

The White World of Disney's *Wall-E*

By

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The Disney brand evokes images of childhood innocence, animation, theme parks, toys, and one of the most iconic animated characters in Mickey Mouse. A 1966 Disney brochure described company founder Walt Disney as “a man – in the deepest sense of the word – with a mission. The mission is to bring happiness to millions” (Pinsky 20). Known as a pioneer in the animation industry, Walt Disney and the Walt Disney Company is responsible for bringing dozens of fictional characters to life through feature film and television. Despite Disney’s success, research shows a stark lack of diversity in its films. Contrary to cultural minority advancements and an increasing complexity of animation narratives, the animation genre, in which Disney is still a leader, continues to feature a dominant white ideology in its films.

This lack of minority importance does not appear to be egregious on the part of Disney but rather part of a larger cycle of hegemony in Hollywood. In his book “White: Essays on Race and Culture” Richard Dyer writes, “White people create the dominant images of the world and don’t quite see that they thus construct the world in their image” (9). It is in this vein that Disney created the 2008 film *Wall-E*, with a white lens in which both its protagonist sees the world view as well as the white constructs of the entire human race with a narrative that resembles the mid-20th century white flight phenomenon. Dyer adds, “Whites are everywhere in their representation...in other words, whites are not of a certain race, they’re just the human race” (3).

As the eco-friendly *Wall-E* narrative takes aim at the conservative values of consumerism, it equally perpetuates the white norm that makes up a majority of the conservative base.

Wall-E is both a love story of 20th century popular culture and a stark warning of overconsumption and rampant consumerism. Set in 2085, humans have abandoned a trash-covered Earth for the safety of ark-like starliners courtesy of the global corporation Buy 'n' Large. The only thing left roaming Earth is a Waste Allocation Load Lifter – Earth Class robot (Wall-E), voiced by Ben Burtt. The robot's sole purpose is to clean the Earth of waste, though over the course of 700 years Wall-E develops artificial intelligence that includes an interest in musicals and unique innate items such as Zippo lighters and Rubik's Cubes. A chance encounter with a robot sent to Earth in search of vegetation, Wall-E travels to one of the Buy 'n' Large starliners where he must convince the now morbidly obese and technology-dependent passengers to return to Earth in order to recolonize.

Wall-E was a commercial and critical success, grossing more than \$223 million in theaters, with more than \$63 million coming in its opening weekend. The Hollywood Reporter's Kirk Honeycutt called *Wall-E* smart and sophisticated with "all the heart, soul, spirit and romance of the very best silent movies 80 years ago" (Honeycutt). Despite the critical acclaim and box office success, further examination of *Wall-E* reveals more than just pop culture romanticism and warnings of excessive consumerism. The narrative of *Wall-E* perpetuates the ongoing cycle of Hollywood hegemony by unintentionally suggesting whites are superior by way of the white flight phenomenon.

Eric Avila describes the phenomenon of white flight in his book "Popular Culture in the age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles." Avila explains that the New

Deal and the beginning of World War II largely constituted a reconfiguration of the American city, creating what he calls a “new paradigm of race and space.” A combination of elements that included technological innovations, government policies and demographic upheaval helped shape a new urban landscape in the 1950s and 1960s. Under this model cities extended outward to accommodate the needs of homeowners, retailers and industrial expansion (Avila 4). This new post-war landscape also created a racial barrier. Avila calls the migration of millions of African Americans into urban spaces during World War II the most significant demographic shift of the twentieth century (4). But decades earlier the way was paved for another demographic shift to take place. Avila cites gains made by labor groups in the 1930s and 1940s created a thriving consumer economy that would focus on suburban home ownership. This process was aided by racially restrictive practices such as redlining, blockbusting, restrictive covenants and municipal incorporations. The mass migrations of whites from urban areas to suburban spaces would become known as white flight.

According to author Kevin Kruse white flight is not a singular issue contained to one city but an issue the entire country was confronted with in the 1960s. In “White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism” he notes that postwar national debates included segregation, the demise of white supremacy and the rise of white suburbia, and new conservative alliances replacing older liberal coalitions. He describes what happened in postwar Atlanta “...not simply an Atlanta story or a southern story. It is, instead, an American Story” (15). Kruse contends that the white flight phenomenon served as a more subtle form of racial segregation, stating:

Ultimately, the mass migration of whites from cities to the suburbs proved to be the most successful segregationist response to the

moral demands of the civil rights movement and the legal authority of the courts. Although the suburbs were just as segregated as the city – and truthfully, often more so – white residents succeeded in convincing the courts, the nation, and even themselves that this phenomenon represented de facto segregation, something that stemmed not from the race-conscious actions of residents but instead from less offensive issues like class stratification and postwar sprawl.

Kruse draws comparisons to postwar suburbia post-white flight and white supremacy, citing “remarkably similar levels of racial, social, and political homogeneity” along with shared ideologies that included privatization over public welfare and free enterprise (8). The racial transition of neighborhoods was more problematic and complex than the phrase “white flight” would indicate. An increase in black homeownership in Atlanta’s Adair Park neighborhood in the mid-1950s was followed by maps that outlined the white community, a warning from the Adair Park Civic Club that stated, “Don’t be misled by the idea you can stand meekly by and do nothing until a negro buys a house on your block,” and a rush by white homeowners to list their homes with black realtors (Kruse 94).

The race to leave the city would have a damaging long-term effect on the city of Atlanta. The migration of white middle-class residents to the suburbs led to an economic boom for Atlanta’s five-county metropolitan region, but inside the city limits the economy slumped. The city’s share of retail sales from the entire metropolitan area fell 22% from 1963 to 1972, with the central business district accounting for just 7% (Kruse 243). The hardships weren’t just limited to Atlanta. Federal initiatives such as tax policies that favored homeowners over renters,

transportation funds favoring highway construction over mass transit, loan policies favoring new construction over renovation, and the placement of low-income projects in the inner cities all contributed to the migration of middle-class Americans to the suburbs (Kruse 244). Researchers David Kirp, John Dwyer, and Larry Rosenthal summed up the effect this had in a study of the New Jersey suburb Mount Laurel, stating, “Pointedly, [white suburbanites] have left the city as blacks have been moving in. The very last thing they want to do is assume responsibility for those whom they deliberately left behind” (Kruse 246).

Failing to take responsibility for those left behind is a central theme in the *Wall-E* narrative. Rather than a proliferation of African Americans moving to urban areas driving whites to the newly-built and rapidly expanding suburbs in the mid-twentieth century, it is rampant consumerism creating an unsustainable planet, forcing mostly white city-dwellers to board space-bound arks meant to preserve the human race. They leave their crumbling cities for starliners that resemble more of a brightly-lit shopping mall rather than a life-sustaining space craft. As they grow more obese and continue their dangerous levels of consumerism, it is clear the very last thing the humans in *Wall-E* want to do is assume responsibility for that which they left behind.

When asked in 1947 if his films contained propaganda, Walt Disney told the House Committee on Un-American Activity, “We have large audiences of children and different groups, and we try to keep them as free from anything that would offend anybody as possible” (Pinsky 262). The maturation of animation since the 1937 release of Disney’s first feature-length animation, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, reveal a racial ideology quite different from that in Walt Disney’s initial testimony. In “Animating Difference” authors King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo point out, “...in the fifty years since Disney released *Peter Pan*, animated

films have undergone profound transformations that make them extremely important cultural texts” (18). Animated films once considered simplistic hand-drawn narratives exclusive to Disney have become in the digital age a cultural force that are more adult-centric. In the 1990s studios such as DreamWorks, Twentieth Century Fox, and Disney began making animated features that moved away from older fairy tales and instead focus on sophisticated characters and their trials and tribulations (18). King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo argue that these character and narrative constructs offer contemporary lessons about sexuality, race and gender (19). The increasing complexities of these “highly racially and sexualized scenarios” serve as socializing agents that guide children in the United States, painting certain social values as normal and others invisible (King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo 11).

In “The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence” Henry Giroux writes, “There is nothing innocent in what kids learn about race as portrayed in the ‘magical world’ of Disney...The racism in these films is defined by the presence of racist representations and the absence of complex representations of African Americans and other people of color,” (106). King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo agree, citing the texts of 1999s *Tarzan* and 1994s *The Lion King* which contain racial allegories and endowing whites with superiority. *Tarzan*, specifically, is replete with Eurocentric projections and although set in Africa is devoid of Africans (61).

A similar void exists in *Wall-E*. There is only one African American in a position of leadership in the film. A scene in the Captain’s quarters of the Axiom features the lineage of Axiom Captains. The lineage is as follows: Captain Reardon (white male), Captain Fee (Asian American female), Captain Thompson (white male), Captain Brace (white male), Captain O’Brien (African American male), and current Captain B. McCrea (white male), voiced by Jeff

Garlin. These minorities are marginalized even further in that they are given Eurocentric names, anglicized versions of Gaelic lineage (named after actual Pixar employees) rather than names with genuine minority origins. Outside of the robots and Captain McCrea, only two characters on board the Axiom have substantial speaking roles and are both white. John, voiced by John Ratzenberger, and Mary, voiced by Kathy Najimy, both break away from the stranglehold of Buy 'n' Large just long enough to help Wall-E and Eve defeat the film's antagonists. Though *Wall-E* does show a small minority representation on the Axiom, the characters are marginalized and have no substantive lines or reason for existing in the film. There are also no minorities in positions of leadership save for two brief visual appearances of past Axiom Captains. Much like King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth-Lugo's examples of *Tarzan* and *The Lion King*, *Wall-E* endows whites with superiority through their overwhelming existence compared to other races.

Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann discuss a clash of ideologies found in *Wall-E* in the book "That's All Folks? Ecocritical Readings of American Animated Features." Because the film explicitly critiques consumerism, Murray and Huemann argue that *Wall-E's* narrative also serves as a critique of Disney's aesthetic and production values. At the same time they point out that the film also supports the conservative romantic ideology found in classic Disney films that maintain the culture of the white norm. Iris Shepard also addresses this in her article "Representation of Children in Pixar Films: 1995-2011." Shepard points out that the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* signaled the beginning of the company's "classic" period. This period also included seminal films such as *Bambi* (1942), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), and *The Jungle Book* (1967) and adopted a conservative view of the world while promoting a culture of consumerism (172).

With themes of themes of fate, environmentalism and the role of technology in human lives, King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo call *Wall-E* a novel setting for an animated film. Despite the progressive tropes, the authors argue the film still features core racial ideological elements analogous to the animation genre. Wall-E's love of the predominantly white musical *Hello, Dolly!* contributes to the film's overall appearance of white normalcy (54). This is in part to the inherent white ideologies present in the musical genre. In "The Great White Way," author Warren Hoffman states:

The power of the musical derives from the notion that everything is in plain sight. Thus, the common audience perception of the musical as "simplistic" or "unsophisticated" is in part derived from the fact that it has nothing to conceal. This tactic of appearing to hide nothing is the same strategy employed by whiteness; whiteness marks itself and its concomitant politics as invisible. Whiteness just "is." It is the norm, it is all surface. (8)

Hoffman argues that these explicitly white productions that mirror the nature of racism in the U.S. and perpetuate a universal white norm are no different than contemporary non-violent white nationalist groups such as the American Renaissance. He points to American Renaissance's nostalgic longing for an American society where a homogenous white community is the norm and questions how it is different than the unspoken worldview in musical narratives that advocate for white exclusivity (10). This white normalcy displayed in *Hello, Dolly!* bleeds into the *Wall-E* narrative with the arrival of Wall-E's romantic interest Eve, a bright white, blue-eyed, egg-shaped extraterrestrial vegetation evaluator robot. Besides *the Hello, Dolly!* video which plays in the film, the only representation of human life on Earth is the white Chief

Executive Officer of Buy 'n' Large. Shelby Forthwright (Fred Willard) appears via holograph commercial for Buy 'n' Large that continues to play in New York City as Wall-E goes about his cleanup duties. Between Forthwright, the featured scenes from *Hello, Dolly!* played in repetition, and Eve's representation of whiteness, Wall-E is never been exposed to any other racial representation on Earth other than white.

King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo also state that Wall-E's discovery of a "decidedly white colony" relates to the propriety of coloniality, indigenous peoples and empire (54). Shohat and Stam discuss the effects imperialism has on identity in the article "The Imperial Imaginary." They assert that beliefs about the origins of nations often take shape in stories, with certain tropes shaping our concept of history. As the world's storyteller, cinema plays an immense role in national identity, arranging actions and events in a narrative that shape a nation's concept of history and time (2). King, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo contend that although *Wall-E's* narrative is set in the future, the text reflects the central tensions of contemporary film (54). Films such as *Wall-E* contain manifestations of imperial nostalgia, a "longing for the freedom, lifeways, values, and possibilities associated with indigeneity..." (55). Despite our present multicultural ideology in contemporary U.S. culture, imperial nostalgia continues to saturate the animation genre through tropes of natives and nature (56).

Despite the seemingly innocent nature of cinematic animation, close examination of the genre's films reveals a glaring absence of minorities that creates a misleading imagery of the culture in which the texts are created. The narratives feature false, nostalgia-based societies where white is the ideological norm, often times simply due to the absence of anything other than white. Though set hundreds of years in the future, the narrative and white normalcy found in Disney's *Wall-E* is reminiscent of the mid-twentieth century white flight phenomenon. After

failing to come to terms with their failed co-existence with nature, white characters flee the cities in which they live for a promise of a better tomorrow, leaving an “other” (Wall-E) with the responsibility of maintaining the places in which they once lived.

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