rhetoric of the irreparable, the movie stresses not only that a previous covenant was made with nature, but also that nature is irreplaceable and essential.

The ecological jeremiad—and warning of irreparable disaster—continues in *WALL-E* as the movie reveals the desolation that came from breaking the relationship with nature. At the very beginning of the movie, the audience is shown the complete barrenness of the earth as the

humans have left it. The view pans out over what looks like New York City, and then zooms in to reveal that the "skyscrapers" are tall towers of trash. No plants or life of any kind can be found on the earth in 2700 A.D. WALL-E is the only "living" thing, and he must hide from periodic wind storms that destroy all in their path. Later on in the movie, as WALL-E is hanging on to the ship that is taking him to outer space, one can see that mega-corporation BnL left trash even on the moon. Besides the ecological devastation caused by breaking the covenant to take care of nature, the humans also suffer harm. Since they have forgotten their own natural duties, the humans cannot walk or play in the pool or even read. Instead, they rely on machines they have created to fly them around, lost in their virtual conversations. Since the humans do not commune with nature anymore, they have lost most of their intelligence, and their very "human-ness" is becoming more and more robotic. The "prodigal sons" have completely rejected their inheritance and have reaped their own destruction. *WALL-E* makes it obvious to the audience that since the humans no longer respect their symbiotic relationship with nature, they have destroyed the earth and themselves.

After establishing nature as extraordinarily valuable, *WALL-E* then follows the rhetoric of the irreparable's pattern and shows how its existence is precarious and threatened. Nature has obviously been harmed since the earth is completely covered in trash. Additionally, the existence of the last plant is threatened by Auto, who tries to eject the plant into outer space and blow it up. The movie ironically uses a robot named "Auto" to be the antagonist seeking to continue the humans' rejection of earth. Excessive industrialization and overuse of the earth's resources initially estranged the humans from their home, and the same force seeks to prevent them from staving off further destruction. Even the ship's captain adds to the shaky existence of the plant when he holds it close and shakes it, causing a leaf to fall off of it. The movie highlights that the

earth's very existence is threatened and frail, further emphasizing that only disaster can come from rejecting the responsibility to care for the earth.

The final feature that makes *WALL-E* seem to follow the pattern of an ecological jeremiad is its optimistic message that the humans can restore earth by returning to their relationship with nature. Throughout the movie, when the humans recognize earth's importance, their lives are changed for the better. For example, when WALL-E bumps into a human, Mary, and turns off her virtual phone, she realizes where she is and appreciates the stars out of the window. She becomes more and more "human" again, establishing face-to-face friendships and playing in the pool. Her mental capacity is slowly restored by her appreciating and valuing nature again. The end of the movie also demonstrates its optimistic return to the principles that can revive earth. When the humans land on earth, the captain leads the way by saying, "This is called farming," and teaching all the humans how to live on the earth again. The closing credits have scene after scene of the humans enjoying nature; increasingly thinner children run through the flowery fields as the adults farm the land, which is growing an increasing variety of crops. *WALL-E* preaches that if humanity will return to valuing earth, then it can restore the damage it has done and live in harmony with nature once again. The jeremiad concludes by showing that the prodigal sons can indeed return home by renewing their relationship with God's earth.

The promise of hope is not certain in the movie; if the characters did not act immediately to save the plant, then the possibility for redemption would have been lost forever. Since the environment's precious survival is in danger in the movie, *WALL-E* demands timely action to combat further destruction. The movie also justifies going to extreme lengths to stave off further damage to the world. When Auto tries to kill the plant and prevent the humans from returning to earth, WALL-E and EVE act immediately to fight back. They stop at nothing to protect the plant,

but are labeled "rogue robots" and hunted down inside the spaceship. WALL-E even sacrifices himself to save the plant, getting crushed as Auto tries to prevent WALL-E from placing the plant in the plant-detecting compartment to turn the ship to earth. Though the humans have been doing the same idle things for over 700 years, once they realize the value of the earth, they immediately take risky action to protect nature. *WALL-E* urges its audience to take immediate action to stave off further environmental destruction; the earth could reach a point at which it is hopelessly ruined, and humankind is justified in taking extreme measures to prevent such a fate.

WALL-E's combined strategies of the ecological jeremiad and the rhetoric of the irreparable serve to make its environmental message stronger. The ecological jeremiad offers the hope of restoring the earth from current problems it faces, such as global warming and pollution. The rhetoric of the irreparable injects urgency into the message, exhorting the audience to act quickly and strongly—if immediate action is not taken, the redemptive possibility may disappear and the destruction may be permanent. The strategies in use together lead to a call for an immediate return to harmony with earth to stave off further man-made destruction.

Anthropocentrism

While *WALL-E* combines the ecological jeremiad and rhetoric of the irreparable to persuade its audience to value nature and take action to protect it, its message also relies on an anthropocentric worldview. Katherine Kortenkamp explains that "in an anthropocentric ethic, nature deserves moral consideration because how nature is treated affects humans. In an ecocentric ethic, nature deserves moral consideration because nature has intrinsic value" (Kortenkamp and Moore 261). An anthropocentric orientation relates what happens to nature with what happens to humans, and does not separate biological and anthropological events from one another. "Anthropocentrism considers humans to be the most important life form, and other

forms of life to be important only to the extent that they affect humans or can be useful to humans" (Kortenkamp and Moore 262). An anthropocentric worldview causes humans to protect nature so far as it protects themselves, which can often lead to short-term actions based upon immediate human needs, but does not lead to a change in valuing nature for itself.

David Ingram examined anthropocentrism at work in Hollywood's environmentally-themed movies. Ingram argues that many movies rely on "…the implication that animals are *only* the result of human interpretations, an assumption which does not take into account biological and ecological processes in which human beings may not play a significant part" (Ingram 72). Ingram explains that many Hollywood films project human qualities onto animals in order to convince audiences to value them, instead of displaying the animals as they exist naturally to encourage protecting animals for their intrinsic value.

The anthropocentric nature of *WALL-E* is simultaneously its greatest entertainment strength and its greatest rhetorical limitation. *WALL-E* projects human characteristics onto its non-human characters in order to help the audience relate to the story, leading the audience to value non-human characters since they are human-like. WALL-E and EVE (and all of the other robots in the story) have distinctly human personalities, and Pixar even makes their "faces" seem human. For example, WALL-E can be described as curious, friendly, and lonely – all words that normally would not be applied to a programmed robot. When WALL-E is alone on the earth, he needs to find a friend, so he takes care of a cockroach. He also falls in love at first sight when he spots EVE, and he pursues her just as a human would, rowing around in a boat with her and bringing her special objects to look at. Even the fact that the audience can distinguish that WALL-E is a male and EVE is a female points to how completely "human" these robots seem.

Besides their human traits, the love story between WALL-E and EVE points to further

evidence of anthropocentrism. WALL-E and EVE fall thoroughly in love, and act outside of their "directive" programming to be with one another. Just like a human might, when EVE realizes how WALL-E took care of her when she was shut down with the plant inside, she widens her eyes, sighs, and appears to fall deeply in love with him. The two zoom around in space together, "laughing" in robot-voices and reaching out their hands to one another. WALL-E and EVE even kiss, which sends literal sparks throughout them. When WALL-E appears to be killed when he is crushed by Auto, EVE cries out in anguish at the thought of losing him. The human-like love story between WALL-E and EVE draws the audience into an otherwise foreign story, since moviegoers typically expect a film to stir their emotions. If the love story was lacking from *WALL-E* and the robots were completely robotic, then *WALL-E* would probably have failed to reach a mainstream audience.

WALL-E is also characterized by the overarching trope of hand-holding that stresses earth's connection to *humans*. The hand-holding makes the robots seem even more human. From the beginning, WALL-E—a non-human robot—wants to hold someone's hand like he sees in *Hello Dolly!* WALL-E tries to shove his hand into EVE's when she is shut down, and eventually it is EVE holding WALL-E's hand that makes him remember her after his memory chip is erased. The emphasis on holding hands also serves to connect humans with nature again. When the plant needs to be put into the plant-detecting compartment on the spaceship, the humans pass it down along the line of outstretched hands. At the end of the movie, the humans physically touch the earth as they farm it again. Finally, hand-holding brings the humans back to their "natural" states. For example, WALL-E shakes Jon's hand and brings him out of his virtually-induced coma. Also, when Jon and Mary touch hands, they gasp and realize that physical connection has been missing from their life, both with nature and with other humans.

However, *WALL-E*'s reliance on an anthropocentric orientation limits the impact of its environmentally-friendly message. Throughout the entire film, the main purpose for treating the earth with respect comes from the benefit it can have for the *humans*, rather than for the earth, itself. The reason the characters fight so hard to protect the plant and return the humans to earth is so that they can farm the earth and live off of it again. Since the humans in the story base earth's value off of what it can give to them, one gets the sense that if no immediate crisis existed that threatened them, then they might return to their earth-destroying ways. Jimmie Killingsworth elaborates upon this problem with anthropocentrism:

> One of the problems with political environmentalism—and by extension, any field of study or practice that shares the values of an ecological world view—is that crisis is always a matter of perception… During times of falling public interest or business as usual, the concept of crisis may not be strong enough to sustain environmental communication. (Killingsworth 59)

Anthropocentrism values humans more than nature, and by extension values what the earth can *give* to humans. This focus limits the impact a movie like *WALL-E* can have upon its audience. If the audience feels that the bounty of nature could be taken away, then they may act to protect it; however, if the audience does not see how protecting the environment will impact them, then they will not respect the earth long-term.

Summary and Conclusion

WALL-E is a unique film, relying on non-human characters to draw the audience in to its environmentally-friendly message. The movie uses the ecological jeremiad to show its audience that if it will act to protect earth again, then the damage can be repaired. It uses the rhetoric of the irreparable in conjunction with the jeremiad to make the environment seem extremely valuable

and to make needed action appear urgent—the window of opportunity to restore the covenant could disappear, and the disaster could become permanent. However, the film's strength is limited by its anthropocentricism, which causes the audience to value earth only for what it can give, leading to a short-term orientation to solving ecological problems. The anthropocentric orientation in *WALL-E* draws a mainstream audience to view the movie, but handicaps the movie's lasting rhetorical impact.

The anthropocentric limitation upon *WALL-E* can give insight into rhetorical practice in environmental communication. David Ingram argues that "… representing ecological crises, in Robert Ray's terms, as 'short-lived' and 'solvable by decisive action,' in keeping with familiar American mythological patterns" (Ingram 2) does not lead to long-term persuasion. Instead, environmental rhetoric could be improved by avoiding the trap of anthropocentrism and encouraging a more ecocentric worldview to lead to long-term commitment to protecting the intrinsically-valuable earth. Anita Krajnc argues that "environmental films at their best reframe the priorities of our existence and set the stage for a new basis for modern life… The arts can help make activism relevant to people and rekindle their motivation to become involved" (2). If future films after *WALL-E* can persuade people to a more ecocentric worldview and do not rely on anthropocentrism, then their influence can have longer-term effects.

Besides limiting itself with its anthropocentric worldview, *WALL-E*'s rhetoric can actually cause damage to the power of the environmental movement. Some critics question the motives behind "Corporate Social Responsibility" (CSR) policies that businesses implement into their workings. Oyvind Ihlen asks, "Is the CSR rhetoric one-way, self-absorbed, and celebratory?" (20). Kelly Gates argues that *WALL-E*'s rhetoric is compromised by Disney's motivation to make money off of related merchandise. "Such glossy images of a perfectly fixed

up future are all too common, offering a seductive message of pleasurable consumption, convenience, and complacency" (Gates 59). The makers behind *WALL-E* also downplayed the environmental rhetoric present in the movie. Director Andrew Stanton proclaimed, "'As it was getting finished, the environment talk started to freak me out. I don't have much of a political bent, and the last thing I want to do is preach'" (Onstad 3). While *WALL-E*'s message may encourage protecting the environment – even if only to save humans – its very creation serves to produce more waste in the forms of toys and videogames sold by Disney.

> The commodification and mass marketing of eco-ethics threatens to make our newly intensified eco-consciousness not only meaningless but self-destructive. Like eco-friendly heroine addicts, we earthconscious shoppers consume one green product after another, looking for the high we get from feeling like we're doing our part to save the planet, only to find that the solution is one more green product fix away (Gates 58).

Until environmental messages in Hollywood films match the marketing actions of their producers, then the impact of such rhetoric will be severely limited by the waste produced by the "green" product fad.

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