WALL-E AND THE CYNICISM OF COMPUTER-GENERATED IDEOLOGY

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By

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The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to:

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my parents, Michele and Guy Yandel and my brother, Chris Yandel,

my bandmates who supported me through everything, Katie Alice Greer and G. L. Jaguar,

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**Introduction**

*Wall-E* is a computer-animated movie produced by Pixar Animation Studios and Walt Disney Pictures in 2008. It tells the story of a robot, Wall-E, who lives on Earth in the year 2805. Wall-E is a robot who was manufactured by the megacorporation Buy-N-Large to collect trash, compact it, and then stack it up neatly. The exigency for a robot like Wall-E becomes clear once the viewer sees the landscape of future Earth. It is completely covered in trash, mostly broken down or discarded commodities; there are literally skyscrapers which have been built out of all the discarded waste. The movie portrays the ecological ruin of Earth and regression of the human race to an infantile state as the consequences of a lifestyle of overconsumption and needless waste fueled by Buy-N-Large. The movie has been hailed by many as timely critique of our current way of life. Claudia Puig of *USA Today* described *Wall-E* as a "cautionary tale with striking ecological implications". David Edelstein of *New York Magazine* notes that *Wall-E* "not only prophecies environmental horrors but targets overweening corporations". While A. O. Scott of the *New York Times* calls *Wall-E* "a G-rated, computer-generated cartoon vision of our own potential extinction" and "an earnest (though far from simplistic) ecological parable".

What is so striking to me about *Wall-E*’s success and overwhelming positive reception is how rarely the groups, Pixar and Disney (which are now actually one company), communicating this message are considered.

The filmmakers responsible for producing this allegory about pollution and over-consumption are part of one of the largest multinationals on the planet. The group that would become the computer-animation studio Pixar and eventually merge with Disney began as a computer graphic division at Lucasfilm in 1978. In 1986, with financial backing from Steve Jobs the group broke off and became an independent company. In 1990, the company began collaborating with Disney to develop a program for coloring and shading hand-animations called
CAPS. After this successful collaboration, Disney agreed to fund and distribute a full-length animated feature by Pixar, what would eventually become *Toy Story* (1995). The movie was part of a three feature deal that set the working precedent for Pixar’s future movies. The two companies went on to produce six more movies together before merging in 2006. The merger was technically a buyout of Pixar by Disney, but one in which Steve Jobs became the majority shareholder of Disney (*The Pixar Story*). Pixar, which we often think of as its own company, is actually a brand or subgroup within Disney Co. Pixar *is* Disney, the corporation that the same year it released *Wall-E* made approximately $37,843,000,000 in revenues, $2,875,000,000 of that coming from “consumer products” (Walt Disney Company 2008 Annual Shareholders Report). Disney’s majority stakeholder at the time of *Wall-E*’s release, Steve Jobs, was simultaneously CEO of Apple Inc. These are two of the largest publicly traded companies in the world and two of the largest manufacturers of consumer goods today who market and sell their products via continually enacted cycles of novelty and obsolescence. In other words, both Disney and Apple make huge profits off fueling consumerism. It is in their financial interest to continually produce and sell new commodities and thus contribute to the endless stream of disposable products that results in exactly the type of pollution and consumerism that *Wall-E*’s depiction of the future supposedly warns the viewer against. How is it possible for a company like Pixar/Disney (with such open ties to Apple\(^1\)) to communicate the message *Wall-E* does without it being labelled hypocritical, deceptive, or exploitative?

I wish I could say this was the question which drove my approach to the topic, but it was actually a realization that came to me rather late in the process of writing this essay. My initial

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\(^1\) Note also the multiple allusions to Apple products in the movie: *Wall-E*’s reboot sound is that same as an apple computer’s boot-up noise, and *Wall-E* runs his VHS player through an iPod and a magnifying screen in order to watch *Hello Dolly!*. One could also argue that Eve’s own aesthetics, as well as, much of the Axiom’s aesthetics are modelled off Apple products; A.O. Scott of the New York Times describes Eve as “shaped like an elongated egg” and “as cool as the next iPhone”.

interest in computer-animated movies was driven by a phenomena called the Uncanny Valley\(^2\), a term which refers to the tendency for realistic computer-animations to fail to captivate audiences while irrealist or fantastical computer-animations, like those produced by Pixar, seem so readily able to. What is it about the pairing of computer-generated imagery (CGI) with the patently unreal that is so effective in engaging audiences? This was the questions which drove my examination of the history of CGI, Disney, and Pixar. The following essay will examine the guiding myths of live-action film, animation, and CGI to see how the assumptions about and conventions of these mediums have shaped the form of contemporary computer-animated movies, specifically Pixar movies. The essay will then move on to examining the fears about reality and simulation that CGI as a medium triggers, and how *Wall-E* manipulates the psychic energy released by these fears to displace and contain the viewer’s skepticism about ideology while simultaneously assuaging the viewer’s deeper, unconscious fears about the nature of reality.

My approach to the topic begins by looking at what Vivian Sobchack, in her essay “Final Fantasies: Computer Graphic Animation and the [Dis]Illusion of Life”, calls scales of values. A scale of values is the horizon of expectation that informs what viewers expect to see when they watch a live-action film versus an animation. Using the guiding myths behind these two mediums to demonstrate how they are conceived of, I will posit that live-action film is judged by a scale of values informed by realism whereas animation is judged, in contradistinction, by its deviations from realism, a scale of values I will refer to as ‘metaphysical release’. Although realism and metaphysical release appear to be discrete scales of value, I will show via an examination of the Disney that, in fact, these two scales of values are always, already imbricated in any movie. The

\(^2\) The term was coined by the robotics professor Masahiro Mori in his 1970 article "Bukimi No Tani" (不気味の谷 The Uncanny Valley) in *Energy*. The article forwarded the hypothesis that when human replicas look and act almost, but not perfectly, like actual human beings, it causes a response of revulsion among human observers. The term "valley" in the title is in reference to the graph Mori used to explain this point. See Appendix A to see graph.
metaphysical release that a Disney movies provides is only visible or legible to its audience if it is distinct from the sense of realism the movie also provides. Furthermore, the realism Disney incorporated into its movies was not derived from reality but from the sense of reality created by the live-action films which preceded and existed alongside Disney’s animations in the cinema and which, like all movies, are themselves a mix of both realism and metaphysical release. Since both live-action film and animation are always, already an imbrication of realism and metaphysical release, how a motion-picture performs, separates, and layers these two impulses becomes an important question and the one which drives the following examination of CGI and computer-animated movies.

Next, the essay addresses computer-generated imagery (CGI). Looking at CGI’s early incorporation into mainstream cinema, I identify cinematic photorealism as the scales of values CGI is interpreted with. A CG image’s value is determined by how well its performs an aesthetic correspondence with live-action film. Photorealism is a form of realism, but one whose value is derived not from the objectivity of the camera or the integrity of the referent, but the labor of the animators that went into mimicking the effect of a referent before a camera. Photorealistic CGI then communicates two seemingly incompatible values, objectivity and labor. If not carefully managed, these antagonistic values can contradict one another and detract from the viewer’s engagement with a movie. To demonstrate this conflict, I will turn to an examination of Final Fantasy (2001). I will then move on to examining Pixar’s computer-animated movies and how their combination of photorealism with metaphysical release avoids this conflict. I will argue that Pixar movies are so captivating, because like the Disney movies that inspired them, they are careful to stage the referent as the location where metaphysical release will be performed and incorporate (photo)realism via other means. Here I will turn to Wall-E to show how Pixar provides metaphysical release via the characters and setting while providing a sense of realism via reinscriptions of the camera into the
digital image.

The camera inserted into Wall-E is just as much a simulation as the characters featured in Final Fantasy, but since Wall-E is making no claims about the integrity of the referent, the camera is relieved of its duty to guarantee truth. This is why the digital camera in Wall-E does not interrupt the viewer’s conscious enjoyment of the movie the way the digital characters in Final Fantasy do, but there is still an uneasiness that surrounds Wall-E. The dissonance between the irreality of the characters and the realism that the simulated camera imbues the movie with highlights what was lost in the compromise Pixar brokered between photorealism and animation: the referent. This absence of a even a vicarious referent reveals computer-animation for what it is, pure simulation. Here I will be drawing upon the notion of simulation laid out by Jean Baudrillard in his essay “Simulacra and Simulation”. The simulation of computer-animation evokes an unconscious fear in the viewer that everything is simulation, which an examination of the current state of cinema proves to be a reasonable fear. Evoking an unconscious fear about the nature of reality might seem like a bad tactic for a movie that seeks to entertain its viewers, but the psychic energy released by the excitation of the viewer’s unconscious fears actually catalyzes an energetic engagement with the movie. Wall-E uses this engagement to manipulate the viewer’s psychic energy and involvement to exploit them ideologically and deliver a greater psychic pay-off in the end, actually making the movie more engaging and enjoyable.

Here again, I will return to the text, Wall-E, to perform a close-reading which demonstrates how the movie works over the viewer’s anxiety about the nature of reality and simulation by performing representation. Wall-E implies the presence of a reality that is not simulation ironically by simulating representation. I will argue, drawing heavily upon Hugh S. Manon’s notion of the phony as detailed in his essay, “Qui Perd Gagne: Failure and Cinematic Seduction”, that Wall-E performs a phony ideology for the viewer that both marks the movie as representation and portrays
the ideological exchange as contained within the diegesis, and hence stops the viewer from identifying the movie itself as ideological. I will end my close-reading of Wall-E by examining the narrative and showing how it functions as a form of wish-fulfillment, and then move on to closing the essay with an examination of why these techniques are so effective in engaging viewers. Slavoj Žižek in his book, The Sublime Object of Ideology posits that there is a fundamental homology between dreams and commodities; I would also add movies to this list. As Jameson notes, the work of art, like the dream, is linked to repression. Both function to hide from the subject’s psychic censor some knowledge that is too unbearable to face, but allow it to surface by translating it into a disguised and thus more acceptable form, which Žižek claims the commodities also do. Wall-E, as both a movie and a commodity is perfectly positioned to be subjected to this type of interpretation.

In my final interpretation of the movie, I aim to show how Wall-E works to keep repressed our knowledge that reality itself is ideological, that the movie’s interpellation of the viewer as outside the ideological exchange is a form of wish-fulfillment whereby the viewer does not have to face the traumatic realization that whatever she or he may believe or think subjectively, objectively she or he is taking part in the ideological exchange. Such a realization nullifies the possibility of occupying or enjoying the position of the cynic. It destroys the option for passive enjoyment and instead makes clear that the viewer is always, already taking part in the ideological exchange and thus has a responsibility to do so consciously and with intent.

Scales of Values

Writing about the failure of Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within, Vivian Sobchack posits that both animation and live-action cinema introduce their own particular scales of values. A scale of values tell us where to look in a movie for value or quality. A reductive, technological example of a scale of values for a digital image would be resolution. If the an image has 1000 pixels per square
inch it is better or of higher quality than an image with only 100 pixels per square inch. The scales of values we approach a movie with are much more complicated and less easily quantified, but the idea of where to look for or how to identify value in an image is the same. Scales of values are developed by a viewer's previous and repeated engagement with movies and the discourses surrounding them. Viewers use these experiences to create different sets of expectation and strategies for interpreting the movies they see. These expectations and strategies are the scales of values that viewers unconsciously use to form judgements about a movie's quality, and thus strongly influence whether or not a viewer is entertained by what she or he sees. Different scales of values arise from the differing expectations a viewer has of different types of movies. These types can be as specific as the "personalized" genres in one's netflix cue, say "Psychological Thrillers Featuring a Strong Female Lead", or as broad as documentary versus fiction. The categories that Sobchack is discussing, animation and live-action, are very broad and thus the associated scales of values that have developed around and through them are complex and highly imbricated with multiple other scales of values that stem from the multiple generic and typological categories any movie occupies. Although these scales of values influence a viewer's interpretation and judgement of a movie, I do not want to imply that any single scale of values determines the viewer's engagement with a movie.

If film critic André Bazin is correct in asserting that "the origin of an art reveal[s] something of its nature", then a good way at getting at these scales of values is to ask: What is the guiding myth of live-action film? And, respectively, what is the guiding myth of animation? (Bazin, 173). To answer the former, Sobchack invokes Bazin's essay "The Myth of Total Cinema" in which he writes, "the guiding myth, then, inspiring the invention of cinema, is the accomplishment of... an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist" (Bazin, 172-3). Essentially what we expect from (live-action) cinema
is an image which mirrors our own world, a world which follows the same laws of physics as our own, what I will call ‘realism’. By realism, I mean a scale of values which situates the value of cinema in the existence of a referent, a ‘real thing’ that had to exist in the ‘real world’ before the camera in order for the image to be created. Bazin is pointing out that it is the integrity of this referent or ‘real thing’ out there in the world, whose objective portrayal is guaranteed by the indexicality of the medium, that imbues the cinematic image with its power. This indicates a scale of values for live-action film based upon realism.

The guiding myth of live-action film reveals how much the medium through which an image is mediated contributes to the scale of values we use to judge it. Live-action film is mediated by a camera and thus is ‘realistic’. Because the camera works indexicality, it is seen as assuring the image’s objectivity. It is this latent notion of objectivity which gives realism its value. This is in direct contrast to animation which is mediated by an animator or animators. Because the medium through which an animation is realized is an artist, a fellow person, these images are marked as subjective. Just as live action film’s value is tied to objectivity or ‘freedom from the interpretation of the artist’, animation’s value is tied to subjectivity or freedom from dictates of reality. The value, then, of animation is the image’s deviation from or subversion of reality. It is these deviations from reality that define animation and make the labor of the animators legible to the audience. Sobchack calls these deviations ‘metaphysical release’ - “that is, the “the vicarious playing out of the plasmatic possibilities for subverting and/or substituting the laws of physics... with the laws of imagination” (Sobchack, 172-3). Animated movies have, as Sobchack describes them, “assiduously shied away, both in narrative and representation, from character ‘realism’ of any kind but emotional” (Sobchack, 172-3). Animated movies are most entertaining, she argues, when they make obvious that they are animation by deviating from reality or breaking with realism. Non-human characters, or at least non-anthropomorphic humans, movement that defies the laws of
physics, and other such tropes of animation are all ways of releasing the viewer from the metaphysical confines of their own reality. Animated movies have developed a scale of values associated with metaphysical release; this scale of values continues in turn to shape the form of contemporary animated movies as well as their reception.

But we must also keep in mind that these guiding myths were coined retroactively and from a specific positions within the larger field of cinema. The guiding myth of animation as it is applied to movies is reflective of animation’s status as a subset of cinema, not true cinema, if you will. Without the guarantee of a real-world referent, animated movies were not accorded the same value as live-action movies. The very fact that when one says ‘movie’ the live-action part is implied, whereas one has to specify ‘animated’ when referring to animated movies, speaks to this condition. This position within a moving-image culture dominated by live-action film led animation to develop a scale of values which was defined by its relation to live-action film. The resultant scales of values set up a totalizing binary, one in which animation strives to break away from realism and the laws of physics that govern our own world while live-action film recreates them on screen in an attempt to portray a world which mirrors our own. The key thing to note though is that while being opposed to one another, these scales of values are never actually discrete or total. Neither realism, nor metaphysical release can be applied exclusively to any movie; they, as well as many other scales of values, are always imbricated. While it may be passé at this point to reiterate that all live-action films perform metaphysical release, and that even the most ‘realist’ or ‘neo-realist’ films provide a measure of metaphysical release, it seems less so to point out that almost all animations similarly perform some measure of realism.

The Realism of Disney Animation

According to the guiding myth of animation, metaphysical release is the driving impetus
that inspires animation and is what audience are looking for when they watch animated movies, but a careful examination of Disney Studios and their approach to animation challenges this notion. A review of their approach underlines how much realism and its incorporation into animation was a defining aspect of Disney. My analysis of their approach is informed by my own experience (a childhood spent watching Disney animated movies), but also by Frank Thomas’ and Ollie Johnston’s *Disney Animation: The Illusion of Life*. I have chosen to look at the history of Disney Animation Studios as it is particularly relevant to the critique of Pixar and *Wall-E* I will be performing later in this essay. Both Ed Catmull and John Lasseter, the founders of Pixar, have recounted how they dreamed of being Disney animators when they were children, and Lasseter actually pursued this dream, attending The California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), the school founded and created by Walt Disney in the 1960s, and working for Disney after graduation (*The Pixar Story*). The Disney approach to animation was a huge influence on the subsequent approach Pixar would take to computer-animation. Looking back at Disney, especially the development of its Twelve Principles of Animation, as well as its practices in the 30s and 40s, it becomes clear how much ‘realism’ was a driving goal of the studio, and how much this notion of realism was defined by animation’s position relative to live-action film in the larger field of cinema.

The view that realism was an integral aspect of the Disney approach is demonstrated by an exchange between newly hired Disney animator Ben Sharpsteen and outside animator Dick Huemer which is recounted in *Disney Animation: The Illusion of Life*. In this exchange Huemer asked Sharpsteen, “‘What do you guys [Disney] do that’s different?’ Ben answered simply, ‘We analyze.’ Dick responded that his people analyzed, too; everyone did. There had to be more to it than that. As he thought about it, Ben decided that the key ingredient must be ‘realism’” (Thomas and Johnston, 80). Thomas and Johnston quote Walt himself as telling the animators that their animations “must have a foundation in fact,” a basis in reality in order to achieve “sincerity.”
(Thomas and Johnston, 62). As Thomas and Johnston explain, “many animators resented this push towards more realism in every action. To them putting over the gag, the business, the strong pose, was all that was needed to be entertaining,” but Walt was adamant (Thomas and Johnston, 72). He believed that Disney could not “do the fantastic things based on the real,” unless they “first knew the real” (Thomas and Johnston, 71). Although the idea that the pursuit of realism is what set Disney apart from its peers is more likely an expression of an internal belief within the studio than an objective reality, it still speaks to how the staff at Disney conceptualized their own work. The idea that realism is an integral part of Disney's animations is somewhat counter-intuitive at first, but, if one pushes on the term realism and examines what at Disney was being described by the term, some productive realizations come to light.

When employees at Disney or Walt Disney himself talked about realism, what they were referring to was the sense of reality conveyed by live-action films. The Disney approach to animation was based off the understanding that recreating the visual cues found in live-action films would increase the realism of their animations. This understanding was put into practice by Walt Disney’s decision to bring in Don Graham, a top instructor at Chouinard’s Art Institute, to teach the animators action analysis from live-action film clips. He used filmed footage of single actions and ran them backward and forward endlessly, talking with the animators about his and their observations, trying to figure out what visual cues would communicate these actions realistically in a drawing (Thomas and Johnston, 72). In the same vein, before animating *Snow White* Walt Disney had a film crew shoot entire sequences with an actress before the scenes were animated, so that the animators would have a ‘realistic’ reference to guide their work (Thomas and Johnston, 114). As Disney animation developed, “decisions as to where to have the camera, how far back to be, who to have the camera on, when to be on someone else—all the facets of filmmaking became
important” considerations in the Disney animation process (Thomas and Johnston, 74). Disney’s practices and Thomas and Johnston’s language here, talking about ‘the camera’ even though none is used speaks to how much the aesthetics of live-action film were equated with realism in this environment. Realism was derived, not solely from ‘the real world’ or from the integrity of the referent to use Bazin’s term, but as Disney’s mimicry of it reveals, also from the industrial and theatrical aspects of live-action cinema (staging, camera work, etc.).

Along these lines, Disney incorporated other aesthetic conventions of live-action cinema into their Twelve Principles of Animation. Principles like ‘Staging’ and ‘Straight Ahead Action Vs. Pose to Pose’ were intended to remind animators to think of themselves as directors and their characters as actors before a camera. Similarly, principles such as ‘Exaggeration’, ‘Secondary Action’, and ‘Appeal’ instructed animators on how to draw their characters, so they performed like actors. These principles were positioned right next to those intended to instruct the animators on how to create movement that resembled movement in reality. Since live-action film is an indexical medium, part of the sense of ‘realism’ derived from it is based off reality, and many of Disney’s principles reflect this drive to recreate movement on screen that mirrors movement in reality. Principles like ‘Squash and Stretch’, ‘Solid Drawing’, and ‘Arcs’ taught animators to think about things like displacement, momentum, and articulation when drawing objects. When one reviews all twelves principle as a whole which sketches out the broader Disney approach to animation, the combination of principles with such varying objectives demonstrates that the realism Disney incorporated into its animations both was and was not derived from reality; it mirrors the way the realism associated with live-action film both is and is not reflective of reality.

Although this push for realism was an integral part of the Disney approach to animation, it did not define it. As I stated earlier, all animation, just like live-action film, is an imbrication of both realism and metaphysical release. I have attempted to draw the reader’s attention to the realism
involved in Disney’s approach to animation, but I also want to stress that metaphysical release was still the predominate and defining characteristic of Disney animation, and its Twelve Principles of Animation reflect as much. Disney’s Twelve Principles did more than show animators how to infuse their animations with live-action realism; it also instructed them on how to deviate from this particular sense of realism in order to deliver the metaphysical release that animation’s scale of values suggests viewers want and expect. The live-action realism that Disney pursued was in the service of the larger goal of providing metaphysical release. A principle like squash and stretch does more than teach animators to respect the laws of mass and displacement that govern our own world (if something is stretched along its horizontal axis, it must then correspondingly squish along its vertical axis\textsuperscript{3}), it encourages animators to move beyond realism, to exaggerate or deviate from realism. The point here is to master realistic depiction, so when moments of metaphysical release take place they are legible to the audience, because they are distinct from and in contrast to the realism that comprises the rest of the animation. It is this particular imbrication of realism and metaphysical release that enables Disney movies to entertain audiences.

The scale of values that have become tied to animation and thus the guiding myth that has been retroactively applied to it posits that metaphysical release is what comprises animation, but by examining Disney’s approach we see that realism is just as integral to Disney animations as metaphysical release. The functioning of realism or metaphysical release is always reliant upon the presence of the other whether it be in live-action film or animation. But Disney animations are more than just an interplay between realism and metaphysical release, their mix of realism and metaphysical releases is layered upon another pre-existing mix of realism and metaphysical release, that of live-action film. One can see already how complicated these of scales of values are, which

\textsuperscript{3} A great example here is chewing. If you just show the up and down movement of the jaw, it looks mechanical and lifeless, but if you pull the cheeks in as the jaw drops (stretch), then push them out as the character bites down (squash) you achieve a much more realistic effect.
makes how, as the Pixar evolution of the Disney approach will demonstrate, a movie performs this
imbrication of multiple scales of values important. Where and in what ways a movie performs
either its realism or its metaphysical release determines whether or not it will successfully play into
the scale of values a viewer associates it with and thus influences whether or not the viewer will be
entertained by what she or he sees.

As I said before, the idea driving realism is that the indexicality of the camera guarantees
the truth or integrity of the referent. When we are watching a live-action film, the most salient
components of this realism are the referents themselves, the appearance of the actors and the
setting. It is here then, in the depiction of the characters and the setting, that animation must
perform metaphysical release; it is here that an animation must make the animators’ labor visible to
the viewer by deviating from realism. An animation can mimic the conventions of live-action film,
so long as it does not make any claims about the referent. It is the referent, the characters and
setting, that must provide the viewer with metaphysical release in an animation or conversely
which must perform realism in a live-action film. It is the characters and setting that must either
deviate from the viewer’s reality in order to display the labor of the animators or abide by it in
order to demonstrate the objectivity of the camera. Disney’s movies are animations, and thus to
entertain viewers, they must portray characters and settings which deviate from reality and perform
metaphysical release for the viewers.

That the aesthetics of Disney’s characters and settings favor metaphysical release over
realism is also important for another reason: it is what allows Disney movies to obscure or hide the
realism that has been incorporated into them. But why hide the realism that Disney has worked so
hard to incorporate into their movies? Because viewers do not want to acknowledge that the
realism they associate with live-action film could be effectively simulated by animation. An
acknowledgement of such would undermine realism’s function as a scale of values for live-action
The value of realism is that people read it as a guarantee of a type of objectivity or truth: the referent had to exist out there in the real world before it could appear on screen, but what the Disney approach reveals is that the affect of realism associated with live-action film is not in fact derived solely from the indexicality of the camera which preserves the integrity of the referent, but in large part from the cinematic conventions that are a result of all the other aspects of filmmaking (staging, editing, camera-work, etc.). These other aspects reaffirm live-action cinema’s basis in industry and theatricality and work against the notion of objectivity that underlies realism as a scale of values. That the integrity of the referent is not the defining aspect of live-action film is unsettling to us. It breeds cynicism, hence why Walt Disney’s own term for the guiding myth of Disney, “the caricature of realism” is such an apt one (Thomas and Johnston, 142). I do not mean to imply that Walt Disney was some self-aware genius that was questioning the value or truth assigned to live-action films due to their being the result of an indexical process, but that he seemed to have an intuition that the scale of values invoked by live-action films was based as much on the conventions of the film industry as any particular reality revealed via the camera. The word caricature conveys how animation’s imitation of realism is a gesture which grotesquely mocks or distorts realism’s more noble features: indexicality, objectivity, the integrity of the referent, and truth.

Moreover, if animation incorporated too much realism, it would delimit its ability to deviate from that realism which is how animation manifests its own value as such. This was less of a concern in early animation when the medium’s capabilities itself closed off the possibility of too much realism, but as animation improves, this need to deviate from reality in salient ways in order to provide metaphysical release becomes more important. By having the characters or setting very noticeably perform metaphysical release for the viewer, Disney makes them the defining feature of the movie, the feature which triggers the scale of values the viewer then use to interpret or judge
the movie. The characters and settings, as the most salient aspects of the movie, function as an icon for metaphysical release in Disney movies which then obscure from the viewer from the live-action derived realism also present within these movies (and thus the metaphysical release also present in live-action film). No matter how much a Disney animation's staging, editing, or story may resemble a live-action film, the audience can be assured by a single glance at the protagonist or scenery that the movie is not of their world.

That the aesthetic of the referents is what activates the scale of values that will be applied to a movie can be demonstrated by an example. Both Iron Man and Wall-E were released in 2008; both feature a mix of CGI and live-action footage and have equally extraordinary premises, but I will argue that the former will be judged by a scale of values associated with realism, whereas the later will not. This is not to say that Iron Man does not provide large amounts of metaphysical release, but that because its referents, its characters and settings have a 'realistic' aesthetic, aka one which conforms to the aesthetic conventions of live-action film, the scale of values associated with realism will be applied to the movie in a way it will not be applied to Wall-E. Iron Man leaves the basic form of the characters unaltered; they look like the result of actors appearing before a camera. The movie has moments of spectacle which deviate from reality, but the predominant aesthetic is still a realistic one. Wall-E on the other hand has an aesthetic which foregrounds metaphysical release. Even though Wall-E features human characters, they do not resemble people in reality; they have abnormal bodily and facial proportions, and thus could never be confused as the result of a person appearing before a camera. Although these scales of values are triggered by one aspect of the movie (the aesthetic of the characters and settings), they are then used to interpret other aspects of the movie. An easy way to demonstrate this is to think of the common complaint heard of so many live-action films: that so and so was not realistic. “Oh the government would never give that much money to private research and development! That’s not realistic!” is seen as a valid criticism
of a movie like Iron Man, but "Humans with so little bone mass and so much body fat could never walk! That's not realistic!" in reference to Wall-E does not strike one as an equally valid complaint. Even though both animation and live-action film always incorporate elements of realism and metaphysical release, the aesthetics of the characters is what determines whether the viewer judges the movie via animation's or a live-action film's scale of values. This choice is an important step in the viewer's process of interpreting a movie and contributes to whether or not the viewer is entertained by what she or he sees.

**CGI: A New Scale of Values**

These scales of values, realism for live-action film and metaphysical release for animation, indicate to the viewer how to judge the value of a movie and thus influence whether or not one is entertained by what one sees. On top of these two seemingly antagonistic scales of values, CGI has developed its own unique scale of values which differs from both the realism associated with live-action film and the metaphysical release associated with animation. As a new medium within cinema, CGI was perceived as a subset of live-action film, still the predominant medium in cinema. This positioning influenced the scale of values CGI developed. As Sobchack notes, "in its perceived place (rightful or not) as a 'subset' of cinema" CGI is guided by a "second-order idealism - that is, by a desire for the 'perfect illusion' not of the 'outside world' but of the perceptual correspondences that inform 'photorealism', and in particular, 'cinematic photorealism'" (Sobchack, 173). This second order idealism is a result of CGI's early incorporation into live-action films primarily as 'special effects'. Massive strides were made in CGI in the 80s that by the early 90s were making their way onto cinema screens. A slew of movies in the mid 90s featured CG images which were beginning to achieve cinematic photorealism as is evidenced by their nearly seamless incorporation into live-action footage: Terminator 2: Judgement Day (1991),
*Death Becomes Her* (1992), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *The Mask* (1994), *Forrest Gump* (1994), and *Jumanji* (1995). *Jurassic Park*, CGI’s metaphorical cotillion into mainstream, commercial cinema, featured more CGI and plastic effects than any other movie up to this point in time and not only got away with it, but made its CGI a selling point. CGI’s particular history as special effects which were incorporated into live-action film began a convention whereby CG images were supposed to perform the aesthetic correspondences one finds in live-action film. This history created a scale of value whereby the quality of a CG image is based on how closely it mimicked live-action film, because the marker of good CGI was seen as its ability to be indistinguishable from the live-action footage it was incorporated into.

The resulting scale of values, photorealism, although aesthetically conforming to the realism of live-action film, represents a very different kind of value than that associated with the indexical image. The value attached to photorealism has to do with labor, and in this way echoes the value associated with animation. This flips the Bazinian notion of realism’s value on its head and moves the definition towards a more Marxist one. The value of photorealistic CGI is labor, the labor of the artists and technicians that was put into realizing the image presented on screen for the viewer’s enjoyment. This also explains the recent trend of an increase in the marketing and discussions of the money, time, and labor that goes into creating these digital effects as they become more seamlessly incorporated into movies. An excellent example of this is the rather detailed and extended making-of documentary (31 minutes) that accompanies the DVD of *Final Fantasy*. The documentary is designed to display and explain to the viewer the massive amounts of labor and capital that went into *Final Fantasy*’s production. It talks about the multiple servers that had to run simultaneously just to render a single scene. Not only does it highlight the technical capital required in the form of servers, computers, and software, it also goes into detail about the considerable human labor that went into the movie’s creation. In one sequence, the documentary
takes a scene from the movie and breaks it down into its component layers for the viewer. The documentary shows each layer that went into the final image and shows the different animators that worked on each layer beside the image explaining their work as it appears on screen atop the previous animator’s work. The documentary directs the viewer’s attention towards all the labor that went into the movie, because the scale of values that has developed around CGI tacitly informs the understanding among viewers and filmmakers that this labor is where the value of CGI comes from. This is why the making-of special goes to such lengths to portrays as Herculean the effort of animators and producers to render the images in Final Fantasy.

This scale of values goes on to become an integral part of how a viewer interprets and judges the subsequent computer-animated movies that began with Toy Story in 1995 and continue to be created today. As both animation and CGI, computer-animated movies must carefully imbricate animation and CGI’s scales of values without allowing them to conflict. As some of the early examples of computer-animated movies such as Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within, The Polar Express (2004), and Beowulf (2007) and their place within the Uncanny Valley demonstrate, this can be a tricky thing to do. In a computer-animated movie, both CGI’s scale of values which demands photorealism and animation’s scale of values which demands metaphysical release create expectations about the aesthetics of the characters and settings. It is when a movie privileges photorealism over metaphysical release that it falls into the Uncanny Valley. By depicting the characters and setting as photorealistic, a movie indicates to the viewer that the movie as a whole should be judged by CGI’s, not animation’s, scale of values. The labor CGI embodies is expressed by how precisely the images mimic live-action film. The limits this photorealism places on the aesthetics of the referents depicted was not a problem when CGI was used as digital effects in a live-action film where realism was still the predominant aesthetic, but this confining of the referent to a (photo)realistic aesthetic becomes problematic in an animation. When the characters and
settings are read as photorealistic animations, they are expected to conform to the realist aesthetic of live-action film and perform metaphysical release; these are incompatible aims.

The Failure of *Final Fantasy*

To illuminate how a computer-animated movie can work through or around this tension, let's start by looking at one which does not, *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*. One argument for *Final Fantasy's* failure is straightforward; it evokes an expectation, photorealism, which it cannot fulfill. The creators of *Final Fantasy* described the movie as “completely based off live-action principles”, which is, in essence, asking the viewer to compare it to all other live-action movies she or he has seen and judge accordingly (Special Features, *Final Fantasy*). On top of asking the audience to judge *Final Fantasy* in comparison to other live-action films, the movie goes on to emphasize the characters as the place where this correspondence will be most saliently manifested. By making the characters the photorealistic focal point of the movie, *Final Fantasy* creates an imperative that the characters both perform the aesthetic correspondences of live-action film and manifest the labor of the animators that went into their rendering.

*Final Fantasy* emphasizes this labor by repeatedly cutting to close-up ‘shots’ of the characters, specifically their faces and hair. The introductory sequence of *Final Fantasy* is indicative of how the filmmakers present the characters throughout the movie. It begins with a pan up and out of a valley onto a burnt-out, desert landscape then cuts to an extreme close up of Dr. Aki Ross’, the protagonist’s, eye. The pores of her skin, her freckles, the fine lines around her eyes, the speckles of her iris, her eyelashes, and each individual eyebrow hair are all distinctly visible⁴. The scene then cuts back to the landscape, and then cuts back again to a close up of Aki’s eye as she squints. By doing this, *Final Fantasy* is foregrounding the details of the characters,

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⁴ See Appendix B.
specifically Aki, as the focal point of the movie. The movie repeatedly uses these close-up shots of the characters as a way of showing off the details of their rendering which would be lost in a longer shot. Because of this approach, the characters in Final Fantasy often come off as ‘hyperreal’; they appear too perfect, possess too much detail. This makes sense considering the expectation that CGI will embody labor; an image with a lot of detail demonstrates that a lot of time and labor must have gone into its realization, but this is a self-defeating tactic. The characters in Final Fantasy fail to achieve cinematic photorealism, not because they are not perfectly rendered enough or cannot capture the je ne sais quoi of a real actor before a camera, but because they show too much.

Film, cameras, and their human operators are an imperfect and imprecise medium. In a live-action film, an erratically moving object might escape the frame for a moment or a camera might lose focus during a transition. These obstructions and imperfections are a crucial component of what comprises the aesthetic of live-action film. The creators of Final Fantasy could be described as being duped by cinematic realism, as forgetting that live-action film itself always starts from a point of metaphysical release, and then goes on to build a sense of realism atop this metaphysical release provided by the camera. The flattening of perspective, the manipulation of time and space that are a result of the camera, film, and editing are all forms of metaphysical release. After all, a camera always obscures more of reality than it reveals. This baseline metaphysical release, this obstruction of or departure from reality, although overlooked by the guiding myth of cinema and covered up because the value associated with realism, is an integral part of what comprises the aesthetic of live-action film and thus photorealism. Final Fantasy fails to fulfill photorealism by overlooking the metaphysical release that is imbedded in live-action film’s

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5 Although arguably this is very true too. Despite the fact one could critique the technical and artistic work of the animators, I am choosing to focus my critique of Final Fantasy elsewhere.
realism. In striving to show off so much detail and thus embody as much labor as possible, *Final Fantasy* ignores recreating on screen those traces of the camera which obscure reality.

Even if *Final Fantasy* did achieve perfect photorealism, it would still be open to increased scrutiny due to its avowed status as animation, as a simulation of the effect of an actor before a camera. Usually an animation creates its own cohesive environment, and thus is allowed to have its own rules and to function its own way within its that environment. But when a computer-animated movie explicitly aims to depict photorealistic characters and settings, the movie is asking the viewer to make comparison between its imagery and all the other live-action film images she or he has seen in the past. In the case of *Final Fantasy*, this amplifies the movie’s failure, because the mimicry itself then becomes the very performance the viewer is watching for. The viewer becomes hyper-critical, and all the deviations from reality that would normally be part of the discrete and fantastic universe created by the movie are now judged by an even harsher scale than that with which the viewer normally approaches other animated or live-action films (Sobchack, 172). These arguments for the failure of *Final Fantasy* posits that the movie failed to entertain its audience, because the mimicry was not good enough; it did not closely or perfectly enough resemble other live-action films, the implication being that if the movie did achieve perfect photorealism, it would not have evoked the uncanny feelings that stop hinder one’s enjoyment of the movie.

But I believe that, not only did *Final Fantasy* fail to achieve ‘cinematic photorealism’, the goal itself is a flawed one as it applies. By trying to portray photorealistic characters, the computer-animated movie is telling the viewer to judge the characters as simultaneously: 1) the result of an actor before a camera, and 2) the result of animators laboring away on an image. These claims directly contradict one another. Photorealism evokes an aesthetic, live-action realism, whose

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6 At least visually. There are plenty of other valid reasons that *Final Fantasy* was a failure, but engaging them all would lead us off topic.
value is objectivity. The value that photorealism evokes via this mimicry is at odds with the value it evokes as CGI or animation. The objectivity of the camera is supposed to assure the viewer that a human is not responsible for mediating the image, whereas the labor embodied by CGI and animation is supposed to assure the viewer that a lot of humans spent a lot of time mediating this image. Human labor and objectivity are contradictory values in this case; an image cannot hold objective value if it is simultaneously marked as the product of human labor. This is why *Final Fantasy* fails. It tries to simultaneously embody incompatible values.

Furthermore, photorealistic computer-animation is a goal that if ever achieved would nullify its own raison d'être. If a computer-animation ever convincingly posed as the result of a referent before a camera, how would the labor of the artists and technicians be evident to us? As Sobchack quotes one viewer of *Final Fantasy* as saying, “if the illusion always worked, how would we know they weren’t really human actors, and some joker just told us they were computer generated?” (Sobchack, 178). *Final Fantasy* evokes a scale of values, cinematic photorealism, whose expectations it cannot yet fulfill and which its status as animation contradicts. The tension between these two scales of values overtakes and obscures the cinematic pleasures that would normally be derived from either. A computer-animated movie that strives to build engagement with the viewer and maintain this engagement for the duration of the feature must find a way to imbricate these scales of value without allowing them to conflict with one another, but how does a

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7 This also explains CGI’s deployment in early movies where it was consistently used to achieve an image whose irreality even if not manifested in the aesthetics was palpable due to the subject matter, where the spectacle-ness could be located in the subject matter depicted if not its form. For example, the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* are perfect for embodying labor, because they can get as close to or achieve perfect cinematic photorealism without ever losing their value because dinosaurs do not exist and thus could not possibly be the result of a naturally-occurring referent. We see the same in *Forrest Gump*, Captain Dan’s depiction as an amputee holds value because we know Gary Sinise does actually have legs in real life, and would not amputate them just for the movie. This is also true of the scene where Forrest meets the president; this scene has value because we know Nixon is dead and Tom Hanks is alive and thus their meeting could never take place in the real world before a camera. CGI can imbricate its desire be a spectacle, to hold value as labor with its desire to mimic cinematic photorealism, but only if it depicts something irreal or impossible otherwise consideration of a real-world referents and disinterested indexicality they evoke will work against value CGI is expected to represent as labor.
computer-animated movie do this?

Pixar: Disney Reinvented for the Digital Age

Pixar carefully imbricates animation's and CGI's scales of value by isolating and separating metaphysical release from photorealism, and inserting them in different places within a movie. Just like Disney adopted some tropes of live-action films but were careful to mark the referent as animated, so too does Pixar incorporate tropes of photorealism while still carefully marking the referent as animated. By privileging metaphysical release over photorealism in the aesthetic of the characters and settings, Pixar directs its viewers to interpret Pixar movies as animations and use this scale of values to interpret and judge the movie. In Toy Story this means talking toys, in Finding Nemo talking fish, and in Up and The Incredibles (the only Pixar movies in which humans are the main characters) it means humans whose proportions are not only anatomically incorrect, but bordering on physically impossible (Carl’s, the protagonists of Up, head is so large it would snap his neck if he were bounded by the laws of physics which govern our own world)\(^8\). These fantastic premises and proportions ensure that the viewer of a Pixar movie will use a scale of value more associated with metaphysical release than photorealism to interpret or judge the movie as a whole, but this does not mean that Pixar abandoned the pursuit of photorealism altogether. In Final Fantasy, the pursuit of photorealism took the form of trying to recreate the perceptual correspondences that result from an actor in front of a camera, the focus there being the actor. Pixar has created consistently engaging computer-animated movies, because its approach to photorealism is all about the camera. Rather than trying to recreate the effect of an actor before a camera, Pixar movies work to recreate the aesthetic correspondences that are the result of the

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\(^8\) See Appendix C.
camera apparatus itself. Moving the location of the CGI performance away from the characters and onto the traces left by the camera apparatus frees up the characters and setting to perform metaphysical release and embody labor without worrying about conflicting with photorealism.

By focusing the effect of photorealism not an the actor (referent) but the camera, Pixar's approach moves CGI's defining function from a mimesis of what takes place in front of the camera to a mimesis of what takes place within the camera. From its inception, Pixar understood that 'photorealism' meant creating the perceptual correspondences that are the result of the camera apparatus itself. During their time in the computer graphics department at Lucasfilm, Catmull and Lasseter cultivated renown in the CGI world by premiering *The Adventures of Andre and Wally B* at the 1984 SIGGRAPH convention. *The Adventures of Andre and Wally B* was a computer-animated short which was notable for containing the first “convincing rendition of motion blur, an element of photorealism that digital animators had long sought” (Prince, 20). Pixar also developed the software package that is the industry standard for CGI, RenderMan. RenderMan performs the “comprehensive set of calculation that are necessary in rendering —lighting, texturing, and adding other 3D effects— to wireframe models. The software calculates the physical properties of the digital set, its distances and layout, the positioning of digital characters, and the virtual camera along with its focal length, and then adding the appropriate lighting effects and shadows” (Prince, 20). With RenderMan we see the Disney approach to animation turned into software. Animators no longer need principles to remind them to think of themselves as actors and directors; the software now interpellates them as such. RenderMan presents an interface which encourages the mimicry of live-action cinema in how an animation is 'staged' and 'shot', and it builds upon this mimicry by adding in the effects of the camera apparatus. This software package ensures that just like Disney, Pixar animations will incorporate the appropriate aspects of (photo)realism to make the subsequent metaphysical release the
characters and setting perform as convincing as possible.

*Wall-E* is an instructive example of this approach to photorealism which defines the Pixar aesthetic. The movie sets up a narrative device whereby humans can be depicted in an unreal or comical manner by positing that in the future, the effects of reduced gravity and lifestyle have reduced bone mass and increased obesity amongst humans to such a degree that they no longer resemble humans as we know them. This strategy allows the filmmakers to pursue photorealism in some aspects of the movie, but without being constrained by the perceptual correspondences of a real world referent before a camera. *Wall-E*’s depiction of future-humans makes no claims about the realism of the characters, thus they can be fantastic and spectacular and embody large quantities of creative and technological labor without the conflict that arises in a *Final Fantasy* where the photorealism expected of the characters fought against the and embodiment of labor and metaphysical release also expected of them. This reasoning also applies to the choice to make thinking, feeling robots the main characters in the *Wall-E*. The viewer has no referent in reality to compare these characters to, so the movie is free to only perform the perceptual correspondences of photorealism that manifest labor while not performing those that would constrain it. Setting the story far in the future does the same thing; it allows the movie to represent settings which appear photorealistic in some ways, but which at the same time are not limited by the perceptual correspondences of a real location captured on film. Because the setting is an imagined future, the movie is making no claims about the integrity of the referent, and thus cannot be constrained by comparisons to it. By marking the referent as not real, as imagined, *Wall-E* is able to provide metaphysical release while still performing photorealism via camera effects that not only embody labor, but also contribute to the realism that is already a part of its animation and which enables metaphysical release to take place.

Pixar had the foresight to separate out photorealism from the metaphysical release, locating
the former in the traces left by the camera and the later in the form of the characters and setting. Locating photorealism in the traces left by the camera apparatus as opposed to the actors is a successful tactic, because it allows the values associated with animation and CGI to complement one another. The Pixar approach stems from the realization that live-action film already deviates from reality as a result of the camera apparatus. By locating the camera’s deviations from reality as the visual cues it will mimic in order to embody the labor associated with CGI, Pixar releases the characters and setting from the constraint of having to conform to photorealism. This frees up the characters and setting to perform metaphysical release and manifest their own value as animation. While rather savvy, it is an unintuitive move as *Final Fantasy* demonstrates. The guiding myth of cinema tells us that the point of the cinema is show the referent, not the camera. By embracing photorealism in the camera effects, Pixar at times shows less of the referent or shows it imperfectly in order to perform photorealism. A large part of the what constitutes photorealism is actually an obstruction of the referent, so Pixar takes these obstructions and turns them into performances capable of manifesting the animators’ labor. The fact that this is counter-intuitive is revealed by our own language for describing the traces of the camera apparatus; we call them ‘imperfections’. The documentary feature which accompanies *Wall-E* is titled “The Imperfect Lens”, and in it, the director Andrew Stanton is quoted as saying, “‘life is nothing but imperfection and the computer likes perfection, so we spent probably 90% of our time putting in all of the imperfections’” (Prince, 95). Roger Deakins, a noted cinematographer who also worked as a visual consultant on the *Wall-E*, sums up the situation well when he notes, "there's things in live-action and certain things that lense-makers in Germany have been trying to get rid of ever since film was invented, and the idea of now recreating these artifacts within the animated form is kind of weird really (chuckles)".

This reinscription of the camera apparatus onto the digital image takes the form of lens
glare, shallow depths of field, bokehs\(^9\), imperfect tracking, and motion blur. These features are present in all Pixar movies, but they are more exaggerated in *Wall-E* than in any other Pixar movie. This exaggeration is a result of Stanton’s desire to make “the movie to look reminiscent of 1970s-era anamorphic widescreen science fiction films” (Prince, 95-96). The imitation of the imperfections of a contemporary camera apparatus was not noticeable enough for Stanton, so he had Pixar invest considerable time and labor on this movie into redesigning “the studio’s virtual camera software so that the optical distortions found in anamorphic movies would be on display in *Wall-E*” (Prince, 96). Up to this point in time (2008), all Pixar movies had used a virtual camera package which “calculated camera variables, such as f-stops, depth of field, focal lengths, and created optical perspectives consistent across these variables” based on a spherical lens perspective (Prince, 96). In order to create an image which looked like the result of a widescreen, 70mm, anamorphic camera, Pixar modified the virtual camera software used on *Wall-E* to include “elliptical shaped bokeh and lens flares, barrel distortion, astigmatism, field curvature, and optical breathing artifacts” (Prince, 96). Recreating and applying the markings of an out-of-date or outmoded camera apparatus onto the images in *Wall-E* functions to make the CGI performance that is the recreation of the camera apparatus more palpable to the viewer. If the traces left by the camera apparatus are obstructions, then mimicking an outdated camera apparatus turns these obstructions into performances themselves and thus a strategy once again capable of embodying value. Mimicking the marks of outdated cameras allows the filmmakers to make the apparatus’s reinscription more legible to the audience and thus able to manifest labor.

The scene in which Wall-E takes Eve back to his home for the first time showcases these effects particularly well. When they arrive, Wall-E turns on the christmas lights which he uses to

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\(^9\) Bokeh is a term that refers to the way the lens of a camera renders points of light that are out of focus. See Appendix D for an example of bokehs.
illuminate the room. The lights are all slightly out of focus and their bokehs “assume the characteristic elliptical form that would be found in anamorphic film” (Prince, 96). When Wall-E hands Eve a lightbulb, the electric current, which presumably runs through her, causes the light bulb to light up and creates a lens flare which spikes horizontally which is also characteristic of anamorphic lenses. Wall-E also features an abnormally high number of diegetic lights sources. When diegetic light sources interact with camera lenses, especially anamorphic camera lenses, they create distinct visual effects such as bokeh and lense flares. By incorporating more diegetic light sources, Wall-E gives itself more places to insert traces of the camera apparatus onto the digital image, and hence increases the feeling of the image having been mediated by a camera.

The camera-effects which Wall-E exploits most often and most noticeably throughout are astigmatism and a shallow depth of field. Astigmatism is one of the most serious ‘problems’ with anamorphic lenses; it makes it difficult to achieve fine focus across the entire field of view (Prince, 96). The relatively shallow depth of field of anamorphic lenses similarly makes it difficult to achieve fine focus across the entire depth of most shots. This shallow depth of field is evident in the scene above when Eve is first floating through Wall-E’s pod. Part of the scene is shot from behind a rack of Wall-E’s items. Although Eve is perfectly in focus, the foreground (the objects), as well as the background (the back wall) are very blurry and out of focus. Later in this scene both astigmatism and shallow depth of field are noticeable when Eve picks up and lights Wall-E’s zippo lighter. Once Eve lights the zippo, the camera zooms in to a tight framing of her hand and part of her face while also framing Wall-E in the background. At the beginning of the shot, Eve’s hand is perfectly in focus, the closer part of her face is in focus while the further section is increasingly out of focus, and beyond that in the background Wall-E is totally out of focus. During

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10 See image in Appendix E.  
11 See image in Appendix F.
the shot, the focus of the camera moves from Eve’s hand to Wall-E in the background, and when it does Eve and the lighter become completely out of focus\textsuperscript{12}. The staging of this scene places Eve in the far left of the frame, a placement which allows the blurring of her crisp lines toward the extreme left edge of the frame to manifest the astigmatism of an anamorphic lense. Similarly, staging the scene with a distinct foreground and background, only one of which can be in focus at any moment, as well as the switching of the point of interest in the scene from the foreground to the background, which calls for the camera to noticeably rackfocus mid-scene, are ways the movie directs the viewer’s attention to the anamorphic camera’s limited depth of field and again makes the camera’s presence more palpable.

Not only does \textit{Wall-E} works to inscribe the technical components of the camera apparatus, it also at moments reinscribes the cameraman behind the camera. A scene where this inscription of the cameraman is particularly noticeable comes after Wall-E has introduced himself to Eve and is following her around as she goes about her search for plant life. The scene takes place in a supermarket where Eve is on the ground floor scanning items to see if they are plants while Wall-E observes her from one floor up, hiding by a bank of shopping carts in front of a wide staircase. Eve hears a noise coming from Wall-E’s direction and turns around to look. This frightens the embarrassed Wall-E who jumps about nervously trying to flee and in the process runs into the bank of shopping carts. By bumping the shopping carts and then turning to run away, Wall-E triggers a sequence whereby the shopping carts chase him down the staircase as he tries to zoom towards the exit, which is closed. Trapped, Wall-E gets battered by the descending mob of shopping carts as they pin him against the doorway. This scene features extreme focal shifts between Eve in the foreground and Wall-E in the background which manifest the shallow depth of field and optical

\textsuperscript{12} See images in Appendix G.
breathing which characterize the movie’s aesthetic, but more importantly this scene features the insertion of traces, not only the camera itself, but also the camera’s human operator. When Wall-E zooms down the staircase, he flies ahead of the frame, and a second later the camera catches up with him. This creates the effect of a human camera operator who was caught off guard by this spontaneous moment and thus lost track of the action and had to refind it in the frame. In running from the shopping carts, Wall-E is moving from the foreground to the background of the scene. Once the camera has recaptured Wall-E in the frame, the focus subtly oscillates in and out a couple time before settling on Wall-E again. This in situ adjustment of the focus gives the viewer the sense of a person behind the camera caught off guard and thus adjusting the focus by hand at the last minute. The scene ends with Eve floating by in the foreground completely out of focus as she shakes her head in dismay at Wall-E’s clumsiness. It is a fitting end to a scene which conveys the spontaneous and unplanned feel of a moment captured on camera.

The Spectre of Simulation

The goal of reinscribing the camera into the digital image is not to convince the viewer that Wall-E’s diegesis, which the director of photography Jeremy Lasky describes as “a 100% created, fantastic, made-up world”, is real, but to make the viewer feel as if the filmmakers have “actually gone and shot it” (The Imperfect Lens). Pixar’s success at grounding photorealism in the camera apparatus reveals the degree to which the value associated with realism is not just the integrity of the referent, but the alterations this referent has to undergo in order to be conveyed to the viewer. The marks left upon the image by the camera guarantee the image’s indexical value. These traces

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13 Optical breathing refers to the slight change in the angle of view of a lens when shifting the focus. For example, if the camera changed focus from something nearby to something far away, this change of focus would be accompanied by a movement which would make it seems as if the camera had simultaneously been shifted a bit to the right.
of the camera mark the film as a representation, a representation that while derived from reality, is nonetheless separate and distinct from it. As much as a viewer may be seduced by the realism of a film’s diegesis, the film is ultimately able to entertain, because all the while the viewer knows that it is, in fact, not real. Jean Baudrillard speaks to this condition in his essay “Simulacra and Simulation”; he explains that the charm of representation stems from “the sovereign difference” between itself and reality that it symbolizes (Baudrillard, 166). This sovereign difference between reality and representation is the medium through which reality is transposed into an image; in film, this medium is the camera. By simulating the camera and making it the focus of photorealism instead of the referent, Pixar movies still manage to indirectly invoke realism. Pixar movies do not make any direct claims about the integrity of the referent, but by making their images look like the result of a camera they indirectly imbue the diegesis with a sense of realism.

But this raises a dilemma. The scenes in Wall-E were not captured by a camera. The camera in Wall-E is just as much a simulation as the actors in Final Fantasy are, so why does one disrupt the viewer’s engagement with the movie, whereas the other does not? One reason for this is that technology mimicking another technology, which is what the digital camera in Wall-E does, seems less contradictory than technology mimicking the referent, which is what the images in Final Fantasy try to do. This misperception stems from the way the camera, as the medium and a product of human labor itself, is separated cognitively from ‘the reality’ that it captures, even though this camera is just as much a part of reality as the referent it films. In Bazin’s guiding myth of cinema, the camera guarantees the integrity of the referent and thus is conceived of as separate from it. Wall-E makes no claims about the integrity of the referent, it in fact refutes this notion by making the characters and settings fantastic and foregrounding their status as animations. Since there is no referent to guarantee, the reality of the camera is irrelevant. The camera is disabused of its responsibility to preserve the integrity of the referent. It functions only as a surface level addition.
A contribution to the movie’s aesthetic that allows the image to manifest value, not only creative labor, but also technological labor. *Wall-E* does not allow its scales of values to contradict themselves the way *Final Fantasy* does, but in brokering a compromise between photorealism and metaphysical release, it abandons the value of realism, the integrity of the referent. It tries to cover up this lack by simulating the camera apparatus and hence imbuing the images with an indistinct sense of realism, a realism which cannot be labelled a lie since its character and setting do not claim to be realistic, but one which endures nonetheless.

This indistinct sense of realism is at odds with the patently irreal characters and objects depicted in *Wall-E*; this dissonance creates an unconscious uneasiness within the viewer. How can an image be so patently irreal and yet at the same time feel so real? This uneasiness is raised by CGI as a result of its guiding myth. Unlike film, CGI is not supposed to mirror reality, it is supposed to mirror live-action film. The value of live-action film stems from its relationship to reality. While never actually reality, it is always tied to it indexically via the camera. But CGI is not tied to reality, it is tied to live-action film, and as such qualifies as what Baudrillard would call a simulacra, “no longer that of a referential being or a substance”, but instead “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 166). Live-action film is a representation whose origin is a reality which it inevitably distorts and conceals. It is this very distortion and concealment that *Wall-E* seeks to recreate by reinscribing the camera into the digital image. The camera-effects created by Pixar do not function to distort or conceal the truth of their referent as these camera effects do in live-action film. The referent in *Wall-E* is saliently irreal, marked as animation, defined by its deviation from reality. The digital camera in *Wall-E* is not a representation, it is a simulacrum. It functions not to conceal or distort the referent, but to conceal and distort that fact that there is none, that in Pixar’s computer-animations the referent which previously grounded realism has been lost. “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth
- it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true” (Baudrillard, 166). The irony of the digital camera is that it produces an image which more closely mirrors reality than the analog camera. It reveals the truth of contemporary society: that there is no longer any truth, we have lost the real.

By mirroring the current situation of contemporary society, CGI evokes the fear that we no longer know what is real, that reality has in fact been taken over by simulation. The conscious fear that the reviewer of Final Fantasy articulates: How do I know the characters aren’t really human actors, and some joker just told me they were computer generated? (aka this movie is not actually the manifestation of labor it claims to be) disguises the real unconscious fear that the movie’s CGI evokes: How do I know that all the human actors who appear on screen are not actually simulations? Wall-E’s combination of irreal content with the realism of the camera-aesthetic triggers a similar unconscious fear: if this imaginary image seems so real, how do I know that all of reality is not imaginary? And this is not a paranoid fear (at least as concerns cinema), this is the current state of affairs. CGI is an operation which deters every real process (shooting with a camera onto celluloid film, editing with interpositives, building a real set, filming real actors, etc.) by its operational double [RenderMan, Final Cut Pro]. These operational, digital doubles “provide all the signs of the real and short-circuit all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have to be produced” (Baudrillard, 167). The viewer of Final Fantasy or Wall-E or any other CGI is correct to walk away from these movies with a sense that the distinction between the real and the imaginary, the sovereign difference, has been obliterated.

The traces of the camera apparatus which Pixar simulates in its movies are the symptoms of an indexical process, but once a live-action film and a computer-generated image are projected onto a screen or watched on a laptop, these symptoms become ontologically indistinguishable, the
same, just light projected on screens\textsuperscript{14}. If both live-action films and computer-generated images produce the same symptoms, how can we distinguish the difference between the indexical process that is the cause of one and the simulation of this process that is the cause of the other\textsuperscript{15}? In this analogy, the movie is akin to a symptom, and the process by which it was made would be the illness. An illness is only made accessible to an observer via its symptoms. Since CGI derives its value from being a simulation of live-action film, but not actually live-action film, the process by which a movie was made is important to how the viewer assesses its value, but if two movies with different processes or mediums produce the same symptoms, how can we separate the one with an origin in reality from the one with an origin in the imaginary? Pixar’s simulation of the symptoms of a camera destroys the clear delineation between the real and the imaginary. CGI reveals that film has become simulatable. When watching a live-action movie, it is completely reasonable for a viewer to look at the images on screen and wonder which are the result of an indexical process, which are simulations, and which are a combination of both.

Baudrillard defines representation, as opposed to simulation, as a “visible and intelligible mediation of the real” (Baudrillard, 170). Film has traditionally been interpreted via its scale of values as a representation. All of the audience’s good faith “was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange” (Baudrillard, 170). In film, the camera was the supposed to be the ‘something’ that guaranteed this exchange, but if Pixar can simulate the symptoms of the camera, then the camera’s ability to represent value is destroyed. Simulation is a “radical negation of the sign as value” (Baudrillard, 170). Simulation cannot embody semiotic

\textsuperscript{14} Or pixels rearranged on screen if one is watching the movie on a television or computer.
\textsuperscript{15} I think this fear is also the unconsciousness psychic fuel which drives the cinephile’s obsession with watching old movies on the original 33mm celluloid print as opposed to a digital projection system. The associated, and usually vehemently-made claim that 33mm prints are discernibly better than their digitally projected counterparts seems to speak to the fear that simulation has becomes indistinguishable from reality.
value, because the referent has been liquidated. This is why it is so important for CGI as a simulation to manifest alternative, non-semiotic value (aka labor), which explains the focus we see in both *Final Fantasy* and *Wall-E* to make the labor that went into them legible in the image itself as well as the ‘making-of’ specials which accompany both movies.

**Working Over Anxiety**

But as I said before, this is an unconscious fear. The audience does not consciously recognize that the computer-animated movie is a simulation which cannot be distinguished from reality. The viewer interprets *Wall-E* as yet another form of representation which manifest a sovereign difference similar to that represented in live-action films. This makes sense considering that the sovereign difference is a form of metaphysical, one which retains an attachment to reality, but nonetheless takes the viewer out of that reality. This metaphysical release is an essential component of all movies; a viewer can only watch and enjoy a movie because of this basic level of metaphysical release, without it they would be living the movie as opposed to watching it. It is this basic performance of metaphysical release that causes movies to be interpreted via the Kantian notion of art as a “finality without an end” as described by Frederic Jameson in his essay “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” (Jameson, 131). ‘End’ in this phrase refers to the consequences in the real world which art is assumed to lack, and reflects the idea that movies (or any other form of art) have “no practical purpose or end in the ‘real world’ of business or politics or concrete human praxis generally” (Jameson, 131). In other words, the Kantian notion of art expresses the idea that “we suspend our real lives and our immediate practical preoccupations” when we watch a movie, because it is an imaginary representation (Jameson, 131). The realism of live-action film can be seen as complicating this notion of art, simultaneously tethering itself to reality via the indexicality of film while still manifesting the sovereign difference between itself and
reality, but animation as a medium which foregrounds metaphysical release plays even more fully into this idea. The Kantian notion of art epitomizes the audience’s conscious interpretation of a computer-animated movie like Wall-E and helps explain why the unconscious anxiety about reality that these movies evoke does not disable the viewer’s ability to enjoy them. Quite the opposite in fact, Wall-E actually uses the unconscious anxiety provoked by its CGI to its advantage.

In “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”, Jameson puts forward the idea that all objects of mass culture function on both an ideological and a psychic level and that it is in fact this psychic function of the text which enables it to function ideologically. The psychic function Jameson speaks of is the Freudian notion of the work of art as a “symbolic fulfillment of the repressed wish, of a complex structure of indirection whereby desire [can] elude the repressive censor and achieve some measure of a to be sure purely symbolic satisfaction” (Jameson, 141). In drawing our attention to the psychic function that mass-cultural texts perform, Jameson makes a connection between Freud’s notion of repression and the psychic manipulation performed by a text, namely that the mechanisms of both can come “into play only after its object—trauma, charged memory, guilty or threatening desire, anxiety—has in some way been aroused, and risks emerging into the subject’s consciousness” (Jameson, 141). In order to manipulate the viewer’s thoughts and emotions, a movie must first trigger a release of these psychic energies.

In Wall-E, the anxiety that CGI as a form raises about the nature of representation, reality, and simulation is this trigger. Simulating the effects of a camera is Wall-E’s attempt at reintroducing the sovereign difference back into the image. Wall-E tries to hides that its simulation conceals nothing by reinserting a sense of representation into the image. This sense of representation is ironically a way of re-injecting a sense of reality into the image, because a representation implies there is a separate reality which the representation is distorting or covering up. This is why reinserting traces of the camera apparatus back into the movie is such an effective way of
simulating realism. Although this strategy imbues the image with a sense of realism, it also triggers the viewer’s unconscious anxieties about the nature of reality versus representation. The sense of realism Pixar works so hard to cultivate haunts *Wall-E*, because the viewer is aware that the characters and settings depicted are not real, could not possibly be real. This discomfort achieves a short circuit with the viewer’s repressed anxieties about the nature of reality and representation in their own world. The disconnect between appearance and being visualized on screen in *Wall-E* parallels the viewer’s experiences in a consumer society where the ubiquity and virulence of commodity fetishism has created a situation in which one is confronted constantly by apparent values which bear no discernible relation to reality. CGI’s displacement of analog techniques parallels how commodity fetishism, beyond just growing the gap between appearance and being, has pushed society to a point where appearance has taken over or absorbed reality. CGI trigger’s the viewer’s unconscious anxiety that the relationship between representation and reality is “no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even of parody” but rather is the substitution of signs of the real (representations) for the real itself (Baudrillard, 167). This is the unconscious anxiety that Pixar-esque computer-animation as a form evokes and which *Wall-E* is working over; it is the fear that representation has overtaken reality, that there is no discernibly, and thus effectively, distinct reality anymore, that there is only simulation and simulacra.

**Faking Representation**

So if the form of *Wall-E* evokes anxiety about the nature of simulation, how does the movie work over this fear? *Wall-E* redirects the viewers anxiety about representation onto diegetic enactments of representation which culminate in a denouement in which reality and representation are clearly delineated and the spectre of simulation is disavowed. This is done by having the characters enact ideological exchanges which are completely contained within the diegesis. This
diegetically situated ideology is presented to the viewer as form of representation. These moments of salient ideology clearly distort or conceal from the characters the reality of their world, the diegesis, which we the viewer can clearly see. *Wall-E* situates and contains ideological representation within the diegetic screens it depicts, and thus defines the rest of the diegesis by its position relative to this representation as reality. *Wall-E* directs the viewer’s critical energies towards the distorted, ideological representations shown on diegetic screens in order to distract the viewer from the realization the movie is a simulation which “envelops the edifice of representation as itself a simulacra” (Baudrillard, 170).

*Wall-E* obscures the dissonance between the realism of its camera effects and the unrealism of its characters by highlighting the dissonance between the ideological images shown on the diegetic screens and the diegesis itself. *Wall-E* is trying to hide the lie of its CGI (that it in fact conceals nothing) under the ideological lie it performs diegetically in hopes the viewer will become so preoccupied picking apart the top level lie (ideology) that the lie which undergirds it (simulation) will go unnoticed. This is not a new tactic in cinema as Hugh S. Manon makes clear in, “Qui Perde Gagne: Failure and Cinematic Seduction”. In this essay, Manon outlines the idea of what he calls double deception. This deception is not double in the sense that the person being deceived is super-deceived but in the sense that the deception is doubled back on itself. In double deception one participant in the exchange takes into account how her or his statement will be received by the other participant, and in turn creates a customized lie. In order to deflect this expectation of deception away from the movie’s status as simulation as well as the ideological interests of its creators, Disney Co., *Wall-E* incorporates “certain snarls or blockages to be undone” by the audience; these snarls or blockages are the secondary lies that are layered over the primary lie (Manon, 4). *Wall-E* does this by incorporating moments of diegetic ideology into the movie. The ideology enunciated diegetically is constructed by the filmmakers to be interpreted by the viewer as
a lie, a deception. The point at which the viewer is convinced they have identified the ideology presented diegetically (really the secondary ideology) is actually the moment they are caught. In attempting to undo the snarls and blockages set up for them, the audience becomes stuck in “a hopeless engagement” which makes them “blind to some very obvious other possibilities” (Manon, 4). In *Wall-E*, the ideology presented as taking place within the diegesis makes the viewer blind to the ideology of the movie itself.

But in order ensure that the viewer identifies the ideological representations that the filmmakers are inserting into the diegesis as ideology, they have to be exaggerated, easily noticed. The movie does this by performing what I, drawing upon Manon, will call phony ideology. The term phony connotes something very particular; a phony is not a faux or a fake which “involves a simple first-order deception”, but a figure based on double deception (Manon, 6). A phony always entails a certain quality of having been ‘seen through’; the past tense being key here. Unlike the faux or fake that is done for once their deceptions have been revealed, phoniness is an ongoing project, something continually performed and enacted while simultaneously being seen through, both parties working under the assumption that even “if the beholder is no longer falling for it, then someone else might be” (Manon, 6). *Wall-E* stages its phony ideology in such a way that even though the filmmaker and the viewer recognize it as phony, and ‘see through’ it, its performance is still justified as taking place for the ‘benefit’ of the characters on screen who are ‘falling for it’. *Wall-E* uses the strategy of diegetic screens to displace the site of ideology off of itself and onto the diegesis.

These diegetic screens are a form of double-deception. *Wall-E* is taking a deception, the simulation that is the movie itself, and layering another deception on top of it, the representations featured on the diegetic screens within the movie. In an ironic twist, it is the indexical images in the *Wall-E* that are read as fake in opposition to the CGI universe whose position outside of the
diegetic screen defines it relationally as real. The diegetic screens in *Wall-E* are the only place in the movie where indexical images are featured. This indexicality plays into the characterization of these images as representation, representation which inevitably distort and conceal the diegetic reality they are situated within. These diegetic screens are dramatically juxtaposed to the diegesis that surround them in order to make clear to the viewer that they are indeed deceptive, ideological representations. These diegetic screens are also situated in relation to characters who are their intended mark, who are portrayed in the movie as buying into or falling for this phony ideology. It is the exaggerated and obvious nature of the ideology, the viewer’s ability to see through it in relation to the characters who do not, which makes the ideology presented on these diegetic screens phony. Last, but not least, *Wall-E* also anchors and contains this ideology within the diegesis by locating a diegetic source of this ideology, so it is not identified as the filmmakers themselves.

**Staging Ideology**

*Wall-E* locates the source of this diegetic ideology early on in the movie. The first six minutes of the movie feature Wall-E wandering around the abandoned landscape of Earth in the year 2805. The planet is covered in trash and debris left over by the humans who fled the planet 700 years ago. The wasted landscape and pieces of debris which the filmmakers choose to highlight function as a form of exposition which informs the viewer that Buy-N-Large is the megacorporation responsible for facilitating the over-consumption which led to the Earth’s deterioration. At one point, Wall-E rolls over a copy of the “Buy-N-Large Times” which features the headline “TOO MUCH TRASH!!! EARTH COVERED” and below that a picture of the CEO of BNL grinning and holding up two peace signs next to the text “BNL CEO declares global emergency”. As Wall-E moves through this landscape, he passes a “Buy-N-Large Ultrastore”
which resembles a Kmart or Target superstore today, except even larger, ridiculously so; it is so large that it cannot fit within a single landscape-shot. As the camera pans right, the viewer keeps expecting to see the building end, but instead it just keeps going on till it fades away into the horizon. Its exorbitant stature is meant to symbolize the excess and waste of consumer capitalism more generally, but of BNL in particular. During his ‘walk’ home, Wall-E also passes by a BNL transit station, a BNL gas station, and a BNL bank. This proliferation of BNL-branded businesses communicates to the viewer that in the future, not only does Buy-N-Large control all aspects of public life, their control is so total that they do not even have to hide behind a proliferation of dummy brands like most multinationals today (PepsiCo, Toyota, Disney itself). Buy-N-Large is a caricature of contemporary multinationals, highlighting certain aspects of these companies that the viewer already recognizes and then exaggerating them. This depiction leads the viewer to identify BNL as the source of the ideology that is taking place within the diegesis\(^\text{16}\). The viewer is able to see through the phony ideology that will be depicted later in the movie via diegetic screens, because these opening scenes reveal to the viewer the real state of Earth and BNL’s role in it. The reality revealed in these scenes is what the viewer sees when they ‘see through’ the movie’s phony ideology.

The first set of diegetic screens appear later in this same scene. As Wall-E passes through the transit station, a series of four projected video-billboards pop up in a row accompanied by the message “Too much garbage in your face? There’s plenty of space out in space! BNL starliners leaving each day. We’ll clean up the mess while you’re away.” Wall-E moves past these video

\(^{16}\text{Pixar and Disney were already one company by the time Wall-E was made. That they could successfully and with a straight-face sell condemn overconsumption prompted by huge corporations while actually being one of the largest corporations in the world that has made massive amount of money from merchandizing (aka the proliferation of totally useless crap) is beyond depressing. Wall-E itself was the third highest selling DVD of 2008, selling an estimated 9,042,054 DVD units ($142,633,974), grossing $521,311,860 in box office sales worldwide, and one can only imagine how much in merchandising.}
screens onto the subway platform, and a new, larger video-screen pops up. The camera then zooms into this screen, so that it takes up the whole frame and conflates the diegetic screen with the cinematic screen. This video-advertisement features the same cheesy announcer saying, “The jewel of the BNL fleet, the Axiom! Spend your five year cruise in style, waited on 24 hours a day by our fully-automated crew while your captain and autopilot chart a course for non-stop entertainment, fine-dining, and with our all-access hover-chairs, even grandma can join the fun! There’s no need to walk. The Axiom: putting the star in executive starliner” (Wall-E). These words are accompanied by indexical images of attractive humans (not future-humans) going about the activities a contemporary viewer would associate with a cruise: getting massages, drinking pina-coladas by the pool, playing golf. The video ends with a shot of BNL’s CEO, Shelby Forthright, who says into the camera as he waves off a departing starliner, “Because at BNL, space is the final fun-tier!” (Wall-E).

The movie’s mockery of contemporary advertising is heavy-handed. The message of the first series of video-ads is delivered in a cheesy rhyme scheme typical of low-budget television commercials today. The second video highlights its own phoniness by listing the name of BNL’s CEO as Shelby Forthright (phonetically: Shall-Be-Forthright). On top of this, the video features stock language and images that are a parody of contemporary advertisements. The pun “fun-tier” instead of frontier and lines like “spend your five year cruise in style,” “chart a course for non-stop entertainment,” and “putting the star in executive starliner” are exaggerated stereotypes of contemporary advertising. They copy the ideology of marketing in a way that makes the ideology easy to identify and ridicule. The images in this video function in the same way. They are clichés of tourism advertisements: an attractive couple clinking champagne glasses, a family gathering around the grandmother, the dependable captain next to the ship’s wheel saluting the camera, etc. This parody implicates the viewer in the phony performance taking place on screen. Both the
filmmaker and the viewer are ‘in on the joke’. On top of being phony, the video-advertisements are clearly marked as untrue, ideological statements meant to mislead or exploit the consumers who used to inhabit the planet. A billboard Wall-E passes by earlier in this sequence as well as the first video described above both feature images of Wall-E robots cleaning up Earth, so humanity can return. But as the broken down corpses of Wall-E robots that litter the landscape and still-ruined state of Earth clearly speak to, this promise made by BNL was a lie. Shelby Forthright, the CEO of BNL, is the symbolic face of BNL’s ideology. His name indicates that he will be forthright, but the dissonance between his words and diegetic reality depicted on screen reveal Forthright, and by proxy BNL, to be anything but. In these first scenes, the movie has already located a diegetic source of the ideology, BNL, as well as located the sites within the diegesis where this ideology takes place, video screens, but the assumed target of these outdated advertisements, the humans who left Earth 700 years ago, have yet to be pictured. For Wall-E’s phony ideology to work, the movie also needs to identify the diegetic viewers who ‘buy into’ Buy-N-Large’s ideology. The cinematic viewer, the person watching Wall-E, has to be interpellated as smarter than or outside of the ideology depicted on screen, and this can only happen if the ideological exchange is anchored diegetically, not only by a source but also by an intended target.

This need to have the characters be oblivious to the ideology they are bombarded with and thus able to ‘fall for it’ drives Wall-E’s comic and pitiful depiction of humans in the future. The bulk of this characterization of humanity takes place right after Wall-E and Eve first arrive on the Axiom. As Wall-E navigates through the bowels of the ship, the viewer gets an introduction to what humans and life in the future are like. At the beginning of this sequence, Wall-E almost runs into a man on a hoverchair who is talking into a screen projected about two feet in front of him. The camera zooms out, and it is revealed he is talking to another man right next to him, but doing so through the computer screen in front of him and vice versa. This gesture makes fun of these
future-humans who are so oblivious to their surroundings that they video-chat the person three feet from them rather than just turning and talking to him. This unflattering first depiction is followed by a rapid-fire series of shots of people communicating with their personal screens and close-ups of mouths talking, hands dialing, and ears listening. The fast-pace editing together of disparate images and their associated sound makes the viewer feel as disoriented and disconnected as Wall-E is in this world full of people who are all caught up in their own personal screens. The humans’ obliviousness to their own surroundings is also demonstrated by the fact that even though Wall-E’s dirty, broken down appearance is in striking relief to the slick, clean environs of the Axiom, none of the humans notice him, except for two: John and Mary, and they both discover him by accident. In one of the scenes where Wall-E is moving through the Axiom’s pathways, he passes by a man on a hover chair, John, who tries to wave Wall-E down thinking he is a robot who will take away his empty cup for him. John yells “Hey drink bot!” while leaning over and waving his big-gulp style cup in Wall-E’s direction, but never actually looking at Wall-E who would immediately be recognized as different from the drink-bot John is try to call for. “Here, take the cup,” John continues, still not looking but waving the cup in Wall-E’s direction, leaning increasingly perilously out of his hover chair. “Hey, take the cup!” John repeats before falling out of his chair. Once he has fallen and is lying on the ground, Wall-E takes the cup from him, but even then, it is not until Wall-E begins pushing John back into his hover chair that John notices Wall-E.

The scene with Mary that comes at the end of Wall-E’s and the viewer’s introduction to the Axiom and its inhabitants is an apt closing for a sequence which underlines the point that humans on the Axiom are totally and completely oblivious of their own surroundings, their own reality. The scene begins with Mary sitting on a train-car next to Wall-E and talking to another woman on the screen in front of her. Wall-E tries to get her attention, so he can pass by her. Wall-E waves his arms in front of her and knocks on the side of her hover chair, but to no avail. Mary is totally
absorbed in the screen in front of her. Eventually Wall-E pulls back the piece of the hoverchair that projects the screen which in turn shuts off the screen. Once the screen is off, Mary looks around astonished. The music cues a sense of awakening as Mary looks around and says, “Huh?” She keeps looking around astounded at the surroundings she has spent her whole life in, but never noticed before. The scene ends once the train arrives at its destination, and Mary gets off and turns around to face the giant pool behind her that a mass of people (all talking into their screens) are sitting around and exclaims, “I didn’t know we had a pool!” The filmmakers depict future humans as oblivious in order to justify their unthinking acceptance of an ideology that appears so obvious to the cinematic viewer.

The movie also paints BNL as responsible for this degeneration of humanity. Future humans’ obsession with screens and their resultant obliviousness to reality is enabled by their environment: the Axiom and its robot staff which were built by BNL. In this same “Introduction to the Axiom” sequence, a woman passing by Wall-E on her hoverchair yells, “Bot, over here!”, holds out her hand, and wiggles her fingers. In response, a robot flies over and brings her a big-gulp style drink in mere seconds. In the scene above when John falls out of his chair, he is too helpless to even get up on his own. He lies on his back, flailing his arms and legs waiting for service robots to come assist him. These interactions between humans and robots indicate to the viewer that future humans have become completely infantilized. These humans do nothing for themselves and rely on the robot staff of the Axiom for everything. Even leisure activities like tennis and golfing are enjoyed via robot intermediaries. As the BNL advertisement earlier in the movie made clear, humans do not even need to walk for themselves. These scenes characterize humans as helpless and oblivious, naturalized into an artificial way of life which is completely controlled and manipulated by Buy-N-Large, they characterizes humanity in such a way that it cannot help but ‘fall for’ BNL’s ideology.
The reality of BNL’s wasting and abandonment of Earth which was presented to the viewer in the opening scenes and the characterization of the humans on the Axiom as helpless and oblivious stages the diegetic ideology which enfolds in the middle of “The Introduction to the Axiom” sequence. As Wall-E rides through the Axiom on a train-car, the ‘camera’ cuts to a series of vignettes which show people located in front of screens as the ideological exchanges that characterize life in the future are acted out before the viewer’s eyes. The first vignette shows a group of babies in a nursery in front of a screen next a robot teacher who reads off the screen, “A is for Axiom, your home, sweet home. B is for Buy-N-Large, your very best friend”. The next vignette is in a cafeteria. It starts with a shot of a BNL advertisement that says, “Mmmm, time for lunch... in a cup!” then cuts to a series of shots of humans making loud, slurping noises as they drink from their cups and stare at the screens in front of them. The next vignette is of a very pink beauty parlor filled with women. The camera pans across the front of the salon as a voiceover says “Feel beautiful!” The camera then cuts to closer shot of a row of beautician-robots working on women’s hair while repeating salon-clichés such as, “It’s the new you”, “Oh, stunning!”, “You look great!”, “I know honey, men”. The last vignette begins with a shot of a billboard which says, “Attention Axiom shoppers: Try blue! It’s the new red” accompanied by an image of cartoon people whose outfits switch from red to blue. The camera then cuts to a man and a woman on the train next to Wall-E who upon hearing the advertisement, look up at the billboard, say, “Ooooh,” and then press a button on their hover chairs which cause their outfits to change from red to blue. Over and over again, these vignettes present the viewer with an obviously ideological message on a diegetic screen that is intended to elicit a response (usually consumerism of some type or another). In all these vignettes, the viewer is then shown a human or group of humans performing the action elicited by the screen. In the first vignette, you do not see the babies act out the command to see the Axiom as their ‘home, sweet home’ and Buy-N-Large as their ‘very best
friend’, but these attitudes are obviously manifested in the adults that inhabit the Axiom.

The scenes described above show how *Wall-E* performs its ideology in such a way that it is contained by the diegesis, but this depiction of humanity is pretty bleak. While the movie depicts ideology as representation as opposed to simulation, it still shows humanity as completely duped by ideology. This is a psychic working over of the fear of simulation, but not in a way one could call pleasurable. It displaces the fear of simulation, but only by replacing it with a fear of representation and ideology. This is why the next set of diegetic screens show humans, and the captain in particular, ‘seeing through’ the ideology presented on these diegetic screens, and eventually coming to realize the reality outside these screens. The staging of this awakening relies on the juxtapositioning of adjacent, as well as subsequent, video screens. The first ideological screen that will later be proven false or ‘seen through’ by the captain is shown after Eve has returned from Earth with a plant which triggers the ship’s response systems and relays her to the bridge. Once there, Eve is inspected by Auto who then pops down to the captain quarters and informs the sleeping captain that he is needed on the bridge. A minute later the captain’s alarm clock goes off and robots pop out of the wall and proceed to scrub, brush, buff, and dress the semi-conscious captain. His hover chair then moves him into the pneumatic tube which takes him up to the bridge. The captain’s physical embodiment of semi-consciousness in this scene is a metaphor for how humans on the Axiom go through life. Upon arriving on the bridge, the captain claps his hands and the lights on the deck turn on and coffee is made. Too lazy to even sit up and reach for the coffee, the captain presses a switch on his hover chair which pushes him upright, so he can grab and drink the coffee. Auto tries to tell the captain about the plant, but is interrupted mid-sentence by the captain, “Protocol Auto, first things first.” The captain then proceeds to run a status report on the ship, where each of his questions is responded to with a homogenous, “Unchanged.” This scene characterizes life aboard the Axiom as strictly protocol, pre-programmed
responses to an environment that never changes. This notion is reinforced by the captain’s morning announcement in which he welcomes the passengers to “day 255,642 aboard the Axiom,” and continues to inform them that “as always, weather’s a balmy 72° and sunny”. Seeing as it is the ship’s 700th anniversary, he reflects that, “I’m sure our forefathers would be happy to know that 700 years later we’d be doing the exact same thing they were doing”. Eventually the captain is distracted from his morning routine by the blinking green light which indicates the discovery of a plant, the symbolic intrusion of reality.

Auto informs the captain that a probe has returned positive. The captain is surprised and perplexed as no probe has ever returned positive before, but he dutifully pushes the glowing, green plant button on his console, which triggers a video screen to pop up. The video opens with the BNL logo and jingle then cuts to an indexical video of Shelby Forthright before a speaking podium in a room that looks conspicuously like the press room of the White House17. Forthright informs the captain that if he is seeing this message, then his ‘Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator’ has found a plant which means that it is time “to go back home” and begin “operation recolonize”. Forthright tells the captain to place the plant in the ship’s halodetector, and the ship will simply do the rest, “It’s that easy!”. Forthright then proceeds to casually mention that the passengers “may have suffered some slight bone loss” (which is clearly a massive understatement) and then layers a reassuring lie on top of this, “but I’m sure a few laps around the ship jogging track will get you back in shape in no time”. The untruth of this statement is indicated, not only by the viewer’s knowledge of how fat future humans are, but also by the captain’s reaction: “We have a jogging track?”. The deceptive and untrue nature of this video will be made clear to the captain in the next video which mirrors the format of this video. The subsequent video is projected on the same

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17 The implication being that Buy-N-Large’s control of public life in the future is so complete that it has taken over the role of government as well.
diegetic screen and is shot in the same place. The visual similarity of these videos lend themselves to a comparison via which this first video will be revealed as a lie.

After the video described above, the captain and Auto open up Eve to extract the plant and find to their surprise that there is none. Eve is declared defective and things go back to the old routine, except for Eve who is distraught over having lost the plant and stressed trying to figure out what to do with Wall-E. She decides to send him back to Earth. To do so, she goes to the bay where the escape pods are located. As she is about to send Wall-E back to Earth, they discover a Go-4 robot putting the plant in an escape pod to send it back to Earth. Eve and Wall-E retrieve the plant and bring it back to the captain. Auto discovers the captain with the plant and tries to stop the captain from putting it in the halodetector. The captain does not understand why Auto is trying to stop the plant from being put in the halodetector. Auto explains that they cannot go home. The captain does not find this a satisfactory answer and keeps pushing Auto for more information. Eventually the captain demands that Auto reveal the classified reason why he is trying to prevent the Axiom from returning to Earth. As a robot, Auto has no choice but to comply with the order and puts directive A113 on bridge’s computer screen.

The second communiqué from BNL opens with an image that reads, “Top secret. For Autopilot eye only”. You hear the BNL jingle as it open onto the same shot of Forthright as before, but now looking dejected, tired. He is slumping on the podium he stands behind. He says, “Just cut it off will ya?” and the jingle stops. He then goes on, “Hey there autopilots, got some bad news. Um, operation clean up has, well, ugh... failed. Wouldn’t you know it, rising toxicity levels have made life unsustainable on Earth. Darn it all, we’re gonna have to cancel operation recolonize, so, ugh, just stay the course, umm... rather than try to fix this problem, it’ll just be easier for everyone to remain in space.” A voice from out of the frame says, “Mr. President, sorry sir, time to go”. Then Forthright says, “Ok, I’m giving override directive A113, gc to full autopilot,
take control of everything, and do not return to Earth [Puts gas mask on]. Repeat, do not return to Earth.” He then says to the person off camera as he turn to walk away, “Let’s get the heck out of here”. The communiqué abruptly ends with a black and white BNL logo. This communiqué, which was shot in the same location around the same time as the first one, reveals via juxtaposition what a sham the first video was. The captain comes to the see what the viewer has known about all along, that BNL destroyed the Earth and is trying to cover up for it and that their interests have less to do with what is good for humanity and more to do with maintaining their public image and pursuing the course that is easiest for them. These videos are shot in the same location, with the same actor, from the same distance, at the same angle, and projected onto the same diegetic screen. These videos parallel each other visually and are positioned chronologically to lead the captain to the realization that he has to resist BNL and fight for what is real aka the plant and humanity’s return to Earth.

The last set of diegetic screens I will examine also stage the captain’s ‘seeing-through’ of BNL’s ideology, but does so by placing the two diegetic screens within the same space. These screens are positioned in a manner that leads the captain to compare their conflicting messages and realize the truth of one and falsity of the other. Beyond enabling the captain to see through ideology, one of these two screen also opens up the possibility (within the narrative) for non-ideological representation. The first of these screen begins after the captain has been introduced to Wall-E. They shake hands and some dirt crumbles off of Wall-E and into the captain's hand. After everyone has left the bridge and the captain is alone, he puts the dirt into the computer’s scanner and tells it to ‘analyze’ the sample. The computer goes into an explanation about what it is. The captain, who the viewer can see through the transparent screen, looks bored and begins to nod off and move away. Then the computer says, “more commonly referred to as soil, dirt, or Earth”. At hearing the word Earth, the captain perks up, returns to the screen and asks,
“Dirt? Define dirt.” An image of a farmer sowing seed pops up, then an image of a bubbling brook, then an image of a big barn in a field of wheat, then baskets of produce, then two hands cupping soil, then a man picking oranges in an orchard. The camera then cuts to a shot from behind the screen, looking through it onto the captain. The succession of images gets too blurry and quick to discern, but ends with an image front and center of the planet Earth as seen from space as the computer gives a definition of Earth as, “the surface of the world as distinct from the sky or sea”. The captain looks totally awed, a soft “Wow...” escapes his hanging jaw. He says, “Define sea,” as the camera pans out of the room through a window onto the exterior of the ship. After following Wall-E and Eve around for the rest of the day, the camera returns to the captain still in front the screen after what the viewer can assume has been many hours spent totally enraptured by his discovery of Earth and sea and who knows what else. The captain asks the computer to “Define hoedown”. As the computer shows an image of a people dancing, we see images of pizza, plants, and barns layered beneath it. Suddenly Auto zooms into the frame, and the captain exclaims, “Auto, Earth is amazing! These are called farms [gesturing at screen]. Humans would put seeds in the ground, pour water on them, and they grow food! Like pizza!” This montage is essentially a love-letter to the present. It shows the aspects of our current way of life that most inspire nostalgia and desire: scenic views of nature, an image of baskets of crops, farmers working the land, a hoedown, pizza, and others. This is a nostalgic and idealized representation of contemporary life, but more importantly it is directly at odds with what the viewer knows the current state of the Earth to be in 2805.

This dissonance is underlined and made clear to the captain by the appearance of a secondary screen within the diegesis, facing the opposite direction, but in the same room as the bridge’s computer screen. There is a brief interlude between the scene describe above and the appearance of this second screen. When the camera return to the bridge, the captain is fantasizing
about humanity’s return to Earth and his subsequent memorialization for being the captain who brought them there. Eve crashes into the room, interrupting the captain’s reveries, and shows him the plant. The captain is overjoyed, excited to return to Earth after all his research on the ship’s computer. He slides over to the computer, which still features all the images from his earlier research, and grabs a portable projector which he then attaches to Eve’s head, so he can look over her memories and see what Earth is like. The scene is shot with Eve on the far left, in the foreground of the frame. The screen being projected from her head is beyond her and little to the right. The captain is positioned on the other side of this screen with the computer screen on the rear wall behind him; he is literally caught between two diegetic screens. The screen being projected from Eve’s head shows a first person perspective of her time on Earth: a rocket blasting off, Eve flying, abandoned buildings and piles of trash, more piles of trash. While these images appear on screen, the captain is pictured behind the screen looking increasingly dejected that the images Eve shows him contradict the idea of Earth he garnered from his previous research. He says, “Wait, that doesn’t look like Earth. Where’s the blue sky?” He turns to the computer screen behind him to compare Eve’s projections to the beautiful images of Earth pictured there and says, “Where’s the, the... grass?” The captain looks down sadly at the little plant. As he does so, the screen Eve is projecting begins to show images from her time inside Wall-E’s pod. As the screen gets to the part where Eve is watching Hello Dolly! The camera cuts to a shot of captain’s face as something dawns on him. He says, “I know that song,” and turns to look at the Eve-screen, “They’re... um... dancing, yes, dancing.” He looks down, surprised to realize his own foot is tapping to the rhythm. This motion is mirrored by the plant in a boot the captain is holding whose movements make it look like the plant is tapping along to the rhythm too. “You made it somehow. Huh, little guy?  

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18 See Appendix H.
You didn’t give up, did ya?”, the captain says.

The screen Eve projects is necessary to the process of pleasurably working over the viewer’s anxiety. The viewer sees staged in this scene a form of representation that breaks the yoke of ideology. The images Eve projects shatter the captain’s idealized vision of Earth. By positioning these two screens next to one another in the same scene, the movie shows the viewer that, even though there are ideological representations, representation if undertaken by an earnest party, Eve in this case, has the potential to reveal truth. This is a fulfillment of the viewer’s unconscious wish that cinema can reveal, as opposed to only conceal or distort, truth. Wall-E plays into the viewer’s anxiety about representation and subsequently works over this anxiety by locating and containing ideology within a series of diegetic screens that the captain, and the rest of humanity, eventually see through. This idea of triumphing over ideology and seeing things as they really are is a theme that is also echoed in the larger narrative of the movie.

Not only does the movie offer up the possibility of non-ideological representation, it also offers a vision of the screen as a possible site of intervention, not just an objective conduit, but an active force for good. The screen as site of positive intervention is acted out in one of the fight scene between Auto and the captain. After the captain’s discovery of the plant, Auto makes it clear he will do anything in his power to stop the Axiom from returning to Earth. First he steals the plant, then he throws Eve, Wall-E, and the plant into the garbage airlock where they ideally will be impacted and thrown out into space with rest of the ship’s trash. Auto also locks the captain in his quarters, where the captain proceeds to beat on the door and yell “Mutiny!” His yelling is interrupted by an alarm triggered by Eve and Wall-E who have escaped the garbage airlock. When the captain looks at the warning mugshot of Wall-E and Eve which accompanies the alarm, he realizes they still have the plant and that all is not lost. With a triumphant, “We’ll see who’s powerless now!”, the captain rewire the computer in his quarters to project a message to Wall-E
and Eve. He cups his mouth and whispers into the camera (ironic since his is being projected on huge screens throughout the entire ship), “Testing, testing, is this thing on? Hey, this is the captain. I am locked in my room. Eve, Wall-E, bring the plant to the Ledo Deck [gestures at illustration in the instruction manual]. I will have activated the halodetector. Now hurry! Auto’s probably going to cut me o... [the screen cuts to static]”. After doing this, the captain realizes he needs to distract Auto, so Wall-E and Eve will have time to put the plant in the halodetector. He improvises an ingenious solution with another diegetic screen. He takes the portable projector he had used earlier to view Eve’s memories and re-projects an image of the plant. He positions himself in front of the projected image of the plant, then uses the computer screen to message Auto on the bridge. The captain’s positioning between the computer’s camera and the projected screen creates a trompe l’oeil which makes it appear that he is holding the plant. This causes Auto to come down to the captain’s quarters to look for the plant. When he arrives, all the lights are off. Auto scans the room quickly once passing over the series of captain’s portraits, almost not noticing that the last one looks different. He scans back, and both Auto and the audience realize the captain is standing in front of his own portrait hiding. This momentary misrecognition gives the captain just enough time to (literally) get the jump on the Auto, and make it to the bridge where he eventually triumphs over Auto and helps Wall-E and Eve place the plant in the halodetector.

These uses of diegetic screens in the service of good show an example of representation helping humans, as opposed to exploiting them and encouraging them to over-consume. The alternative portrayal of representation is necessary to the psychic working-over the movie is performing. The movie thwarts the fear of simulation by depicting itself as representation, which it does by staging phony ideology. If the movie tries to pass itself off as representation, but then only

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19 See Appendix I.
20 All the portrait are also projected screens.
provides negative examples of representation aka ideology, then it risks classifying itself as ideology. By offering up a positive example of representation, the movie opens up the possibility of itself being one of these positive forms of representation. By showing the captain using diegetic screens as an intervention to stop wrongdoing, Wall-E is instructing the viewer on how to interpret the movie itself in the same way. The movie shows the viewer what ideology looks like via phony ideology. The movie portrays ideology as obvious, something viewer can recognize immediately as such. Because the movie itself does not resemble the phony ideology on screen, the viewer is instructed to read it via comparison as not ideology, but instead as this alternative, morally good version of representation. The tactic clearly worked as so many reviews which laud the movie as a courageous criticism of the ecological or consumerists aspects our way of life clearly indicate.

**Narrative Relief**

Wall-E constructs a narrative whereby the audience is able to disavow “the specter raised by simulation: namely that truth, reference and objective causes have ceased to exist” (Baudrillard, 168). Truth and objective reality are represented in the movie by future Earth. This is the world Wall-E inhabits, but which humans have lost touch with. Future Earth is vast and untamed, its materiality overflows and overwhelms Buy-N-Large’s attempts control it as the overconsumption which pushes not only BNL but also humanity to abandon Earth demonstrates. In this sense, reality resist BNL and humanity’s intentions. This unruliness, this disobedience of reality refutes the notion of simulation. If reality were just simulation, then it would conform to our notion of what it should look like and how it should behave, thus depicting reality as superfluous and uncontrollable assuages the viewer’s fear of simulation. By depicting a world in which representation fails, the movie gestures to the strength and irreducibility of reality.

The vast, realness of Earth is juxtaposed to the contained, technologically-mediated world
of The Axiom. The Axiom is characterized by total control and precision. The Axiom symbolizes the triumph of ideology, the successful covering over of reality with its representative double. Here again the spectre of simulation is raised. The ideological representations that the Axiom and Buy-N-Large embody seem total to their inhabitants who are portrayed as having completely lost touch with reality. The Axiom appears at first to be a simulation. It is depicted as particularly simulacra-like in the scene where the captain realizes it is 12:30pm, which means he has missed making his morning announcements. The simulated nature of the Axiom allows the captain to just dial back a switch on the dashboard and the whole environment of the ship is switched back to the morning as is visualized on screen by the sun moving backwards in the sky, the signs at the cafeteria changing from “lunch” to “breakfast”, the umbrellas at the pool closing, and the tram moving backwards. This playing out of simulacra visually is part of the way the movie evokes the fear of simulation, so it can later assuage it. In the end, the world proves itself to not be a simulation, but in fact an ideological representation, a representation that reality can and does intrude upon and eventually triumph over.

The object which the whole plot turns upon is telling one: a plant from Earth. The plant functions as a symbol of reality as a result of its connections with nature, materiality, and primary production (agriculture). That reality is as readily identifiable as the plant is for Eve and the other humans in the movie is a form of wish-fulfillment. The anxiety CGI evokes is not just that we have lost touch with the reality, but that we have mistaken simulations for reality, or even worse that simulacra is the only reality left. By making the plant so easily identifiable in the movie, something that Wall-E, Eve, the Captain, and the humans all immediately recognize as real and of value is a fulfillment of our fantasy that we are equally as capable of recognizing reality and distinguishing it from ideology, or worse, simulacrum. The movie portrays this connection with reality as an inherently human trait, a connection that has been lost, but is easily re-established. This
confrontation with the real is the catalyst by which future humans overcome ideology and rediscover their own humanity, their own ontological ‘realness’. This rediscovery of one’s humanity is symbolized in the movie by the taking of one’s first steps\textsuperscript{21}. The captain is the first to be awakened from his ideological coma by the plant, and the rediscovery of his humanity, conveyed by the image of him taking his first steps, is highly dramatized in the movie to underscore its importance. The scene is in part shot with low camera angles to emphasize the magnitude of his step and is set to Richard Strauss’ \textit{Also Sprach Zarathustra} (the iconic opening music from \textit{2001: A Space Odyssey}). Last but not least, the movie takes special care to conflate the audience’s gaze with the future-humans on screen’s gaze via eyeline match, so that when the future-humans are astonished and gasp at first seeing the captain stand on his own two legs, the audience is also cued to gasp and be astonished. When the future humans on the ship cheer the captain on, the audience is also interpellated into cheering him on. And most importantly, by the end of the movie, the other humans also begin to stand on their own two feet. This rediscovery of their own humanity takes place at the same time as their rediscovery of reality as symbolized by the plant and its placement within the ship’s halodetector, the catalyst that will return the humans to Earth, also representative of reality. By conflating these two moments in time, the movie posits that it is by turning to reality that humanity can break free of ideology. This narrative is a soothing and pleasurable working-over of the fear that humanity can no longer turn to reality to escape ideology, because reality is ideological, it is simulation.

\textbf{Ideology as Ideology}

This diegetic ideology serves multiple purposes; it contains the viewer’s identification of

\textsuperscript{21} Note: Up to this point in the movie all the humans have spent their entire lives scooting about on hover-chairs, even the babies in the nursery are depicting sitting in little hover-trotte-bebes
ideology within the diegesis and offers up the possibility of non-ideological representation, while simultaneously marking 'the screen' as a site of representation as opposed to simulation. Wall-E portrays representation and reality as completely distinct and separate entities. It reifies the Kantian notion of art, or in our case entertainment, that what you watch on a screen is not real life, not reality. In the movie, reality is what the characters 'tune out' or 'put on hold' when they interface with the screen. Wall-E makes it clear that reality is what lies outside the screen. The movie models the viewer's engagement with itself on screen; it instructs the viewer via example to interpret the movie as a representation and the world outside the screen or theater as reality. Wall-E presents itself "as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real" (Baudrillard, 172). The movie's status as animation and a Pixar/Disney production works in its favor here, marking the movie as a 'children's movie'. "The infantile degeneration of this imaginary" world is intended to make the viewer believe that the adult-world is out there, outside the theater (Baudrillard, 172).

This attempt to mark itself as representation also fuels much of Wall-E's cinematic nostalgia. By alluding to other classic films, Wall-E marks itself as a representation of a like kind. This cinematic nostalgia is most apparent in the incorporation of the music and images from Hello Dolly! which run throughout the movie and structure Eve and Wall-E’s romance. Wall-E uses Hello Dolly! to characterize cinema as an undeniably idealized, and thus distorted representation of reality, cheesy or schmaltzy perhaps, but ultimately harmless and possibly even good for the human (or robot) spirit. To aid in this association of Wall-E with a nostalgic, idealized version of representation, there is also the noticeable similarity in form between Wall-E and E.T. from E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial (1982) and Auto and HAL from 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), not just in physical appearance but also in voice. Wall-E does not really talk, just like E.T., and Auto and Hal both speak in computerized monotones and use similar language. Wall-E also features the voice of Sigourney Weaver as the ship’s computer which is an allusion to her role in the classic sci-fi film.
Alien (1979), and also Aliens (1986), Alien³ (1992), and Alien Resurrection (1997). Also contributing to this cinematic nostalgia is the attempt to make the movie look like a 1970s sci-fi film via the simulation of the effects of an anamorphic lens like the ones used in E.T., 2001, and Alien. Even the larger narrative structures of the movie quote past films. The whole romance between Wall-E and Eve is a sort of parody of the standard tropes of romantic comedies: the meet-cute of Wall-E and Eve, the getting-to-know-one another montage, the scene of Eve cradling Wall-E as he is ‘near death’ after being crushed by the halodetector.

This cinematic nostalgia and quoting of past cinema is Wall-E’s way of performing its own phoniness. This is not the negatively marked phoniness of the ideology presented diegetically which I discussed earlier, but a type of sweet, earnest phoniness, what some might call cheesiness. I think the most revealing definition of this term ‘cheesy’ comes not from an academic publication, but from the website UrbanDictionary.com. The most popular definition of cheesy on Urban Dictionary reads, “Trying too hard, unsubtle, and inauthentic. Specifically that which is unsubtle or inauthentic in its way of trying to elicit a certain response from a viewer, listener, audience, etc. Celine Dion is cheesy because her lyrics, timbre, key changes, and swelling orchestral accompaniment telegraph ‘i want you to be moved’ instead of moving you”. The third most popular response echoes this, stating “Cheesy is a unique word it’s usually used for calling something bad but it isn’t directly bad. Cheesy means something that is trying too hard to be good, basically something that’s supposed to be good but it isn’t and bad. For example, Twilight is cheesy you can see that they are trying hard for the movie to be good but it’s just a cheesy vampire story. Jersey Shore is cheesy because they are trying too hard to be ‘cool’ while it’s just bunch of crap”.

What these writers overlook though is the overwhelmingly affirmative response this type of ‘trying too hard’ or the cheesy entreaty has garnered, that many people are moved by Celine Dion. The popularity of Wall-E, Celine Dion, Twilight, or The Jersey Shore indicates that many viewers
acknowledge the distorted or unrealistic nature of these representation and choose to engage them anyway. Cheesiness interpellates the viewer as a cynic, as ‘knowing better than’, but invites the viewer to participate regardless. As the first writer who defines cheesy notes, “What seems cheesy to me, may cause you to weep and hug your girlfriend tight”. I would argue this is not ‘or’ situation. Wall-E is cheesy and causes ‘you to weep and hug your girlfriend tight’. Wall-E and these other forms of media we call cheesy are enacting what Slavoj Žižek calls cynical ideology in The Sublime Object of Ideology. These movies, songs, or television show do not try to show the viewer something real or true. They do not invoke realism’s scale of values. The viewer does not look for objectivity, the integrity of the referent, or the ability to reveal truth in these texts. Wall-E and media like it foreground that they do not accurately or objectively represent reality. Their cheesiness informs the viewer that they plan to manipulate her or him; they say to the viewer, as the writer above points out about the Celine Dion song, ‘I want you to be moved’.

This is why it is so important that Wall-E plays into the Kantian notion of art, that it foregrounds its metaphysical release. If the movie was seen as tethered to reality, it would be interpreted as trying to communicate to the viewer something true or objective about their own world. If there were any consequences or ends in the real world to the emotional manipulation Wall-E performs, the viewer would not be able to enjoy this manipulation. The metaphysical release that animation foregrounds assures the viewer that the movie screen is pure representation. CGI takes this a step further; its value comes from the very fact that it is not real, but instead a simulation of something real. The metaphysical release of animation and the perceived ‘unreality’ of CGI, work together to reinforce the viewer’s notion that everything presented before them is totally unreal, completely divorced from reality. It is exactly because Wall-E is so unreal that the viewer feels safe giving itself over to the emotional manipulation the movie provides. This is also why the simulated camera in Wall-E is so effective. It makes what the viewer consciously interprets
as ‘a cheesy fantasy’ feel real. *Wall-E* allows viewers to feel ‘caught up’ in the film while simultaneously assuring them they are not actually fooled. The irreal aesthetic and movement of the characters and settings on screen reassure the audience that the images are not real. Pixar movies are designed to communicate to the audience that they are ‘just fantasies’ which the audience ‘knows better’ than to take seriously. This is the great ideological sleight of hand that *Wall-E* performs. What seems like the movie’s deception, the realism that the simulation of the camera in *Wall-E* imbues the movie with, is actually covering up the real deception: the metaphysical release these movies purport to offer.

*Wall-E*’s ideology is ideology itself. It is the idea that one can separate out reality from ideology or representation, that reality is what we put on hold when we watch a movie, that we are watching instead of living movies. *Wall-E* reassures the viewer that she or he can engage a movie emotionally (getting ‘caught up’ in the movie) or physically (sitting in front of the screen for 90 minutes), while still subjectively knowing better or not buying into the ideology presented. Viewers live through movies, not just watch them. The theater the viewer watches the movie in is just a real as the office they go to work in, and the billions of dollars Disney made from *Wall-E* are also real. But beyond these more obvious examples, I want to argue that the viewer’s emotional engagement with the movie is equally real, that what the movie is really hiding from the viewer’s psychic censor is the traumatic realization that reality itself is structured by her or his unconscious desires, by fantasy, and that this reality is inescapable. *Wall-E* hides from us, our own fantasies and beliefs by showing them on screen and marking them as ‘not real’, just ‘representation’.

Žižek refers to this as the objectivity of belief. Contrary to the usual idea that belief “is something interior, and knowledge is something exterior”, the viewer’s engagement with *Wall-E* reveals that “it is belief which is radically exterior, embodied in the practical effective procedure of people” (Žižek, 31). Take the viewer who went to see *Wall-E* in a theater: the viewer is aware in
her or his subjectivity, her or his conscious thoughts that over-consumption and pollution really are
destroying the Earth, but they do not want to believe it. Understandably, it is a very pessimistic and
depressing realization, one that would create an exigency for action. The viewer would rather
believe that somehow humanity will deus ex machina itself out of this problem and that everything
will be ok, which is exactly what the narrative of *Wall-E* depicts happening. In her or his own
psychological interiority, the viewer can think whatever she or he wants about the value or veracity
or lack thereof of the movie, but in the act of buying a ticket, sitting in the theater, and possibly
engaging emotionally with the movie, whatever the viewer may be thinking, *objectively* she or he
is instantiating the value of movie (Žižek, 32). This is not something that can be reduced to
economics either. Yes, it is true that the viewer objectively makes *Wall-E* a commodity which
possess value when she or he buys a ticket or pays to rent it, but beyond this the movies makes
exterior and material the fantasies which we think of as subjective phenomena. Our fantasies are
real phenomena that take place every time a movie is screened. The ultimate sleight of hand was
really that of a figure like Bazin or the realists. By positing that realism was something that had to
be assured via the objectivity of the camera, they obscured the fact that realism is in fact
inescapable. The camera is a part of reality, and it is ideological. It is a product of human labor.
That reality is somehow out there and separable from ideology is the real ideology, metaphysical
release, the real deception. What CGI tries to covers up is what a simple examination of the process
of shooting a movie on film reveals. Celluloid film is a material reality, *and* it is ideological, the
result of human fantasies and desires. More of reality than not, is arguable the same. Reality is
something that is enacted by all of us in the fashion of our beliefs and fantasies. CGI is trying to
hide via a second layer of simulation the truth of all representation: it is material. Reality,
representation, desire, and fantasy are one messy, ongoing phenomena. One can never just opt-out
of reality. Once the viewer faces this, the cynical stance becomes untenable. The luxury of being
able to see-through or not buy-into the ideology is revealed for the sham it is. While watching
*Wall-E*, whatever the viewer may think subjectively about her or his position outside the
ideological exchange, objectively she or he is in it. This position within the ideological exchange
defines the viewer as an active agent in this exchange, one who either confirms, negates, or
somehow alters the movie as it is received, and in some sense makes the movie reality via her or
his choice of how to interact with and respond to the movie. By facing the real of our fantasies and
desires as presented on screen and their role in shaping our social and material reality, we can fight
against the phony ideology of the *Wall-E* and the multitude of other media that interpellates us as
passive cynics, perhaps the most pervasive ideology of the 21st century.
Appendix C:
Carl from *Up* (2009)
Works Cited


