

WALL-E AN ECOLOGICAL DYSTOPIAN MASTERPIECE

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Abstract: *Films in the recent past have reflected on many ecological concerns and have contained a spark of a thought process that is vital to all human beings. As a mass medium of entertainment, films can influence large sections of humanity. They can easily capture people’s attention and visually recreate a glimpse of the natural world that existed before, the present environmental crisis, and can also envision the future of the world. Films like Avatar, Instinct, Horton Hears a Who, Dreams and Bee showcase ecological concerns. Wall-E is one such film, which presents a dystopic world. The film foresees a bleak future for a world that has failed to understand the environment in a deep way and is irrevocably, trapped in the clutches of consumerism, technology and other related issues.*

Keywords: *Consumerism, Dystopia, Environment*

Films, as any other mode of cultural expression, offer a glimpse in to the world we live in and our relationship with various aspects of this world. Though the movie Wall-E seems to be the story of love between two robots, it offers a powerful scrutiny of environmental issues. More than half the action of the movie is set in Axiom, a man-made space ship designed for a five-year cruise in outer space, as there is too much

garbage in the world earth. While on the cruise the Buy N Large Company promises to clean up the mess. But when the operation cleanup fails due to the rising toxic levels that make life unsustainable on earth, Buy N Large Company’s CEO suggests not returning to Earth but remaining in Axiom itself. The story then is set in a time that is 700 years after some humans abandon the Earth. The question is, Can humans survive outside planet Earth? Can they live in a space shuttle like Axiom as portrayed in the movie?

Living in the space is a wonderful idea but humans are not programmed to live in the space. Humans are largely dependent on resources available only on planet Earth. They need resources for their growth and to continue living and these resources are not found in space. Space is devoid of oxygen and gravity that is so essential to life. One can simulate reality, but cannot create the real Earth, with its conditions in the space. The problem is that humans cannot live just anywhere, and most places are not conducive to sustain human life. Further, human life is inextricably linked with other forms of life and so cannot be sustained in isolation. The flimsy human body evolved under the pressure of the atmosphere, and is largely influenced by the exact pulling power of Earth’s gravity. In a place with too little pressure, it would explode and if the pressure is high then it would implode. If the gravity is too strong, then, one will not be able to move and if it is too weak then our muscles waste away. The Earth has the optimum temperature and the right kind of atmosphere that human life requires. Human beings have to maintain a body temperature of around 37°C to stay healthy. At just a few degrees higher or lower, they would die of hypothermia (being too cold) or hyperthermia (being too hot). Humans also need to breathe oxygen but if the air contains too little or too much, we die of hypoxia or oxygen toxicity. Absence of gravity has a negative effect on some cells of the immune system, as the functions of these cells may stop or the body may lose control over it, which may lead to infections and diseases. Space biologists confirm that absence of gravity for long time causes nausea and face swelling due to the disorder of blood circulation and also causes the

retreat of ratio of calcium in bones. It also leads to difficulty in sleeping, which causes imbalance in the brain. Scientists are aware of the importance of gravity for continuation of life on earth, and also that life outside our planet is impossible. Since it is impossible for humans to survive outside the earth in the space, human intelligence has searched for planets with atmospheric conditions similar to that of the Earth, and have not been successful. If human life cannot live in the space according to science, then what does the movie Wall-E mean, wherein a space ship is shown to exist for 700 years. The movie does not really show the future world, it is rather a representation of the contemporary modern world. It shows a world is caught in the clutches of consumerism, industrialization, technology, advertisement and so on and also the response of human beings to it. The space ship Axiom is the Earth as we know it today.

Life in the modern world, today is like the life on Axiom. Throughout the film, the people and all the needs of people are governed not by a government or people’s power but by a corporate company named Buy N Large. The company controls people and resources. They possess all the stores – Buy N Large Ultra Stores, Buy N Large Work’s Wear, Buy N Large Gas, Buy N Large Bank, Buy N Large Shop Live, Buy N Large Times, Buy N Large Currency, Buy N Large Transit and so on. People in the Axiom depend on this one big company, which monopolises not just trade but life itself and this is a reflection of the corporatization of life that we see before us today everywhere in the world. Buy N Large Company has authority over everything that happens within the ship and outside the ship. There is no mention of a government throughout the movie. The Axiom’s captain controls all activities inside the ship. Once, when he wakes up late and finds that he has missed the morning’s announcement he changes the day’s time from noon to morning immediately. This he effects by changing the ship’s digital sun to the morning position. As a consequence, every activity within the ship changes; the lunch supplies are stopped and breakfast is served, shade umbrellas are closed in the beach area because now it is morning. The control of even the atmosphere by this faction is felt more when there is an emergency evacuation due

to the increasing toxic gas in the Earth. Buy N Large’s CEO declares Global Emergency immediately.

The portrayal of a capitalist monopoly in a fictional world reflects the reality in today’s world. The exploitative, money-powered world order we live in is best expressed by Henry Kissinger, "If you control the oil, you control entire nations. If you control the food, you control the people. If you control the money, you control the entire world." In today’s world, the capitalists control most human beings. Capitalism is the system in which a small minority of people is in control of the money and resources of the planet. They accumulate wealth and power and move their money and factories around at will to keep their profits high and wages low. Profit comes before people and the environment. There are only a few effective public sectors in government’s hand. Major public sectors are given to capitalist. Even governments depend on private ownership for their own benefits. Capitalists are not willing to take into consideration the well-being of people. Profit is their only concern so that they become richer. All over the world people are being forced to move away from their lands so that oil, timber and mining companies can move in. Robbed of their land, cultures and communities people are left with no choice but to work as labour, for the profit of the global corporations, just to survive, and to buy necessities, which they would once have been able to grow or make for themselves. Many communities are destroyed as companies and industries move to areas where labour is cheaper and easier to exploit— Third World countries. This exploitation increases poverty and restricts choices leading to frustration, violence, drug dependence and other social problems. Andrew Gavin Marshall observes:

“We are ruled, though it may be difficult to imagine, by a small dynastic power structure, largely consisting of powerful banking families... .. They emerged in controlling the financial system, extended their influence over the political system, the educational system, and, through the major foundations, have become the dominant

social powers of our world, creating think tanks and other institutions, which shape and change the course of society and modern human history.” (Real World Order).

We live in a world being plundered by the institutions of global capitalism to enrich the few at the expense of the many. Humans have reached the point in history when the very survival of civilization and perhaps the species depends on replacing these rogue institutions with institutions supportive of democracy, market economies, and ethical cultures that function in service to life and community.

Under capitalism, democracy is for sale to the highest bidder, the market is centrally planned by global mega-corporations larger than most countries, the elimination of jobs and livelihoods is rewarded as an economic virtue, and the destruction of nature and life to make money for the already rich is viewed as progress. Capitalism’s relationship to democracy and the market economy is much the same as the relationship of a cancer to the body whose life energies it appropriates. Modern democracy, as we know it, is less than 250 years old. For most of history, except for this brief period, the world has been ruled by powerful elites who wielded absolute power over their societies, controlled the wealth and resources of their known world, and dominated their people by force. Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company, says, "It is well enough that people of the nation do not understand our banking and money system, for if they did, I believe there would be a revolution before tomorrow morning" (Real World Order).

Capitalists benefit when their products and projects get sold in large numbers and for this they need consumers and customers. Consumers are the people who buy what they need. But if people bought only what they needed then capitalist would not be able to get rich quickly. In order to increase their bank balance and production, capitalist put in place many a strategy where people are targeted and often lured into buying much more than what they actually need. An artificial demand is created and an image of indispensability is given to products that are either superfluous or actually harmful.

One of the chief methods by which this is done is advertisements. The purpose of advertising is to help increase the demand for goods and services amongst consumers. The basic aim of advertising is to create awareness in the minds of people, about the availability of products and services and to influence them to buy the same. The famous ad man David Ogilvy once said, "I do not regard advertising as entertainment or an art form, but as a medium of information" (125). Whatever else advertising is trying to do, whether with words or pictures, its purpose always is to impart information. The information isn't always about a product or service, though. Advertising pervades everything from politics to social consciousness. The advertisements which are supposed to promote the products are not promoters of the products itself but it attributes with falsifying values.

The Buy N Large Company in the film Wall-E promotes its online shopping with the quote “keeping power in our hands.” As an anthropocentric society, the wielding of power by humans proves to be an attractive idea. The question that is to be asked in this context is “Who will wield the power – the person or the company?” When power is viewed from an eco-centric perspective, the value of power itself is undermined. Advertisement tag lines in no way assign any true value to consumers’ life. But then instead of thinking and questioning the veracity of the statements made in the advertisements consumers trust them blindly. With the possession of and access to a few technological innovations, humans believe that they have complete power. For instance, in recent times, the computer mouse seems to give people an illusion of power over everything.

The advertisement for Axiom in the film is very much similar to British Airlines advertisement. The advertisement tagline of Buy N Large Company is: “Everything you need to be happy, your day is very important to us.” Similar concerns are often found in almost every advertisement in the modern world. People do not stop to think about the detrimental effects of advertising on their spending habits. Sometimes an advertisement is so good that the average consumer goes out and buys that product

only to find out later that what they saw in the advertisement is very different in reality. Today’s advertisements use tactics that are invasive and controlling. Advertisements focus on materialism and consumption. They are meant to create demand for goods that may not be of any real value to the people.

Technology also has made humans captive to its influence. Throughout the film we find the people preoccupied with some sort of work, but they are not aware of what is happening around. Everyone has a virtual screen in front of them and they communicate through the technology even when the other person is nearby. People in Axiom are controlled by technology and are depended on them. Every physical activity is rendered easy by technological assistance. They do not walk but they move from one place to other place using hover-chairs, which were meant for old people. Their drinks are served by robots as they keep on moving. Breakfasts, lunches, dinners are served in a cup. Even for the outdoor games, which are meant for physical activity, robots are used.

At the beginning of Wall-E, one sees dump yards everywhere. The trash scrapers are taller than skyscrapers, and rivers are filled with oil leakage and so on. But the humans who are responsible for these activities live on Axiom. Even in Axiom their consumerism and dumping activities have not changed. They dump the wastes in space. Humans have developed the habit of keeping their immediate space clean and littering places outside of its surroundings with trash they have generated. Today one witnesses this phenomenon when developed countries dump waste in the Third World countries. E-waste is routinely exported by developed countries to developing ones, often in violation of the international law. Inspections of 18 European seaports in 2005 found as much as 47 per cent of waste destined for export, including e-waste, was illegal. In the UK alone, at least 23,000 metric tonnes of undeclared or 'grey' market electronic waste was illegally shipped in 2003 to the Far East, India, Africa and China. In the US, it is estimated that 50-80 percent of the waste collected for recycling is being exported in this way. We have also found a growing e-waste trade problem in India. 25,000

workers are employed at scrap yards in Delhi alone, where 10-20000 tonnes of e-waste is handled each year, 25 percent of this being computers. Other e-waste scrap yards have been found in Meerut, Firozabad, Chennai, Bangalore and Mumbai. In nature everything is inter-connected and so are human activities. Humans have occupied a large area of the planet due to their need for resources. Human greed has propelled the race to invent machines, without any thought of environmental impact, to produce more than what is needed, because more productions translates to more money. With the onset of a consumerist culture, human consumption increased proportionately and there has been a corresponding increase in the waste generated. Humans have lost their organic bond with nature. Technology has given humans a sophisticated life but has stolen human’s innate capacity of being humane. The capitalist scenario born out of human thoughts has a great bearing on human existence. By delinking humans from nature, it has created a phenomenon that spells of a future that is bleak. Unless there is a change in approach from greed to need, the chances of the survival of the human race are very low. The earth will carry on, as it is a survivor, but not the human race.

More than reflecting on ecological concerns, the film Wall-E shows some ecological truths, which attacks the complacency of human beings, who have taken many a thing for granted. As an intellectual being, considering oneself superior to other living forms, humans take pride in believing that they can alone help save the planet. But such assumptions are entirely incorrect. The planet earth can survive without human help. Earth is a great survivor. It is not the planet one should be worrying about but humans should work to save the human race, which is far more susceptible to extinction than other complex life form on the Earth. The film Wall-E establishes the fact that human beings have to take care of themselves and to do so they should not alter the conditions that are required for their survival, as Earth is a great survivor and it will continue to sustain life, but may be not humans once again.

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