

When you write about politics and culture for a living, it's sometimes difficult to separate the two, which can be a drag. It's tough to savor the pleasures of even the most fanciful entertainment – a children's movie, for instance – when your message meter is always on high alert.



Columnists of a more conservative nature are particularly sensitive to the contemporary “wisdom” that Hollywood sprinkles – and sometimes pours by the gallon – into its cinematic confections. Often, we leave the movie with a vague sensation we've just paid good money to be lectured by a smug professor who didn't even have the courtesy to wear a tie to class.

Having said that, I think some of my fellow columnists have been *overly* sensitive to the politics in Disney Pixar's latest release, WALL-E. Yes, yes... it's a Hollywood film. Yes, it predictably celebrates certain values we've come to associate with liberalism (or progressivism), and likewise condemns other so-called “conservative” values. And yes, the “statement” occasionally distracts from the story. But it's not that simple this time. Wall-E is too beautiful, too good-hearted – and frankly, too full of love for the old-fashioned virtues we traditional types hold dear – to be written off as a mere Hollywood screed against conservatism. To do so is not only to belittle a transcendent work of art, but to belittle conservatism, allowing it to be defined by its detractors. Contrary to popular opinion, not all of us are in it for Big Oil and Bill O'Reilly (despite their myriad charms).

It's easy enough to see why some conservatives finds WALL-E condescending... not to mention deliciously ironic. Greg Pollowitz, a blogger at National Review Online, writes: *“I saw WALL-E with my five year old on Saturday night. It was like a 90-minute lecture on the dangers of over consumption, big corporations, and the destruction of the environment. All this from mega-company Disney, who wants us to buy WALL-E kitsch for our kids that are manufactured in China at environment-destroying factories and packed in plastic that will take hundreds of year to biodegrade in our landfills. Much to Disney's chagrin, I will do my part to avoid a future environmental Armageddon by boycotting any and all WALL-E merchandise, and I hope others join my crusade.”*

Tee hee. Pollowitz has a point. WALL-E does pack a serious punch against consumerism and anti-environmentalism (is anybody *actually* anti-environment?), and this *is* a rather rich scolding coming from Disney.

The movie begins in the 28th Century, where our titular hero – a sweet, robotic trash compactor – is sifting through the rubble of a ruined earthly metropolis which has clearly fallen prey to the greed and gluttony of mankind – a mankind which, by the way, is nowhere in sight. We later learn the earthlings were whisked off to space some 700 years prior, by a global organization cleverly named B&L (Buy & Large), where they've been living on an enormous space ship, Axiom, for lo these many centuries. There, the humans have grown fat, lazy and dim-witted. They move around in floating chairs, stuff their faces with meat and potato “milkshakes,” stare vacantly at computer screens, and are waited on, hand and foot, by robots who display more personality than they do. Meanwhile, the soothing voice of B&L encourages the humans, from an assortment of loudspeakers, to “consume, consume, consume!”

Okay, so maybe this unflattering portrait of humanity *is* supposed to be a liberal indictment of our consumer culture... some nightmare scenario of capitalism run amuck. But while Shannen Coffin, also of NRO, saw WALL-E as “Godforsaken dreck” and felt “bombarded with leftist propaganda about the evils of mankind,” I saw something else entirely: a wistful ode to traditional American values... and a warning.

Let's look at B&L, for instance, the vast organization that runs the gargantuan space city,

Axiom. Yes, it's a Big Corporation (or, in Hollywoodspeak, "evil"); and yes, it encourages the earthlings to consume themselves into a comfortable numbness. But, B&L is also the *only* corporation on Axiom. (Capitalism is all about competition, remember?) And did I mention that B&L is the *government*,

too? Are these earthlings porky, complacent, and nigh on braindead because there's too much wicked consumption going on? Maybe so. But then again, maybe it's also because they don't work (B&L takes care of all their needs), don't raise their own children (B&L starts rearing them in groups, as babies), and have no reason to exert any effort whatsoever, mental or physical. In fact, the Axiom community smacks of the cradle-to-grave entitlement society that conservatives tend to oppose. Could it be that WALL-E opposes the nanny state mentality, too, or am I just seeing what I want to see?

Say you *do* go in for the obvious interpretation, accepting B&L as a mere symbol of the consumer culture writ large. I'm the first to admit that said "culture" is out of control, but I reject the old saw that conservatism is solely to blame. While capitalism is certainly a conservative value, gluttony and greed are not. To the contrary, the conservatism I embrace stresses frugality, restraint, and self-control... not exactly Hollywood staples, despite all the Priuses zipping around on the strip. So while the makers of WALL-E may think they're lashing out at conservatism, this conservative ain't feeling the sting. This conservative, in fact, is thinking "lasher, lash thyself."

But I digress. While I may be imagining the film's indictment of Big Government (though I don't think I am), WALL-E clearly takes aim, whether intentionally or otherwise, at other modern-day sacred cows. The twin hopes, Science and Technology, for instance. Here we see a world so technologically advanced that humans have been relieved of virtually all responsibility – physical, mental, and emotional. They glide along in a state of perpetual, pampered pleasure – actually, it's more like indifference – with nary a worry or care. Sound good? It's actually grotesque – an ugly, insulting caricature of humanity as we know it. Can it be merely accidental that the movie's robots – the only ones in the WALL-E universe who must work and strive and put forth energy – form emotional bonds, even falling in love, while the baby-faced, cosseted humans are more attached to their computer screens than each other? It's almost as if Disney-Pixar, that behemoth of technological innovation, were warning us against the dehumanizing effects of... technological innovation. Again, there's a satisfying irony.

And it's not just technology that's suspect in WALL-E. It's progress in general – or, at least our contemporary, baby-out-with-the-bathwater *idea* of progress. The movie rather boldly (for Hollywood) suggests that not all progress is good progress. Even the almighty Darwin finds himself under scrutiny, as WALL-E dares to float the notion that evolution doesn't guarantee improvement. (Just look at the wall of historic photos featuring an ever-flabbier, more hapless-looking line of Axiom captains. "Survival of the Fittest" is not a phrase that springs to mind.)

C.S. Lewis famously wrote, "We all want progress, but if you're on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive." I would argue that WALL-E is, at heart, a movie about turning back – literally and figuratively. The film romanticizes, even reveres, what Lewis would have called the "old things." When Captain McCrea, commander of Axiom, begins to consider a return to earth, he watches reams of digital footage from "home" (as he still calls it, 700 years later) on a big, Star-Trekkie screen. He is mesmerized by scenes of small town life, farmers

working in their fields, boisterous families around the dinner table, joyfully wholesome entertainment like “Hello Dolly.” He is especially moved by the sight of people dancing. (No, not club kids at some hip rave. We’re talking Dick Van Dyke, here. The ol’ soft shoe. Did someone say “conservative”?)

Compared to the sterile, homogenized, ever-comfortable Axiom, the earth seems full of love and laughter, risk and striving, color and diversity, aspiration and connection. Even when the Captain learns that the planet is now a wasteland, that these happy images no longer apply, he is determined to return his people to their “home” and do whatever it takes to restore earth to its former glory. Inspired – maybe for the first time? – he tentatively steps from his floating chair and begins to walk on his own two feet. He is a man reborn, a man with a mission! And all on the promise of one little plant that’s been retrieved from the devastated earth... the miraculous revelation that, in the midst of neglect and decay, selfishness and destruction, new life has sprung. Something in his heart of hearts tells him that tiny life must be nurtured, come what may. It will mean sacrifice – of comfort, of convenience, of security – and it will be worth it. (Yes, this is a “green” message, straight from the Hollywood Handbook, but dost thou not detect a certain conservative theme emerging, as well? Hmmm...)

The point is, WALL-E may have been intended as an indictment of conservatism, but it’s not. Not really. Conservative critics need to remove the chip from their collective shoulder – where it is in grave danger of becoming permanently affixed – and enjoy WALL-E for what it is: an enthralling film that transcends politics, transcends easy labels, and may even transcend its creators’ vision.

In other words, a thoroughly successful work of art.